The Epistemological Significance of Blindness in Plato's *Republic*: Bridging Ancient Philosophy and Disability Studies

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to address the philosophical significance of Plato's use of the metaphor of blindness, particularly regarding knowledge and cognition. To begin with, I shall summarise key arguments concerning blindness in Disability Studies. It will emerge that blindness is significantly employed to express ignorance or lack of knowledge due to the current ocularcentric prejudice, i.e. the view that sight is the most important sense. After a brief contextualisation of traditional ocularcentrism embedded in ancient Greek culture, I shall turn to analysing some occurrences of the metaphor of blindness from Book VI and VII of Plato's *Republic*. The study reveals how Plato's use of the metaphor of blindness in Book VI serves to make subtle epistemological points, such as differentiating knowledge from a cognitive state that only happens to be true. In Book VII, focusing on the famous simile of the Cave, the paper shows that Plato deliberately establishes a complex symmetry between metaphorical and literal blindness: to overcome one's lack of knowledge (metaphorical blindness), one needs to be, temporarily and partly, blind to perceptible things (literal blindness). The striking outcome of this view is that, due to Plato's ocularcentric framework, blindness provides him with the argumentative tool that opens the field of enquiry into the nature of knowledge and its objects.

1. Introduction: Disability Studies and Blindness

Blindness as a physical impairment and as a socially disabling phenomenon has understandably drawn the attention of Disability Studies, including the views and theories of blind scholars. I say "understandably" because sight or vision is traditionally considered the primary sensory capacity. The most recent example of that is precisely my use of the terms "view" and "theory" a couple of lines above. "View" is used here metaphorically as a signpost for scholarly analysis of a certain concept or phenomenon. "Theory", broadly speaking, means a mental

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construct that aims to describe something in the world. Etymologically, it comes from ancient Greek and directly derives from a verb of vision (whose history is quite complex and fascinating, though not relevant to discussion here). As we shall see, this is because the complex amalgam of cultures to which we belong has been significantly ocularcentric since Homer. Disability Studies have sought to challenge the mainstream ableist interpretation of blindness.[1] Without any claim to exhaustiveness, we can summarise the main thrust of this discussion as follows:

1) *Spectrum vs binarism.* It is commonly assumed that to be blind or sighted is a binary, yes-or-no kind of scenario. In reality, facts are quite different. To be legally blind applies to many people who have some capacity to see. Blindness is not necessarily the same as total blindness, despite being usually and unproblematically associated with it (approximately 10-20% of legally blind people are totally blind). A variety of sensory capabilities related to what sighted people conceive as sight are distributed across a spectrum and several complex variations.

2) *Total blindness as the metaphor of ignorance.* As per (1), given that blindness stands for "total blindness", it is almost universally employed as a metaphor for ignorance. No deficit of what is perceived as the standard sensory capacity better grasps the lack of knowledge. This seems commonsensical to non-blind people, despite their likely never having experienced blindness themselves. This often stems from the fact that non-blind people conceptualise blindness as total blindness, equating it with what they experience when they cannot see (e.g. walking in a completely dark space). This disproportionately underestimates the expertise that blind people develop in renegotiating their relationship with the environment.

3) *Blindness and the other senses.* Renegotiating the environment significantly involves the other senses. Blind scholars in Disability Studies put particular emphasis on how blind people develop new skills and unexpected sensory capacities unrelated to sight, disclosing new experiences through a prolonged and complex interaction with the other senses, especially touch and hearing. Furthermore, blind people potentially establish new functional

[1] To name but a few recent and influential studies, see Kleege 1999; Bolt 2005; Kleege 2006; Kleege 2018; Whitburn and Michalko 2020; Burch 2023. For more references, see Bolt 2023.

relationships with other entities, whether they be inanimate (e.g. cane) or animate (e.g. guide dog or human assistant). This in many cases allows blind people to potentially have much more functional lives than sighted people would commonly tend to think.

4) *The ocularcentric culture.* Just as is the case with other disabilities, these scholars claim that much of the disabling effects of physical impairments are the by-product of the fact that our urban environment is designed for sighted people and that much of the inalterability of our environment strictly derives from how deeply entrenched our ableist prejudices are. In other words, a different conception of what being blind is, hopefully, informed by what blind people share about it, would contribute to a change in language and a change in the design of the environment we live in. This makes room for many yet unknown non-sight-requiring relations with the environment that have the potential to significantly reduce the disabling effect of the current status quo towards blind people.

What I aim to do in this paper is take one step towards understanding the ocularcentric aspects of our culture as they are significantly disclosed by ancient Greek philosophy. The history of disability is becoming an established discipline, and efforts have already been devoted to disability in Antiquity; however, without any particular attention to ancient philosophy.[2] On the other hand, Disability Studies on blindness have engaged with both the history of disability and the key role played by philosophy in this history. Predominantly, the history of philosophy that has been taken into account is from early modernity onward. The gap this paper is meant to start filling is the missing link between ancient philosophy and Disability Studies' critical reflection on the role philosophical theories of the past have played in shaping our worldview, with particular emphasis on ocularcentrism.

After a very brief contextualisation, I will focus on some passages in Plato's *Republic*, where blindness is deployed as a metaphor in the domain of epistemology. As far as (1) is concerned, it has been recognised that the ancient

[2] To focus only on disability in ancient Greek culture, see the seminal studies by Garland 1995 and Rose 2003. Cf. also Breitwieser 2012, Penrose 2015, Samama 2017; Garland 2017 and Dillon 2017. As far as visual impairment in antiquity is concerned, from the specific perspective of the history of disability, see Rose 2003, 79-94 and Van den Abeele 2020. On the relation between monstrosity and philosophy in Antiquity, cf. Del Lucchese 2019.

Greeks moved within a binary opposition between sightedness and sightlessness.[3] In other words, either one is totally blind, or one is not blind at all. As for (2), Plato does make use of the metaphor of blindness as a sign of cognitive deficiency, yet, by means of this metaphor, he makes some subtle epistemological points worth expanding upon. Moreover, in the *Republic*, he employs the metaphors of visual dazzlement and blindness in a complex system of oppositions that are not so one-sidedly negative as one might at first think. As far as (3) is concerned, it is worth briefly mentioning that Plato, building on the theories of vision of his time, often associates sight and touch in metaphorically describing knowledge. The association between sight and touch has a complex and influential history in the early modern period, at times emphasising the distance between the two senses. Consider the famous Molyneux problem questioning whether a congenitally blind person touching a sphere or a cube, upon gaining sight, would be able to recognise them visually, as reported by John Locke in *Essay* II.IX.8.

However, Plato's association of sight and touch is grounded in the conviction that they both metaphorically capture some key aspect of knowledge, whereas modern philosophers are concerned with different issues, such as the mechanisms of perception or the translatability of one sense into the other.[4] I shall not cover this topic in the present paper, but it is definitely worth delving into, keeping in mind Disability Studies on blindness and the other senses. Finally, Plato presents the earliest image of the philosopher as a figure that is socially inept due to how her philosophical nature is removed from mundane facts.[5] These carelessness and inability in everyday matters make it challenging for the philosopher to survive within the polis and the court. The reason for this is entirely relational: it is the ethical misconceptions of other people that make their own lives miserable and the polis a perilous place for real philosophers at the same time. This bears some resemblance to (4) insofar as, despite sharing in ocularcentrism, Plato adumbrated a social-relational model where philosophical minds are disabled by the prejudices of others due to the philosopher's blindness to worldly and everyday interests.

In what follows, I shall mainly focus on (2) by analysing some epistemologically relevant uses of the metaphor of blindness in Plato's texts, and particularly the *Republic*. Two main points will emerge. On the one hand, Plato's use of

[3] Cf. Van den Abeele 2020, 69-70.
[4] On this, cf. the extensive discussion in Paterson 2016.
[5] Cf. *Resp.* 517c-d and *Theaet.* 174a-175e.

blindness as a lack of knowledge is adapted to the specific nature of his metaphysics and epistemology. Blindness will be considered as a lack of knowledge, serving to express a subtler point: the fact that there is a form of cognition (*doxa*, i.e. opinion or belief) that can be true but only contingently so. Moreover, blindness will be associated with the metaphor of journeying or travelling, which will prove to be full of epistemologically relevant implications. On the other hand, in analysing the occurrences of blindness and eye-damage in the simile of the Cave from book VII of the *Republic*, it will emerge that Plato suggests that metaphorical blindness to the proper object of knowledge, which as we shall see is an imperceptible, intelligible object, can be overcome by becoming literally, though partly and temporarily, blind towards perceptible things. The main result of my analysis is that in a complex system of oppositions, where blindness is deployed both metaphorically and literally (in a very qualified sense), Plato endeavours to create the specific domain of philosophical enquiry.

2. Greek ocularcentrism and Plato

Sight is everywhere in ancient Greek culture from its very beginnings.[6] It is deeply inscribed in the language itself. The quintessential example is one of the perfect forms of the verb *horao*, meaning "to see". This form is *oida*, which literally means "finding myself in the situation of having seen, I know", and its common meaning is "I know". In Homer, famously a blind poet, and Hesiod, Muses are always present and therefore know everything (e.g. *Il.* 2. 484-7 and *Theog*: 22-34, respectively). Typically, ocularcentrism establishes a hierarchy among the senses, assigning priority to sight.[7] Famous examples of this in philosophical texts include Heraclitus' statement that "eyes are better witnesses than ears" (DK 22 B101) or the opening line of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which states that proof of human beings' natural drive towards knowing lies in our enjoyment of perception and our preference for sight above all (980a21-9).

Against this background, blindness makes quite naturally its appearance alongside sight. One of the earliest occurrences in a philosophical text is in Parmenides DK 28 B6.6-7, where those who think that being and not-being are

[6] For a survey concerning Greek ocularcentrism, see Jay 1994, 21-33 and Squire 2016. Cf. also Levin 1999. For recent reconstructions of the theory of sight developed by ancient philosophers, see Clements 2014; Rudolph 2016 and Nightingale 2016. To name just a recent, and quite explicit, example of ocularcentrism in modern-day epistemology, see Ayers 2019.

[7] On Presocratic thinkers, cf. the seminal von Fritz 1945.

the same and not the same are described as "blind and deaf". Regardless of the meaning of Parmenides' dictum, we see a crystal-clear instance of blindness (and deafness) as a metaphor for the total lack of discernment; these individuals are also called *akrita phyla*, meaning: a race or tribe of men unable to exert their judgment. Interestingly, a metaphorical use of blindness for people who are not literally blind conveys a crucial philosophical point: if one can see with their eyes and still be blind, this may suggest that something beyond bodily senses is required to "see" properly, i.e. the mind.[8] In other words, on one hand, ocularcentrism privileges sight over the other senses as the most complete and enjoyable sensory relation with the world; on the other, it employs sight to metaphorically describe key cognitive functions of the mind, thought of as something over and above the senses and their deliverances, *including* sight. As we shall see, this tension between literal and metaphorical (mind) vision lies at the core of Plato's epistemology.

Building upon his predecessors, Plato gives full prominence to sight: in a passage certainly less famous than the incipit of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, but equally significant, he states that seeing, like thinking and being in good health, is something we love both for its own sake and for its consequences (*Resp.* 357c2-4). Furthermore, Plato employs sight metaphorically in some key passages concerning knowledge.[9] To begin with, Plato claims that things that can be perceived by means of bodily senses are not ontologically basic. Instead, he claims that what is truly real are certain Forms that can only be grasped through thought.[10] The main term he uses for these items is *eidos*. As is well known, the meaning of the term in ordinary ancient Greek is the visible "aspect", "form", "shape", sharing the same stem as *oida*. This already hints at the apparent paradox of seeing (with the mind), without seeing (with the eyes).[11] Why, then, conceive of knowledge as an "eyeless sight"? Understandably, addressing this question has been both a curse and a blessing for scholars. Matters are further complicated by Plato's view that *logos*, i.e. the articulation of reasons and accounts,

[8] For some early sources, see for instance Epicarmus 23 DKB12 or Empedocles 31 DKB3.9-13.
[9] For instance, cf. *Symp.* 210d; 212a; *Resp.* 476b7; 484c7-8; 500c3-6; 501b1-3; 518c7-d1; *Phaedr.* 247d-e. For an interpretation centering upon the privilege Plato ascribes to the metaphor of sight, see Nightingale 2004, esp. 72-138.
[10] Cf., for example, *Resp.* 507b8-9.
[11] See, for instance, *Resp.* 511a1-2, 518d3-7, and 529b2, where we find reference to seeing with thought and not with the eyes.

plays a necessary role in achieving knowledge.[12] In other words, he repeatedly asserts that one "sees" by means of thought, and often this thought involves providing definitions and accounts aiming to capture beings or essences such as the Beautiful, the Equal, Justice and other such typical examples of Platonic Forms.

I shall not address this issue further, nor shall I delve into the scholarly debate on Plato's conception of knowledge.[13] What is relevant to my discussion of metaphorical blindness in Plato is only that knowledge is associated with (a mental) vision. The metaphorical association of vision with knowledge can be taken to convey several critical and interrelated epistemological points. Firstly, knowledge has an acquaintance-like aspect: to know something one must have a first-person relation with the object of knowledge. Hearsay or images are not enough. Secondly, this relation with the object of knowledge is direct. Thirdly, knowledge is factive and thus has a kind of ontological dependence: what I know must exist (and, for Plato, the way it exists specifies necessary conditions for knowledge). Consequently, vision conveys the notion that what I know can only be known as it is in itself as opposed to being something I create or construct. Such an emphasis on sight is often accompanied by metaphors of light and clarity (*saphencia* and *enargeia*).[14] From the epistemological point of view, the more something qualifies as a proper object of knowledge, the clearer it is to the mind that sees it. In a nutshell, Plato establishes a relationship between the way something is, how clear it is, and how fit to be known it is. Accordingly, Forms are fully real entities (i.e. always-existing, changeless entities), inherently the clearest objects of thought, and the only entities that allow for perfect knowledge.[15]

[12] Cf., for example, *Resp.* 531e3-532b2 and 534b3-6.

[13] To give but a few coordinates, reference to vision might be taken to imply that for Plato ultimate knowledge is non-propositional, e.g. Cornford 1965 and Gonzalez 1998, or is in fact propositional, Sorabji 1982 and Fine 1990. Cf. also Szaif 2007.

[14] Cf., for instance, *Resp.* 511e2-4. On Plato's notion of clarity, especially the term *saphencia* and cognates, see Lesher 2010.

[15] Plato commonly associates the metaphor of sight with metaphors of touch. The mind, the soul, reason touch and grasp being when they know it. Much of what has been said about the metaphorical value of sight in Plato's epistemology holds of touch as well. An interesting implication comes from grammar: contrary to verbs of vision, the verbs *haptomai* and *ephaptomai*, meaning "grasp", can only be complemented by the genitive, not by a that-clause, possibly emphasizing the objectual nature of what is being known. For some instances, cf. *Resp.* 484b5; 490b3. However, it is worth pointing out that the association between sight and touch as metaphors for knowing are not commonplace in other periods. In this, Plato is following the theories of vision of his time: sight

To conclude this section, it should also be noted, despite these clear assertions of ocularcentrism, that the focus on sight that we find from Homer to Plato is developed within an oral culture, where hearing retains the greatest significance as far as the *transmission* of knowledge is concerned. As convincingly argued in a seminal work by Eric A. Havelock, Homer and Hesiod represent a so-called "tribal encyclopaedia", which provides an ethos for an entire culture, but also works as a mnemonic repository of a great number of precepts on how to deal with every-day activities.[16] Orality is crucial to memorise and to transmit knowledge and therefore the performative dimension of the poetic experience (quite different from our own), in facilitating memorisation, plays a pivotal role in educating the young and in recreating the adults. Havelock correctly argues that Plato, especially in the *Republic*, reacts to this deeply entrenched custom of his culture and bans the poets from his ideal city because they cause people to identify with the characters they tell them about, who however make for inadequate ethical models. However, ocularcentrism and orality are far from being incompatible. The basic idea is that there is somebody who sees and tells the others what has been seen. This chain is exactly what happens in the case of the great poets: Muses have seen everything, they tell the poets what they have seen and the poets, in turn, tell the audience.[17] Accordingly, the identification with the subjects of poetic performances by the audience allows the latter to "see" the truth conveyed by poets, rhapsodes and the like.

Havelock's insightful reading also suggests that the emergence of writing has ground-breaking effects on how Plato conceives of reality and knowledge. In writing and reading, sight is involved in a different way from how it is in listening to and hearing (but also watching) a poetic performance. In what follows, I will not deal with this important issue, namely how sight is related to writing in a way that marks an essential difference from orality. To be sure, Plato's philosophy plays a prominent role in the history of writing and the way it influences the history of thought. Yet it cannot be argued that ocularcentrism is only related to writing and that being an oral culture is incompatible with considering sight as the privileged access to the world. Even more, we should not think that the slow and always partial transition from orality to writing perfectly

was theorized as having a sort of haptic functioning; in other words, according to some ancient theories, in seeing, people grasp visible things. For discussion and further references, cf. Squire 2016, 16-7.

[16] Havelock 1963.

[17] Cf. *Ion.* 533d-e.

overlaps with an alleged transition from hearing to sight. In the remainder of this paper, I shall limit myself to discussing some appearances of blindness in the *Republic*, suspending any analysis of how sight and the priority of vision might be (and indeed are) connected to the emergence of writing as such a task would far exceed the scope of an article.

3. Blindness: a complex metaphor

Given the pivotal role Plato ascribes to sight in describing knowledge, an analysis of his employment of blindness as a metaphor in his epistemological reflections is worthwhile. However, we find neither a theory of blindness nor a systematic use of it as a metaphor. Nevertheless, some specific references to blindness appear in key passages throughout the corpus.[18] I shall focus on Plato's *Republic*, where we find the most comprehensive treatment of knowledge and the most substantial presence of sight in discussing knowledge and the nature of philosophy (the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* are also key, and the academic consensus considers them as essentially coeval with the *Republic*, both chronologically and philosophically). Two main groups of passages will be considered, specifically in relation to the employment of the metaphor of blindness.

3.1 The lack of Knowledge and the Contingency of Truth

The first couple of excerpts from book VI are used to make an epistemological point. The character Socrates (Plato's mouthpiece) is talking about philosophers, namely those who have genuine knowledge of being, i.e. Forms, and on these grounds are best suited to rule. The strict dependence of political authority upon the capacity to know relevant Forms, such as Justice, is made clear through a comparison with blind people:

> And isn't it clear that a guardian who is to keep watch over anything should be keen-sighted rather than blind? / Of course it's clear. / Do you think, then, that there's any difference between the blind and those who are really deprived of the knowledge of each thing that is? The latter have no clear model in their souls, and so they cannot—in the manner of painters—look to what is most true, make constant reference to it, and study it as exactly as possible. Hence they cannot

[18] The only contribution I have encountered entirely devoted to the metaphors of blindness and deafness in Plato is Aronadio 2020.

> establish here on earth conventions about what is fine or just or good, when they need to be established, or guard and preserve them, once they have been established. (*Resp.* 484c4-d2)[19]

Plato's point here is that knowing is like seeing something. This something, however, is not to be seen by means of the eye. It is to be seen by exercising rational thought. This mental activity can take place over time and knowledge of being is brought to bear on particular things and actions one is faced with. For instance, knowing what Justice is (i.e. the Form of Justice), allows one to determine whether a single action in a particular context, at a particular time, is just or merely appears to be so, and, if so, in what respect.[20] This process is likened to painting. Painting is a visual art and therefore perfectly squares with equating knowledge with seeing and the lack of knowledge with blindness.

The term "model" stands for the Greek *paradeigma*. The central idea is what one points and looks at when crafting a replica or an image. To continue with the example, just laws and actions are imperfect reproductions of the nature of Justice. A true legislator can establish such laws just as a true painter can make a correct image only by looking at the model. This model, which is the object of knowledge the soul has a grasp of, is said to be clear (*enarges*).[21] It is worth noting that looking to this object is expressed in terms of looking away from all other objects at what is most true (*eis to alethestaton apoblepontes*). Here "true" is the same as "being" and designates the really existing nature of X, e.g. Justice. In turning one's internal gaze towards truth or being, one has to observe it as accurately as possible (*theomenoi hos hoion te akribestata*). Clearly, this is as ocularcentric as it can get.

This passage does not inform us as to how one knows Forms, metaphor of sight aside. It illustrates how one is to bring such knowledge to bear on judging what things related to the relevant Forms are like. It is precisely the cognitive incapacity to know Forms and consequently to connect things and Forms that for Plato is captured by the metaphor of blindness. This clearly falls within point (2) in section one above. Blindness represents the lack of any clear model

[19] All translations from the *Republic* are by G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve.

[20] For discussion, cf. Reeve 2010.

[21] This leads Reeve 2010, 212 to say that reference to clarity implies that being blind means using an unclear model. The unclear model means using the many empirical things to judge other empirical things. This makes sense within the overall picture of Plato's philosophy. However, using empirical things as unclear models implies that one does not see the clear model at all. In other words, blindness means lack of vision (of the clear model, i.e. the Form).

grasped by one's soul or mind – a model meant to provide a rational and definitive ground to determine whether one's judgement about empirical things correctly describes them. To use the same example as above: if I do not know what Justice is, I do not have the ultimate guarantee that what I or other people take to be just happens to be just (or understand in what respects it may or may not be just).

Blindness specifically serves as a metaphor for failing to recognise the existence of Forms and to grasp what they are, thereby missing the only link with things that allows one to judge them rationally. This does not entail that one cannot pass judgement on the world around them. On the contrary, it implies that one can do that. In fact, for Plato most people do. Most people are metaphorically blind to the Forms. As we shall see, this blindness to Forms is due to an excess of sight and the senses, taken literally. Moreover, blindness to Forms can be overcome with literal (in a very qualified way) blindness or at least significant neglect of the deliverances of the senses. For now, it is important to emphasise that metaphorical, epistemic blindness equates to making judgements about the world without a stable model providing a criterion for determining their correctness. Metaphorical blindness is mental sightlessness towards Forms and never signifies the total absence of relations with the world. I talked about blindness as a metaphor for the lack of knowledge. This remains neutral enough. However, this argument can quite naturally be connected to the notion of ignorance. Plato's theory of ignorance is a very complex matter with regard to both Socrates' disavowal of knowledge and Plato's metaphysics. In this context, we can content ourselves with interpreting blindness as a metaphor for the fact that one does not even consider the existence of Forms and only deals with *doxai*.[22]

The judgements that the epistemically blind produce are referred to as *doxai* or opinions. Another relevant occurrence of the metaphor of blindness in relation to opinions is to be found a few pages later in the dialogue:

> Haven't you noticed that opinions without knowledge are shameful and ugly things? The best of them are blind—or do you think that those who express a true opinion without understanding are any different from blind people who happen to travel the right road? (*Resp.* 506c6-9)

We can assume that "opinions without knowledge" stands for what we have seen in the previous passage: the sort of judgment concerning empirical things that

[22] This is clearly asserted at 476b-c where the *sight*-lovers are those whose mind is not able to see Beauty as opposed to the many beautiful things and who do not acknowledge its existence.

is not accompanied by the constant reference to the object of knowledge functioning as a model. Opinions can be true or false. As clearly implied by the remainder of the quotation, the best opinions are true opinions. The most one can expect of them is that they are true, and this is an outcome opinions can achieve.

At this point, the metaphor of blindness expresses its epistemological potential in Plato's ocularcentric framework. Blindness stands for the lack of knowledge, which never comes to mean a totally blank cognitive state. Crucially, the metaphor of blindness is associated with the metaphor of being on the right path, arguably to reach a destination. We shall see below how far this metaphor can go. Here, the metaphor of the path stands for a type of success: sightless people can get to a certain location, but the way they do it is different from how sighted people would. We can surmise that for Plato blind people can get to their destination without having full awareness of whether they have arrived and/or have no way to correct their course *en route*. Outside the metaphor, blindness represents the contingency of truth-value of a type of cognitive relations with empirical things that is not accompanied by the only knowledge able to provide grounds to its truth, i.e. intellectual knowledge (note the use of the term *nous* in the passage above, rendered as "understanding", as the apprehension of the relevant Forms).

Within an ocularcentric conception, sight is the essential capacity required to have full awareness of when and how to reach a destination. Similarly, knowing Forms through specific intellectual acts and activities is the sole means of grounding judgements concerning perceptible and becoming things. Here, blindness denotes the incapacity to make stable and certain steps, and correlatively stands for a type of mental activity that cannot deliver stable and certain truth, or that can provide only truths that coincidentally happen to be correct.[23] This quick invocation of the metaphor of blindness discloses a key aspect of Plato's views concerning ontology, knowledge and truth.

There are real beings, i.e. Forms, which are proper objects of knowledge. One can accompany cognitive states concerning becoming things with such knowledge in order to guarantee that these states are not only contingently true. Most people fail to recognize the existence of these beings, resulting

[23] This being said, we should never conflate knowledge of Forms with opinion about particulars, even opinion accompanied by knowledge of Forms, as the level of certainty and stability of the former is quite other than the latter's. For a similar argument concerning *orthe doxa* (correct opinion), cf. the much more famous passage at *Men.* 97a-98b.

in their inability to orient themselves in order to pass consistently true judgement on things they experience. Blindness denotes the ungroundedness of people's opinions and beliefs. Path and orientation are spatial metaphors that derive from the last citation's reference to traveling the right road (*hodon orthos poreuomenon*). The association between blindness and travelling is key for at least two reasons with considerable epistemological import.

Firstly, reference to travelling can be interpreted diachronically. The path comprises a series of steps. Along the way, one encounters signs, obstacles and must make turns. In other words, the metaphor of travelling symbolises enquiry. Recall: we are not discussing knowledge of Forms, but how knowledge of Forms can accompany opinions to judge how things appear to the senses in a more solid way. This process, though, can well look like a type of enquiry. Consider again the first passage: the painter is said to make constant reference to the model (Forms) to judge empirical things. This first interpretation of the metaphor of travelling intersects with blindness to make a very significant epistemological point: it is not just a matter of chancing upon truth; it is rather a matter of method. How fortunate that the very term *methodos* is often employed by Plato and is clearly derived from *hodos*, "way" or "road", which occurs in our second passage.[24] The English term "method" is a catachresis of the metaphor of travelling, thanks to which *the very point of privileging rational analysis over merely hitting upon truth is made through the reference to blindness as a lack of cognizance of Forms*, i.e. the only thing that can provide a rational ground to describe the empirical world. In other words, blindness here metaphorically signals the absence of a rational procedure, dependent on one's grasp of Forms, when formulating judgments, which are compared to travelling insofar as they aim for something and potentially reach it, i.e. truth.

Secondly, the reference to the path can be interpreted synchronically. To fully understand this point, one should get to the very core of Plato's philosophy, which is well outside the scope of this paper. However, there are some aspects related to blindness that are worth discussing. Blindness seems to be essentially and negatively associated with space and extension.[25] Sight involves a plurality of objects perceived simultaneously. This might be the reason why, as mentioned above, Aristotle famously states at the beginning of his *Metaphysics*

[24] Cf., for instance, *Resp.* 532e1 and 533b2.

[25] According to Aronadio 2020, 80-82, this association is reinforced by what Plato says at 507-8, where sight is said to require the medium of light to be effective. Aronadio argues that light discloses a space that becomes a structural field of visibility.

that sight is the sense more conducive to knowledge because it allows one to make distinctions. To make distinctions – or to do it more efficiently – one needs to have more than one thing before them. This idea could be reinforced by the comparison with painting in the previous passage: one has the entirety of the model before them while the process of depicting it takes place over time. While this might sound odd in relation to travelling, which clearly takes time, it can still be pertinent. In an ocularcentric and ableist view, a blind person lacks orientation; that is, one does not have fixed coordinates that allow one to reach their destination. Forms are unchanging, always-existing intellectual objects that provide fixed coordinates for judging empirical, changing things. To be unchanging and always-existing implies synchronicity.[26] There is no evolution over time of matters regarding Forms. If there is a Form of, say, Justice, it has always existed and it has always been what it is. Therefore, if opinion is a process, where one does not want to be blind, this is because having knowledge of Forms provides the fixed map to guide one in their journey.

This aligns closely with some basic phenomenological characteristics of sight. Sight is generally the sense of the simultaneous, but at the same time, it also gives a basic experience of permanence. When fixing one's gaze at a certain point, the field remains the same; among the multiple objects in the field, if something moves or alters, there is likely something else that remains unchanged. This has led the philosopher Hans Jonas, in a seminal but quintessentially ocularcentric paper, to say "only the simultaneous representation of the visual field gives us co-existence as such, i.e., the co-presence of things in one being which embraces them all as their common present. The present, instead of being a point-like experience, becomes a dimension within which things can be beheld at once and can be related to each other by the wandering glance of attention".[27] In his view, sight transcends the now, entering an extended present and allows one to conceptualise the eternal as an infinite present. I shall not

[26] This reading is supported by the notion that the philosopher who knows Forms has a sort of synoptical view of them, cf. *Resp.* 537c.

[27] Jonas 1954, 513. Jonas' claim is not so distant from Plato's own assertion in the *Timaeus* (47aff.): seeing patterns in days, nights, months and years as, we can assume, something remaining regular while something else changing, gave us the concept of number, time and proper instruments to investigate the nature of the universe. The title of Jonas' paper *The Nobility of Sight*, might be unknowingly a Platonic citation: in the aforementioned *Timaeus*, sight is called the *megiste ophelia*, the greatest advantage, at *Resp.* 507c7, sight is *polytelestate*, the most precious thing. In Plato's phrasing, one might sense slightly more emphasis on the usefulness than Jonas'

discuss Jonas' view. I wish only to point out that eternal existence and simultaneity of all relations between Forms (relations between Forms and things, on the contrary, vary) are typical attributes of Platonic Forms. In other words, sight, stability of things and spatial relations between them provide some metaphorical material that Plato renegotiates to develop his metaphysics. To understand that sight and its deliverances are metaphors, it suffices to recall that the words for Form are mainly *eidos* and *idea*, meaning "look" or "aspect" of things that can never actually be seen with the eyes. In turn, blindness is a metaphor that is openly associated with the metaphor of travelling. We can consider it to be at least arguable that being metaphorically blind to Forms means being unknowing towards this field of fixed entities whose natures are epistemically relevant in achieving any rational comprehension of other thing or in orienting oneself, if we remain within the metaphor of travelling. Blindness, touched upon only in a couple of quick metaphorical remarks, possesses immense philosophical importance, precisely due to the centrality attributed to sight in conceptualizing metaphysical and epistemological matters. What is more, blindness might even be taken to be more informative, or to creatively complement, than what positive metaphorical references to sight are meant to convey. Yet, there is even more to Plato's metaphors of blindness, in a game of reflections where overcoming metaphorical mental blindness implies a certain degree of literal sensory blindness.

3.2 Sight in the body, sight in the soul

The second group of texts I wish to address is from book VII, specifically the famous simile of the Cave (514a-517c). The simile is well-known and has understandably drawn enormous attention.[28] In a nutshell, it tells the story of prisoners who are shackled inside a Cave and are forced to see shadows on the walls, under the false conviction that these shadows are real things. The key aspect for our analysis is that one prisoner is made to escape and, upon exiting the Cave, comes to see real things and the source of their visibility, namely the sun. The

"nobility". Be that as it may, the "nobility" of sight, observation is to remark the superiority of theoretical (again a *verbum videndi*) labour over manual labour, which is consistent with Plato's disdain for *banausia*, meaning both handicraft and vulgarity (cf. *Resp.*495d).

[28] I will not present the terms of the debate as my incursion into the simile is entirely instrumental to Plato's mention of blindness and eye-damage. For a recent and detailed discussion regarding the structure of the simile of the Cave, and the main questions and the critical debate surrounding it, see Smith 2019, 125-158.

simile serves as an image of the intellectual journey of the human soul that abandons the false, ordinary conception of what is real (everyday empirical things), and turns to Forms, which are real entities (where the sun, outside the image is the Form of the Good). After a proper contemplation of true reality, the prisoner returns to the Cave and, based on the newly acquired knowledge of true reality, gains a better understanding even of the shadows inside the Cave. Roughly, this informed approach to empirical things, grounded in the knowledge of Forms, is what we discussed above in this section. In what follows, I shall focus on Plato's references to blindness and eye-damage in this context. Significantly, a state of dazzlement as temporary blindness is a necessary condition marking the turning points of the journey both in exiting the Cave and returning to it.

> And if someone dragged him away from there by force, up the rough, steep path, and didn't let him go until he had dragged him into the sunlight, wouldn't he be pained and irritated at being treated that way? And when he came into the light, with the sun filling his eyes, wouldn't he be unable to see a single one of the things now said to be true? (*Resp.* 515e5-516a3)

This first passage conveys two ideas. Firstly, despite being for one's own benefit, exiting the Cave causes pain and irritation. People are not easily persuaded to abandon their views or mindset. At first, the prisoner is forced to leave and dragged out of the Cave. Outside, things can be seen more clearly than inside, due to the very nature of the environment and the presence of light (in the Cave there is only an artificial light of a fire). Nevertheless, prisoners do not want to see properly, as they tend to cling to their original condition. Secondly, the escaping prisoner's initial experience upon being forced out of the cave is the incapacity to see. This makes one of Plato's key points explicit: one could be blinded by too much light. Outside the image, this state of visual dazzlement represents the cognitive disorientation one feels when realising that one must engage with entirely different entities to have solid knowledge – i.e. unchanging, always-existing, imperceptible Forms. Progressively, the prisoner regains his sight and looks at increasingly luminous objects, ultimately gazing at the sun itself. Thus, his previous state of blindness proves to be temporary.

After that, the prisoner heads back into the Cave:

> And before his eyes had recovered—and the adjustment would not be quick—while his vision was still dim, if he had to compete again with the perpetual prisoners in recognizing the shadows, wouldn't he invite ridicule? Wouldn't it be said of him that he'd returned from his upward journey with his eyesight ruined and that it isn't worthwhile even to try to travel upward? And, as for

> anyone who tried to free them and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn't they kill him? (*Resp.* 516e7-517a6)

Initially, the prisoner is still adapted to the light-conditions of the external environment. This makes him inept at what he once did with ease. The returning prisoner is dim-sighted, which represents the fact that, at first, those who have acquired knowledge of true reality, which however seems to be quite removed from mundane affairs, are unable to perform in society as other people do. This is, of course, a magnificent version of the well-known narrative of the ineptitude of the philosopher. As long as the philosopher is just perceived as an oddity, the other prisoners who never left the Cave might leave him be or just ridicule him. However, as soon as the philosopher starts questioning them and begins to urge them to reconsider their deeply entrenched opinions, there is the serious danger that he might be killed. This is a clear reference to the historical Socrates, who in 399 BC was convicted and sentenced to death on the charge of impiety by the democratic regime of the Athenians. From Socrates' own point of view, he was helping people rid themselves of false opinions and pushing them towards a life of reflection. In the simile of the Cave, Plato reinforces this point: the philosopher qua the freed prisoner who had a grasp of true reality, tries to liberate other prisoners, who might end up refusing his help so violently that they could kill him. It can be noted that blindness towards Forms also implies blindness towards the true nature of the philosopher: prisoners kill the philosopher, even though the latter's goal is to improve their condition, because they are not able to see that as a consequence of their not being able to understand what is good or just. As for the use of blindness or eye-damage, it is used within the story to mark the initial incapacity to see in the dark for those eyes accustomed to seeing in open daylight. In this case, blindness is caused by an excess of darkness and shadows.

Plato has perfect awareness of the plasticity of his use of the metaphor of blindness.

> But anyone with any understanding would remember that the eyes may be confused in two ways and from two causes, namely, when they've come from the light into the darkness and when they've come from the darkness into the light. Realizing that the same applies to the soul, when someone sees a soul disturbed and unable to see something, he won't laugh mindlessly, but he'll take into consideration whether it has come from a brighter life and is dimmed through not having yet become accustomed to the dark or whether it has come from greater ignorance into greater light and is dazzled by the increased brilliance. (*Resp.* 518a1-b5)

In this key passage, Plato explicitly identifies the two causes of blindness. Moreover, he also makes explicit that there is a strict parallelism with souls and their path towards knowledge. I am reasonably persuaded that the reader now has full cognisance of why Plato is such a towering figure in the history of our ocularcentric culture. His use of blindness in the simile of the Cave is laden with complex philosophical implications that I shall now summarise.

I) Visual dazzlement as a form of temporary blindness can arise from both too much light and too much darkness. The blinding effect is given by one's starting conditions and is not permanent.

II) Blindness retains a negative value: it marks an incapacity and is the first effect of the fundamental mismatch between one's starting conditions and the new environment one has reached.

III) Without contradicting (II), in the simile, blindness also signals a positive process: the first blinding due to being filled with sunlight for the first time is a necessary step towards the best outcome for a soul, i.e. reaching the proper object of knowledge. The second blinding due to the return to the Cave reflects the ethical responsibility that the philosopher has towards his fellow citizens, despite the risks it entails.

IV) Thus, while blindness remains a negative thing, it represents a necessary evil in a positive process of intellectual and ethical nature. Outside the image, if one meets a philosopher who is in some way odd and socially estranged, one should respect these conditions whether it reflects his first discovery of truth or his attempt to bring it back to his fellow citizens.

In the simile, blindness exemplifies what Andrea Nightingale has called the "rhetoric of estrangement", wherein becoming things we are accustomed to by means of the senses (the interior of the Cave) are considered as stranger and more distant than the proper reality one grasps only through thought (the outside of the Cave).[29] The simile of the Cave and the theory it is designed to depict belies a complex internal symmetry hinging on blindness. Plato's main point is that one must relinquish everyday perceptual experiences in order to gain sight of true reality. At *Resp.* 518b8-d1, Socrates says that education is not acquired

[29] Nightingale 2004, 96.

the way one could put sight into blind eyes, i.e. something that is impossible. On the contrary, our soul already has the capacity to see, it must only be forced away from becoming things and turned towards what really is.[30] Thus, for Plato, the mental and rational sight is not something that can be added to the soul from without as something extrinsic. The soul has the capacity to turn its mental gaze towards Forms: everyday people have unlearned how to use their rational capacities, and they have never turned them towards the correct objects.[31]

The sight of true reality consists in exercising one's thought and achieving a rational grasp of intelligible entities. Throughout Book VII, mathematics – in the form of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and harmony (525b-531b) – plays a crucial role. Despite falling short of ultimate knowledge of Forms for reasons we cannot explore here, mathematical disciplines have this philosophically crucial capacity to turn one's soul away from physical reality towards intelligible reality. This is because properties of mathematical objects or relations between numbers are not perceivable and exempt from any form of becoming or alteration, thereby proving to be infallibly knowable. In ancient Greek, this resonates in the very word: mathematics comes from *manthano*, which means to "learn" or "understand". This soul-turning process is the essential aspect of education, where the entirety of the soul must be turned, including its emotional and motivational sides, which gives, in a characteristically Platonic way, a double, intellectual-ethical, nature to the whole process.

What is relevant to our discussion is that the very sense of Plato's argument is that for one to *metaphorically* see true reality she needs to become (at least partly and temporarily) *literally* blind to perceptible, material things. Bodily sight delivers information about a type of object which does not admit of proper knowledge. What is more, bodily sight has a distracting effect towards the mind, which at first needs to be compelled to mentally look at another type of entities.[32] Plato's ocularcentric mindset leads him to illustrate this key philosophical point through blindness.[33] True sight, i.e. mental sight, is no literal sight, i.e. bodily sight. It should be acknowledged that there is a difference between the philosopher's blindness towards the perceptible world and bodily blindness in the eyes

[30] Cf. Reeve 2010, 222.
[31] Cf. *Resp.* 411d.
[32] Cf. *Resp.* 518d.
[33] A glimpse of which, *mutatis mutandis*, can perhaps be caught in the distinction between the manifest and the scientific image of the world.

of a person, whether their soul is philosophical or not. When Plato says that the philosopher is blind towards becoming things he means at least two things. Firstly, the philosopher pays no attention to the sensible world. This includes not engaging into investigations concerning empirical objects and not paying attention to political/juridical facts in the Assembly or the courts.[34] Secondly and consequently, the philosopher is contingently blind towards the sensible world ranging from the famous anecdote of Thales falling down a well while he was observing the starred sky,[35] or the more apt case of philosophers investigating Forms by means of their intellect alone. This is to say that Plato's use of blindness in this passage oscillates between metaphorical and literal use. However, literal use of blindness goes in two directions. Non-philosophers cannot see Forms literally, but with their minds, so it is total blindness in terms of not accessing Forms, but it is metaphorical because it is non-philosophers' minds that cannot see Forms. The second direction is that philosophers are metaphorically blind towards the sensible world insofar as they do not pay attention to sensible objects or contingent political/historical events. This carelessness, however, can be so radical that philosophers happen to be literally blind in a non-physical sense towards the sensible world. When philosophers are focused on attaining knowledge of Forms they cannot see what is before their eyes (i.e. one cannot see what happens inside the Cave while they are outside the Cave).[36] However, this condition cannot be permanent, and it is not necessarily total. What is necessary is to abandon the deeply entrenched assumption that what is real is primarily accessed by exerting physical sight. Significantly, this is expressed by Plato himself, who speaks of the "sight of the soul" (*ten tes psyches opsin* at 519b3) or the "eye of the soul" (*to tes psyches omma* at 533d2).[37] At 527e, Socrates openly compares the value of bodily sight with mental-rational sight conducive to knowledge: the result is that the latter is more valuable than "one thousand eyes" as "only with it can truth be seen" (*mono gar auto aletheia oratai*).

The importance of this can hardly be overstated. By using sight to explain how thought is related to its object, Plato shapes a conception of our rational psychological life that, despite undergoing substantial changes, is still recognisable over the centuries (consider the Cartesian *theatre*). As I hope is

[34] Cf. *Theaet.* 173c-e.
[35] Cf. *Theaet.* 174a-b.
[36] See for instance *Symp.* 174d; 175a-b; 220c-d.
[37] Cf. also *Phaed.* 83b5.

clear by now, the point I wish to make in this last section of my paper is that for Plato's intellectual innovation to work he needs blindness. Precisely at the juncture between bodily and mental sight, where diminishing the former enhances the latter, lies what I take to be a significant aspect of Plato's legacy, and consequently classical Greek philosophy: the notion that reality presents some fixed structure that can only be accessed by rational means.

4. Conclusions

By way of conclusion, I wish to summarise the key points of my analysis and highlight their overall significance. From a few, though dense, texts in Plato's *Republic*, it becomes evident that Plato is the quintessential ocularcentric thinker. Looking back at section one, it is clear that he employs sight as a metaphor for mental activity and knowledge, while conversely using blindness to signify a lack of knowledge. However, things are not so simple. From Book VI of the dialogue, it appears that blindness serves a specific point: most people have a sort of cognitive activity that yields results without any warrant as to their success. This falls within the province of *doxa* or opinion, which can be contingently true or false. Moreover, the metaphor of blindness is intricately linked to the metaphor of travelling. This gives the metaphor of blindness a remarkable philosophical depth. It suggests that knowledge requires rational procedures and a method. Also, the association of these two metaphors suggests that blindness-sight are essentially related to the simultaneity of a field of objects and to the persistence of the present – both of which appeared to be at the core of Plato's ontology. In Book VII, particularly the simile of the Cave, we see Plato make a complex and deliberate reference to blindness, *both* metaphorically and literally (in a qualified manner). The central point of my analysis is that for Plato there exists a mental eye, whose sight can only be made sharper by turning one's bodily sight away from perceptible things and focusing on intelligible entities such as mathematical objects and then Forms. In this sense, doing philosophy requires being literally, though partly and temporarily, blind towards perceptible things and everyday affairs.

Where does this leave us? Plato is ocularcentric all the way through. Despite conceiving of a type of blindness qua visual dazzlement that is the side-effect of a positive process (existing the Cave), it remains a *negative* effect, nonetheless. The specific and at times convoluted nature of Plato's conception is that sight is too important to leave it to the body, i.e. to the literal act of seeing. In his

remarkable philosophical innovation, Plato *needs* blindness.[38] In lamenting the non-philosophers' neglect of true reality (the Forms), he uses blindness to express the lack of awareness of an entirely different type of reality. This reality, however, is not perceptible. It must be grasped by means of one's rational activity, often related to some sort of mental sight. What is more, literal sight distracts people and keeps them tethered to what they erroneously consider to be real, namely empirical things. Thus, becoming blind to empirical things constitutes a precondition to acquire mental sight that leads to knowledge. Overcoming mental blindness requires temporary and at least partial bodily blindness and a lack of attention towards empirical things. To first become a philosopher, these two types of blindness are related and co-dependent. In other words, given Plato's ocularcentrism, he felt he could best conceptualise this crucial transition in terms of blindness. What is of immense significance to the history of philosophy is that, in doing so, among other things, Plato disclosed the field of epistemology, broadly understood as the reflection concerning how one can know through rational means what is real.

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[38] This need may bear some resemblance to the concept of narrative prosthesis discussed in Mitchell and Snyder 2000.

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