PLATO AND THE SCOPE OF ETHICAL KNOWLEDGE

One of the most famous features of Platonic thought is the idea that ethical knowledge is closely linked with mathematics and with an understanding of the nature of the universe. This idea sometimes strikes modern readers as simply bizarre; but it takes on fresh interest because of contemporary interest in the ethical implications of medical and biological research, especially into the human genome, which is currently being analysed in mathematical terms. What, exactly, does Plato have in mind in holding this view about the interrelationship between different kinds of knowledge? This is, of course, a large and complex question. In this short discussion, my aim is simply to outline a possible line of interpretation, and to indicate the philosophical issues raised by the idea of correlating ethical ideas (more broadly, ideas about value) with thinking about mathematics or the natural universe.¹

In addressing this question, like others, we need to face the interpretative issue of the kind of evidence we should use to determine (what we call) ‘Platonic’ thought. Should we rely primarily on the generalised descriptions of ideal knowledge or ideal dialectic in the dialogues, on later, external evidence for Plato’s doctrines, or on the dialectical practice of Plato’s dramatised figures? I focus here on the third type of evidence, drawing inferences from Plato’s representations of dialectical practice about - what may be - his own underlying patterns of thought.²

My starting-point is a passage in the Republic which presents as a necessary prelude to the knowledge of the Form of the Good the process of forming a unified vision of the kinship of the subjects studied during the educational programme for the guardians. A slightly earlier passage suggests that mathematics should play a crucial role in the process of gaining this type of unified understanding.

¹For further discussion, though still highly exploratory, see Gill (forthcoming a). In the using the term ‘value’, I am not assuming any of the subjective or ‘market’ connotations that the term ‘value’ sometimes has in modern discourse: I am assuming the relevance of an objectivist approach to questions of value.
²On the interpretative challenges posed by Plato’s use of the dialogue form, see Gill (2002).