The Highest Good for Plato

Goodness is an abstract concept that is very difficult to define, and saying what counts as the highest good is perhaps even more so. In *Republic*, Plato attempts to say something about what makes things good, but his answer is very vague in the end. Still, we can get some clarity on what he would have answered if asked what the highest good is, from what he says in this text. What counts as the highest good for Plato can be said to be knowledge of the Form of the Good, because it is necessary for knowing and using the other Forms well.

The nature of the Forms is not clear in *Republic*; Plato writes about them as if his audience already knows what they are. Still, we can get some sense of what forms are like from the text. In several places he says that when two or more things share the same name, then they share a form. For example, in Book IV Socrates and Glaucon talk about the form of justice: “...are things called by the same name, whether they are bigger or smaller than one another, like or unlike with respect to that to which the name applies? Alike. Then a just man won’t differ at all from a just city in respect to the form of justice; rather he’ll be like the city” (435 a-b). But what is a Form, exactly? We can start to get a sense of what Plato means by a Form by looking back at *Euthyphro*. Socrates criticizes Euthyphro’s first definition of piety because it gives one of many examples of pious things, not the “form” of piety itself: “what I urged you to do wasn’t to teach me about one or two of the many pieties, but rather about the form itself, by virtue of which all the pieties are pious” (6d-e). From this text we can see that a Form is that which somehow makes pious things pious, that which is, we might say, an essential characteristic of piety (Hendricks).
One way to think about the Forms is to imagine properties of things like beauty, justice, goodness, or even “roundness”: “Take any property of an object; separate it from that object and consider it by itself, and you are contemplating a form. For example, if you separate the roundness of a basketball from its color, its weight, etc. and consider just roundness by itself, you are thinking of the form of roundness” (Banach). This helps make sense of Plato’s quote from book V that each of [the forms] is itself one, but because they manifest themselves everywhere in association with actions, bodies, and one another, each of them appears to be many” (476a). The abstract concept of the property is singular, but it can be manifested in many things. Still, this doesn't mean that the Forms are just the ideas of properties in our heads; Plato thought of them as somehow existing apart from our minds, in the realm of the “intelligible” that is only understood by reason (507b). This is the only way he could argue that they are eternal and immutable (Hendricks).

Plato’s arguments in Republic suggest that all Forms are good. In the allegory of the cave, the sun represents the Form of the Good, and the sun is what allows things in the visible realm to be both visible and to exist at all (509b). Similarly, the Form of the Good “gives their truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower” (508e). In other words, it makes the objects of knowledge knowable like the sun makes physical objects visible. For Plato, the objects of knowledge are the Forms (479e). In comparing the Form of the Good to the sun, Plato is also implying that the Form of the Good makes the other Forms not only knowable but also gives them the possibility of existing, like the sun allows objects in the visible realm to exist. We can interpret Plato as saying here that all Forms are Good (see also Silverman).

But what is the highest good? This must be, for Plato, knowledge of the Form of the Good itself. He states in Book VI that one must have knowledge of the Form of the Good before knowledge of the
other Forms can be of any use or benefit (505a-b). We can't use the knowledge of the other Forms well without understanding what goodness is. Further, if the other Forms are also good, then it makes sense to say that we can't even really know the other Forms unless we have knowledge of what “good” means. We can say, then, that knowledge of the Form of the Good is crucial for knowledge of the other Forms and effective use of that knowledge. It is in that sense that it is “higher” than knowledge of the other Forms. And since for Plato knowledge of the other Forms is better than beliefs about the many objects in which those Forms exist (506c), then the best thing is knowledge of the Form of the Good.

It is interesting that Plato doesn't provide us with an answer as to what the Form of the Good is, however, in Republic. All Socrates says is that he can give us an “offspring of the good” (506e) in the comparison to the sun and suggests he can't go any further than that. Perhaps Socrates himself has not gone through the arduous steps out of the cave and into the light of the sun.

**Works cited**


<http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/platform.htm>


<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-metaphysics/#4>