The Origin, Significance and Bearing of the ἐπέκεινα Motif in Plotinus and the Neoplatonic Tradition

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In the following essay, I would like to offer an account of some of the circumstances that surrounded the emergence and the development of the concept of ἐπέκεινα within the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions. In the attempt to trace the history of a philosophical concept, one must, in my view, try to avoid two main pitfalls that are, as it were, two extremes.

The first is to attach excessive importance to the word itself without taking into consideration the context of its expression, as if the mere presence or absence of the word were enough to attest to the presence or the absence of the doctrine it is supposed to confer. If the mere use of a word, or of a certain group of words, were the determining factors, any substitutions, even the most minor ones (ὑπέρ, say, instead of ἐπέκεινα) or any alterations to the group of words into which the initial term appears, would entail the irreremediable dissolution of its initially intended meaning. And so the transcendence expressed by a term such as ὑπεροχή would remain fundamentally foreign to otherwise cognate terms, or the very same word, in this case ἐπέκεινα, would take on entirely heterogeneous meanings as soon as the immediate context of its enunciation should be modified, no matter how little. In such a scenario, the entire history of philosophy itself turns out to be but a discontinuous series of episodes devoid of any real connections with each other.

The other extreme, however, is no less cumbersome. This time starting from an already given or settled meaning, one would strive to show such a meaning to remain intact under new and in the end always indifferent forms. The context of the expression, the language of the author, a period’s or an era’s particular vocabulary, the ever-changing network of influences (political, cultural, philosophical, etc.), all of these would remain external to a solid core of pre-established meaning, a message once and for all preordained. In such a perspective, the Platonic ἐπέκεινα would already contain within itself the whole range of meanings that several centuries of elaboration and reflection would later strive, in vain, to add to it. No longer concerned with context and formulas, one would then hold that Plotinus means no more, when making use of this formula, than what Plato already suggested in using it, and Damascius, nothing else than what Plotinus himself had perceived in it.

Platonic and Neoplatonic literature offer more or less pronounced examples of both these tendencies. There are commentators for whom the Plotinian ἐπέκεινα is in no way Platonic, even though it actually refers to and is inspired by Plato, whence the principle of a clear-cut division between Platonism and Neoplatonism (e.g. Lafrance, Brisson); others for whom its use is essentially
Platonic, whence the principle of an identity of intuition or content in both, making Neoplatonism a sort of mere repetition, scattered over several centuries, of primitive Platonism (e.g. Krämer, Hager).

In the face of this dilemma, the interpreter, it seems to me, has no other alternative but to develop an interpretation which, while receptive to particular formulations and to the modifications they may be subjected to, remains open to the community of meanings retained within them. In concrete terms, this means to try to make sense of the Plotinian project in both its difference from and its effective continuity with Platonic thought. Every step, of course, lays one open to the objections of divergent or adverse interpretations. But can any interpretation, whatever its more particular orientation, ever be contemplated without assuming such a risk?

I. Ἐπέκεινα in Plato

First a precision. My aim is not to assemble here all the texts in the Platonic corpus which, in one way or another, refer to the transcendence of a first principle or could be cited in confirmation of the Ἐπέκεινα of Republic 509b. I also leave aside external references which could as well clarify or reinforce such or such a reading of the passage in question. Concentrating exclusively on that text, and on its context, is what I would here claim as a legitimate position.

What we reencounter in this portion of the Republic is an ascending dialectical movement which, going from Idea to Idea, reaches or tries to reach a primary Idea, the Good, asserted to be not itself an "ousía" (οὐκ ὀὐσίας δύτος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ), "but rather something which rises above (ὑπερέχουσα) and beyond (ἐπεκεῖνα) ousia by its majesty and its power," in a phrase where the idea of going beyond, or of a difference of level, with regard to the other Ideas, themselves already transcendent, is twofold, expressed by both the verb ὑπερέχειν and by the preposition Ἐπέκεινα.¹

What we do not encounter in this passage of the Republic is, I think, a mode of expression accounting, once this going beyond ὀσία by the Good is acknowledged, for the mode of existence or the particular mode of being—how is one to express it here, since Plato himself has left us with no determinate term?—of what is, in any case, not ousia and is, in its majesty and power, far beyond ousia.

¹ This has been pointed out by J.-F. Mattei in a suggestive study: "Plato could have, to bring the good to mind, contented himself with writing ὑπερέχουσα τῆς ὀσίας, "in rising above essence"; but he strengthens the verb ὑπερέχειν by adding a pleonastic Ἐπέκεινα resulting in hyperbole: the Good "rises above essence," the ἐπὶ intensifying the ὑπερ in an ever deepening loftiness, thus already heralding what Levinas would later call "height that goes beyond all height" (p. 77).