

Phainesthai and *Aletheia* in Plato's *Republic*

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Abstract

In the *Republic*, the link between *aletheia* and *phainesthai* is of utmost importance. In different passages “truth” is defined by a juxtaposition with a “falsehood” consisting in a deceptive *appearance* of things. Such is the case in 380D (*phantazetai*), in 382A (*phantasma*), and 382E (*phantasia*). *Phainesthai* is therefore a characteristic feature of the *dokoumena*, that is of objects belonging to the lowest level of knowledge (e.g. 479B-480A and 509D-510A). This does not entail, however, that *phainesthai* should be understood as a mere error or deception. Its meaning is in fact much wider, and not only a negative one. Plato stresses how the whole ascent to the ideas takes place within the *phainesthai* of the *horoumena*. Each step undertaken by the *dialektike technē* (starting from *ta en hydasi phantasmata* and ending up with *tau phanotatou en boratoi topoi*) is related to different ontologic “appearances” of things (532C1 and 7-8). The same applies to the soul which hides behind its exterior aspect although being perceivable through a *blepein* (611B-612A): even here, Plato's disavowal of visibility seems to lead to the establishment of another, “superior” kind of “what can be seen”.

The visibility arising from the *phainesthai* of things is therefore both mimetic (*concealing* truth: 596D-601E) and ontologic (*showing* that very truth: 523B-525B). It is intrinsically ambiguous, thus leading to very different ways of approaching it in modern scholarship. The literature dealing with *mimesis* in Plato's *Republic* concentrated on the “falsehood” of appearance, whereas the scholars interested in the phenomenologic background of Plato's ontology pointed out the “constructive” aspects of that very appearance. The present work aims at combining these two approaches, showing their complementarity in Plato's polyvalent use of *phainesthai* (and of the connected nouns *phantasia*, *phantasma*, etc.) in the *Republic*.

In the *Republic*, the link between *phainesthai* and *alētheia* is of utmost importance. In different passages “truth” is defined by a juxtaposition with a “falsehood” consisting in a deceptive *appearance* of things. This does not entail, however, that Plato understands *phainesthai* as a mere error or deception. Its meaning is in fact much wider, and not only a negative one. In some passages Plato stresses how the ascent to knowledge can be attained only within “what appears” of truth. The visibility arising from the *phainesthai* of things is therefore both mimetic (*concealing* truth) and ontologic (*showing* that very truth). *Phainesthai* in its connection to *alētheia* is intrinsically ambiguous, thus leading to different ways of approaching it in modern scholarship: on one hand literature concentrated on its “falsehood”, on the other on its “constructive” features.¹ The

¹ See the influential work by Heidegger 1947², and the criticism on it by Heitsch 1962, Friedländer 1964³, and Szaif 1998³, 145-152. A recent overview on *alētheia* in Plato is provided by Szaif 2009. On the constructive features of *phainesthai*, see most recently Vogt 2012, Smith 2012, Harte 2013, Schwab 2013, and Moss 2014, esp. 221-227.

present work aims at combining these two approaches, showing their complementarity in Plato's polyvalent use of *phainesthai* and the connected term *phantasma*.

In the first part of the paper I will dwell on two passages of the *Republic* featuring the deceptive aspects of *phainesthai*. In the second part, I will focus on a passage which shows how the *phainesthai* of things refers as well to something which can be approached only gradually, through its visible albeit unsteady manifestations. It will turn out that such a *phainesthai* may not be “true” from an epistemic viewpoint, but is nevertheless “true” from another viewpoint, that of a progressive unveiling of *alētheia*. In the final part of the paper, I will draw some conclusions from these different ways of understanding *phainesthai* and *alētheia*, and focus on the reciprocity linking these two notions to each other.

1. *Phainesthai* as deception (378a-383c and 596d-601b)

In a section of Book II dealing with the canons the poets should observe when representing myths, Plato focuses on which features the gods may display and which not (378a-383c). Gods should always be shown as what they are really like, that is good and responsible for everything beneficial; this excludes that they can be represented as evil, or quarrelling with each other. Since they are perfect, they should also be portrayed as changeless, incapable of transforming themselves, and, most important, as incapable of doing any harm to mankind. Therefore, they should not *appear* in many guises, as this would deceive people making them believe that their nature is never the same (380d).

This passage is crucial, as it shows the connection between appearance, deception, and belief. The god appearing in different shapes (*phantazesthai*: 380d2) is not a god but a sorcerer (*goēta*: 380d1). He becomes a deceiver (*apatōnta*: 380d4) once he makes people believe (*poiounta dokein*: 380d4-5) that he is not what he really is, but what he *appears to be like*, that is unsteady and multi-shaped. In the subsequent pages (381e-382a) we learn something more about the deceiving strategy of the gods. Socrates asks Adeimantus if the gods, though remaining identical to themselves, deceive (*exapatōntes kai goēteuontes*: 381e10) by making it seem (again *poiouein dokein*: 381e9) that they appear in different guises. Their “appearing” (*phantasma*: 382a2) can be *direct*, performed through what they do (*ergōi*: 382a2); or else it can be *indirect*, performed through what they say (*logōi*: 382a1).² In both cases *phainesthai* conceals truth, and leads to a false belief of what gods really are.

² See as well 382e-383a, where the distinction *ergōi-logōi* is outlined very clearly. It seems sensible to take the *phantasma* of 382a2 with *logōi* and *ergōi*, as Adam 1905 I, 121 does (contra Waterfield 1993, Ferrari–Griffith 2000, and Vegetti 1998-2007, all of them taking *logōi* and *ergōi* with *pseudesthai*).

It is very important to note that in these passages the concealment of truth performed by the gods is seen as a productive operation: their deception consists in producing a *dokein*³ which has the scope of substituting reality with appearance. This *dokein* leads to a deception which is much more powerful than that arising from *phainesthai*, as it implies the involvement of the judicative ability of the deceived person. *Doxa* is in fact a sort of “commitment to truth”, for believing something entails believing as well that what one believes is true – even if at the end of the day this belief can turn out to be wrong. In other words, *doxa* is highly deceptive because it is not at all conscious of being a *doxa*.⁴ It takes a complex paideutic process to understand that *doxa* is only a limited kind of knowledge, which has to be abandoned in favour of a superior one, that of *epistēmē*.⁵ And even after such a process it is far from easy to distinguish “true” or “correct” *doxa* from epistemic veracity.⁶

A kind of deception similar to that performed by the gods occurs at the beginning of Book X, where the making of the “mimetic” artist is defined as the reproduction of things not how they *are*, but how they *appear* (*phainomena... ou onta tei alētheiai*: 596e4; cf. 596a10, 598a5 and b3-4). Such a reproduction is faint in comparison to truth (*amydron ti... pros alētheian*: 597a10-11; cf. 598b3-4), as well as to the objects it represents, the *phainomena*. For this reason, the works of the mimetic art *par excellence*, that is poetry, are downgraded by Plato to a third ontologic level, that of *phantasmata* (599a2).⁷ These *phantasmata* are deceptive *illusions* in an ambiguous sense: in spite of being appearances of appearances, pale reflections of what they stand for,⁸ they turn out to be so realistic that they manage to pass themselves off as what they represent.

As in the passage of Book II we saw before, the deception induced by the *phainesthai* leads also here to a *dokein* (601a-b), to a belief which is not conscious of its own epistemic limits. What we learn more about this *dokein* is that its power relies on fascination (*kelesin*: 601b1). Such a fascination is unavoidable, since it depends on the deceptive nature (*phusei*) of poetry itself, on the “colours of its music”, i.e. the names and the verbs which can be seducing *irrespective of what*

³ As Plato shows extensively at the end of Book V (476a-480a), every knowledge based on perception, that is on the *appearance* of things, leads to *doxa*, to a *belief* which is juxtaposed to the steady knowledge arising from a perceptual *epistēmē*. For a thoughtful account of the relation between *phainesthai* and *doxa/doxaizein* in this passage see Szaif 1998³, 110-124.

⁴ See Wieland 1999², 284-285.

⁵ On the distinction *doxa-epistēmē* see Cross–Woozley 1964, 166-195; Ebert 1974, 105-132; Annas 1981, 190-216; Lafrance 1981, 117-151; Horn 1997, Wieland 1999², 280-309; Fine 2000².

⁶ See Sprute 1962, 11-14; 57-60; 92-99; Wieland 1999², 304; Szaif 1998³, 144.

⁷ I refrain from connecting the notion of *phantasma* in the *Republic* to that occurring in the *Sophist*, i.e. at 266c (as most scholars do, e.g. Adam 1905 II, 138; Sprute 1962, 48; Untersteiner 1966, 119 and Halliwell 1988, 118). The reason for this choice will become clear in the conclusion of my paper.

⁸ On this issue see extensively Halliwell 2002 and Palumbo 2008.

they represent. Hence the extreme danger of this art, which can make people believe potentially anything.⁹ And hence also the necessity to banish it from the ideal city.

This passage is very interesting, since Plato provides here a hierarchy of *mimēsis* from the viewpoint of *phainesthai*: at first place (1) we have reality, of which art can represent only the appearance; at second place (2) we have the representation of that very appearance; at third place (3) we have, in addition to that very representation, the enchantment caused by the media of poetry. The sense of this tripartition becomes clear when Socrates invites Glaucon to look how words would appear “once stripped of the colours of music and spoken by themselves” (601b3-4). This specification is important, because it shows that Socrates does not reject *mimēsis* altogether, but aims at establishing a moderate kind of it, i.e. an artistic *phainesthai* free of magic enchantment (=2). In this particular case *phainesthai* has therefore a positive function, being a means able to unveil the deception of the magic devices characterizing mimetic poetry.

2. *Phainesthai* as the unveiling of *alētheia* (510a-532c)

This positive aspect of *phainesthai* leads us to the second part of my paper, which is devoted to *phainesthai* as a manifestation of *alētheia*. The passage I will examine is one of the most discussed of the whole *Republic*, as it stretches along the famous allegories of the line and the cave featured in Books VI and VII. Here Plato dwells extensively on the route leading from the unsteady and imperfect knowledge of the visible arising from perception to the firm knowledge of the idea of the Good, which can be grasped only through intellectual effort. As we will see, each step undertaken during this journey is linked to *phainesthai*, that is to a progressive unveiling, of *alētheia*. This graduality of *phainesthai* entails that *alētheia* can be experienced only at subsequent levels, each of them getting closer to its complete manifestation. To indicate the progressive nature of this ascending process, Plato uses both the comparative (*alēbestera*: 515d) and the superlative (*alēbestator*: 484c9. Cf. *Phaed.* 65e) of the adjective *alēthes*: things can be “true”, “truer” or “truest” depending on the amount of *alētheia* they unveil.¹⁰

The first step directing towards *alētheia* occurs at 501a, where Plato introduces the analogy of the line in order to explain the difference between the realm of what can be seen and that of what cannot be seen. Here, in the second section of the part of the line hosting the visible things, we find a term we already met before, that of *phantasmata*. These “appearances” reflect in the

⁹ Scholars as Untersteiner (1966, 130) claim that in these passages of the *Republic* Plato is criticising Gorgias. In fact, not only the noun *keleusis* (601b1), but also the occurrences *goētēs*, *apataō*, *exapataō* and *goēteuō* seen in the passage of Book II (380d1, 380d4, 381e10) can be found in the texts of the Sicilian sophist, thus suggesting that Plato is referring to a conception which is characteristic for Gorgian aesthetics.

¹⁰ See Sprute 1962, 75-77.

water (*en hydasi*) everything which can be perceived through the eyes, and are therefore the first things telling mankind that something different from what can be seen exists. The connection between these *phantasmata* and *alētheia* becomes evident at 516b-c, where they reflect the sun (again *en hydasin*),¹¹ which is the source of every possible *alētheia*. Far from being the deceptive illusions of the passage we saw in the first part of the paper (599a2), these *phantasmata* are connected to truth in the sense that they reveal all the visible things. As Plato puts it, visibility as such owes its origin to a “place which appears through the sight” (*di’ hōpseōs phainomenēn hedran*: 517b2).

But *phainesthai* unveils not only what is visible. It occurs also within the realm of “what can be known and hardly seen” (*en tō gnostō... kai mogis horasthai*: 517b8-c1), where its function is to make appear what would otherwise be inaccessible, that is the idea of Good.¹² For on its own this idea does not show itself: it can be “seen” only thanks to *phainesthai*, which unveils it as the cause of everything good and right, of the light and the light’s sovereign in the visible realm and of truth and reason in the intelligible realm. Plato defines the idea of Good as *tou ontos to phanotaton*, which means as much as “that which appears more than everything that exists” (518c9).¹³ Here again we are faced with a superlative, which in this particular case indicates that once the maximum of appearance is reached the object appearing must be necessarily the idea of the Good. This coincidence is of utmost importance, as it entails that a full unveiling of the idea of the Good is the only possible condition for an epistemic knowledge of what is visible and what invisible, of what is an intelligent conduct in private affairs or in public business (517c).

Opposite to such knowledge is the unsteady and untrustworthy world of *doxa*. This is not “true” as the idea of Good is: it is in fact only a partial appearance of it. Still, it should not be rejected completely, as even an imperfect *phainesthai* can direct towards *alētheia*, being “the offspring of that very Good” (*ekgonos te tou agathou*: 506e3) – exactly like the fire in the cave is in a way the reflection of the sun reigning outside. The same gnoseologic function applies to the *phantasmata*: despite their deceptive character, they are “true” in the sense that they are an indispensable means for approaching *alētheia*. Not by chance Plato calls them “divine” (*theia*: 532c1), acknowledging their provenience from the sun as well as their ability “to guide the soul until it sees the best part of reality” (532c5-6).

¹¹ This *en hydasi* has a markedly propedeutic character, as is evident also in 516a and 532c1: looking at ideas “how they really are” is possible only after having been prepared to do so by looking at the “appearances” of these ideas. Such appearances are therefore a necessary means for ascending to *alētheia*, albeit being themselves only a pale (and potentially deceptive) image of that very *alētheia*.

¹² Socrates is very clear in stating that “the things which appear to me do appear to me as follows: in the realm of what can be known [what appears is] uttermost the idea of Good” (*ta d’oun emoi phainomena houtō phainetai, en tō gnostō teleutaia hē tou agathou idea*: 517b8-c1).

¹³ See as well 532c7-8: *tou phanotaton en tōi sōmatoeidei te kai horatōi topōi*.

3. Conclusion

The *phantasmata* occurring in the *Republic* are very different from those we can find in other dialogues of Plato, e.g. in the *Sophist*. In the passages we examined they certainly bear many deceptive aspects, but at the same time they refer to something different, of which they are the unveiling appearances. This entails that despite their deceptive character they are “true”, being an indispensable manifestation of *alētheia*. *Phantasma* and *alētheia* are closely related to each other, as without the first the latter would not become visible at all. The process which leads to gnoseologic visibility can however not ground exclusively on the *phantasma*, as it is *alētheia* which in his turn “activates” the *phainesthai* of things by shedding light and being on them.¹⁴

Hence the reciprocity of *phainesthai* and *alētheia*. What “appears” of *alētheia* is “true” even if it is deceptive from a logical or epistemological viewpoint, as it enables to start a process of approximation to *alētheia* which may eventually lead to a complete unveiling of it. On the other hand, what “is true” in *phainesthai* “appears” despite its deceptive power: it shows itself by displaying an ambiguous *phantasma* which drives away from every-day experience and enhances the search for knowledge.

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¹⁴ See 508d4-e3 (*botan men ou katalampeī alētheia te kai to on, eis touto apeireisētai* [sc. *psyche*], *enoēsen te kai egnō auto kai noun echein phainetai*), on which cf. Szaif 1998³, 136 n. 86.

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