

“Would He Not Get His Eyes Full of Darkness?”
Objectivity in *Republic* V and VII

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David Diener has given a close reading of the exchange at the end of the *Republic*, Book V, following the course of a debate surrounding its interpretation and weeding out a less likely alternative reading by looking at the logical inconsistencies that result.¹ Diener’s critique of Gail Fine’s alternative reading points to a great difference, and suggests a “drastic effect” in the way each interpretation might inform educational theory. Yet when Diener moves to the scene of instruction in the cave allegory, he expresses the differing effects in these two statements: Following the traditional reading, “the freed prisoner is able to reenter the cave and correctly appraise as mere shadows the images on the wall.” On the alternative reading, the educated person “is now able to distinguish between what appears to be true and what really is so.” The similarity of these two educational outcomes might lead us to believe that Diener has misled us in claiming that drastic differences for educational theory depend on our interpretation of Book V. But Diener’s application of the traditional reading to the cave allegory does not do justice to the traditional, existential reading he carefully and rightly defends. By retracing Diener’s central claim that the philosopher and the spectator look at different objects and therefore reside in different worlds, I can return to the cave to demonstrate the difference for educational theory Diener claims but does not adequately explicate.

Fine’s undoing of the traditional two-worlds reading rests on her denial that the philosopher and the lover of spectacle look at different objects. Diener’s analysis helps us to see the logical flaws in Fine’s idea that make it untenable, but what are we to do with her intuition that resists dividing the sum total of all things into knowable, quasi-knowable, and unknowable objects? Surely we do not want to hold, for instance, that knowledge pertains to kittens and belief to muffins, knowledge to jelly and belief to helicopters. Certainly, for the theory to work, we ought to be able to have both knowledge and belief about a single thing.² The most useful reading — that which maintains the political purposes of Socrates’ distinction — would allow spectacle-lovers and philosophers to share a common space while allowing the objectifying impulses of each to account for the differences they see.

The difference between the lover of wisdom and the lover of spectacle can be found in the ways purposes shape experience. The lover of spectacle is not concerned with accounting for the object in front of him or her, but with being moved by the spectacle; the lover of wisdom, on the other hand, is drawn to the significance that seems to lie behind the spectacle. In watching a comedy, for instance, we may be moved to laughter without knowing *why* the comedy is funny. Indeed, our capacity to laugh in appreciation of the comedic object might be stilled by our analysis of the funny thing. Socrates makes the mutual exclusion of our possible relations to the things that confront us clear in describing his theory of the faculties: “In a faculty I

cannot see any color or shape or similar mark such as those on which in many other cases I fix my eyes in discriminating in my thought one thing from another.”³ In other words, a faculty — whether rational, emotional, or other — only arrives at its object through a process of objectification wherein some details will be considered and others not, thereby producing a different object entirely than would be produced by a different faculty.⁴ While we all might look in the same direction, the purposes or frames of mind that carry us produce different objects.⁵

The significance of Diener’s defense of the traditional reading for teaching is that it puts the philosopher at odds with the spectator in objectifying the phenomena that confront them. The educated person does not return from the world above triumphant, able to “correctly appraise...the images on the wall,” but instead returns to the world he had once known with the same difficulty he experienced in leaving it:

If such a one should go down again and take his old place would he not get his eyes full of darkness, thus suddenly coming out of the sunlight?...Now if he would be required to contend with these perpetual prisoners in “evaluating” these shadows while his vision was still dim and before his eyes were accustomed to the dark — and this time required for habituation would not be very short — would he not provoke laughter, and would it not be said of him that he has returned from his journey aloft with his eyes ruined and that it was not worth while even to attempt the ascent? And if it were possible to lay hands on and to kill the man who tried to release them and lead them up, would they not kill him?⁶

The cave allegory shows the disabling effect that the pursuit of wisdom has on the philosopher returning to the cave. While the reader is able to appreciate the philosopher’s discernment between shadow and reality, the prisoners are not, and without their appreciation the educated person becomes a buffoon. Only through submission to the philosopher’s authority — a move that is significant in that it links epistemology, politics, and education — would the objects of the prisoners’ world begin to shift from reality into shadows.

1. All references to works by Plato in this text are quoted from *Plato: Collected Dialogues*, ed. Huntington Cairns and Edith Hamilton (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989).

2. In the *Meno* Socrates affirms that “right opinion is something no less *useful* than knowledge” (97c, emphasis added). Here the known and opined objects remain separate even though they stand in relation to the same thing (the way to Larissa). The equation of the two separate objects is made based on the added perspective or measure of use-value.

3. Plato *Republic* 477c.

4. This is not to agree with Fine that two people preferring different faculties will experience different aspects or qualities in the same object. To speak of experiencing a quality runs counter to the whole of human experience, in which we experience objects, which in turn are the bearers of qualities. To separate qualities from their objects simply does not make sense.

5. In the *Republic* (477c–d) along with (474d–e) Socrates wants Glaucon to admit that any faculty or way of approaching the world will distort those characteristics that lie at its periphery: “Those who seek after beauty and spectacle will undoubtedly distort the truth, just as those of us who seek after truth will undoubtedly distort and misrecognize the beautiful, but each will take their own as the true object.”

6. Plato *Republic* 516e–517a.