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2017

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Citation

Edmonds, Radcliffe G., III. 2017. "Introduction: The Power—and the Problems—of Plato's Images." In *Plato & the Power of Images*, edited by Radcliffe Edmonds & Pierre Destrée, 1-10. Leiden: Brill.

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Introduction: The Power—and the Problems—of Plato’s Images

Pierre Destrée and Radcliffe G. Edmonds iii

Plato is well known both for the harsh condemnations of images and image-making poets that appear in his dialogues and for the vivid and intense imagery that he himself uses in his matchless prose. How then does Plato handle the power of images? The uses of imagery might be imagined to include allegories, similes, metaphors, analogies, models, and even vivid writing styles that capture characters in dialogue—perhaps even ideas of images and image-making not directly connected with writing, for the question of why Plato uses vivid images in his writings is obviously linked to how he understands images and the way the mind handles them.

In the analysis of all of these, the focus is the way in which Plato moves beyond abstract philosophical reasoning to engage with the poetic and literary, whether in his devastating critiques of the abuses of the power of poetry and poetic devices or in his superb and subtle uses of those same powerful arts and devices. While Plato is famous—or infamous—for his banning of Homer and the poets from the ideal city of the *Republic* because of the corrupting power of poetry, Plato is also famous—or infamous—for the powerful myths and images he employs, not just in the *Republic* but elsewhere throughout his dialogues. The metaphor of the Ship of State, the tripartite description of the soul, the allegory of the Cave, the model of the divided line, are all memorable images from that dialogue, not to mention the vivid scenes from the concluding Myth of Er, the towering vault of heaven, the sirens singing on their revolving cosmic spheres, the souls of evil-doers being dragged back to torment, like wool being carded over thorns, or the lottery of souls where the heroes of myth choose their new incarnations.

Just as, in the *Phaedo*, the image of Simmias evokes the memory image of Cebes, so too the images of the *Republic* recall to us Plato’s other fantastic images, the spherical double men of Aristophanes’ speech in the *Symposium*, the whip-scars on the naked soul of the Great King in the underworld in the *Gorgias*, Socrates’ self-description as the gadfly on the rump of the somnolent Athenian public in the *Apology*, the poignant song of the dying swan in the *Phaedo*, the great chariot race around the vault of the heavens of the soul chariots in the *Phaedrus* and the terrible crashes that lead to the soul’s incarnation.

These vivid and powerful images that Plato employs raise a variety of questions: How does the power of these images fit with the critiques that Plato raises against other use of images in these and other dialogues? Why should Plato employ a vivid sense image like, e.g., the winged chariot of the soul, to talk about something that is not perceptible to the senses? What makes some images more powerful than others? Why might an image of a soul chariot that inaccurately represents the idea (one that, e.g., has four horses instead of two) nevertheless be more powerfully memorable than a more accurate representation that is less striking in other respects? How does Plato reconcile the gap between the image’s appearance and the truth it signifies? Is the relation of the image to that which it represents some kind of mimesis, reflection or refraction or inversion or perhaps even perspectival distortion? What is the role of color, shape, size, even beauty? How does this power of image work for Plato in any case?

The essays in this volume represent an attempt to grapple with questions like these, even if the sheer quantity and quality of Plato’s images make a comprehensive treatment beyond the scope of this or any volume. This volume continues the lines of investigation begun in two prior volumes, *Plato and the Poets* (edited by Pierre Destrée and Fritz-Gregor Herrmann) and *Plato*

and Myth (edited by Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, and Francisco Gonzalez), published in this same *Mnemosyne* series.

The volume comprises twelve chapters which offer various perspectives on the ways Plato has used images, and the ways we could, or should, understand their status as images. Although Plato's *Republic* may contain some of the most famous of Plato's images, as well as his most famous critique, the volume starts examining images in Plato by analyzing the image of Plato's Socrates himself, notably in the speech of Alcibiades in the *Symposium*, where Alcibiades explicitly says that he will offer his encomium of Erôs as a praise of Socrates "by means of images" (215a).

In "Alcibiades' Eikôn of Socrates and the Platonic Text (*Symp.* 215a–222d)," Andrew Ford proposes a new and challenging reading of one of the most memorable images in Plato, Alcibiades' extended comparison (*eikôn*) between Socrates and the popular carved statuettes of Sileni. Reading the passage as a virtuoso example of the sympotic game of "drawing similes" (*eikones legein*), Ford suggests that Plato exploits the *eikôn* as a way of praising his own writing: just as such objects could be opened up to reveal little figurines of gods (*agalmata theôn*) within, Plato's text is presented as a cunning kind of verbal icon that has a precious hidden meaning for those able to penetrate its surface sense. Ford's essay also raises the questions of why Plato resorts to such similitudes and why, at least in discussing some issues, the language of the Platonic text can only be *like* what it represents.

Reading the same speech from quite a different perspective, Elizabeth Belfiore, in "The Image of Achilles in Plato's *Symposium*," shows that some aspects of the imagery of Plato's *Symposium* can help us to achieve a better understanding of Plato's use of heroic figures. Plato must resort to imagery because of Socrates' strangeness: "With a man such as Achilles was," says Alcibiades, "one might compare Brasidas, and others, and with such a man as Pericles one might compare Nestor and Antenor," but Socrates can be compared with no other human, ancient or modern (221c–d). Thus, Alcibiades says that Socrates is not the image of anyone else, and, in particular, that he is *not* the image of Achilles, first on this list of heroic figures. Comparison of significant words and actions of Socrates in the *Symposium* with those of Achilles in the *Iliad* reveal that Socrates is indeed not an image of Achilles in the sense of a likeness. He is, on the contrary, an Achilles in reverse, whose words and deeds are just the opposite of those of Achilles. That is, he is a mirror-image of Achilles, in the sense of an image that is the reverse of the original.

After these rather different openings into our theme, Francisco Gonzalez, in "The Power and Ambivalence of a Beautiful Image in Plato and the Poets," embarks upon the larger question of the status of images in Plato's dialogues, pointing out that Plato's critique of the poets for their use of images in no way implies that philosophy can dispense with images. The starting point of any discussion of the topic must be the fact that Plato's relation to images, and thus also to the poets in whom he sees the masters of images, is deeply ambivalent. What Gonzalez shows is that this ambivalence is rooted in the ambivalence that characterizes images themselves on Plato's account, an ambivalence that especially comes to the fore in the *beautiful* image. Such an image is ambivalent in that by its very nature it both produces satisfaction with itself, is desirable in itself, and points beyond itself, leaving one unsatisfied. Here again, the *Symposium* is one important place to start, in particular the contest between Agathon and Socrates. What we learn from this contest is that the beautiful image can be more than an image only when it ceases to satisfy. In the end it is an emphasis on the 'erotic' character of images, and thus on their

ambivalence between possessing and lacking that of which they are the images, that distinguishes the philosopher from the poet.

The status of images is further explored from the 'erotic' perspective by Radcliffe G. Edmonds iii ("Putting him on a pedestal: (Re)collection and the use of images in Plato's *Phaedrus*"). In the *Phaedrus* Plato plays with the problematic status of images, employing some of his most vivid and memorable images to illustrate how images may be used philosophically in the processes of *sunagôgê* and *anamnêsis*. The beautiful beloved serves as an image of the divine reality, and the lover sets up, adorns, and worships this icon as if it were the god itself, for it both reminds him of his prenatal glimpse of the hyperouranian realm and leads his soul back toward that divine reality. Plato describes the lover's treatment of the beloved as an image of the divine in terms similar to those of the true rhetorician's construction of a speech that leads the soul of the hearer toward truth. The lover actively tends to this divine image, fashioning it in the likeness of the god he recollects following in the path toward the hyperouranian realm, while Socrates claims that, when he finds someone who can employ philosophical collection and division, he will follow in that man's tracks as if he were a god. Both the worship paid to the beloved icon and good speeches employ images and mnemonic associations to lead the follower, step by step, toward the truth. While *Phaedrus* fixes his desire upon the images, both the beloved boy and the speeches, Socrates uses these images as signs on his philosophic path, reminders of whence he has come and whither he is going.

Christopher Moore approaches the problem of mistaking the image for the reality from a different angle, exploring how creating images of the self can actively lead to the likening of the self to that image. In "The Images of Knowing Oneself," images are linked to the famous theme of self-knowledge; indeed, in all the dialogues where such a theme comes up, Socrates urges practically all his interlocutors onto self-knowledge, and he does so through images. Some are images suggesting what to do; others suggest how to be. The first kind depicts people doing analogous activities: the mirror-gazer (*Alc.*), the myth-rectifier (*Phdr.*), the riddle-solver (*Apol.*), the comic butt (*Phlb.*), the selfdiagnostician (*Chrm.*). The second kind provides a form, such as Typhon (*Phdr.*) or Prometheus (*Prot.*), the meditation on which conduces to self-knowledge. Plato has Socrates deploy these images because knowing oneself means more than simply cataloguing one's beliefs or accepting one's (im)mortality. Self-knowledge assumes and ratifies a dynamic picture of what it is to be human, as, e.g., active, transformable, and ideally rational. Urging someone to know himself thus involves bringing him to accept such a picture of himself.

And what about the problem of truth and falsehood of images—which include the themes of perspectivism, misappearance, and inaccurate representation? Gerd van Riel offers yet another context for the analysis of images, that of Plato's theology in "Perspectivism in Plato's Views of the Gods." In the *Sophist*, Plato clearly prefers the image that accurately reproduces the proportions of the model (*eikastikê technê*), over the "perspectival" image (*phantastikê technê*), which—though more artistic—falls short in truth-value, and this rejection of perspectivism, van Riel argues, underlies Plato's theology. Contrary to what recent interpreters have held, Plato's theology is not about introducing a monistic system headed by a thinking (and hence, comprehensible) *Nous*. Rather, Plato's view of the gods is based on accepting human beings' fundamental incapacity to grasp the nature of the gods and the necessity, therefore, for them to represent and understand the gods through images—be they pictures, statues, or mythic tales—even if these can never accurately depict them.

Our next six chapters are primarily devoted to the *Republic* which is, paradoxically enough, the dialogue where Plato both criticizes the poets the most harshly, and uses images—

similes, metaphors, analogies and myths—the most extensively. If these poetic images provide compelling and effective methods of inquiry, why is the so-called allegory of the cave, perhaps the most famous image created by Plato, so particularly compelling? In the “The Power of Plato’s Cave,” Grace Ledbetter offers a fresh way to answer this question by looking closely at the way that Plato has Socrates present the image. The Cave could have been told in many different ways, and not all of them would have been as powerful as the version Plato offers. Plato has crafted Socrates’ narrative in particular ways—for example, so that the narrative does not simply describe, but asks Glaucon to draw inferences from the material. Ledbetter argues that the “telling” of the Cave itself performs a rhetorical ascent out of the cave. The Cave narrative compels by giving its audience an experience analogous to the very thing it describes.

In the *Republic*, this active effect of images is of crucial importance in the political realm *stricto sensu*, as well as in Plato’s descriptions of the soul. In “Political Images of the Soul,” Olivier Renaut examines the use of images which compare the soul to a city; he argues that political images of the soul are a means for going beyond a mere isomorphism between psychology and politics; they explain how the two fields interact, so that politics can act upon the soul of the individual. If the city-soul analogy, strictly understood, fails in explaining the valid relations of inclusion between individuals and the city they belong to, the political metaphors are powerful devices for making the rule of law a reality in the city. Transferring the power of reason to the power of law is a task that political metaphors of the soul seem to fulfill for an audience of citizens in the Platonic city.

In “The Ship of State and the Subordination of Socrates,” Alex G. Long considers what Socrates’ use of images shows about the relationship between him and the philosopher-guards of the ideal city. Sometimes, such as when Socrates employs an image in order to represent the Form of the Good, the use of an image appears to show Socrates at a lower level of understanding, lacking full knowledge of Forms, but his use of images should not always be connected with his knowledge of Forms. When he compares the city to a ship, he is not trying to understand a Form; rather, he is trying to explain why philosophers are not respected, despite their possession of true political expertise. An image is chosen in order to make the combination of expertise and disrespect seem unsurprising, not because Socrates lacks full knowledge of the relevant subjects. Against the assumption that the only contrast between Socrates and the philosopher-guards is an epistemic contrast, Long also argues that Socrates and the guards have different political tasks in the ideal city, and in several passages, including the Ship of State, it is the nature of Socrates’ political role that explains why he behaves differently from a philosopher-guard. Unlike Socrates, actual philosopher-guards do not need to devise ways of persuading others about the desirability of rule by philosophers, and moreover the guards would not have been trained for this task by their philosophical education.

In contrast to the Cave or the Ship of State, the hypothetical goat-stag is one of the less well-known images from the *Republic*, but Kathryn Morgan (“Plato’s Goat-Stag and the Uses of Comparison”) shows how this mysterious goat-stag serves as a programmatic introduction to Socrates’ multiple images in Book 6 of the fate of philosophy and the philosopher in the contemporary city. Whereas most scholarly treatments have interpreted the goat-stag in terms of Plato’s complex images of the soul, she argues that it is best seen as a reflection of the particular nature of the philosopher king. The easiest way for an ideal state to be established would be to establish as rulers people who combine the traits of political experience and philosophical expertise. There is, however, considerable doubt among Socrates’ interlocutors whether this is a viable hybrid, and so Socrates pauses to create a second-order image that focuses on the

problematics of unnatural combinations. Prior and subsequent references to this fabulous animal in Aristophanes and Aristotelian tradition show that the goat-stag becomes emblematic of the difficulties of complex entities that have no real-world referent.

Returning to the problematic allure of images, Penelope Murray (“Poetry and the Image of the Tyrant in Plato’s *Republic*”) analyzes the paradoxical use of images from the perspective of poetry and poetic images in that dialogue. Towards the end of the discussion of poetry in *Republic* x Plato describes poetry as an *erôs*, a passion from which all right thinking people should tear themselves away, like lovers who realise their passion is doing them no good. Mimetic art as a whole had earlier been figured as a hetaira who consorts with an inferior part of the soul to bring forth base offspring, and now poetry herself is envisaged as a dangerously seductive female whose charms must be resisted at all costs. This *erôs*, which has been engendered since childhood by education, *paideia*, has its analogue in the master-passion which takes control of the tyrant’s soul at 572e–575a8, while the figure of *erôs tyrannos* is itself a theatrical image (cf. Eur. *Hipp.* 538). Murray looks at how poetry, tyranny and desire are linked through a network of imagery and verbal echoes which reinforce the argument for banishing poetry, focusing on the poetic qualities of Plato’s writing and his use of figurative language to generate meaning through associations that are not spelled out explicitly, but which are nevertheless there for the reader to interpret.

While readers usually take images to illustrate how souls are to be conceived, in the final essay of the volume, Douglas Cairns (“The Tripartite Soul as Metaphor”) explores the rather different idea that the souls themselves are metaphors in the tripartite model of the soul as deployed in the account of the deviant personality types in *Republic* 8 and 9. The levels of the hierarchy and the stages of degeneration from the ideal make frequent use of personification. Agency, however, is not attributed only to the *eidê* of the *psuchê*, but also to the individual and to his desires. Interaction takes place between the individual and the *eidê* of his *psuchê*, but also between the individual and his desires, as well as between one desire and another and between the various *eidê* of the *psuchê*. There is, moreover, interaction not just between one individual and another, but also between one individual and various personified elements of another’s personality. Since personification characterizes the model at all levels, it makes no sense to ask what the *epithumêtikon* (for example) can ‘really’ do; it is only in so far as it is personified that it can ‘do’ anything. The tenor of the metaphor is not some non-metaphorical or less metaphorical version of the tripartite soul, but simply the person, and the agency of persons remains Plato’s central focus throughout the discussion, both as the phenomenon that the model of the tripartite soul is designed to elucidate and as the source domain for many of the metaphors that structure that model. It is the fact that personal agency structures both the vehicle and the tenor of the metaphor that gives rise to the frequent intrusion of the *explanandum* (the behaviour of whole persons) in the *explanans* (the model of the tripartite *psuchê*). This phenomenon is itself a further sign that Plato has no intention of using his model to dispense with the notion of persons as agents.

Two themes thus recur throughout the collection, the problem of how an image resembles what it represents and the problem of how to avoid mistaking that image for what it represents. Through their resemblance to true reality, images have the power to move their viewers to action and to change themselves, but because of their distance from true reality, that power always remains problematic. This ambivalence recurs in treatments of Plato and his use of images throughout the centuries of the philosophic tradition. For example, Philoponus, in his

commentary on Aristotle's treatise on the soul, borrows an image from Plutarch of Athens that derives from Plato's Divided Line to discuss the nature of imagining (*phantasia*). Just as a point that marks the end of a line coming down from above and also a line coming up from below is both a singular point and the endpoint of two different lines, so too an image has a double nature, betwixt and between reality and falsehood.

In the same way the imagining can be taken both as one and as two, because, on the one hand, it gathers into one what in perceptible things is divided and on the other receives an impression of the simple and, one might say, unitary quality of the divine in imprints and different shapes.¹

Like a philosopher engaging in dialectic, the process of creating an image can bring together into a single sign things that may be separate (like a goat and a stag), or present in multiple forms (a chariot, a sea monster, a tripartite beast, and even a whole city) something that is actually unitary, like the soul. Thus, like the philosopher who neither knows fully nor is wholly ignorant, but seeks always to move toward the truth, the ambivalent position of the image between reality and falsehood provides a means to move toward the truth, if used philosophically, but away from it, if used without the precautions of philosophic inquiry.

The perilous potential of images, then, requires careful handling, and Plato hedges his images with cautions and caveats, as well as specific critiques of the ways images can mislead. Throughout his work, Plato plays with the many ways in which images represent, using different kinds of images in different dialogues and circumstances. Various essays in this volume address the ways particular Platonic images represent by means of mimesis or analogy, through mirror images that may be clear or distorted or even reversed, or with likenesses in visual or other sensible qualities. Each of these modes of representation provides different effects and serves different ends in Plato's dialogues, from the reversed mirror image of Achilles in the *Symposium* to the perspectival paintings or sculptures mentioned in the *Sophist* to the abstract analogy of the Divided Line in the *Republic*. The sensible qualities that the images provide are predominantly visual in the Platonic dialogues, although auditory representations in music or even tactile sensations of pain and pleasure may also be used. The images whose relation to what they represent works through logical analogy (or even mathematical ratio) rather than visual mimesis seem to provide the surest and clearest guide toward truth, but the Divided Line or the eclipse in the *Phaedo* are hardly the most memorable images in Plato's corpus, nor are they the ones that have provoked the most philosophic activity over the centuries. Other features of the images' representations factor into the power of images.

One way in which Plato discusses the power of images is in erotic terms, images whose beauty or vividness provokes the viewer into action. However, the more attractive the image appears itself, the more dangerous it becomes as a distraction from, rather than a guide to, what it represents. Whether such pleasing images appear as the tempting whores of poetry or a statue that arouses lust or even a model of the soul as a city that accounts for internal conflicts, Plato

¹ Philoponus, in Aristotle *De anima* iii, 515. 26–29 οὕτω καὶ ἡ φαντασία δύναται καὶ ὡς ἓν καὶ ὡς δύο λαμβάνεσθαι, διότι τῶν μὲν αἰσθητῶν τὸ διηρημένον εἰς ἓν συναθροίζει, τῶν δὲ θείων τὸ ἀπλοῦν καὶ ὡς ἂν τις εἶποι ἐνιαῖον εἰς τύπους τινὰς καὶ μορφὰς διαφόρους ναμάττεται. (Trans. Sheppard, modified). See the discussion in Sheppard 2014: 54–57 (Sheppard, A. 2014. *The poetics of Phantasia: imagination in ancient aesthetics*, Bloomsbury).

warns repeatedly of the problems that arise from stopping at the image rather than continuing to pursue its referent, of remaining satisfied with the image itself. The images that engender the best philosophic *erôs* are those that are neither too transparent in their abstraction nor too opaque in their surface appeal, but rather those whose translucence allows a glimpse of the signified while still reminding the viewer of the presence of the sign. An impossible composite, such as a goat-stag or a tripartite monster, may serve to warn that the sign cannot be taken as the thing it represents, but Plato also includes many warnings in his dialogues about the images he uses like the famous one from the *Phaedo*, “No sensible man would insist that these things are exactly as I have described them, but I think that it is fitting for a man to risk the belief—for the risk is a noble one—that *this, or something like this* is true about our souls and their dwelling places.”²

Philosophically constructed images, then, may need to call attention to their constructed nature, reminding the viewer of the limited perspective of mortals who can never perceive the truth completely or wholly. This perspectivism, as van Riel refers to it, is another way to describe the gap Gonzalez discusses in the erotic response to images; in both cases, the viewer is motivated to go beyond the image in a philosophical pursuit of reality. The power of images to provoke action or change in the viewer is another recurring theme throughout the volume, from the adoring care of the beloved in the *Phaedrus* to the shaping of the self in the likeness of the philosophic image to the mental turning around in response to the image of the Cave in the *Republic*. In all these cases, Plato’s images have the power not simply to illustrate and entertain those unable to grasp philosophic reasoning, but to stir the viewers to action and to transform their very souls.

The essays here were all presented in draft form at the pair of conferences held in the fall of 2013 at Bryn Mawr College in the United States and in the spring of 2014 at the Université Catholique de Louvain and Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Belgium.³ The conference at Bryn Mawr was organized by Radcliffe Edmonds, who is grateful to the Tri-College Working Group in Ancient Philosophy, the Departments of Greek, Latin, & Classical Studies and Philosophy, the Class of 1902 Lecture Fund, and the offices of the President and Provost at Bryn Mawr College; the Distinguished Visitors Office and the John B. Hurford ’60 Center for the Arts and Humanities at Haverford College; and the Departments of Classics and Philosophy, and the office of the Provost at Swarthmore College, for their generous support. The Louvain & Leuven conference was organized by Pierre Destrée and Gerd van Riel, thanks to the generous sponsorship of the frs/fnrs (Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique de la Communauté Française de Belgique), and the fwo (Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek—Vlaanderen). Special thanks are due to our assistants at both venues, Charlie Kuper at Bryn Mawr and Erika Gielen at Leuven and Louvain. Both

² Plato *Phaedo* 81e–82a. Τὸ μὲν οὖν ταῦτα δυσχυρίσασθαι οὕτως ἔχειν ὡς ἐγὼ διελέλυθα, οὐ πρέπει νοῦν ἔχοντι νδρί· ὅτι μέντοι ἢ ταῦτ’ ἐστὶν ἢ τοιαῦτ’ ἅπτα περὶ τὰς ψυχὰς ἡμῶν καὶ τὰς οἰκήσεις, ἐπεὶ περὶ θάνατόν γε ἡ ψυχὴ φαίνεται οὐσα, τοῦτο καὶ πρέπει μοι δοκεῖ καὶ ἄξιον κινδυνεῦσαι οἰομένῳ οὕτως ἔχειν—καλὸς γὰρ ὁ κίνδυνος.

³ Papers delivered by Pierre Destrée, Catherine Collobert, Elsa Grasso, and Richard Hunter at Bryn Mawr and by David Wolfsdorf, Zacharoula Petraki, and Susan Sauvé Meyer in Louvain will be published elsewhere. Video recordings of the papers delivered at Bryn Mawr, including the question sessions after each paper, are available in the Bryn Mawr College Repository (http://repository.brynmawr.edu/plato/Bryn_Mawr/).

conferences provided a great opportunity for the participants to discuss the papers and to refine their ideas in philosophic dialogue (something we think Plato would have approved of!), and we want to thank all those who made those conferences possible, especially the many scholars in both places who attended and joined in the conversations.