# The personal benefits of moral action in Plato's Republic

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**Abstract**

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**I**

1. **The question**

Is there any personal (not legal or social) benefit in giving a way, in self-restrain while there is an alternative action in which the agent will achieve more power? For example is there any personal benefits in returning a £250000 that accidently transferred to your bank account from a big organization or a rich person whom doesn't even notice the mistake (see the story of Benedictus 2012)? In case you afraid that the transfer is documented forever, think of returning a case of money no one saw you found or less amount of money, say 10000$. Is there any personal benefits in putting one's life and family's life endanger for helping a persecuted refugee (assuming it is the moral thing to do in the situation)? In general – waiving on what seems to be one's interests?

The question arises because while from legal or social-order point of view one *has to* return the lost money, then from individualistic-competitive everyday life perspective the answer seem to be negative. I.e. to waive up on a relative advantage one has over the others seems, from everyday life perspective, to be an act of naive self-sacrificing person – an act of a gullible person. It is common that doing the good and right thing is a kind of compromising one does. One directs oneself to keep and increase one's relative advantage over the others ,but on the other hand this direction makes one afraid that someone else might take advantage of him or her, and use him or her without getting just reward or without the ability to punish the user. Therefore the common rationales for doing the good are social, legal and in general – negative. I.e. they are concern with the *risks* of *not acting* in accordance with the good, rather than with the individual benefits of doing the good (Plato, Rep.2.358-367).

The issue behind the question is important for education (moral education) in liberalistic context. In this context the values of freedom, happiness and self-fulfillment of the individual are essential, parents and educators are obliged us to look for a rationale to our moral demands from the perspective of the individual and that *telos*. How can we expect ourselves and the young generation both self-fulfillment and self-restrain – waiving on a relative advantages?

Therefore it may seem that as teachers and parents in liberalistic context, if we think of the individual student interests for happiness and self-fulfillment, we have all the reasons to advise them (in four eyes and behind closed doors) that, if they have an option to increase their relative advantages without risking themselves (let alone risking themselves for a big moral idea), they should (again - personally speaking) do it without any hesitation. Would you advise your childes or students otherwise? Why? In what follows I will give an account of the personal benefits of moral action.

1. **The question and Plato's Republic**

This question famously raised in Plato's *Republic*. But his answer is quiet vague. He does not give a clear description of the good and it is not explicitly clear from his writings whether he would consider our illustration of good deeds (returning a wallet, helping refugee and so) as expressions of the Good. Socrates declares that he himself doesn't know what is the good – the most important thing (Plato, Rep.6.506b-506c). Irwin (1995) points at this silence of Plato 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, 317)*.* Nevertheless Irwin tries to understand Plato's idea of justice in a way that is close to what I am looking here. He distinct two ideas of justice: "Platonic justice" and "common justice" (1995, 283). Platonic Justice is the proper inner balance of the soul that Plato describes in book IV. Common Justice is what we conceive as justice in everyday language, i.e. caring and acting towards the good of others (Irwin 1995, 293). This connection is not trivial in Irwin's eyes since he believes that all the four declined cities and characters (timocracy, oligarchy, democracy and the tyrannical (Rep. 8.545b-c) are all express deep un-justice from common perspective (Common Justice) yet do not show any un-justice in terms of Platonic Justice. Irwin finds it difficult to attribute to them un-balanced soul, because he sees their goals set and pursue as perfectly rational. Irwin claims that we cannot say that any one of the corrupted types is controlled by the appetites (Irwin, 1995, 285). Irwin believes that these inner tension does not get any explicit clarification or other solution in the *Republic*. As he conclude his account on 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, 317).

Irwin thus is bothered by the same question in Plato which I have raised. Yet while from his perspective the *Republic* does not answer to this question I would later try to show that it does.

Kraut (1999) also tries to understand how a just action can benefits the agent. He rejects general claims that fall into circularity in their argumentation like "the good is the just and the opposite". He believes that the connection of justice and the good lies in the need for political justice in order to live the good life. The good life are the search for the Good, the Form of the good, which possess the perfect harmony and order. This perfect harmony ought to be realized in the particular earthly lives of the individual and the community. From this point Kraut deduce that the interest or benefit of the philosopher to do justice in the political sphere is to promote social welfare and harmony in their political sphere. Such an order is needed for them to contemplate at the ideal Forms (Kraut, 1999, 329).

The limits I find in Kraut's account is that the relevancy of that problem, as I show at the beginning of the paper, goes further than the text. It is not just a philosophic problem or only for philosophers. This question is relevant to every individual, and educators (which are all parents) in particular. They have to give an account, first of all for themselves, of the rationale for their moral demands from their kids and students. Second limitation I find in Kraut's account is that, although he describes the psychological benefits of just lives, i.e. temperance, peace of mind, the ability to control the appetites, he stay at the surface of Plato's text and thus, like him, doesn't give a concrete account of what it means to see the Forms and contemplate on them.

1. **The interpretational problem and the theistic reading**

But how can we give a concrete account *beyond* what the text itself offers? In other words how can we tackled Irwin's claim that Plato has left the concrete understanding of the good to the next future moral philosophers? Rist (2012) suggests a theistic perspective in which he reads Plato from Plotinus perspective. He too finds that there is a gap in Plato's *Republic* and in general between the Form of the Good which is formal and impersonal on the one hand, and the moral obligation of the human agent, of the good moral action on the other. Therefore he suggest a personification of the Form of Good to God and God's will (269). Without such a God Rist claims, there can be no obligation to moral action, and in my terms – no incentive, no benefit for the individual to do the 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, 268). Thus in Rist eyes in order to find benefit for the individual to do the good action there has to be personification of the Good to God's will.

Although Rist says that Plato himself expresses his awareness to this gap in later writing such as *Phaedrus* and the *Laws*, I believe that Plato would not be approved of the personalized solution. The personalization creates moral and metaphysical problems. Rist himself mentions few metaphysical problems amongst the issue regarding the ability of God to "know" the particulars (Rist, 2012, 267). He doesn't mention the moral or metaethical problematic implications that the personalized solution creates. One of the problems is that it materialize the transcendent sublime. And this would be a deep contradiction of a well-accepted Plato's central theme regarding the human inclination to ascribe hyperbolic value of realness to earthly-material things which possess very little amount of the property of realness (Rep. 6.510a). In so many places he shows our wrong inclination to give exaggerated value – value of realness – to things which are not possess large amount of realness. Yet this is exactly what personification of the Good would bring to. For it serves, as Rist actually says, as an instrument for performing the moral deed. This makes the specific "moral deed" superior in hierarchy to the personalized God. This perspective may easily lead in the slippery slope of pseudo-moral actions in the name of God. People start thinking that their idea of what is good (for example punishing the sinners, inquiring and frightening them or start a war upon them) is a goal which the personalized God should serve. In other words, once the good becomes the personalized God it loses its transcendent sublime holiness in favor of the material earthly level of existence. And this mixture is, at least in Plato's eyes, an ontological contradiction. Again since the amount of realness of the material earthly ontological level is much less than that which is pure reality, or as Gadamer names the Platonic Good: the "arché, the starting point (principle) of everything" (1986, 90). This mixture illusion of taking the value of pure reality and give it to earthly things leads to endless inner divisions which brings to tensions, conflicts and cruel wars – absolutely not holy. It is worth to mention here that Plato didn't foresee (as he did with timocracy, oligarchy, democracy and the tyrannical state and individual types), the theocratic corruption of the best state and individual.

Nevertheless I do not wish to omit the moral obligation of the agent even though Rist suggest that that it is the only alternative of those who don't agree with personalizing the Good (2012, 268).Therefore I would like to suggest more speculative interpretation then that of Irwin and Kraut in order to find a way to connect this gap between the good and the just and to give some concrete illustrations of the good.

In order to do so I will use a literary dramatic method of interpretation or a kind of *Midrash*. Midrash is an old traditional Jewish method of interpreting the old Bible and canonical texts. The aim of the interpretation is reconciling apparent contradictions in the text. It does so by creating a new story based on the original one (Dimitrovsky, 2001). These stories illuminates themes and other aspects of the original text that supposed to be analytically included in it from the beginning. Melzer (2014) calls for such esoteric reading of Plato. Plato, he claims, is one of the most central thinkers whom wrote in esoteric style. He calls to read between Plato's lines while looking also for what Plato *shows* through the specific characters, the specific moment in the conversations or the *way* things are being said.

In what follows I will show according to Plato's *Republic* the benefits that the individual gets from doing the right and the good deed. In order to do so we have to find a connection between (1) what we intuitively conceive as a good deed – say returning a lost wallet, helping a refugee – with (2) what is considered by Plato as a benefit to the individual.

The well-known fragments regarding the good are in books VI and VII when Socrates is asked by Glaucon and Adeimantus to say what is the good. Although his anger responds seem to be dramatically overblown by him, his answer is unequivocally – it is impossible to talk about the Good (Rep 6.506b-c). Yet in response to their pressure he agreed to say something, not directly about the good, but about the *descendants* of the Good – Truth and Knowledge. After Socrates tries to explain the enigmatic analogy of the sun (his first answer regarding the nature of the Good) by the *analogy of the divided line* (his second answer), he continues to the *allegory of the cave*. In this famous allegory he tries to illustrates, as he explains, the differences between the good and educated lives and uneducated lives. In this allegory he also describes the process of transferring from the uneducated lives to the good ones. I will use a speculative *Midrash style* of reading this allegory.

1. **Midrash of the allegory of the cave**

If we can assume that life in the cave represents an unworthy lives for humans and getting out of the cave and living outside it represents the good life, then an answer regarding the differences between the *life-experience* (LE) of those two general alternative ways of life, will give us a clue regarding the substantial content of the good and what are the benefits of living this lives.

In imagining the prisoners' LE we may deduce that since it is their own nature that binds them to look at the cave's wall and they will always look for returning back to that place even though they will see what is behind them, then their LE can reasonably be characterized by the feeling of a place that one desire to go back to, a place of comfort control, of secure – of allegedly being *beyond reality*. "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 other words, since one of the main characteristic of the prisoners LE is that the "reality" is *in front* of them *over there* on the wall, we can deduce that life inside the cave are experienced as being beyond "the world": beyond history and time and beyond physics and space. Like being in a worm sleep. This comfortable state of mind is expressed in the resentment Socrates had gotten from the Athenian people while he was examining their presumption about central social and moral categories as courage, knowledge, justice, virtue and so. Their comfort familiar old understanding and categorizing of the world, their common distinctions, dichotomies and hierarchies were their comfort cave, comfort protected zone.

On the other hand the individual that gets out of the cave, as she uncomfortably become aware to her own ignorance as well as her community unconscious-ignorance, seems to *see* and experienced herself 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; she experiences in each and every bone that the reality is allover: surrounds her and within her. While life inside the cave has the ability of controlling the "real", then outside the cave one has no control over its main elements: the sun, the heat, the cold, the starting time and ending time of the biting of her heart.

Existentially speaking, outside the cave the individual grasps her fragileness, her partiality temporal nature. And as it well known and according to many thinkers and texts whom emphasize the existential aspect of the human life experience (as Ecclesiastes, Plato's Phaedo, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Camus or Sartre), it is accepted that the awareness to the naked reality invokes anxiety and depression. In the text of Plato these feelings are represented by the sufferings one bears in 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* has been undermined, and one finds herself as a temporal ignorant guest totally a *subject* to the Real. Thus it is of no surprise that no one wants to get out of the cave, and the one who is *compelled* to go through the process, is in suffering pain and keep on resisting the process, trying to return back.

For this and others reasons, it is hard to keep in mind this new self-perspective of the individual's place within reality (for other aspects of the problem see Segev 2016). It is an existential situation that we may want to forget, to repress. But in spite of that Plato as a truth and coherence lover cannot accept that the real is bad and causes suffering – there must be something wrong in the way one conceive herself and her reality if the truth about one's reality causes her for depression and anxiety. Therefore the educational process should be aimed to adapt the individual (and police) soul so that it would cohere with this unchangeable form of the existence as a whole. But what makes this process? What is the force which changes the soul as to find joy and comfort rather than fears while facing the Real? As I'll described later, such a positive approach toward reality most possibly would ran away from the mind just as the sculptures of Daedalus do (Meno. XXX). practically this means that unfortunately we are pushed to return to the comfort zone and to put reality into sleep. And here comes the substantial content of morality – of the good actions.

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. Good actions are those:

which preserves and helps to produce this condition of soul, and wisdom the science (443d-e) 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" (444a) (Rep. 4. 443d – 444a).

I would like to focus on two ideas in that phrase. First that there is an inner connection between the just and good deed (and in general the good life) 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 precede the inner balance and not the other way around. In other words, that the inner life are the aim in itself and within them lies the desirable results, and not, as we usually think – in the outside world for example the repairing of the frustration feelings of the person who lost the wallet. Second, that wisdom from that perspective is seeing, wrapped up by the overall constant metaphysical context of our lives, what sort of deed from all possible deeds a situation potentially holds, would help to create, developed and preserve this inner unite balance.

Now in the context of what I've suggested earlier regarding the life experience (LE) of the prisoners inside the cave vs. the LE of those whom are on a journey out of the cave, we may offer to see the wise and good deed as one that would *keep in mind* the LE of being within reality – of being on a journey outside the cave. An unmoral deed on the contrary would help to develop, deepening and preserving the LE of the prisoners – the illusion of being beyond "reality". And so we can generally say that by choosing the good-moral possibility in a situation and putting it into practice a person reminds herself the reality and her place within it. Remembering not just in terms of cogitation but in whole of her existence. This is why truth loving is a pre-condition on the road for the good life. It is the motivation to know, to remember reality, to be in accord with it that drives the moral deed. I will get back to this theme later.

Therefore and regarding our own case, the personal (not social or legal) benefits of returning a lost £250000 to a very rich firm (who won't really feel the difference) has a moral educational impact not only on the social or interpersonal level, nor as Kraut has suggested on the political sphere of the philosopher, but on the internal level; by returning the money one "reminds"[[1]](#footnote-2) herself her place within reality; she recalls the LE of getting out of the cave. Keeping the lost money would break down her inner unite balance, i.e. it would return her back to the cave's illusion of being beyond reality.

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

A question may arise here: Why one's acknowledgment of her metaphysical-existential fragile partial temporal status would bring her to do a good deed – say returning a lost money and not, say, adopting the approach of: "let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die" (EDTD approach to leaving) [Isaiah 22:13]? In other words, why not choosing life which direct to use ones surrounding in order to maximize, whenever one cans, one's advantage? Why not execute each and every opportunity for pleasure even though it comes at the expense of others: after all – you live only once?

The answer is that leaving according to an EDTD approach expresses a *deep frustration* from one's reality, from its metaphysical constant essential elements; EDTD approach expresses a *resentfulness* for it. It is like being in a struggle or fight with Reality. It means that if one would have the opportunity to change one's metaphysical-existential status (for example making oneself to live forever like a god – see the character of Immortan Joe in Miller's (2015) Mad Max: Fury Road) one would do it without hesitation. This frustration and resentfulness is expressed in the monuments 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 sometimes wrongly called their power. It is wrong because from the Platonic perspective I draw here this is the opposite of power. Vice versa the good and just deed expresses one's *acceptance* and *love* of that metaphysical-existential status. This inner acceptance and love is *created* and *maintained* by small and large human moral gestures: from returning a lost wallet to risking one's lives and family lives without accepting any rewards in order to help a persecuted refugee. Returning to our example, by keeping the 50000$ (as part of living according to EDTD approach or the competitive individualistic *geist*) I'm not just expressing frustration, resentfulness and fear from my place in the overall real I am also *creating* and *maintaining* within me this approach toward reality. While by returning the money I'm *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.

1. **The practical type**

But can't we think of an individual that totally doesn't live according to the (extreme) EDTD approach and yet finds it perfectly OK not to return the wallet, and anyhow actually not returning it and enjoining its fruits? A person that there is no chance would donate money or time to any goal without social demands or reward as status or honor or other benefits, let alone put himself in danger for helping a persecuted refugee. Just for the sake of illustration we can think of most of us - our "bourgeoisie" one dimensional social selves, or/and 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. I will name that person as the *practical* type. This practical character is one who may do whatever she can to increase her advantages over others, but will never break the common social norms. She may be very effective, intelligent, help her friends and harm her enemies, good negotiator – she can gain high honors and success. The question then is what is the problem with that way of life? Does getting out of the cave say something about that person who won't return the wallet or save the refugee, but does not live by an EDTD approach? Actually this question brings us back to Irwin's claim I've brought above that the degenerated types (timocratic, oligarchic, democratic and the tyrant) *do* have balanced soul.

My answer to this is connected with the character of reason. MacIntyre in his famous After Virtue describes the failure of the enlightenment to establish morality without *telos* (MacIntyre, 2007, 53-55), i.e. a unifying end, arché, that gives meaning to everything, especially to our decisions, free choices, specific deeds and generally our chosen way of life. His critic lies on the inability to divide the moral commandments from the *telos* that was their goal (2007, 53-55). This division from the telos, the arché, do not prevent the practical type to do many things well and even succeed in the context of the common norms of the social life and technical world. But since that person would incline to deny, to repress all the existential, metaphysical elements of life, then she or he will be paralyzed while facing the edges of social life and technical world, the constant unchangeable aspects of reality (we can think for now of death, illness, stupidity, defining ultimate goals), or if they confronted with their inner split or denial.

Reason aspire to see *why* – it seeks for a *reason*. Living the life of the practical character necessitate to divide the reason from this inner aspiration, which is also part of its aspiration for truth, unifying harmonies coherence order. The self-educational process that creates a positive approach towards the constant unchangeable aspects of reality, is necessary for those that cannot waive the craving of their reason for unifying harmonious order, for truth (see Kant's idea of reason as a unifying function in Williams 2016). In terms of the allegory of the cave these truth searching individuals, philosophers, would "prefer while living on earth to be serf of another, a landless man, and endure anything rather than" return back to the illusions of the cave (Rep. 7.516d). For those whom would prefer to stand all the sufferings of the real and not live in illusion, then moral lives, moral gestures are the only way to get happiness and create within them unconditional joy of life, self-contain joy, in which on the one hand there is no need of falling into inner contradictions that demands disconnecting our reason and its need for coherence, from ourselves, and on the other hand there is no suffering.

Therefore it is not just EDTD approach that costs its adherent a negative feelings towards reality, it is also the price of the practical type. Because while accepting the social and technical aspects of reality, they still creates within their souls a split in which the Form of reality and its epistemological parallel – the reason – must be denied. This denial necessarily creates a negative approach towards some aspects of reality but thus to reality as a whole.

1. **The creation thought experiment: why Reality deserves our acceptance**

But why at all is it so good for one to love her reality and to accept it? Why what is real or true is also good and thus deserves our acceptance and love? It should again be clarified that by accepting reality I don't mean accepting each and every event, case or phenomena *within* reality. If there are for example cases of cruelty or hunger we *ought* to fix it and not accept it. But these event do not prevent us from accepting reality as a whole. Again, the question is why accepting the constant unchangeable aspects (the Form) of reality, the constant metaphysical dimension of the reality, reality as a whole?

So, why what is real deserves our acceptance and love, why is it good? Why for example should a refugee father who has lost his daughter in a bombardment of a tyrannical regime, or a woman that was traded and raped, should accept reality? I believe that this is the question that Plato is silent about – the ineffable. There cannot be a literal answer to it. Either one *sees* that reality as a whole (i.e. the Form of reality and existence as a whole) is good or either not. And of course it is only by her or him selves that one may see this. Yet I believe that it is possible to give a sense of what it means to see that.

In order to get that sense let's use a thought experiment. Imagine a time when you are all alone. In that time you are approached by something that presented you the following binary decision. There is a planet billion lightyears far. The planet has nothing on it – cold solid rock. It is also given that *nothing* that is happening on that empty planet can for better and for worse affects us here on earth and never will. By pushing a button (an act of wishing or whatever binary procedure you prefer), this planet would create an atmosphere, water, grass will grow, some insects, fishes, rodents, birds, owls and hawks. That's it. Again it is given that all these won't have any effect for better and for worse upon Earth and its surrounding. One more term is that the person who has the option to push the button (you), will never have the ability to share the whole situation and the decision you take – it forever be only with you. What then would you do?

I would like to claim that by deciding to push the button and creating lives – without any interest – one expresses the intuition that existence as a whole is good. In other words, taking into account all the constant metaphysical characteristic of the reality (for now we mostly think of the inevitable separation from our love ones, death, our inability to know the truth, diseases and degeneration of our bodies, our subjection to space and time and logic and so), then by pushing the button we express our willing to accept reality as a whole *including our subjection to the hurting and sad unchangeable elements that are included in it*. This hurting fate does not change the intuition that life, as a whole, is good (Wittgenstein, 1929); And that it is better that there is everything rather than nothing. An analogy from a personal level is to say that *no matter what* has happened to me I am thanking for my birth and living and always conceiving of them as better option (better in a total different level) in comparison to the option of not been born at all (see also Nietzsche's The Gay Science #341).

To conclude the first part, what then can we draw from Plato's Republic regarding the personal (not legal or social) benefits of doing what is good and just? And what rationale we have as teachers and parents – as educators – to advise our students and children to, for example, return lost money even though they need it badly? The general big answer to which we have reached is that by actually doing the right and the good thing we benefit the creation, developing and keeping a unite harmonious balanced soul. Such a soul is in a constant learning and searching to adjust itself so not to suffer pains, fears, anxiety or depression as a result of facing the real and its place within it. These negative feelings direct it to look for compensational illusions in which it fantasizes itself beyond reality, and so depriving and suppressing its own craving for the truth and the real and soon become accustomed to that. What would a hard working single mother benefits from returning good money that she had found? If at the moment of returning the money she would direct her intention to the inner connection between existence as a whole, her place within it and the Good, she will transform the returning event from a case of a gullible person who does not understand her surrounding into a metaphysical ceremony that binds the Good with the constant unchangeable aspects of reality. The benefits than of moral action is in harmonizing on the one hand the constant unchangeable aspects of reality with acceptance and love and not with fears. Moreover by doing the good we also learn to accept and love the constant unchangeable elements of *our own* personal lives and so to always appreciate our birth and lives over the hypothetical possibility of not been born at all.

Giving the above account regarding what is a good and just action and why Plato's Socrates insists that it is the best to act this way, another question should arise regarding the meaning of *Knowing* what to do and the inner connection between the good, knowledge and truth. This question takes us to the second part of the paper.

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1. Later on I'll discus in more details the meaning of remembering and its connection with knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)