

# **Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics**

Volume 11, 2019

Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar Jovanović

Published by the European Society for Aesthetics

**esa**

## **Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics**

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: [proceedings@eurosa.org](mailto:proceedings@eurosa.org)

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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# *Plato's Images: Addressing the Clash between Method and Critique*

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ABSTRACT: In Book X of the *Republic* Plato develops a structured criticism of the images of painting, in order to denigrate, by means of analogy, the cognitive value of poetry. Yet Plato persistently employs verbal images at points of utmost importance with regards to his philosophical aims. In the face of Plato's critique of the image, his methodic use of images can seem paradoxical: critique and method point to opposing directions with regard, especially, to the cognitive value of the image. This article examines two accounts, drawn from the existing literature, which may seem to resolve the inconsistency between Plato's critique of the image and his method. Evidencing that both of these accounts are in error in ways that affirm the inconsistency, the article aims to defend an alternative account that can lead to its proper resolution.

## **1. Introduction**

In Book X of the *Republic* Plato develops a structured criticism of the images of painting, in order to denigrate, by means of analogy, the cognitive

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value of poetry. It is due to this criticism that the history of iconophobia and iconoclasm traces their intellectual lineage to Plato. Yet Plato persistently employs verbal images in the dialogues—rather than rational argumentation—at points of utmost importance with regards to his philosophical aims.<sup>2</sup> Admitting to being smitten by images (*Republic* 488a1–2), Plato recurrently devises an image precisely where the interlocutor's understanding is at stake and instead of giving a straightforward definition of the terms examined. These images are explicitly treated as educational, teaching devices or as devices that can facilitate comprehension, while Plato repeatedly defends his use of images when an argument is difficult to prove, when there are no proofs and evidences and, generally, when there is lack of clarity or adequate knowledge on a matter. The *Republic* is admittedly no exception to this method: some of the most powerful and memorable images of philosophical discourse are given in the dialogue that purportedly manifests Plato's hostility towards images.

In the face of Plato's critique of the image, under its standard interpretation, the methodic use of verbal images is puzzling, paradoxical: critique and method certainly seem to point us to opposing directions with

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<sup>2</sup> The targeted class of verbal images includes a host of figurative devices (analogies, similes, metaphors) that Plato groups under the genus of *image* (eikon) to the extent that they trade on likeness and guided visualization. For a discussion of Plato's use of "eikon" in relation to such devices, see Pender 2003.

regard, especially, to the *cognitive value* of the image.<sup>3</sup> Before we are led to assume (with Robinson 1953, 233 and Murdoch 1998, 462) that a philosopher of this magnitude, theoretically obsessed as he was with the world of images, failed to notice or was not bothered by an inconsistency in his own stance towards the image, it is merited that we attempt to resolve the inconsistency. This article aims, in the first instance, to assess two relevant accounts that can be drawn from the existing literature and which may seem to provide such a resolution. Both of these accounts hold on to the inferiority of the painted image that the critique foregrounds, but then, in rather opposing terms, call for a revision of the nature and/or function of Plato's images that, if judged merited, would resolve the inconsistency.

According to the first account, discussed in Section II, the images of painting that the critique targets are indeed cognitively mute and pernicious to the soul, but the verbal images belong to a different class. They fall under the class of *true* images, along with the images that dialectic aims eventually to construct, i.e. the *logos* of philosophy. From this perspective, it is only a category error that can lead us to claim an inconsistency between Plato's critique of the image and his methodic use of verbal images.

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<sup>3</sup> The issue can and indeed has been raised with regards to Plato's criticism of poetry and the dialogical form of Plato's philosophical exposition. And while dialogical form faded out in philosophical discourse, imagery invoked by figurative devices is used throughout the ages by philosophers, often adopting the same ambivalent stance detected in Plato, i.e. persistently using images but also mounting a harsh critique against them (pertinent cases are philosophers of the British Empiricist tradition, such as Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke). For that reason, Plato is an ideal test-case for an approach to this theoretical issue, being the matrix of a paradox with continuing relevance for the understanding of the role of images in philosophical discourse.



According to the second account, discussed in Section III, there is no category error in our thinking of the verbal images but also *no inconsistency* between critique and method: the verbal images and the images of painting fall under the same class but also, despite appearances to the contrary, the former can be seen to bear the *same cognitive limitations* as the latter. From this perspective, there is obviously no clash between critique and method: the critique states and the method manifests the image's definite lack of cognitive value. So, if there is a certain function that Plato's images are meant to serve in the context of the dialogues, this should be presumably looked for in their aesthetic and/or affective capacities, which the critique indeed affirms rather boldly.

Through our analysis we will evidence that both of these accounts are in error and that the reasons for which they are in error actually affirm rather than resolve the inconsistency between critique and method. It is thus our aim, in the closing Section, to defend an alternative account that can lead to a proper resolution. The presumed inconsistency between critique and method is upheld, we will argue, within the bounds of a widely endorsed but still *myopic* reading of Plato's critique of the image that demands revision. Affirming the cognitive function of the verbal images, on the basis of just those traits of the image that the critique highlights, we will evidence that Plato's theorizing of the image and his methodic use of verbal images (a) are fully consistent and (b) point to an overall conception of the nature of the image and its cognitive value that is more lenient and more elaborate than the one that has been attributed to Plato—in the philosophy of art and

beyond—on the basis of a rather crude reading of the critique in Book X. In effect, through a structured understanding of the method, we will defend an alternative reading of Plato's critique of the image that seems to be merited and resolves the apparent inconsistency between critique and method.

## 2. An Attempted Resolution through a Division of Mimesis

Acknowledging that Plato's own image-making is in tension with his critique of images, James Risser (2013) has attempted a reconciliation through "a reconsideration of the now classical treatment of imitation (mimesis) in Book Ten of the *Republic*" (249).<sup>4</sup> Being grounded on a scrutiny of the terms of that treatment, in the light of relevant insights in *Cratylus* and the *Sophist*, the suggested reconsideration foregrounds a threefold division of mimesis: mimesis as replication; mimesis as false resemblance; and mimesis as true resemblance. From this perspective, Plato's own images are allowed a different value than the images of painting targeted in Book X, not because of their different medium but because, due to their internal traits, they fall under a different class—the class of true images (*eikones*) rather than the class of false images (*phantasmata*), where painted images fall. So, it is only a category error, it seems, that would lead

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<sup>4</sup> Plato's "image-making" in Risser's analysis seems to concern predominantly the artistry of the dialogues and the accounts he gives regarding different objects of inquiry. It seems appropriate, however, to extend the argument to the verbal images, which are themselves part of the artistry of the dialogues and which are also aimed to give an indirect account of targeted objects of inquiry.

us to claim an inconsistency between Plato's critique of the image and his own ample use of images towards cognitive ends.

Whereas the division that Risser draws is merited by Plato's overall treatment of mimesis, still we need to scrutinize the verbal images before we can accept their suggested classification. In order to proceed to such scrutiny, let us first be clear on the terms of the division that Risser draws. What should first be clear is that, from the three suggested kinds of mimesis, only the latter two concern images: in *Cratylus* (432a–d) Socrates makes it rather clear that the image is marked by an *ellipsis*, i.e. that if a mimesis were to copy every aspect of its object so as to replicate it in its entirety, then that mimesis would cease to be an image. It is, thus, a mark of images that “they are very far from having qualities which are the exact counterpart of the realities which they represent” (432d).

It follows that both the second and the third term of the division that *do* concern images, as the *Sophist* (233ff) makes clear, bear the ellipsis that marks images. Both true and false images, that is, fail to reproduce some aspects of their objects: they are essentially selective, as they present their objects under specific dimensions at the exclusion of others.<sup>5</sup> The definitive difference between true and false images, then, is that the former, but not the latter, are accurate, while being selective: they present the qualities that their object bears under the selected dimension(s), with a certain completeness but also without distortion (235d). Consider, for example the case of

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<sup>5</sup> This has implications concerning the expression of knowledge, as becomes rather clear in the *Seventh Epistle* (342a–b and 343d–c). See Ringbom 1965, 103–4.

sculpture—a kind of visual mimesis that can have, according to Plato, both true and false instances. A piece of sculpture is clearly an image and not a replica of its object, as it can only present the external, formal properties of an object at the exclusion of its internal properties or its constitution: sculpture can reproduce form and possibly colour but is, in any case, limited to the dimension of space. A piece of sculpture will then be a true mimesis if it presents the spatial, formal properties of its object with completeness and accuracy, i.e. without altering the latter's form and the true proportions of its parts. As Plato notes in the *Sophist* (235b–236a), this is not the case in big sculptures, where the maker needs to distort the true proportions of the original for the sake of beauty. If the sculptor held to the true proportions, “the upper parts would appear too small and the lower parts too big, on account of the fact that we see the ones from afar and the others from nearby” (235e–236a). So, in order for a big sculpture to be true to the eye and beautiful, it needs to be false: it needs to be a *phantasma*, an appearance of likeness, rather than a true likeness.

It is rather clear from the critique of painted images in Book X of the *Republic* that they fall under the category of false images. It is also clear that, unlike sculptures, they do so by necessity.<sup>6</sup> Like sculptures, the images of painting can only reproduce the spatial, formal properties of their objects as well as their colour; but, because they are two-dimensional, their likeness

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<sup>6</sup> Risser seems to think otherwise, as also Tate (1932). See, however, Keuls (1974, 118) and Janaway (1995, 115–7 and 170, n. 46) on the reasons for which such a stance is not merited in the light of Plato's analysis of painting.

to the original can only be a rather compromised likeness. On the one hand, the images of painting can only present those aspects of their objects that are manifest from a certain point of view, being, thus, selective *even within the spatial dimension* that they selectively target (598b). On the other hand, to be true to the eye, they need to present those aspects as they appear from the relevant point of view, rather than as they truly are (so the image can only present us with an *apparent* shape and an *apparent* colour rather than with their true counterparts [598a5–b5, 602c7–d4]; cf. Hyman 2006, ch. 5). The painted image, then, is a *phantasma*, a compromised likeness, owing to its inflated selectivity and overall perspectivity. And yet, this compromised likeness masks itself, especially when the image is seen from a distance (as Plato notes with regard to *skiagraphia*; for a discussion see Keuls 1974). When seen from a distance, the painted image has the power to fool us that we are in the presence of its object, in its absence; or—for more minded viewers—it can lead us to make-believe seeing that object and/or marvel at the image's realism, oblivious of the many respects in which the image is unlike its object. Images, that is, have the power to enchant, at the expense of a critical, reflective stance that would allow us to judge the like and the unlike and, thus, to see the image as what it is—*an image*, i.e. a construction that is only a partial likeness (602c4–603b2).

Turning our focus on Plato's own images, we need to reflect: are they true images, like some instances of sculpture can be and as the images—the *logoi*—of philosophy indeed are for Plato (in contrast to the false images of the sophists); or rather they bear the same limitations as the images of

painting do, according to Plato's critique? Risser's analysis, targeting more generally "the artistry of Plato as the writer of dialogues" (253), can seem to favor the first line of response.<sup>7</sup> But we cannot endorse this response merely on the grounds of the fact that those images are used in the context of philosophical discourse (that, for Plato at least, aims at truth); or even under the hypothesis that the philosopher has possibly attained a grasp of the essence of things (i.e. of Ideas), so as to be able to represent such essence in an image. As Plato acknowledges after all, one that is in possession of the truth, may need to use a false image in order to promote good ends, given the limitations of those whom he addresses (*Republic* 414b8–415c; *Laws* 663b–c): a false image may well give a philosophical truth, but in compromised terms that the recipients can grasp. To ascertain under which class of image Plato's verbal images fall, it is thus merited that we consider their internal traits vis-à-vis their objects, bracketing the philosophical acumen of their maker.<sup>8</sup>

Consider, for example, the image of the Sun in the *Republic* (507b–509c). Having explained the difficulties involved in examining directly the idea of Good, of which, anyway, we have no adequate knowledge (505a–506d), Socrates proceeds to talk instead about the offspring of the Good,

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<sup>7</sup> Risser does not proceed to a scrutiny of Plato's "images"—be they dialogues, accounts, or verbal images—but only focuses on the conception (supposedly of a whole, i.e. of the Idea) that guides their construction. However, the criteria of truth set for images in the *Sophist* are much more demanding than *that*.

<sup>8</sup> It is blatantly true, of course, that the extent to which an employed image will be of cognitive value to the recipient—the extent to which the image will allow him or her to develop appropriately her thought about the image's object—directly depends on the cognitive capacities of its maker, apart from his or her artistry.

what is most similar to it and is its image, i.e. the Sun. The description of this image of the Good focuses *selectively* on specific, empirically accessible or verifiable, properties of the Sun (and its relation to the visible realm), that Socrates exploits in order to illuminate by analogy the nature of the Good (and its relation to the intelligible realm): the Sun shines, it illuminates the visible realm, it is the cause of our ability to see and be seen, it empowers or sustains birth and growth. The image, we should admit, is rather forceful. It exploits our conception of the Sun as the ultimate luminous force on which vision and life depend in the visible realm, in order to transfer (in our thought) the same power and relational force to the Good in the intelligible realm.

If we reflect on the analogical device, however, we will notice limitations analogous to those that mark false images. On the one hand, as the images of painting, the image of the Sun bears an *inflated selectivity*: the image is further selective *even within the dimension* that it selectively targets, i.e. the order of the intelligible realm and the relations that pertain to this realm. As there is apparently much of grave importance (*within* the context of the targeted dimension) that the image conceals, Plato devises further images—the image of the Line and the image of the Cave—that correct on the selectivity of the Sun–image, revealing further aspects that a comprehensive conception of the intelligible realm (and of our own cognitive powers) needs to involve.

On the other hand, the Sun–image presents a partial likeness that is persuasive *when considered from a distance*. If we reflect more closely on

the description of the image, it will become evident that there is a host of properties that the Sun possesses and which the description conceals—properties which, if acknowledged, would undermine the seeming aptness of the attempted analogy. For instance, besides empowering vision, the Sun can also blind us, as is indeed acknowledged in the image of the Eclipse (*Phaedo* 99d–e); every living thing is naturally turned towards the Sun, whereas our soul needs education in order to be turned towards the Good (518d–e); even if the Sun has a dependent being, it does not further depend on any other *source of light* to make things visible, whereas the Good seems to require the assistance of the Sun to make things known;<sup>9</sup> and the Sun not only sustains life but it can also end it—a property contradictory to the very notion of the (all positive) Good. In concealing these properties of the Sun through its selective focus, the description of the image remains silent (non-committal) with regard to how things might be with the specified referent, the Good, in analogous respects. Given that there are differences to be noted along some such respects, in concealing those differences the image retains its persuasiveness and seems *deceivingly* apt: it is only when the image is considered from up-close (i.e. when we reflect on it) that we can trace the whole pattern of likeness and difference and see the image for what it is—a construction that is only a partial likeness.

But as the images of painting, the verbal image (indeed, any

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<sup>9</sup> The progression of knowledge, note, relies—up to a certain advanced point—on the use of the senses, as the Line and the Cave tell us but also *Timaeus* (47a). See Gordon 1997 for an analysis of this aspect of Plato's thought in relation to his persistent use of verbal images.



successful figurative device, as has been repeatedly noted in the relevant literature) has the power to *enchant*. Given its directness, its vividness, and our own enhanced power of visual recall (in relation to our rather more limited power of verbal recall; see, e.g., Kosslyn 1980; Worren et al. 2002), the image exerts a special force on our thought, such that, even when we are aware of its partiality, we are prone to think of the targeted object under the image's terms (see, e.g., Moran 1989). Admittedly, although there is much in the rational argumentation of the Platonic dialogues that may escape the reader's attention and memory, Plato's artful images are definitely bound to capture the reader's imagination but also to haunt the reader's thought, long after the rigorous discourse that surrounds them fades-out in his or her memory.

Space does not allow us to evidence the aforementioned limitations of the Sun-image in any other verbal image employed by Plato, but those limitations are there to be traced by a reflective recipient: Plato's different verbal images, one can affirm, fall under the class of false images, along with the images of painting. And they do so for a good reason, rather than because of a deficit in their medium, as in painting: the verbal images *need to bear* the limitations of false images in order to better serve their role in the dialogues, as will be argued in the final section. But if, for now, we trust Plato that this role promotes his cognitive aims, the fact that the verbal images are false images affirms rather strongly the inconsistency between Plato's method and the critique of the image in Book X. According to that critique, false images suffer from an informative poverty and are pernicious

to the soul, so how could Plato use false images in a cognitive project deemed of utmost importance? Plato, it seems, has to err either in his own assessment of the method or in the critique: being mutually exclusive, they cannot both be on the right track. Julia Annas's approach to verbal images, to which we will now turn, indeed supports this line of thought.

### **3. An Attempted Resolution through the Denial of Cognitive Value**

Annas, it should be noted, does not develop anything close to a *theory* about Plato's images. She rather critically examines the images in the context of her analysis of the *Republic* (Annas 1981). But her examination conveys a rather clear stance on the cognitive value of the images—or, rather, the lack of it—and such a stance directly confirms Plato's critique of the image. It is worth examining Annas's approach, as it can be seen to provide a swift resolution to the tension between Plato's method and his critique of the image: if Plato's images have no cognitive value, then they do not really fly in the face of the critique. Of course, it would then need to be explained why Plato used those images. Perhaps he erred regarding their informative capacities, being himself a victim of their allure, which the critique confirms rather boldly. Or, more charitably, despite Plato's insinuations on their cognitive role, the images were perhaps meant to serve a function of an entirely different sort—an aesthetic or affective function, as indeed some

scholars seem to think (see, e.g., Robinson 1953; Tecuşan 1992; Destrée 2012). But before we turn decisively our thought on those other functions, let us first consider whether Annas has given us sufficient reason to doubt what Plato seems eager to confirm, i.e. that the images he employs are meant to serve a cognitive function.

Annas's stance on the verbal images is expressed with some force in her examination of the successive images of the Sun, the Line and the Cave (1981, ch. 10). Examining these images individually but also in correlation, Annas recurrently comments on their resistance to a clear and coherent interpretation. Most notably, the images are said to suffer from *vagueness* or a lack of clarity and precision; for instance, she comments on the image of the Sun (246):

‘Plato’s Good’, which he refuses to clarify here, became a byword for obscurity. How can the Good make things known, still less make them be what they are, in a way comparable to the workings of the sun? Plato is putting forward two thoughts, though he leaves them deliberately schematic.

But vagueness is not the only problem that a reader of the images has to face. Owing to their vagueness, the images are open-ended, indeterminate: they open up different possible interpretations at once, all merited, even if from different perspectives. The latter charge concerns the image as a whole as well as its individual elements. For instance, it is rather unclear, Annas notes, whether the Line (like the Sun) conveys a stark contrast between the

visible and the intelligible realm or, rather, whether it depicts “a continuous scale of epistemological achievement” (250); and it is certainly unclear whether the ‘shadows’ at its bottom end are meant literally or metaphorically—indeed the Cave follows to play at the level of both possible readings at once, thus *overloading* the imagery (256). The different ways in which the same element may function in different images points to a further interpretative challenge noted by Annas. The images that are evidently connected do not seem to neatly correspond or coincide: it is unclear where—or even, whether—the Good falls in the Line, as it presumably should; the Cave does not neatly divide into four sections, as the Line does; ‘shadow’ and ‘belief’ seem to suggest different things in the Line and in the Cave, and so on. Annas draws a stark assessment (252):

The insolubility of this problem is a good illustration of the difficulties that Plato runs into by using images to make a philosophical point. The imagery is apt to get overloaded, as happens with the Line [...]. And the detail of the imagery tempts us to ask questions that cannot be satisfactorily answered within the terms of the imagery; if we treat it with philosophical seriousness, the image turns out incoherent. As Iris Murdoch says (*The Fire and the Sun*, p. 68), ‘The Theory of Forms, when read in conjunction with the explanatory tropes of the Line and the Cave [...] can certainly produce some blazingly strong imagery in the mind which may well in the long run obstruct understanding.’

And she continues elsewhere (256):

Once more [Plato] has himself illustrated the dangers in the philosophical use of images, dangers which he warns against without seeming strikingly alive to [...]. [T]he imagery, memorable though it is, has no consistent, overall interpretation. Sun, Line, and Cave are philosophically frustrating; they point us in too many directions at once.

Plato's images are thus taken to *obstruct* rather than promote understanding. Whatever Plato's aims might have been in using them, their scrutiny confirms, for Annas, Book X's critique: it confirms the informative poverty of the image but also the cognitive harm that it can cause. However, we should not rush to endorse Annas's conclusion. As Annas does not ponder on the specific cognitive role that the images were meant to serve in the dialogues—which could be such as to *justify* their noted informative profile—her assessment is rather short-sighted.

Let us start with the one charge that is misplaced—as Annas (1982) indeed seems to acknowledge—and should be disregarded: i.e. that the images which seem to target the same domain do not correspond or neatly coincide. As noted earlier, each image bears an inflated selectivity, i.e. it is selective even within the context of the dimension that it selectively targets: in the discussed images, this is the order of the intelligible realm and the relations that pertain to this realm (including our own relation to it). To correct on this inflated selectivity, Plato sometimes devises further images that indeed target the same dimension. But it doesn't follow that they target

that dimension from *the same perspective*, so that the images could coincide, painting gradually, as it were, a more and more detailed image of their object from *that same* perspective. The connected images are connected because they target the same dimension, but it should be evident (from their context and their content) that they target it from *shifting perspectives*. And if there is a shift of perspective, even a marginal one, we cannot expect an overlap in the aspects that the images conjointly reveal: any effort to superimpose the images will indeed result in hermeneutic puzzles, but this is a misguided effort in the first place (cf. Gonzalez 2016 for an analogous point regarding the Platonic dialogues).

The charges of vagueness and, accordingly, of openness are, however, merited. But still, they do not justify the negative conclusion that Annas draws regarding the cognitive value of Plato's images. For such conclusion to be adequately justified, another premise is needed in the argument, one that Annas does not defend: i.e. that the *specific* cognitive aims towards which the images are geared *demand precision* rather than vagueness. This is a premise of utmost importance, one that we just cannot by-pass, assuming that it is self-evident, as Annas presumably does. The long scholarly literature on vagueness persuades us that the premise is far from self-evident: it alerts us to the fact that vagueness is not an unqualified villain but a two-edged sword, and so a contextual analysis is required before we can assess the cognitive value of a vague representation (see, e.g., Lipman 2009; de Jaegher and van Rooij 2010). Not only there are cognitive contexts where a vague representation is the only representation that can be

had (still better than nothing when there is a pressing need for some instruction); there are also cognitive contexts where a vague representation is the *merited* representation—contexts where a more precise representation that we could possibly devise would flaunt our cognitive aims (and *context* here includes the whole communicative situation).

Consider for instance a small-scale map vis-à-vis a large-scale map (the one being vague in relation to the other). In some contexts a small-scale map may well be the only map that can be had (e.g. because we haven't yet been able to cartograph the targeted terrain more precisely) but, better than nothing, it can still serve general orientation needs, that will in turn allow the targeted users us *to map the terrain themselves* from up-close. In other contexts, where a more precise map may well be at our disposal, the small-scale map may still be the one that it is merited to use. If, for instance, we want to orient a new colleague in the university campus that s/he visits for the first time, we better give him or her a vague sketch with the main landmarks rather than a detailed map of the campus's Daedalic twists and turns. The rough sketch is easier to process and more effective for the given orientational purposes, as it avoids the clutter that would be confusing to a newcomer. *Mutatis mutandis* what holds for vagueness also holds for openness: an open, indeterminate, representation may well be the representation that it is merited to use when (as in the case of Law, for instance) there are just too many contingencies that cannot be easily foreseen or accommodated beforehand, but still it is imperative that we give some directives to the targeted recipients; or when, apart from giving

directives, we aim further to activate the recipient's thought—when we aim to activate his or her rationality (see, e.g., Endicott 2011; Waldron 2011; Lanius 2019). It is no accident, note, that the post-modernist theorists which called for the *emancipation* of the reader, favored strategies of literary writing that foster interpretative openness and indeterminacy (see, e.g., Hutcheon 1988).

Now, it takes a little thought to confirm that all the contextual variables that merit the use of vague and open representations are present in the communicative context where Plato's images appear.<sup>10</sup> Rather briefly: the images are addressed to recipients that are yet to find their path in the realm of philosophical knowledge, so they are meant to provide them with a first vague orientation in that realm, before they are exposed (through rigorous rational discourse) to its cumbersome twists and turns. Further, given the complexity of each relevant object of inquiry, but also its internal connections to any one of the many different areas that Plato targets even within the same dialogue (from education, to epistemology, to psychology, to politics, to art), the images need to be vague enough to accommodate the yet unforeseen contingencies that close rational examination will reveal. And last, but not least, Plato aims above all to activate the recipients' rationality or thoughtfulness—he aims to turn them (actually, us) towards

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<sup>10</sup> That is so, even if we want to doubt what Plato admits through Socrates, i.e. that he lacks an adequate or precise understanding of certain targeted issues, which would thus make the use of vague images merited. In other words, the use of vague images seems to be merited in the given context, even if Plato had the sort of understanding that would allow him to devise more precise images.



critical thinking and this noble cognitive aim requires that the images resist a closed neat interpretation. In accordance with the maieutic method, the images need to be such as to challenge us, like Socrates's gadfly (*Apology* 30e–31b). And indeed, they are.

It follows that Annas's negative assessment of the cognitive value of Plato's images needs to be rejected. When the specific cognitive aims that the images are meant to serve are taken into account, as they should, the cognitive value of the images becomes manifest. In the same sleight of hand, the inconsistency between Plato's critique of the image and his methodic use of images is, again, affirmed. Yet, a resolution *is* possible. But that resolution requires a radical turn of thought regarding what, in the first instance, gave rise to the seeming inconsistency—the widely endorsed but still myopic interpretation of the critique.

#### **4. A Merited Resolution**

To recap, we have not been given good reason to assume that Plato's images are radically different from the compromised images of painting; and we have not been given good reason to assume that Plato errs or is dishonest when he suggests that the images can be cognitively beneficial to those whom he addresses. Plato's images, as was noted, indeed can be seen to serve a cognitive function, given the specific context of use and the cognitive aims that pertain to this context. Moreover, and importantly, they

can be seen to serve a cognitive function *not in spite of* but, rather, *due to* being limited in aforementioned ways. That is, they can develop our thought (as Plato wants it to be developed) owing to their inflated selectivity, their overall perspectivity, their vagueness and their openness.

On the one hand, the inflated selectivity of the verbal images can be seen to perform a *framing* function toward the targeted conception of their objects (see, e.g., Moran 1989; Camp 2009; for Plato, see Pender 2003; Collobert 2012). The image's selective content aims to *focus our attention* on salient aspects concerning that which is abstract and hard to conceive distinctly (at least for one that is not versed in abstract thought); or, in other instances, it aims to bring succinctly to the fore the salient properties of that which is too complex to *experience* distinctly and comprehensively (as is the case, for instance, with the image of the Ship of State [*Republic* 488a–489d] that targets the concrete domain of political rule).<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the perspectivity of a verbal image entails a perspectival structural organization of its parts (see Hyman 2006, 75–77), and this dimension of its content can be instructive regarding the cognitive achievement that pertains to philosophy, according to the *Sophist* (253a–d). Departing from the thought, already highlighted in the *Republic* (476a4–7), that Ideas “manifest themselves everywhere in association with actions, bodies and one another,” it is presented as philosophy's task to unravel this complex pattern of intelligible relations (e.g. relations of compatibility, of

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<sup>11</sup> In the *Critique of Judgement* (§49) Kant nicely frames this insight with the concept of the *aesthetic idea*, formed through the poetic image.

participation, of difference). Given the epistemic project assigned to philosophy but also the pedagogical direction of the Platonic dialogues, there is a pragmatic consideration that makes the use of perspectival images merited. Even if the philosopher has attained a complete grasp of all the relations pertinent to a given subject of inquiry, so as to be able to represent them in a complex description, that description (as the descent of the philosopher to the Cave nicely illustrates [516e3–517a6]) would be hard to follow for one that is yet to be philosophically illuminated, as indeed Socrates's interlocutors are. A pattern of salient relations, however, is what an image can give us with economy and boldness through its structure. The image can function, that is, as a structural map, a map that helps us to mentally navigate a specific cognitive domain from a particular merited perspective (as well as from further apposite perspectives in the case of connected images), giving us a rough glimpse of the different salient relations or connections that pervade it. The cognitive outcome of this synoptic perspectival representation is that it allows the recipients a first *vague* orientation in the targeted domain from a merited perspective. Rational discourse then needs to follow (and indeed follows in the dialogues) to unpack individual elements of the domain, for which we already have a *vague sense* of their "coordinates" from an appropriate rational standpoint.

Further, the openness of the image (that pertains, note, to all analogical or figurative devices) encourages thoughtfulness, as noted earlier: it encourages an explorative or interrogative stance, in order to trace, for

instance, counterpart properties and relations in the image's target; or in order to affirm how far the analogies can go and where they end. The same holds for vagueness, in addition to its further contextual merits noted earlier. With regard to the Line, for instance, a reflective recipient may wonder: what is the significance of the fact that the middle segments of the Line are equal? And, is the space in each segment uniform or graded, so that possibly some points in that space are closer to the next level than others?<sup>12</sup> The images, when interrogated, stimulate critical thinking that, if carried through, can promote what philosophical inquiry is after—comprehensive understanding or intelligibility (see also Gordon 1997; Collobert 2012). In that sense, and in accordance with the maieutic method, the role of the image is undoubtedly *heuristic*: the image, that is, is not a mental repose before rigorous philosophical examination; it is rather such as to trigger (and thus it probes us to exercise) the reflective, critical stance that is pivotal to such examination.

It thereby follows, however, that the image's heuristic value hangs on a strict condition—one that indeed is highlighted in the critique, if only in the negative: i.e. that the image is approached with a critical rather than a passive stance. We need to be acutely aware, that is, that the image is just

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<sup>12</sup> Annas (1981, 252) complains that questions such as these cannot be answered by the images themselves, which only adds to our confusion. But the complaint is gullible: would we be right to blame a painted image, analogously, for not being able to answer our questions about those aspects of its object that it conceals, through the aspects that it reveals? The questions that may arise are to be pondered, in both cases, via active simultaneous reflection on the image's object and not merely through a scrutiny of the image: the image can only be a springboard for such reflection, that may in turn allow us to develop our thought about the image's object.

that—an *image*, i.e. a construction that is only a partial likeness; and we need to stand towards the image with the critical mind that this awareness demands. For Plato, this is the condition *sine-qua-non* of cognitive integrity: the condition that allows us both to avoid deception and to gain any cognitive benefit in our encounters with an image, given its inherent partiality and incompleteness. And Plato, alert as he is to the risk of enchantment that images foster, manifests responsiveness to this risk: the seemingly redundant announcement that an image will be used—which, despite stating the obvious, persistently precedes the articulation of verbal images—is a crucial reminder that the image *is only an image*, encouraging us to assume the right epistemic stance towards it.

Method and critique thus seem to manifest a consistent, *unitary* conception of the nature of the image:<sup>13</sup> of its distinctive traits and of its perils. So how can they depart so radically on the dimension of the image's value? It should be evident by now that the image, under Plato's unitary conception, is Janus-faced: i.e. it can have a positive and a negative cognitive effect, depending on its context of use—the specifics of this contextual dependence (relevant to who represents what, for what purpose, and, importantly, to whom) being illustrated by the method and the theory respectively.

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<sup>13</sup> The general term used from here onwards concerns the image as falling under the class of visual false mimesis, according to Plato's criteria. We defend more extensively the idea that Plato's method and his critique manifest a consistent unitary conception of the image in K. Bantinaki, F. Vassiliou, A. Antaloudaki, A. Athanasiadou (forthcoming).

The impression of an inconsistency in Plato's overall stance towards the image has been the result of a persistent but erroneous reading of Book X, as offering a diagnosis of the value of the image *tout court*—it does not. Let us not forget that Plato critically turns on images in Book X in order to create an image of poetry, i.e. an analogy that has poetry as its target—in the wider context, note, of the *quarrel* between philosophy and poetry (607b5–6). As all images, this one also fosters selectivity, incompleteness, and needs to be approached reflectively to properly assess its scope.

The real aim of the critique of the image that Book X provides is apparent once we approach the critique with a structured understanding of the method: rather than a diagnosis of the overall capacities of the image, it is meant to provide a contextually-g geared critique of its cognitive value. And we should admit, once the permissiveness of Plato's overall conception of the image is acknowledged, a rather insightful one—bringing Plato in line with contemporary analyses of the conditions that govern the cognitive value of representation, in both art and science.

Plato, we are convinced, is not an iconoclast—he does not present in Book X a polemic of the *medium* but only of a certain *use* that we may make of the medium. Under this light, it becomes obvious that the history of philosophy needs to correct an error.

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