

**Proceedings of the
European Society for Aesthetics**

Volume 9, 2017

Edited by Dan-Eugen Ratiu and Connell Vaughan

Published by the European Society for Aesthetics

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Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

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

Email: proceedings@eurosa.org

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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Relation Between Education and Beauty in Plato's Philosophy

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ABSTRACT. Analyses of Plato's philosophy and his *paideia* from the aesthetical perspective usually focus on his critique of poetry and other arts. In this study, we will investigate Plato's concept of education from the perspective of aesthetics without taking the arts into account, all the while bearing his notion of beauty from his middle dialogues such as *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* in mind. We will question it with regard to two key aspects: 1) the role of the idea of beauty in the cognitive process and 2) the transformation of one's soul in ascending to beauty. The results will present how the idea of beauty has a great importance for knowledge of ideas and also its role for reaching a life filled with virtue.

1. Beauty and Art in Plato's Philosophy

Analyses of Plato's philosophy and his *paideia* from the aesthetical perspective usually focus on his critique of poetry and other arts. In this study, I will try to investigate Plato's concept of education from the perspective of aesthetics without taking the arts into account, but bearing in mind Plato's notion of beauty. I will question it with regard to two key aspects – 1) the role of the idea of beauty in the cognitive process and 2) the transformation of the one's soul in ascending to beauty.

However, in order to be able to carry out this thesis, it is necessary to highlight all the peculiarities of Plato's and the ancient Greek's understanding of art on the one hand, and the ancient and Plato's understanding of the phenomenon of beauty, on the other hand. Setting the

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concepts of art and beauty in the proper context is one of the conditions necessary for the avoidance of modern and contemporary prejudices that are sedimented in everyday use of these terms.

Ancient notion of art as *téchne* is much broader than the modern concept of art; apart from that what is now one of the arts, *téchne* also includes crafts (Грыбор, 2012, p. 67). Art as *téchne* refers to the knowledge of certain rules that must be followed when creating an object regardless of whether it is painting, sculptures, or any craft creations. This term is therefore very close to the concept of the art techniques, as well as requiring skills needed for artwork creation; and it mainly refers to painting and sculpture. In addition to the notion of *téchne*, a very important concept for the understanding of Greek art is *poiesis*. This term refers primarily to poetry, which is separate from the other arts, and is much closer to augury and religious and rhapsodical practice than other arts. Poetry conceived as *poiesis* implies inspiration of the poet provided by the gods, and therefore singing based on inspiration. That shows us a clear difference towards the other arts that involve the implementation of previously learned rules for creating. Thus, in the first case we have a needed knowledge for artwork creation, while in the second case, this knowledge is left out.

It is important to note the major role of ancient Greek poets and poetry within ancient community – poems of Homer, Hesiod and other poets were sources of knowledge about the gods, the world, politics, and other important aspects of Greek culture. Hence, Plato's interest in poetry and his critique are encouraged by the extremely important role of poetry in the educational practices of the Greek world. In fact, Plato's education theory represents a contrast to the established and existing educational practices.

Problematization and complexity of the use of the concept of beauty is marked in Plato's early dialogue *Hippias Major* – the main issue of this work is the question of everyday Greek prejudices regarding the beauty phenomenon. The concepts of beauty that Plato analyzes are identifications of beauty with a pretty girl, gold, beautifully lived life, suitability, usefulness with good purpose and satisfaction through the senses of sight and hearing (Plato, 1997a, p. 899-921). All those definitions are rejected by counterexamples and relativization – beautiful girl appears ugly compared

to the beautiful goddess, gold appears to make some things more beautiful, but it is not the beauty itself and so on. All provided answers actually miss the question that Plato raises, which refers to the definition of beauty as such, the idea of beauty. Although the *Hippias Major* ends without final resolution, still, it is of crucial importance for the understanding of the Greek conception of beauty in general, which refers to the gods, humans, animals, equipment, customs, human character, satisfaction through the senses of hearing and vision and such. Thus, the definitions of beauty from *Hippias Major* provide us with the broader context of how the Greeks understood the beautiful, as well as Plato's critique of these usual prejudices about beauty.

Bearing in mind Plato's analysis from *Hippias Major*, we can easily notice the existence of major differences between the ancient and the modern concept of beauty. The domain of Greek understanding of beauty is much broader than it is the case in modernity - word *kalon* applies not only to beautiful objects and their experience, but also to the laws, customs and so on. More specifically, modern and contemporary differentiation of aesthetic and moral values are not fully explicated in Ancient philosophy, which results in overlapping of moral good and aesthetically beautiful in concept *kalon*. This overlapping is also present in Greek term *kalokaghatia*, which refers to the beautiful and in accordance with virtue formed character, as well as to the ideal of beauty and nobility (Grubor, 2010, p. 97). Ambiguity of the ancient concept of beauty is also visible in the ancient Greek language – for concrete beautiful things Greeks used the adjective *to kalon*, while the abstract, nonsensory characteristic of beautiful was marked by term *kallos* (Tatarkiewicz, 1980, p. 121).

The fact that further underlines the contrast between the modern and Plato's understanding of beauty and art is relation between them. Unlike 18th century concept of *Fine Arts*, which is understood as creation of fine, beautiful artworks, Plato does not explicitly talk about necessary connection between beauty and artworks. Of course, Plato will not deny the existence of beautiful works of art, but art as such it is not understood as prominent spot for self-showing of beauty, as it is the case in modernity (Grubor, 2010, p. 96). In his famous critique of poetry and other arts, question of the beauty of

art is almost never mentioned, nor does Plato see it as key aspect of art. Therefore, Plato's attitude towards the relation between art and the beauty makes a possibility to see the role of beauty alone, beauty separated from art, in context of educational and upbringing practice.

2. Idea of Beauty as Necessary Condition for Knowledge of Ideas

The main interest of Plato's philosophy is reflected in the multitude of attempts to create a coherent theory of ideas. Accordingly, his works should not be seen as a presentation of a completed system, but rather as a polemical writings in which he discusses not only with his predecessors, but also with his earlier works in order to overcome the difficulties within his own philosophical position. Plato's permanent self-criticism, therefore, should essentially influence our understanding of his entire philosophical project; his teachings should not be viewed as a pure evolutionary continuity, but rather as an effort to overcome problems of theory of ideas which was approached from multiple angles and perspectives.

Problem of beauty is present throughout almost all phases of Plato's thought – the dialogue *Hippias Major* is an attempt of problematization of phenomenon of beauty in his early thought. Then, in the middle works, the idea of beauty becomes one of the central themes of dialogue *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. Although it seems that in Plato's late period he lost interest in this issue, there are brief reviews on the idea of the beautiful in *Philebus* (Plato, 1997b, p. 441) and *Timaeus* (Plato, 1997c, 1286), where he provides us with his famous definition of beauty as a measure and proportion. In this study, I will focus primarily on the definitions of the beauty in his middle works such as *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, and try to show the relationship between the theory of beauty from these dialogues with his the most significant text from the same period – *Republic*. More precisely, my main task is an attempt to prove that Plato's famous myth of the cave actually implies his theory of beauty. In other words, my thesis is that idea of beauty is necessary condition for leaving the cave, and therefore that the idea of beauty is necessary condition for knowledge of ideas in general.

In order to support this thesis, first we must look back to the previously mentioned Plato's allegory of the cave. The myth begins with vision of shackled people inside the cave, in front of whom shadows move, which also is their only access to reality. After a while, one of the inhabitants of the cave, with great anguish and pain, gets released from chains and notices the fire behind the cave dwellers as well as people walking near the fire - at that moment he realizes that shadows, which were originally believed to represent the whole reality, actually are merely a reflection of the objects and the people who were passing by the fire. Then, another inhabitant would take him to the exit of the cave, where he would see how the sun shines over other beings outside the cave (Plato, 1997d, p. 1132-1136).

Common interpretation of this myth, which we largely accept, refers to the fact that the allegory of the cave represents the path of the individual to the knowledge of the truth of reality; it begins with the shadows of sense objects that correspond to the shadows in the cave, through sensory and perishable things that correspond to those objects whose shadows are available to all people in a cave, to getting an insight of nature of ideas or beings outside the cave whose visibility is provided by the Sun or idea of good. To be more precise, ascending towards knowledge of ideas happens when One finally leaves the cave and realizes that the Sun (idea of good) provides visibility of other ideas as well as the knowledge of true reality. Although this interpretation is not problematic, it, however, does not provide us with an answer to one very important question and that is why would cave dweller even turn and get himself released from the chains in the first place, especially bearing in mind Heidegger's suggestion on the significance of the inconvenience and suffered pain at the time of this turn (Heidegger, 1998, 159). In other words, the question we ask is what is it that drives an individual to review the daily experience of the world, especially because it indeed results in feeling of distress (Barrachi, 2002, p. 29)? The answer to that question cannot be found in the previously mentioned interpretation of the myth of the cave, but we will try to make it explicit by some of Plato's insights from *Phaedrus*, which, as well as *Republic*, also belongs to the middle phase of Plato's thought.

One of the key definitions of the idea of beauty from *Phaedrus* is that the idea of beauty is only available sensual idea, the idea that can be observed through the senses of sight (Plato, 1997e, p. 528). Because of its sensory accessibility and immediacy, the idea of beauty, or the aesthetic experience of beauty is actually a highlighted place where can be seen that the ontological basis of reality is in the world of ideas and not in individual perishable beings. This is so because the experience of beauty is a special form of experience, it is an aesthetic experience that provokes us to further examining of beauty phenomenon. Judging by Heidegger's interpretation in *Nietzsche I* (Heidegger, 1991, p. 196), the idea of beauty in Plato's philosophy figures as a key idea for one's grasp of Being. In other words, the sensual availability of beauty is the trigger for the beginning of anamnestic process, the process which leads to the understanding of Being. In general, we agree with this interpretation, but we will try to be more radical – we will try to show that the experience of the idea of beauty is a necessary condition for all knowledge of ideas. To be more precise, my thesis is that only an encounter with the beautiful can lead to existential turn of the individual, which would eventually drive him to the knowledge of true reality. Of course, the idea of beauty has no ontological primacy over other ideas, but without idea of beauty, anamnestic process could never begin.

In order to demonstrate the previously mentioned role of beauty, we will take a look on one very important passage in *Phaedrus*. In this dialogue, among many other problems, Plato raises questions about the nature of human knowledge. Those questions are partially answered by the thesis of pre-existence of the soul, which leads to Plato's *anamnesis* theory. Speaking in parables, Plato says that winged human soul resided in the world of ideas before becoming corporeal. By becoming one with the body, the soul had lost its wings and forgot its former residence, which also means it forgot the true nature of reality. Depending on the way of life in this world, the human soul can remember its pre-existence which drives it to the remembrance of the ideal world as well as essences of all perishable and individual beings (Plato, 1997e, p. 524-525).

In the same dialogue, Plato extends allegory of the winged soul. In

fact, in *Phaedrus*, Plato notes that the human soul, when encountering the idea of beauty, comes in a specific mood accompanied by pain, which Plato compares with fledging. More specifically, when encountering the idea of the beautiful, the soul of the individual receives a specific appetite for ascending to the world of ideas, which is symbolised by growth of feathers (Plato, 1997e, p. 529).

Bearing in mind all the foregoing, we can conclude that aesthetic experience of the idea of beauty at first glance may seem pleasant, but it also at the same time reflects the tension and anxiety (Plato, 1997e, p. 529). In other words, the encounter with the idea of beauty leads to changes in existential posture and potential existential turn – individual then loses his self-evident understanding of the world, which is the first step on the road towards discovering the truth of reality.

Taking into account the description of the experience of the beauty in *Phaedrus*, we can notice the implicit connection between Plato's conception of aesthetic experience of beauty and the moment when the individual releases himself from chains in the allegory of the cave, which is the moment when cave dweller goes through an existential turn. The first parallel that can be drawn between these two, some might say, completely separate things, is reflected in the *stimmung* which both situations share. As I previously mentioned, the moment of turning in the cave and an beauty experience are both accompanied with basic feel of discomfort, which is non the less but the moment when the existential posture of individual is radically changed – In *Republic*, after the liberation from chains in the cave, and in the *Phaedrus*, after encountering the idea of beauty begins the process of ascending of the individual to the knowledge of the ontological order of reality.

Second, perhaps even more fundamental connection between these cases refers to the question that is answered through the description of aesthetic experience of beauty on the one hand, and the allegory of the cave, on the other hand. Namely, in the myth of the cave Plato never mentions why an individual would turn from the shadows to the people who carry the objects near the fire at first place. In other words, he offers no answer to the question why would someone question their own self-explanatory

understanding of the world. Precisely, the question of the cause of existential change of posture of the individual, and in this case that means turning towards the world of ideas, remains unanswered in *Republic*. However, the answer to that question is implicitly provided in *Phaedrus*, where the aesthetic experience of beauty is actually a trigger for anamnestic process. Understanding the experience of beauty as condition which enables One's ascend towards ideas also means that access to ideas is enabled for every individual through the aesthetic experience of beauty; whether the individual is ready to actualize this, to really start to explore the ontological structure of the world, depends on his decisions. One gets to decide whether will he continue to enjoy in pleasures of sensual beauty or will he, with *stimung* accompanied by discomfort and pain, move from the idea of beauty towards other ideas.

The aesthetic experience of beauty, as we have seen, is highlighted as an important event in the existence of an individual; in potency, it is a moment that cuts and separates the two radically different types of existential postures. Therefore, primary definition of aesthetic experience of beauty is not satisfaction or pleasure, how it is often portrayed in aesthetic tradition, it rather has more fundamental role in Plato's philosophy. Understanding the specifics of beauty in Plato's philosophy can open up the possibilities not just for one unusually view on Plato's philosophy as a whole, but it also provides us with some possibilities for rethinking the concept of aesthetic experience in general.

3. Beautiful Upbringing and Upbringing by Beautiful

In the previous part of this work, I have tried to show the role of the idea of beauty for knowledge of it and other ideas; By doing that, I've tried to show mutual familiarity between the phenomenon of beauty and educational aspects of Plato's *paideia*, I approached the idea of beauty in view of its role in the educational process of the individual. This section will look at the possible connection between idea of beauty and elements of *paideia* primarily related to the wider type of education, or in other words, the upbringing and forming of good human character. I will approach this

problem bearing in mind Plato's concept of beauty presented in *Symposium* with some other observations about this topic from *Phaedrus*.

One of the key points in the dialogue *Symposium* is the famous Socrates' speech about the nature of beauty and the process of transformation of individual character in ascending towards the beauty as such. The road towards beauty is marked by two different types of ascending (Hyland, 2008, p.50) - one is related to the ascending as a result of the urge for creation in beauty for the sake of immortality. Second, and for our thesis far more important type of ascending concerns the ascending of individual beautiful things to the very idea of beauty.

The first step in this second type of ascending concerns the encounters with the beautiful bodies. It is not just the first, but also a necessary stage in the process, because the beauty of bodies, as well as other perishable things, is the first form of beauty that One can encounter; In addition, if the goal is reaching the beauty of its own, then it is necessary to grasp all its forms. When observing several beautiful bodies, One acquires the ability to rank their beauty that varies from less beautiful to more beautiful. After, One learns that the beauty of the soul is considered much more valuable and enduring than beauty of the body. Then, he becomes able to recognize the beautiful speeches, to observe the beauty of the laws and customs, knowledge, and at the end of philosophy, which enables access to the very idea of beauty (Plato, 1997f, p. 492-493).

Ascending towards beauty, besides giving us an insight into its various manifestations and knowledge of beauty as such, also has a role in forming of good human character. In other words, by distinguishing and ranking of different manifestations of the beauty, man's soul is being trained for the understanding of true nature of reality or so called world of ideas. At the first stage, an individual can see variety of beautiful bodies and can get clues about general form of beauty which is present in every single beautiful body. Then, One becomes able to recognize this form in other beings such as speeches, laws and customs, and so on, until he reaches the pure form or the idea of beauty itself. By acquiring knowledge about what is beautiful, individual, at the same time, acquires the knowledge about the nature of all other ideas, which once again confirms the thesis about crucial importance

of the idea of beauty for knowledge of ideas in general.

However, gaining insight into the idea of beauty doesn't only have pure theoretical and cognitive value. What knowledge of beauty also provides is virtuous life (Plato, 1997f, p. 493-494). Although this statement is not explicitly given in *Symposium*, it nevertheless indicates the practical and educational role of idea of beauty in process of upbringing. By gaining insight into the beauty of body and soul, a man is provided with possibilities to transform his own body and soul in accordance with the beauty. Beautiful soul, then, has an insight into the beauty of speeches, laws and customs, and finally the philosophy, which individual can aspire to. In other words, practice and life of beautiful soul lies in making of right decisions and the right choices, which in the end results in virtuous life.

The idea of beauty is not simply given as an idea, but an insight into its nature has yet to be reached via the previously outlined ascending through sensible beautiful things towards the beauty as such. However, the pursuit of beauty as such is not innate like the pursuit of sensual pleasures, but it is acquired as a desire for what is best (Plato, 1997e, p. 517). More specifically, the urge of the soul towards the idea of beauty, and therefore towards life conducted in accordance with virtue, is something One learns; for that reason, Plato discusses the love relationship between two people in the *Phaedrus*. In that relationship, one of them is always older and more experienced, and in this case he acts as a mentor - he educates and teaches the younger one by helping him to ascend above the beauty of the body, or the beauty given through sensual pleasures, to other, loftier manifestations of beauty. Hence, one of the mentor's tasks is to provide upbringing and education by beauty, which end result is nothing but good manners, and good formation of human character.

As I already pointed out when reflecting the allegory of the cave, Plato insists that cave dweller, who is leaving the cave, is accompanied by another individual who helps the leaving inhabitant to leave the cave and see the sun or the idea of good. That, maybe crucial part of the allegory, can also be interpreted in relation with Plato's concept of idea of beauty. In other words, Plato's theory of upbringing by beauty implies mentor and learner as well as his allegory of the cave also implies two individuals that

are required for leaving the cave. In that sense, situation in the cave can be understood as metaphor for previously mentioned mentor-learner relationship. Needless to say, there is no certain proof for this claim, but Plato's allegory of the cave and his upbringing theory definitely open space for such interpretation.

That being said, I can conclude that the idea of beauty not only plays an important role in anamnestic process, but it appears to be of great importance for the upbringing aspect of the Plato's *paideia*. Besides, the educational role of the idea of beauty confirms the Greek concept of beauty named as *kalon*, which main characteristic is in overlapping of aesthetic and moral values.

4. Conclusion

In previous parts of this work, I have demonstrated the role of idea of beauty in Plato's concept of *paideia*. Under the term *paideia* I meant both upbringing and education. In both of those aspects of *paideia*, the idea of beauty appears to be of crucial significance – it is the necessary condition for knowledge of ideas in general, as well as an essential factor in the formation of proper upbringing of human character. I've tried to investigate Plato's *paideia* from the perspective of aesthetics with no regards to his criticism of poetry and the other arts, but only taking into account the concept of beauty, which, in Plato's case, can be conceptually separated from the concept of art.

One of the possible ways to strengthen this thesis can be found even in Plato's writing style. Namely, if we take a look at Plato's texts, we can see that the vast majority of them are in form of dialogue. Therefore, it might be the case that Plato used the dialogue form to make his writings more aesthetically appealing to his readers (Popović, 2013, p. 130) – in that case, we could argue that the concept of *paideia* of beauty is implemented by Plato himself.

However, previously demonstrated thesis actually shows the whole of Plato's philosophy in a different theoretical light than is usually the case. One implication of the phenomenon of beauty transcends its internal

aesthetic meaning. Namely, if the idea of beauty is the trigger for the beginning of anamnestic process, and thus the beginning of philosophizing, the question is whether aesthetic experience of beauty may represent an alternative to the established and well known thesis concerning the wondering as the beginning of philosophy. This and many other questions can not only provide us with a different view of Plato's philosophy, but also it can lead to a rethinking of the very essence of philosophy in general.

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