

'Look, see!': Plato on moral vision

It is an old question whether Plato's attitude to sensible particulars precludes appeal to moral experience in the development of virtue. It is another old question whether his criticisms, both of particularity and of its representation in literary form, render his dialogues unsuitable, in his own terms, for moral education. I consider these connected questions by reflecting on the pervasive language of vision in the *Republic*, in three different contexts.

The first is in the drama of the dialogues, especially the exhortation to the interlocutors to look, and to see (e.g. at 514a-b or 526a; compare the discussion of hearing at 386a ff). The second is in the language of vision used in his account of epistemic development, not only in the cave (e.g. 515a ff.) but also in the more analytic context of the divided line (e.g. 511c) and elsewhere. The third is in Socrates' notable interest in the subject's points of view (e.g. throughout the cave, notably in the account of the turning of the soul at 518c; or at 598a), which culminates, I argue, in the use of a complex visual idiom, *theôria*, to describe epistemic success.

I have argued elsewhere that Plato's *Republic* account of perception, and of vision in particular, is committed to its having complex cognitive content. Here I claim that this makes possible an explicit perspectival reference in perception; and that this, in turn, provides the basis for attentive viewing (notably, for example, at 508d; compare the suggestion that we can view things *together* at 523a). This both explains the shortcomings of perception and shows how they can be overcome.

Both perspective and attention are, I argue, essential to the development of virtue: so Plato advances, here, an account of moral vision, continuous with his account of 'ordinary' perception. For the *Republic* offers a comprehensive account of how, by reference to what we see and otherwise perceive, we may develop in virtue. This aspect of moral development is exemplified in the interlocutors' looking and seeing, so that it brings the dramatic encounter under the theory therein; and it explains the claims made for the visual idiom of *theôria*. Furthermore, it brings Plato's account of moral virtue in line with what he might say about epistemic virtue, where the conception of a virtue depends on how its development is explained; this relieves Plato from a common charge of crude consequentialism in his account of the relation between virtue and knowledge.

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