

Vision

Plato's interest in vision and the visual is multifaceted, and complex. Visual words and images are frequent in the dialogues along with many direct and indirect discussions of physiological, intellectual, and social vision. The increased emphasis in recent scholarship on the importance of visuality in Plato is a part of a 'scopic turn,' the effect of which was to ground interpretations of the history of western European philosophy and metaphysics in its entirety in certain optical premises. On this view, the Ancient Greeks, as the founders of the European thinking tradition, were said to be ocular people in contrast to the verbal/acoustic Jews. A particular reading of Plato played a key role -- both positive and negative -- in this. Studies published in the last decade have, in a sense, replayed debates of the early of the 20th c., when a hyper-rationalising Neo-Kantian interpretation of Plato gave way to a reaction, e.g. by the Platonists of the 'George-Kreis,' as well as by Julius Stenzel (1983-1935), Bruno Snell (1896-1986), and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Today, scholars disagree about Platonic visuality: some believe that for Plato, the most authentic cognition is dialectic (q.v.), and thus the cognition/vision comparison is merely a figure of speech; others draw various serious conclusions from Plato's multiple and extensive use of visual motifs. Some (e.g., Press 1995) even use the term 'vision' to define the polyphonic and dialogical character of Plato's philosophy as a whole.

Platonic visuality poses a number of problems. Though historians of science consider him an important and comprehensive source, physiological representations (e.g. of vision as two opposite streams, one from an object and one from the eye meeting halfway, *Timaeus* 45a-46c, 67d) merely attest that Plato was well informed about the science of his time (Hippocrates of Chios, Democritus, and even Empedocles). The study of optics, which drew on the fields of geometry, physics or ophthalmology, actually developed later on. Thus, Plato tended to treat it as the subject of a 'likely story' (*eikos logos*) and part of a wider ensemble, which could be called *scopics*.

Plato's *scopics* involves optics, the psychology of visual perception, theories of light, colour and optical illusions, theories of the image and of the sun (which in the *Republic* is a metaphysical being), together with studies of *mimêsis* (imitation; q.v.) and *sêmeiôsis* (the relation between signs and things signified). Social visibility is also important for Plato as attested by comments on the psychology of observation, testimony, ocular witnessing and judgement (*Laches passim*, *Symposium* 194bc, 218d, *R.* 442bc, 537c), the problem of (in)visibility of virtue and justice (*Meno* 72cd, *Phaedo* 65d, *Phaedrus* 254bc, *R.* 577a, 368c-369a, 402de, 445bc, 501b, 611bd), the aesthetics of theatre (etymologically linked to 'theory') and performance in general (*Laws* 659b, 701a), as well as the theory of beauty (*Phdr.* 249d-250d). Statements related to this broad scopic interest belong to different but closely related categories, among which one can distinguish: (a) visual situations: visual exchanges between participants of the dialogues, condensation of the visual lexicon and word games, mise-en-scènes implying observation, performance and the visual aspect; (b) myths: of the cave (*R.* VII), of the Ring of Gyges (*R.* 359c sq., 612b), of the charioteer and his horses (*Phdr.* 246b sq.), of the Demiurg and his paradigm (*Ti.*); and (c) statements or doctrines that raise various philosophical questions linked to vision: 1. The main problem of interpretation lies in the tension between what might be considered Plato's 'doctrine' and his language. In order to show the importance of the dialectical grasp of the invisible, he frequently uses visual vocabulary and images; but the analogy between vision and knowledge often encountered in his work seems at odds with the invisible character of objects of genuine science. This tension culminates in the designation of invisible paradigms with words such as *idea* and *eidōs* (q.v. forms) derived from the verb *idein* (the meaning of which, however,

was 'to know,' before narrowing to 'to see'). The traditional expression 'theory of ideas' turns out to be an oxymoron, meaning the contemplation of the invisible.

2. Plato expressed the distinction between the sensible and the intelligible through the opposition of two types of vision (e.g. the two visions of the soul *Phd.* 65-79, *R.* 523-524), although corporeal vision can impede or on the contrary favour 'real' vision (the intellect looking upwards, *Tht.* 174a) by the invisible soul. This problem is connected with a Platonic imperative of knowing the similar by the similar, since the invisible object can be 'seen' only by an invisible 'seer,' i.e. soul.

3. The relationship between cognition and recognition (*Philebus* 38cd, *R.* 376ac, 484cd, *Tht.* 189b sq.) is both interesting and important. One can attribute to Plato a certain *opsodicy* (coined after Leibniz's theodicy; cf. its platonic antecedent in *R.* 617e), whereas vision is summoned to the trial that will reveal its participation in the creation of illusions and distractions from what is true, and justify it partially.

4. The problem of illumination or sudden knowledge (*Epistles* 7 341cd, 344b, *Smp.* 210e), implying that the dialectical process climaxes in a vision-like revelation of the truth.

5. The problem of the relation 'being' to 'seeming' on the ethical and political level (*Apology* 21c, 41b; *Hippias Major* 294d, *Lysis* 217cd, *R.* 360e-361d, 362a, 365c) as well as on the epistemological in terms of the opposition between truth and opinion (*Tht.* 188a and *passim*, *R.* 475d, 479e-480a, 527de).

6. Discussions of the participation of the eye in vision (*Tht.* 184c sq.) are inserted in philosophical reflections on the soul, on the role of mind (*nous*), on the question of its unity and its relation to sensation or perception (*aisthêsis*; q.v.). The mind itself becomes a supervisor of all active sensation, taking on the function of the inner eye, or the eye of the soul.

7. The relationship of eyesight with the other senses, e.g. the competition between the senses (*Ti.* 45b-47b). Eyesight is sometimes considered as one of the senses (*Tht.* 163d), at others it is representative of all the other senses, a model sense. Primarily, however (*Phd.* 79a, *Ti.* 30cd), it features in asymmetric oppositions such as the 'sensible' versus 'invisible,' or the 'thinkable' versus 'visible'. Plato's rational ethics (q.v.) and moral epistemology (q.v.) suggest that one should prefer the invisible to the visible, and that this preference is precisely what distinguishes the philosopher from any other person. Plato was the first to compare and clearly distinguish eyesight and thought. He created the vocabulary of visual metaphors, which he deployed as a pedagogical strategy for selecting and educating people towards philosophy and the pursuit of truth. Whereas for those starting out on their ascent towards philosophy, the visual operated as a metaphorical tool enabling them to 'see' the truth, for Academy initiates vested with the eye of reason (e.g. *R.* 533de), the metaphor contained a different message: it is not a 'physiological' vision at all.

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