# Rationale for moral education: A reading in Plato’s *Republic*

1. **The question**

Imagine a time when you are all alone and you are approached by something that presents you with the following binary decision. There is a planet, a billion light years away. The planet has nothing on it – a cold solid rock. It is also given that nothing that happens on this empty planet can, for better or for worse, affect us here on Earth, and it never will. By the pushing of a button (an act of wishing or whatever binary procedure you prefer), this planet would develop an atmosphere and water, grass would grow, insects, fish, rodents, birds, owls, and hawks would emerge. That’s it. Again, it is given that none of this would have any effect, for better or for worse, on Earth and its surroundings. One more factor is that the person who has the option of pushing the button (you) would never be able to reveal the situation and the decision they make – it must remain forever only with them. What then would you do?

This thought experiment, to which I will return at the end of the article, is part of an attempt to deal with doubts regarding the possibility of finding a rationale for moral education in our *prima facie* meaningless world. Doubts regarding the possibility of moral education arise when we view reality, being, existence as “groundlessness”; when we perceive “the *un-reason* of things”; when we feel that “being is a lawless series of events”, and that “the groundlessness of being attests to the meaninglessness of all there is” (Oral, 2017, p. 40). These doubts regarding meaning and reason in our reality and being are intensified by (not to say that they have directly resulted from) what Meillassoux (2010) calls the “essential spectres,” i.e.:

[…] horrendous deaths: premature and odious deaths, such as the death of an infant, or the death of parents knowing that their children are doomed to the same fate, and other similar ends of an equal degree of horror. Natural or criminal deaths, of a sort that could not be predicted either for those who suffered or by those who survive them. A death that bears no meaning, no completion, no fulfilment: just an atrocious interruption of life, such that it would simply obscene to think that it was not experienced as such by those who suffered it. (Meillassoux, 2010 in Oral, 2017, pp. 50-51)

I call these horrible cases *the unchangeable aspects of reality*, *the form of reality*,or *the logic of reality.*[[1]](#footnote-2) I assume them to be part of the logic, *the form*, of our existence. For although it may seem to be a list of contingent, unnecessary and horrible events, it nevertheless represents, in my eyes, a necessary part of our existence, the bearing of undesirable, yet unchangeable, components of reality. Beginning with impersonal limitations such as our inability to know once and for all what is good, true, or just; our subjection to space and time, logic, and laws of nature; and of course we also bear the connected personal limitations such as the inevitable separation from our loved ones, our specific future of the degeneration of our body, existential loneliness, our specific personality and specific history, fate and so on. And on top of all that, we bear ever existing unjust and evil social phenomena such as extreme poverty and starvation, social gaps, cynicism, alienation, and, as written in Ecclesiastes 8:14: *“There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve.”* Oral (2017), while dealing with the same question regarding the possibility of a rationale for moral education in such unreasonable and meaningless contexts, concludes nevertheless that moral education is possible (p. 53). In the next section I will describe his argument.

The problem is that, although human beings are born into a sphere of living that appears to be an unfair arena, they are nevertheless called to live fairly, justly, morally. If a just and moral action and life includes elements of self-restraint, of waiving what would seem to be in one’s interests or to their advantage (or even what is only socially considered to be an unfair advantage), a question may very reasonably be asked, what is the reason, the motivation, to act and live justly and morally in such a meaningless, chaotic, un-reasonable and unfair reality? And who or what would be so blind as to call on people to be moral and to act as such? In other words, two basic aspects of human lives would seem to contradict one another: (1) the un-reason of things and the *prima facie* meaninglessness of being, and (2) the demand to live a just and moral life that includes elements of acting in opposition to what may seem to be in one’s best interests, to one’s relative advantage.

For example, *why* should one overrule one’s own interests and return (not for legal or social reasons) £250,000 that was accidently transferred to one’s bank account from a big organization or a rich person who would not even notice the mistake and assuming that this person will never be caught or punished by the authorities (see a case in Benedictus 2012)? *Why* do we expect one to overcome the craving for revenge, or even to risk their life and to be compassionate to their worst enemies, and at the very least to not be cruel and arbitrary with them? *What reason* is there to expect oneself to put oneself and one’s family in danger (of punishment, or accusations of betrayal or collaboration with the enemy as sometimes happened in the Second World War) and help a runaway refugee child? And even, *why* waste time in helping another to change a tire, or in accepting an unknown priest’s request to be the only participant in the funeral of a lonely old homeless person?

From the perspective of a chaotic reality and the meaninglessness of being, in which the righteous get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked get what the righteous deserve, to waive a relative advantage one has over others would seem to be the act of a naive, self-sacrificing, and gullible person. This is why, in a secular culture, the reason that is commonly given for doing or not-doing what is considered to be good, is solely centered in the potential benefits or costs within the socio-political-economical or legal realm: *the general social realm*. If this is true, it would seem that, in the case of having the power to benefit from an evil deed (from the perspective of the general social realm) without taking the risk of being punished, one would have every justification for doing so. It would be unintelligent, foolish, and nonsensical to act otherwise (as Plato describes in the *Republic* book 2 using Glaucon and Adeimantus).

And so, from an educational point of view, it may seem in such a meaningless world that, as teachers and parents, we have every reason, and even duty and responsibility, to advise our students and children (face-to-face and behind closed doors – far from the general social realm) that, if they have an option to increase their relative advantage without risk to themselves or of being caught (let alone risking themselves for a big moral idea), they should do so without hesitation. Would you advise your children, students or yourself otherwise? If so, why? This article suggests a Platonic answer to the question of the inner rationale to act morally, i.e. to waive a relative advantage over others in this *prima facie* meaningless reality.

1. **Oral’s answer based on Meillassoux**

In a search for a rational and justified moral education, Oral formulates a similar question to the above: “[w]hat kind of ethics can one imagine in an acausal universe?” (Oral, 2017, p. 50). Describing Meillassoux’s answer, he argues that, in the absolute contingency of being, which lacks any order, meaning and divinity, and in the search for hope in the face of the ‘essential spectres’, one cannot negate the possibility that such an order, meaning and divinity would emerge one day in the future (Oral, 2017, p. 51). Just as life has emerged from matter, just as thinking has emerged from life, so the absolute contingency of reality enables the possibility that order, meaning and divinity might emerge in the future from this chaotic meaningless, matter, life and thinking. Moreover, it is only we, the human subjects, *because* of our fragility and mortality, *because* we are integrated parts of this senselessness contingency of being, and because of our consciousness of our existential status and craving for universal justice in a reality that lacks it, only subjects like this, and *not* any other more perfect being such as God or angels, can be the ground from which meaning, order and justice may emerge (Oral, 2017, p. 52).

We see that the rationale for moral education that Oral bases on Meillassoux includes two components. The first is the analogical argument regarding the ‘optimistic’ possibility that cannot be negated, i.e. that a reason, an order, and a meaning may emerge from the actual reasonless contingent universe, just as life emerged from matter, and thinking emerged from life. The second component is concerned with the place of humanity in this possible process of emergence of meaning. Oral’s argument concludes that it is humanity with its fragility, and not any other divine complete entity, that would be the source of such possible emergence. This condition is crucial for him because of Meillassoux’s ontological assumption that the world is meaningless and that therefore, if meaning and order were to emerge at all, it would necessarily occur on a background which is empty of any order, and through forces (humanity) that are themselves part of the incompleteness and fragility of the universe. Any element of a perfect divinity that may be the source of the emergence of order and meaning would contradict this fundamental ontological assumption of Meillassoux and Oral, and therefore cannot be included in the narrative they suggest as a rationale for moral education.

This rationale for moral education is, I believe, not good enough for two basic reasons. Firstly, from a logical and ontological point of view, if we assume that the world is contingent reasonless chaos, then the chance of this chaos yielding order and reason is an analog, not to the actual existence of life and thinking as Meillassoux and Oral believe, but to the chance of a monkey typing randomly on a typewriter typing the bible. I.e. for it to happen one time (tending to one time), there is a need of an amount of time that tends to infinity (Banerji, Mansour and Severnini, 2014). And therefore, this possibility which tends to zero is not logical and ontological enough as a foundation for a rationale for moral education.

Secondly, it is not enough from a mental and spiritual point of view. Thinking of the general public (children, their working parents, sick people, elderly people, or any healthy person who is aware of their existential condition, an awareness that causes them to suffer) and the amount of hope that is needed to enable the human being who wishes to survive the next hour, day, or week to do what is good and just, one finds Oral’s rationale for moral education (i.e. that we cannot negate the possibility that one day reason will emerge in our reasonless world) to be insufficient.

What then are the requirements of a narrative to provide a rationale for moral education? We are looking here for a narrative that (1) would have an explanatory power regarding the meaning and worth of moral action and moral lives, (2) would have a motivational power, be an inspiring narrative for morality, and (3) would be rational, i.e. that believing in it would not contradict what is reasonably and logically possible, even though it cannot be proved.[[2]](#footnote-3)

I therefore suggest an alternative rationale for moral education. I will do it through a reading of Plato’s allegory of the cave and other parts of the *Republic*. Plato raises the problem of the personal benefit of acting morally and justly in the first and second books of the *Republic*, and the rest of the book is actually an attempt to answer this huge question. In my reading I suggest a connection between three elements in the *Republic*: (1) the idea of a balanced soul as described in book IV, (2) an interpretation of the allegory of the cave from book VII, and (3) what we usually conceive to be a just and good action and life; for example, returning a lost wallet. Before describing my suggestion in detail, I briefly review three different readings of the *Republic* from the perspective of the question of the justification and rationale for good and moral action, i.e. the existential rationale of morality.

1. **The *Republic* and the question regarding the idea of the Good and the moral and just life**

Although the main issue of the *Republic*, Plato does not give a clear description of the good and just life. Socrates declares that he himself does not know what the Good – the most important thing – is (Plato, Rep.6.506b-506c). Irwin (1995) points to Plato’s silence regarding the substantial content of the Good by claiming that “proper explanation and defense of Plato’s conception of the good are left to later Greek moralists” (Irwin, 1995, p. 317)*.* Nevertheless, he tries to understand Plato’s idea of justice by distinguishing between two ideas of justice: “Platonic-justice” and “common-justice” (Irwin, 1995, p. 283). Platonic-justice is the proper inner balance of the soul that Plato describes in book IV (see below), while common justice is what we conceive of as justice in everyday language, i.e. caring and acting in the interest of the good of others (Irwin, 1995, p. 293). This connection is not trivial in Irwin’s eyes, since he believes that all four of the degenerate regimes and characters described by Plato in the last books of the *Republic* (timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny [Rep. 8.545b-c]) express deep injustice from the common perspective (common-justice), yet do not show any injustice in terms of Platonic-justice. Irwin finds it difficult to attribute an un-balanced soul to them (I will elaborate on Platonic-justice below), because he sees the way they set and pursue goals as perfectly rational. Irwin claims that we cannot say that any one of the corrupted types is controlled by the appetites (Irwin, 1995, p 285). Irwin believes that this inner tension does not merit any explicit clarification or other solution in the *Republic*. As he concludes his account of the *Republic*:

Does Plato show that p-just [Platonic-justice], as he eventually conceives it in the *Republic*, is a dominant part of happiness, important enough to ensure that the p-just person is always happier than the p-unjust person, no matter what else is true of them? We might agree that life is not worthwhile if it involves complete psychic chaos; but why might it not be worth scarifying some p-just for a larger supply of other goods? To answer this question, we need to know more about why p-justice is a good in itself and about the way in which other goods are good; we also need to reexamine the character of the human good and its relation to rational activity.

When we see that this question arises, we come to the most important unfinished element in the argument of the *Republic* (Irwin, 1995, p. 317).

Irwin is thus concerned with the same question in Plato which I have raised. However, while from his perspective the *Republic* does not answer this question, I will attempt to show that it does.

Kraut (1999) also attempts to understand how a just action can benefit the agent, or in our terms, how such an action has any personal meaning (regardless the social one) in our world. He rejects general claims that fall into circularity in their argumentation. He believes that the connection between justice and the Good lies in the need for political justice in order to live the good life. The good life is the search for the Good, the Form of the Good, which possesses perfect harmony and order. This perfect harmony ought to be realized in the earthly lives of the individual and the community. From this point of view, Kraut deduces that the interest of or benefit to the philosopher in doing justice in the political sphere is in promoting social welfare and harmony in their political sphere. Such an order is needed for them to contemplate the ideal Forms (Kraut, 1999, p. 329).

I believe there to be two limitations in Kraut’s account. The first is in the scope of the problem. As I showed at the beginning of the article, the problem is relevant beyond the purview of philosophers; it is relevant to all individuals, and in particular all educators, which includes all parents. They must give an account (first of all to themselves) of the rationale for their moral demands from their children and students. The second limitation I find in Kraut’s account is that, although he describes the psychological meaning and benefit of a just life, what Irwin calls Platonic-justice (i.e. temperance, peace of mind, the ability to control the appetites), he does not resolve what Irwin considers an internal, textual difficulty in Plato’s text – that is, he does not give an account of the inner connection of this just balanced soul with the good action. In other words, he does not explain what it means to see the Forms, to contemplate them, and how this activity connects to doing the right and good deed.

1. **The theistic reading and the problem of the personification of the Good**

But how can we give a concrete account *beyond* what the text itself offers? In other words, how can we tackle Irwin’s claim that Plato has left the concrete understanding of the Good to future moral philosophers? Rist (2012) suggests a Plotinian-theistic perspective to address our problem of drawing from Plato a rationale for morality. He too finds that there is a gap in Plato’s *Republic* (and generally in Plato’s texts) between, on the one hand, the Form of the Good which is formal and impersonal, and on the other hand, the moral obligation of the human agent to do the good moral action. He solves it by suggesting a personification of the Form of the Good to God and God’s will (Rist, 2012, p. 269). Without a personal God that has will, Rist claims, there can be no obligation to moral action, i.e. no sense in performing a good and just action. Only if “wrongdoing is a sin against a creator as well as a crime, its seriousness is the better understood, inasmuch as it offends not only against the Good (as God), but against his commands” (Rist, 2012, p. 268). Thus, in Rist’s eyes, for there to be a meaning and rationale for the individual in doing the good action, there must be a personification of the Good as God’s will.

Rist is of course aware that the personification of the Good creates problems, and he points, as an example, to the issue regarding the ability of God to “know” the particulars (Rist, 2012, p. 267). Nevertheless, he does not mention the problematic moral and meta-ethical implications that the personalizing solution creates. And in our case, in which I try to find a practical rationale for moral education today, these problems cannot be ignored. One of the problems with this reading is that it materializes the transcendent sublime, and this materialization is in tension both with accepted readings and interpretations of Plato’s *Republic*, and with the demands from a rationale for moral education.

Regarding the textual interpretation problem, a well-accepted and central theme to find in Plato’s texts is the idea that there is a human inclination to ascribe a hyperbolic value of realness to earthly-material things which possess a very little amount of the property of realness (for example see Rep. 6.510a, and Vlastos, 1973). In many places, Plato shows our mistaken inclination to give such an exaggerated value – value of realness – to things which do not possess a large amount of realness.[[3]](#footnote-4) And in a totally different ontological sphere is the Good, which is pure reality, or as Gadamer names the Platonic Good: the “arché, the starting point (principle) of everything” (1986, p. 90).

But beyond the interpretational tension, the main problem with personification of the Good is that it might serve, as Rist actually points out, as an instrument for performing a specific moral deed. This means that it may actually cause, even if not intentionally, specific moral deeds to become superior in hierarchy to Good. In other words, it may lead to the slippery slope of pseudo-moral actions in the name of Good. People start thinking that their idea of what is good (for example punishing sinners, interrogating and frightening them, or waging war on them) is what God wills. Again, once the Good becomes the personal God – a God that wills – the Good loses its transcendent sublime holiness in favor of the material earthly level of existence. It is a mixture, an illusion of blending together the value of pure reality with an earthlier thing such as a concrete specific will – a will that in principle directs itself to a whatsoever concrete specific object. In other words, it is idolatry. This idolatry leads to endless inner divisions which bring tensions, conflicts, and cruel wars – absolutely not holy.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Therefore, even though Rist suggests that agreeing with personalizing the Good is the *only* alternative for those who wish for moral obligation of the agent (Rist, 2012, p. 268), I, on the contrary, while not wishing to omit the moral obligation of the agent, would like to omit the personalizing of the Good.

In order to do so, I suggest a metaphysical existential narrative based on a reading of Plato’s *allegory of the cave*, which connects the metaphysical Form of the Good and moral actions; this reading gives, I believe, a much more encouraging context for morality and moral education than the narrative suggested by Oral (2017). To do this, we must find a connection between (1) what we intuitively conceive of as a good deed – say returning a lost wallet or helping a refugee (in Irwin’s terms: common-justice), and (2) what is considered by Plato as a benefit and to have meaning for the individual, i.e. the balanced soul (in Irwin’s terms: Plato-justice).

The well-known fragments in the *Republic* regarding the Good are in books VI and VII, when Socrates is asked by Glaucon and Adeimantus to say what the Good is. Although his angry response to their question seems to be a dramatic overreaction by him, his answer is unequivocal – it is impossible to talk about the Good (Rep 6.506b-c). Yet in response to their pressure, he agrees to say something indirectly, not of the Good, but about the *descendants* of the Good – Truth and Knowledge. For this purpose, he uses the *analogy of the sun*. After Socrates tries to explain the enigmatic *analogy of the sun* (his first answer regarding the nature of the Good) by using the *analogy of the divided line* (his second answer), he continues to the *allegory of the cave*. In this famous allegory, he attempts to illustrate the differences between good educated lives, and uneducated lives, and the *process* of transferring from uneducated lives to good educated ones.

These three allegories, intended to clarify something regarding the content of the Good, regarding its essence, do not really do so directly. Therefore, clarifying what may be the nature of the Good demands that we delve into an interpretation of the allegories, and mainly, the allegory of the cave.

1. **The allegory of the cave**

Since it is obvious to assume that life in the cave represents an unworthy life for humans, and that exiting the cave and living outside it (or at least being in a life-long attempt to exit it) represents the good life, then an answer regarding the differences between the *life-experience* of these two general alternative ways of life (inside/outside the cave) may provide us a clue regarding what the life experience is that is connected with the idea of the Good. The idea of the Good is the lastly and hardly “object” to be seen by the person outside the cave (Rep. 7.517c), and it is seen as “the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world light, and the author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this” (Rep. 7.517c). A metaphysical existential narrative that is based on an understanding of this *original* Good as the source of the whole of reality and all the goodness and just within it, can be a much more encouraging context within which to act, live, and educate morally, despite the feeling that the world is morally chaotic.

In imagining the “prisoners’” life-experience, we may deduce that: since it is their own nature that binds them to looking at the cave’s wall (the reason why the title “prisoners” is only a metaphor), they will always look to return to that place even if they see what is behind them.[[5]](#footnote-6) This being the case, the life-experience in the cave can reasonably be characterized by the feeling of a place that one desires to return to, a place of comfort, control, security – of allegedly being *beyond reality*. The experience in the cave is that “reality” is *there*, on the wall, and the prisoners watch it like rich tourists from their comfortable hotel; like zapping channels on TV from a warm comfortable couch; like surfing the internet. In short, it is the subjective feeling of controlling reality. The cave is close, the prisoners are secure from the rain, wind, burning sun, or freezing snow. When it is cold, it is possible to use their technology to increase the flames of the fire, and when it is hot, to lower them. In other words, since one of the main characteristics of the “prisoners’” life experience is the “reality” being *in front* of them *over there* on the wall, we can deduce that life inside the cave is experienced as being beyond “the world”: beyond history and time and beyond physics and space. This feeling is of course an illusionary one; it resembles the life experience of a rich tourist, of sitting on a couch in front of the television – one is experiencing full control as being outside reality.

On the other hand, the individual who is pulled out of the cave (or experiencing the difficulties of being in the on-going attempt to exit it), as they uncomfortably become aware of their own ignorance as well as their community’s unconscious-ignorance, seems to *see* and experience themself as being, not beyond the reality, but *within it*; as a subject of it all, a very tiny part of it all (Rep. 7.516b-c); *not* at all an experience of controlling reality, but on the contrary – of being controlled by it; they experience in each and every bone of their body that reality is all over, around, and within them. While life experience inside the cave consists of controlling “the real” (the alleged reality), life experience outside the cave lacks control over life’s main elements: the sun, the heat, the cold, the starting and ending of the beating of one’s heart.

The awareness of the subject to her or his naked reality invokes anxiety and depression. This experience is well described in many traditional existential texts. In the allegory of the cave, these feelings are represented by the suffering one bears on this very long journey outside the cave and in becoming used to the world outside. The secure ground, the controlled fire, and controlled “reality” *over there* (on the wall of the cave) has been undermined, and one finds oneself as a temporal ignorant guest, totally *subject* to the unknown real. It is no surprise therefore that no one wants to leave the cave, and the one who is *compelled* to go through the process suffers and continues to resist the process, trying to go back.

This new self-perspective of the individual’s place *within* reality, this awareness, causes suffering, and so one may be inclined to and prefer to forget, repress, and resist keeping it in mind. Nevertheless, as a lover of truth and as a lover of coherence, one cannot accept the denial of reality and truth. And neither can one accept the idea that the real, as a whole, is bad and causes suffering. Therefore, if the truth about one’s reality causes anxiety and depression, there must be something wrong in the way one conceives one’s self and reality.

Hence, the educational process should be aimed at adapting the soul so that it coheres with the fragileness, partiality, temporal and uncertain nature of reality and our status in it, i.e. the constant and unchangeable form of existence as a whole.[[6]](#footnote-7) This educational process is metaphorically described in the allegory of the cave, but due to the metaphorical language, it is not clear what makes up this process. What is the force that changes the soul so that it finds joy and comfort in finding itself within Reality rather than fear; what enables it, being aware of the Real and its place within it, to act in courage but without illusions? In the next section I will show that Plato implies that doing the just and good thing is *the means*, the ladder, by which this attitude changes.

1. **The good deed and its impact on the soul: Plato’s “Copernican revolution”**

In book IV, Plato presents the good and just *action* as the force that educates the soul – creates its balance. A good and just action is one:

…which preserves and helps to produce this condition [balance] of soul, and wisdom the science that presides over such conduct; and believing and naming the unjust action [contrary to good and just action] to be that which ever tends to overthrow this spiritual constitution, and brutish ignorance [contrary to wisdom], to be the opinion that in turn presides over this” (Plato, Rep. 4.443d – 444a).

I would like to focus on two ideas in this phrase. The first idea is that there is an inner connection between the just and good deed (and the good life in general) on the one hand, and the inner balance of the person who acts on the other. Plato’s “Copernican revolution” here is that the action precedes the inner balance and not that an inner balance leads to good, just, moral actions. At least they nourish one another. It means that *the inner life* *is the aim in itself*, and the desirable results lie *within it*, and not in the outer social and political realm as we usually think, for example, returning the lost wallet resolving the frustrated feelings of the person who had lost it. The second idea is that wisdom from this perspective is seeing (wrapped in the overall constant metaphysical context of our lives) what deed, out of all possible deeds a situation potentially offers, would help to create, develop, and preserve this inner united balance.

In the context of what I have suggested earlier regarding the life experience of the prisoners inside the cave vs. the life experience of those on a journey out of the cave, we may suggest seeing the wise and good deed as one that would *keep in mind* the life experience of being within reality – of being outside the cave, or on the journey outside it. An immoral deed, on the contrary, would help to develop, deepen, and preserve the life experience of the prisoners – the illusion of being beyond “reality”. One example of such an act is the humiliation of others, probably to make oneself feel better, or to avoid paying, working, or fulfilling one’s part in an agreement or in the world in general. Another act of illusion is avoidance, as if zero exposure and zero conflict would help one to overcome any risk and danger. As such, we can generally say that, by choosing the good-moral option in a situation and putting it into practice, a person is reminded of reality and their place within it; remembering, not just in terms of cognition, but in the whole of their existence, their being. This is why the love of truth is a pre-condition on the path of the good life. It is the motivation to know, to remember reality, to be in accord with it, that drives the moral deed. This being the case, a moral life means the constant aspiration to empower our awareness of the true, good, just and beautiful potentialities of reality, while always keeping in mind that, although this aspiration will probably never be realized once and for all, individuals and communities should nevertheless do the best they can to continue to pursue these potentialities, and, as much as is possible, actualize them. I will come back to this theme later.

Therefore, the meaning and benefit of, for example, returning a lost £250,000 to a very rich firm (who would not really feel the difference), or overcoming fear and standing and fighting for what is good and right, has a moral educational impact that is not only on the social or interpersonal level, nor as Kraut (1999) has suggested, only on the political sphere of the philosopher. The impact is also on the internal level. By returning the money or by overcoming fear to stand up and fight for what is right, one “reminds” oneself of their place within reality; one remembers the life experience of being pulled out of the cave. On the other hand, keeping the lost money, or avoiding an important fight, would break down their inner unity, their inner balance i.e. it would return them to the cave’s illusion of being beyond reality. In this sense, a moral action is like a repeat investigation of the real and our place within it.

To sum up, a good moral action derives from the love of truth, and by doing it, one remembers one’s status within reality, a memory that is expressed in creating, developing, and maintaining a balanced, unified and harmonized soul.

But why does remembering the endlessness of reality necessitate doing good moral deeds (such as fighting fair, or generally waiving what may seem to be an unfair advantage) and not living and acting according to the well-known approach of “let us eat and drink for tomorrow we shall die” (Isaiah, 22:13)? In other words, why not choose a life which is directed towards the exploitation of one’s surroundings to maximize, whenever possible, one’s relative advantage? Why not use every opportunity for pleasure even though it comes at the expense of others, after all – as many have said before choosing an extreme pleasure: “you only live once?” And why be bothered with the quest for the truth regarding our reality and see it as good? In what follows I will answer these questions.

1. **Facing reality: good deeds or eat and drink for tomorrow we shall die**

My direct answer to the above question is that living in accordance with the approach of “eat and drink for tomorrow we shall die” expresses a deep frustration with the unchangeable aspects of reality; it expresses a resentfulness of it. It is like being embroiled in a struggle with reality (not with the unjust changeable contingent components *within it*, but with the unchangeable aspect of it as a whole). Living according to the “eat and drink” approach implies that if one had the opportunity to change one’s metaphysical-existential status (for example of making oneself live forever like a god – see the character of Immortan Joe in Miller’s 2015 *Mad Max: Fury Road*), one would do so without hesitation. This frustration and resentfulness is expressed in the monuments that tyrants – Pharaoh for example – have built for themselves throughout history; in the terror and the use of people and other lives to gain their being-beyond-reality (inner-cave) illusion – what in everyday language is sometimes wrongly called “their power”. It is wrong, because from the Platonic perspective I draw here, this is the opposite of power.

On the contrary, the good and just deed expresses one’s acceptance, and even love (or at least it expresses the will, the motivation to be in a state of acceptance or love), of that metaphysical-existential status. This inner acceptance and love is created*,* developed, and maintained by small and large human moral gestures: from returning a lost wallet, to risking one’s life and the lives of one’s family without any rewards to help a persecuted refugee.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Moreover, by ignoring the persecuted refugee, or by keeping the £250,000 (as part of living in accordance with the eat-drink approach), I am not just expressing frustration, resentfulness, and fear of my place in the overall reality, I am also creating, developing and maintainingwithin me this approach toward reality. While by returning the money on the other hand, I am *educating myself* to accept and love the constant unchangeable aspects of my place in the world – I am creating and maintaining a positive approach to it (or at least expressing my will to change my attitude in that direction).

1. **The practical type**

But can we think of an individual who does not live in accordance with the (extreme) eat-drink approach, and yet finds it perfectly reasonable to not return the wallet, and actually does not return it and instead enjoys its fruits, a person who would not donate money or time to any goal without social demands or other materialistic rewards, let alone put themselves in danger to help a persecuted refugee? Just for the sake of illustration, most of us can think of ourselves (in our one dimensional social ‘bourgeoisie’ selves), and/or its caricature expressions in fictional characters such as George Darling, the father of Wendy Darling in *Peter Pan*, or Petunia and Vernon Dursley, Harry Potter’s aunt and uncle – the prototype Muggles – in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. I will name this person the *practical* type. This practical character is one who may do whatever they can to increase their advantage over others, but will never break the common social norms and would be very alert to what others may think of them. They may be very effective, intelligent, helpful to their friends and harmful to their enemies, a good negotiator – they can gain high honors and success. MacIntyre's (2007/1981) calls this character the manger. “The manager treats ends as given, as outside his scope;[[8]](#footnote-9) his concern is with technique, with effectiveness in transforming raw materials into final products, unskilled labor into skilled labor, investment into profits” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 30. See also Mangham, 1995). What, then, is the problem with this way of life? Does the interpretation of the allegory of the cave say anything about the person who would not return the wallet or save the refugee, but does not live to the extreme in accordance with the eat-drink approach?

The problem is that the manager or the practical type, gives hyperbolic, unrealistic value to changeable ends, to changeable aspects of reality, and sees them as an unchangeable given. Yet doing it does not make them so, because they are not really the unchangeable aspects of reality. Therefore, that person would be inclined to deny, to repress all the *truly* unchangeable aspects of reality, the existential, metaphysical elements of life. Hence, she or he would be paralyzed (like the prisoner who is forced to turn his head to the fire) in the face of the “essential spectres” or the true constant unchangeable aspects of reality such as death, illness, ignorance, laws of logic, or other constant elements of humanity, not necessarily with clear negative connotations.

Another aspect of the limitations of the life experience of the practical type regards our use of our reason. Our reason is a force that aspires for explanations, to understand *why* – it seeks a *reason*. [[9]](#footnote-10) Living the life of the practical type necessitates separating the reason from this inner aspiration, which is also part of its aspiration for truth, unifying harmonies, coherence, rationality. But as has been said, truth loving is a prerequisite, and therefore it is also the practical type, not just the "eat and drink" approach, that suffers from unbalanced soul and thus, even though she or he may seem to be very realistic, from a negative approach to reality. The self-educational process (i.e. doing moral actions and living a moral life) that creates a balanced soul with a positive approach towards the constant unchangeable aspects of reality stems from the claim of reason for a unifying harmonious order, for truth and the real.

In terms of the allegory of the cave, after experiencing life outside the cave and the state of consciousness one arrives at on seeing the sun – the source of creation and reality, this truth-searching individual, this lover of wisdom,

if he recalled to mind his first habitation and what passed for wisdom there [in the cave], and his fellow-bondsmen, […] he would count himself happy in the change and pity them […]. And if there had been honors and commendations among them which they bestowed on one another and prizes for the man who is quickest to make out the shadows as they pass and best able to remember their customary precedence, sequences and co-existence, and so most successful in guessing at what was to come, […then] he would [not] be very keen about such rewards, and […] he would [not] envy and emulate those who were honored by these prisoners and lorded it among them, [rather] he would […] ‘greatly prefer while living on earth to be serf of another, a landless man’[[10]](#footnote-11), and endure anything rather than opine with them and live that life […] (Plato, Rep. 7.516c-e).

Hence, we see that, for those who prefer to search for and withstand the (real) unchangeable aspects of reality and not live in illusion, moral lives, moral actions are the only way to achieve happiness and create within them the unconditional joy of life, self-contained joy. This is so because, on the one hand, there is no need to fall into inner contradictions that demand the disconnection of ourselves from our reason, from our intellectual need for coherence and truth; and on the other hand, there is a process of balancing the psyche so that, more and more, it comes to accept and approve of the unchangeable aspects of reality, yet not fall into anxiety and despair, but rather enjoyment and love of reality as a whole as it is revealed.

So to conclude this section, it is not just the “eat-drink” approach that costs its adherent negative feelings towards reality, it is also the price of the practical type. Because while accepting the social and technical aspects of reality (the changeable aspects of reality) as unchangeable, as a form of reality, they still create within their souls a split in which the true unchangeable aspects of reality and its epistemological parallel – reason[[11]](#footnote-12) – must be denied. This denial necessarily creates a negative approach towards some aspects of reality (especially the unchangeable ones) and thus towards reality as a whole.[[12]](#footnote-13)

1. **Why reality as a whole deserves our acceptance: The creation thought experiment**

But why is it so good for one to crave to the unchangeable aspects of truth and reality, and accept it? Why what is real or true also good, and does it thus deserve our acceptance and love? Should we not devote our energies to changing reality? In the background to this question one may find the atheistic tradition of atheistic existentialism, Marxism and neo-Marxism that consider the *rebellion* against reality and against its absurdities and senselessness contingencies, to be a main issue. I believe that my interpretation of Plato is not in a deep tension with it, as far as the distinction between degrees of reality in which some aspects of it are changeable and others are not, is accepted.

It should again be clarified that, by accepting reality, I do not mean accepting every event, case, or phenomenon *within* reality – the *changeable* *contingent* *events* *within* it. If there are, for example, cases of cruelty, hunger, or other *potentialities* and possibilities to correct and so develop the wellbeing of humanity, we ought to rectify what it is possible to rectify and not accept the *actuality* of a lesser possibility. But these contingent events do not represent reality or existence as a whole; i.e. the Form of reality, its logic, or the unchangeable aspects of it. Yet the issue I raised here is regarding accepting *these* aspects: the unchangeable rather than the changeable contingent ones. Again, we may demonstrate it by indicating what for now at least we consider as unchangeable characteristics of reality: the law of noncontradiction, our being historical and physical creatures that are subject to space and time, our need for oxygen, protein and so on.

Returning now to our question: why the unchangeable aspects of reality, reality as a whole, deserve our acceptance and love? Why is it good? Why, for example, should a refugee father who has lost his child in a bombardment of a tyrannical regime, or a person who is sexually abused, accept reality as a whole?

As I noted earlier regarding the nature of the Good in itself in Plato, I believe that this is *the* question that Plato is silent about – the ineffable. There cannot be a literal answer to the question of why we should love existence as a whole, why it is good. Either one *sees* that it is good, or one does not see it. And of course, one can *only see this by oneself* on their own. Nevertheless, I will now try to give a sense of what it means to see that. Let us now go back to the opening of the article and describe here again the thought experiment.

So again, imagine a time when you are all alone, and you are approached by something that presents you with the following binary decision. There is a planet, a billion light years away. The planet has nothing (in everyday language) on it – a cold solid rock. It is also given that nothing that happens on that empty planet can, for better or for worse, affect us here on earth, and it never will. By pushing a button (an act of wishing or whatever binary procedure you prefer), this planet would develop an atmosphere and water, grass would grow, insects, fish, rodents, birds, owls, and hawks would emerge. That’s it. Again, it is given that none of these would have any effect, for better or for worse, on Earth, humanity and its surroundings. Actually, no one would ever encounter any creatures from this planet or any other creature that may have encountered this planet’s creatures. One more factor is that the person who has the option of pushing the button (you), would never be able to share the whole situation and the decision they make – it would forever be only with them.[[13]](#footnote-14) What is your choice?

I would like to claim that by deciding to push the button and create life – without any interest – one expresses the intuition that existence as a whole is good. In other words, taking into account all the constant unchangeable characteristics of reality (again, for now we mostly think of the law of noncontradiction, our being historical and physical creatures that are subject to space and time, and more concretely and terrifyingly, the inevitable separation from our loved ones, death, the built-in uncertainty, disease, and degeneration of our bodies and so forth), by pushing the button we express our willingness to accept reality as a whole, *including our subjection to the painful and sad unchangeable elements that are included in it*. This painful fate does not change the intuition that life as a whole is good, and that it is better that there is everything rather than nothing (Wittgenstein, 1965).[[14]](#footnote-15) Of course it is possible to be on the way to such an ideal state of mind, to hope for it and work towards it. An individual or a culture can say to themselves that they are working on themselves so that such an acceptance of the unchangeable aspects of reality would one day be achieved. Of course, first we need to be able to identify these aspects, to learn and gain knowledge and understanding so as to be able to distinguish them from the changeable aspects, and so on. These are the goals of education, of knowledge, research, the value we find in truth and morality. It is built on the belief, the hope, of being an educated person or an educated culture, and then feeling acceptance and love towards reality as a whole, towards existence as a whole.

From a personal point of view, it is to say that *no matter what* has happened to me, no matter what contingent event had occurred in my personal history, I am thankful for my birth and life, and always conceive of them as the better option (“better” on a totally different level) in comparison to the option of not having been born at all (see also Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* §341).

1. **Conclusion**

What then can we draw from Plato’s *Republic* regarding the implications of a moral life in a (prima-facie) meaningless world? What rationale do we have as teachers and parents – as educators – for advising our students and children to waive a relative advantage that has fallen into their hands, for example to return lost money even though they need it badly? In other words, what rationale could an educator hold when practicing moral education in what may seem to be a world lacking in reason, in which one would seem to be a fool to not fulfil their advantage over others?

After showing the limitations of Oral’s (2017) answer to the above question, I have suggested an alternative rationalistic answer founded on a reading of Plato’s Republic. In one of the first formulations of the problem, Plato asks in the *Republic* what is justice and good, and what is the meaning and reason for performing good and just acts, or living good and just lives; actions and lives that require at least some degree of relinquishing one’s relative advantage over others. In other words, what makes it reasonable and meaningful (not in terms of fear of punishment or the interests of winning an award) to overcome the natural urge and the common logic to maximize comparative advantage and exploit it as much as possible? After reviewing some of the readings others have arrived at regarding this question in the *Republic*, all sharing the enigmatic character of Plato’s own answer to the question, I have suggested a reading that combines two elements in the text. The first is the idea that just and good actions and lives are ones that create, maintain, and develop the inner balance of one’s soul, and wisdom would be the ability to see, among all possible acts and lives, the option that would do so. The second idea (based on the first one) is that Plato’s allegory of the cave implies what the substantial content of good and just actions is. And so, as I have argued, it is those lives and those decisions and actions that remind and empower the individual awareness of the unchangeable aspects of reality, and in addition bring the individual to an acceptance, balancing their psyche towards a positive affinity with reality as a whole, even towards loving it. Such an affinity is developed even though the unchangeable aspects of reality have an unpleasant and difficult to accept (let alone love), implication regarding human life.

So, the general main answer I have come to is that the implications of a moral life, of actually doing the right and good thing (i.e. waiving unjust relative advantage that has fallen by chance into our hands) in a (*prima-facie*) meaningless world, is the creation, development, and maintaining of a united, harmonious and balanced soul that possesses a positive affinity towards reality and existence as a whole. Such a soul is in a state of constant learning and searching to adjust itself so as to not suffer pain, fear, anxiety, or depression as a result of facing the real and its place within it. These negative feelings towards reality, when governing the individual or community way of life and decisions, direct it to look for compensational illusions. This negative affinity is being represented as the life experience of the prisoners inside the cave. In this life experience, the prisoner fantasizes themselves beyond reality. This means a poor understanding of reality, which means giving an unrealistic value of unchangeable-aspect-of-reality, to changeable and contingent events in it. Such an illusion, although it may be very comfortable and give a sense of control and security in the short term, deprives and suppresses one’s own reason and its craving for the truth, the real.

Specifically, how, for example, would a hard-working single parent benefit from returning money that he or she had found? If, at the moment of returning the money, he or she were to direct their attention and intention to the inner connection between existence as a whole, their place within it, and the Good, they would transform the returning event from a case of a gullible person who does not understand his or her surroundings, into a metaphysical ceremony that binds the Good with the constant unchangeable aspects of Reality.

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1. I use interchangeably the terms: reality, being, existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. For more on the idea of reasonable faith see Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See for example *Symposium* 210e-211b where he describes the “final object” which is “… neither comes to be nor perishes, neither waxes nor wanes”, and keeps on to “describe” it in negative form, closing this description of the absolute indescribable One with the obscure line “existing ever in singularity of form independent by itself” (Plato, Sym. 210e-211b). Or the special character of the philosophers vs. the “doxophilists” (lovers of opinion) (Plato Rep. 6.480a). While the “[…] philosophers are those who are capable of apprehending that which is eternal and unchanging, […] those who are incapable of this but lose themselves and wander amid the multiplicities of multifarious things, are not philosophers” (Plato Rep 66.484b). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. It is worth mentioning here that Plato did not foresee (as he did with timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and the tyrannical state and individual types), the theocratic corruption of the best state and the individual. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. As Plato describes: “[…] would not that pain his eyes, and would he not turn away and flee to those things which he is able to discern and regard them as in very deed more clear and exact than the objects pointed out?” (Plato Rep. 7.515e). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. I use interchangeably the terms: “constant unchangeable form of existence”, “constant unchangeable aspects of reality”, “reality as a whole”, “constant metaphysical context”, “the Form of reality” and so on. In Meillassoux’s terms it is the senselessness of being, the absolute of contingency and the essential spectres. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Of course, that the last deed is one of waiving one’s advantage due to feeling that their comfortable life in the face of a persecuted refugee is an unfair advantage. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. By “outside his scope” I refer to the unchangeable aspects of reality, i.e. the manger, the practical type, gives hyperbolic value to changeable aspects of reality like norms, public opinion and materialistic objects, all of which are in a state of continuous, ongoing change, even though we do not (immediately) sense it. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. See Kant’s idea of reason as a unifying function in Williams, 2016. For more recent discussions on reason, see Deutsch, 2011, or Cavell, 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Homer, The Odyssey, 11.489. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. See the analogy of the divided line. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. One may reasonably ask if the above idea is not just an opposite basic assumption to that of Meillassoux and Oral. While they assume a contingent unreasonable order in the world, I suggest a Platonic rational order. I do not believe that it is so simple. Because I agree with their first intuition regarding what they call the essential spectres of reality. I.e. the starting point regarding the human existential experience is the same. Yet my suggestion shows that knowledge of what is changeable vs. what is unchangeable, plus moral actions and life, can develop a soul, a psyche, that sees these unchangeable aspects, which condition reality as a whole – as good. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. The last demand is being put forth in order to refrain as much as possible from social or group pressure or a disposition to either please or provoke others. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. For an opposite understanding (a terrible one I believe) of the issue of the worth of existence see the concept of anti-natalism, and for example Benatar (2012; 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)