

Does Plato radically reject visual arts? References to the epistemological function of arts in Plato's dialogues

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At the subject family event (04/03/09), I aimed to tackle the question of whether Plato radically rejects visual arts. Plato is considered to be an opponent of visual arts as his famous mirror analogy in *Republic X* is often interpreted as a rejection of visual arts.

In my talk, however, I suggested that Plato's attitude towards visual arts is not that negative. My claim was that Plato only dislikes arts which prevent man from gaining new knowledge. By focussing on the Platonic dialogues *Symposium*, *Ion* and *Sophist* which challenge the traditional reading of *Republic X*, I showed that visual arts can fulfil an epistemological function. To substantiate my claim, I illustrated my talk with different artworks. I referred to Barnett Newman's [Midnight Blue](#) and to Franz Marc's *Der Turm der blauen Pferde* ([The Tower of Blue Horses](#)) as examples of modern paintings which Plato might have appreciated. Richard Estes's photorealistic paintings, by contrast, may be examples of a type of visual arts Plato might have disliked because of their illusory effect.

By reference to these different forms of visual arts, I aimed to make clear that there are some epistemologically valuable artworks. These might establish a new way to a form of knowledge which cannot be realised in a philosophical dialogue. Since Plato might acknowledge this crucial epistemological function of visual arts, I argued that he must not be misinterpreted as an outright opponent of pictorial representation.

In the analogy of *Cave*, Plato draws a crucial distinction between truth and appearances. This distinction is important for his conception of mimesis. In *Republic X*, Plato argues against mimetic images. He states that paintings are only an imitation of appearances because the painter does not look up to the forms as the craftsman does. Therefore, the painter is 'by nature third from the [philosopher-] king and the truth (*Rep.* 597^e6-7). He is a mere 'mimêtês' (*Rep.* 597^e2) because his paintings are only imitations 'of appearances' (*Rep.* 598^b3).

However, I do not agree that paintings only mirror appearances. For example, the vase painter Polygnotos depicts a fight between gods and giants on his *kratêr*. This scene is no imitation of appearances, but rather makes something visible which does not appear in nature. In addition, Zeuxis of Heraclea tried to illustrate the ideal conception of a beautiful woman. Both Zeuxis' and Polygnotos' paintings require more than sensory perception of mere appearances.

In what follows, I intended to show that Plato acknowledges a kind of art which contributes to man's acquirement of knowledge.

In *Symposium*, Plato outlines a way to gain knowledge of the forms. Being closely connected with sensual perception, this way differs from the usual road to knowledge, the philosophical dialogue.

Plato describes how the 'Spirit called Love' (*Symp.* 204^c1) advances the ascent to the forms. As Love is a 'lover of wisdom' (*Symp.* 204^b4), he starts out from beautiful bodies and uses them as 'raising stairs' (*Symp.* 211^c4) to the 'beauty of knowledge' (*Symp.* 210^d1). After having ascended from the sensual perception of beautiful bodies to the intellectual perception of the beauty of knowledge, one is all of a sudden turned to 'the great sea of beauty' (*Symp.* 210^d5).

Then man has reached the 'final and highest mystery' (*Symp.* 210^a1) which might be analogous to the knowledge of the forms. Plato emphasises how sensual perception of beautiful bodies leads to the intellectual perception of the beautiful which, characterised as being 'always one in form' (*Symp.* 211^b1-2), seems to be similar to the Platonic theory of forms. In addition, Plato states that 'all the other beautiful things share in that [the beautiful; note by the author]' (*Symp.* 211^b2-3).

This may be viewed as evidence in favour of the thesis that visual arts do have an epistemological function. Similarly to Plato's example of the beautiful bodies, visual arts may encourage Love to ascend to the 'superior nature'¹ of the physical medium of paintings, for example. Furthermore, a picture 'might share in and allude to the forms, although its nature differs from the forms'.² Accordingly, visual arts might be necessary in order to gain knowledge of certain forms. As beauty is closely connected with the sensual perception of vision, one might even assume that it is hardly possible to gain knowledge of the form of beauty in a philosophical conversation. Therefore, sensual perception is required in order to approach to the form of the beautiful.

During the perception of beautiful things, one has to become aware of the fact that there is something which 'transcend[s] the particularity of particular things'.³ In order to recognise the 'law of beauty manifested in all of them',⁴ one needs certain intellectual abilities. If visual arts managed to create pictures which encourage the activity of these intellectual abilities as well as sensual perception, they might even be superior to the beautiful bodies which activate Love to pursue wisdom without any reference to intellectual cognition. Thus, the epistemological advantage of visual arts compared to philosophical dialogues may be that arts appeal to intellectual as well as to sensual cognition. The combination of both abilities could lead to a specific kind of knowledge which cannot be achieved by philosophy alone, as philosophy is mainly based on the activity of the intellect.

The fact that pictures might be connected to the forms is already implied by the linguistic affinity of the Greek terms *eidos* (form) and *eidôlon* (image). *Eidôla* deal with mere appearances. In contrast, *eidos* refers to 'to on' (being) (*Rep.* 598^b2) and therefore makes knowledge of the truth possible. However, both terms are linked with each other as they derive from the verb *idein*. This Greek term does not only mean sensory perception, but also the intellectual process of gaining knowledge. As the terminology already implies, sensual perception may serve for the ascent to knowledge. Sensory perception which leads to intellectual cognition might not only be encouraged by beautiful bodies, but also by visual arts. I tend to assume that Plato would acknowledge this kind of art which encourages man to gain knowledge of the forms which exist beyond the sensible world.

In the *Ion*, Plato illustrates how arts differ from the other *technai*. By giving an example of a poet who 'is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind' (*Ion* 534^b4-6), he shows that arts contain a certain element which cannot be rationally explained. Artists need a 'divine gift' (*Ion* 534^c6) in order to be able to create works of art. This is why arts differ from *technai*. Plato explicitly states that the god uses the artists as 'his servants' (*Ion* 534^c8). The god himself speaks and 'gives voice through them [the artists; note by the

¹ Lodge, 1953, p. 173

² Cassirer, 1924, p. 21

³ Lodge, 1953, p. 175

⁴ *ibidem*, p. 175-176

author]' (*Ion* 534^{d4}). Plato's approach to arts in the *Ion* therefore corresponds with the 'Hellenic view of arts as divine in origin'.⁵

This characterisation of art as inspired by a supernatural power challenges the mirror analogy in *Republic X*. If art reveals the message a god wants to convey, it cannot be viewed as a mere mirroring of appearances. Then art rather displays a medium which manifests a 'higher kind of reality'.⁶ It is questionable whether this supernatural reality could be hinted at in a mere intellectual medium such as a philosophical conversation. As the god takes the artists' intellect away in order to announce his message via the works of art, it seems as if it were necessary to pause one's intellectual activities in order to experience the whole meaning of the god's message. Thus, the philosophical way of gaining knowledge by relying on one's intellect does not seem to be appropriate for the experience of the supernatural reality. In order to understand the divine pronouncement, one has to rely on the guidance of the god. During the process of artistic inspiration, the god appears to lead us to the knowledge of a reality which is beyond our sensible world of physical things. This knowledge, however, could not be fully understood if we only perceived with our intellect. As art encourages us to perceive in a way which is not rationally explainable, it is necessary for the experience of a supernatural reality. This experience, namely inspiration, might lead to an increase of our knowledge because it grants us access to a reality which transcends our sensible world. Without art we were not able to gain knowledge of this divine sphere. Thus, art which results from inspiration establishes a new way to knowledge and therefore has an epistemological function. I assume that Plato would acknowledge this kind of art which conveys a voice from above.

In the *Sophist*, Plato draws a crucial distinction between 'literal (eicastic) and viewer-dependent (phantastic) kinds of mimesis'.⁷ Eicastic mimesis is characterised as producing an imitation by 'keeping to the proportions of length, breadth, and depth of his model, and also by keeping the appropriate colors of its parts' (*Sophist* 235^{d7-e1}). In contrast to eicastic mimesis which is 'likeness-making' (*Sophist* 236^{b2}), phantastic mimesis produces 'appearances that aren't likenesses' (*Sophist* 236^{c3}) because it requires a certain 'viewpoint' (*Sophist* 236^{b4-5}) of the observer.

Phantastic mimesis qualifies all visual arts which employ *skenographia* and *skiagraphia*. Both techniques were established in the late fifth century, shading (*skiagraphia*) by Apollodorus and scene-painting (*skenographia*) by Agatharchus.⁸ Plato distrusts arts which use these techniques as they distort our sensory perception. Consequentially, we remain ignorant because we take these images for the truth. Phantastic mimesis prevents us from gaining knowledge as we believe that the appearances it depicts already are the true being. Phantastic mimesis deceives the observer who is not able to recognise an appearance for what it is because of the tricky application of *skenographia* and *skiagraphia*. This is why Plato dislikes these kinds of images.

In contrast to phantastic mimesis which is produced with regard to the observer, eicastic mimesis does not consider the observer's viewpoint and is therefore rather objective than subjective. As eicastic pictures do not employ techniques like *skenographia*, it is difficult to find out what these images depict. During the creation of an eicastic image, the artist concentrates rather on the nature of the entity he wants to depict than on the observer's

⁵ *ibidem*, p. 168

⁶ Lodge, 1953, p. 174

⁷ Halliwell, 2002, p. 25

⁸ Morgan, 1990, p. 130

viewpoint. Therefore, the image is similar to the nature of the entity. However, the viewer is not immediately able to find out about this nature as it is hard for him to recognise the content of the image because of the lack of viewer-friendly techniques. That is why the viewer of eicastic images has to activate his capacity for reasoned reflection in order to make sense of the image. Thus, the viewer of eicastic mimesis has to employ his intellectual abilities in addition to his sensory perception. By the contemplation of eicastic mimesis, he is 'stimulated in the right way, without being fed the answer'.⁹ In fact, the technique for stimulating the soul to approach the truth is the Socratic dialogue. Apparently, eicastic mimesis is able to stimulate man in a way the dialogue does. The perception of an eicastic image which cannot immediately be identified with reality 'provoke[s] the soul to think about what is beyond the perceptual'.¹⁰ This stimulation reminds us of mathematical *dianoia* which is 'central to the educational program that will train the philosopher'¹¹ as Plato illustrates in the analogies of Line and Cave. As eicastic images strengthen our capacity for critical reflection which is essential for the knowledge of the forms, eicastic images may be viewed as fulfilling an epistemological function. That is why Plato may accept this kind of visual arts.

My conclusion was that Plato is not a general opponent of visual arts. Rather he dislikes arts distracting one from gaining knowledge. I proposed, however, that Plato may acknowledge arts which can fulfil a certain epistemological function. Having shown that visual arts can encourage man to look beyond physical appearances, I emphasised that sensual perception can offer an incentive to experience the physical world in a way which reveals that there must be a superior principle behind the mere appearances.

As a result, I stated that Plato may acknowledge all kinds of arts which have a philosophical impact. In *Republic VII*, he even compares the philosopher with a painter as both 'look to what is most true, make constant reference to it, and study it as exactly as possible' (*Rep.* 484^{c9-d1}). Eventually, my suggestion was that maybe the ideal artist has to be a philosopher, too.

I especially enjoyed the discussions after my talk. It was extremely enriching that students from different disciplines contributed with their comments to the discussion. So I got the unique opportunity to get feedback to my research from very diversified viewpoints.



Sarah Hegenbart currently examines the question of how one can develop a virtuous constitution. Her suggestion is that an encounter with beauty in arts contributes to such a constitution since it enables us to create an authentic form of our life. This is why she would agree with Iris Murdoch who held that: 'Art then is not a diversion or a side issue, it is the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*.'

⁹ Irwin, 1989, p. 95

¹⁰ Morgan, 1990, p. 125

¹¹ *ibidem*