

Straipsniai

GAPING EYES AND STARING MOUTH: ON PLATO'S LITERARY SUBTLETY IN *RESP.* VII 529 A–C

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It is common knowledge that in ancient Greek philosophy – and arguably in Western philosophy in general – Plato's literary genius has no equal. Yet, what becomes apparent only after close reading of Plato's original Greek prose – and eventually turns out to be most unexpected and extraordinary – is that Plato as a writer is most ingenious in those parts of his *œuvre*, which are most important philosophically and where some philosophical point of crucial importance is being made.

Over the past few decades extensive research has been carried out into the modes of interplay between the literary form and philosophical content of Platonic dialogues¹. Nevertheless, some specific and problematic issues still await to be dealt with. A significant amount of scholarly research still has to be carried out at the microlevel of Platonic dialogues – that is to say, at the

level of particular sentences, phrases or even individual words.

In what follows, in order to demonstrate how the interplay between the literary form and philosophical content can take place at the microlevel of Platonic dialogues, I will analyse a small excerpt from the Seventh Book of Plato's *Republic*, 529 a–c, where Plato's Socrates, who participates in a dialogue with Glaucon, speaks about the role of astronomy as one of the arts, or sciences (*tekhnai*), that are chosen to be cultivated in the envisioned ideal city. The analysis of the true nature of astronomy follows the discussion of arithmetic, geometry of surfaces, or planimetry, as we would call it, and geometry of solids, or stereometry (the latter discipline is described as still rudimentary and left to be developed in the future). In his treatment of these sciences, Socrates rejects all of them as they were practised before, up to the time of Socrates, as purely observational, empirical endeavours aimed at achieving practical needs, and emphasizes the necessity to create them anew as purely theoretical disciplines that might be put into

¹ See especially these works: C. H. Kahn, *Plato and Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form*, Cambridge, 1998; G. R. F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus*, Cambridge, 1990; A. W. Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy*, Cambridge, 2000.

service to theoretical philosophy based on the contemplation of Forms, especially the Form of the Good.

Plato's discussion, by way of a dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, on the true nature of astronomy and his emphasis on the need to construe a purely theoretical form of astronomy that could facilitate the contemplation of intelligible entities, such as Forms, could have simply proceeded as a discursive sequence, as a chain of formal and explicit arguments. Instead, Plato here employs a completely different, completely non-theoretical and non-explicit strategy. This is the strategy of Plato, as an artist. The paradox is that Plato – or, we should say, Plato's Socrates, as a constructed literary character – in order to convince us of the need to create a purely *theoretical* form of astronomy, decides to proceed *non-theore-*

tically and non-discursively. He presents an extended simile based on two ingenious analogies.

The first of them is the analogy between the practical astronomer who observes the heaven, the visible revolutions of heavenly bodies and, above all, the constellations, which look like celestial decorations created by some heavenly artificer, and the lover of arts who lies on one's back and observes the artistic beauties of a carved ceiling, a masterpiece of Daedalus or some other artist.

The second analogy, which is implicit and even concealed, is the analogy between the eyes and the mouth.

The passage that I am focusing on (528e–530c) is a real literary masterpiece, thus I will present it unabridged in the translation of John Llewelyn Davies and David James Vaughan:

- 528 e (Socrates) Then let us assign the fourth place in our studies to astronomy, regarding the existence of the science now omitted (that is, stereometry – *N. K.*) as only waiting for the time when a state shall take it up.
- (Glaucon) It is a reasonable idea, Socrates. And to return to the rebuke which you gave me a little while ago for my vulgar commendation of astronomy, I can now praise the plan on which you pursue it. For I suppose it is clear to every one that astronomy at all events compels the soul to look upwards, and draws it from the things of this world to the other.
- 5
529 (Socrates) It is not clear to me, I replied, though perhaps it may be to everyone else: for that is not my opinion.
- 5 (Glaucon) Then what is your opinion?
- (Socrates) It seems to me that astronomy, as now handled by those who embark on philosophy, positively makes the soul look downwards.
- (Glaucon) How so?
- (Socrates) I think you have betrayed no want of intrepidity in the conception you have formed of the true nature of that learning which deals with the things above. For probably, if a person were to throw his head back and learn something from the contemplation of a carved ceiling, you would suppose him to be contemplating it, not with his eyes, but with reason. Now, perhaps your notion is right, and mine foolish. For my own part, I cannot conceive that any science makes the soul look upwards unless it has to do with the real and invisible. It makes no difference whether a person *stares stupidly at the sky, or looks with half-shut eyes upon the ground* (emphasis mine – *N. K.*); so long as he is trying to study

c any sensible object, I deny that he can ever be said to have learned anything, because no objects of sense admit of scientific treatment; and I maintain that his soul is looking downwards, not upwards, though he may be lying on his back, like a swimmer, to study, either in the sea or on dry land.

5 (Glaucón) I am rightly punished, he rejoined, for I deserved your rebuke. But pray, what did you mean by saying that astronomy ought to be studied on a system very different from the present one, if it is to be studied profitably for the purposes that we have in view?

d (Socrates) I will tell you. Since this fretted sky is still a part of the visible world, we are bound to regard it, though the most beautiful and perfect of visible things, as far inferior nevertheless to those true revolutions which real velocity, and real slowness, existing in true number and in all true forms, accomplish relatively to each other, carrying with them all that they contain: which are verily apprehensible by reason and thought, but not by sight. Or do you think differently?

(Glaucón) No, indeed, he replied.

e (Socrates) Therefore we must employ that fretted sky as a pattern or plan to forward the study which aims at those higher objects, just as we might employ diagrams which fell in our way, curiously drawn and elaborated by Daedalus or some other artist or draughtsman. For I imagine a person acquainted with geometry, on seeing such diagrams, would think them most beautifully finished, but would hold it ridiculous to study them seriously in the hope of detecting thereby the truths of equality, or duplicity, or any other ratio.

530 (Glaucón) No doubt it would be ridiculous.

5 (Socrates) And do you not think that the genuine astronomer will view with the same feelings the motions of the stars? That is to say, will he not regard the heaven itself, and the bodies which it contains, as framed by the heavenly architect with the utmost beauty of which such works are susceptible? But as to the proportion which the day bears to the night, both to the month, the month to the year, and the other stars to the sun and moon and to one another – will he not, think you, look down upon the man who believes such corporeal and visible objects to be changeless and exempt from all perturbations? And will he not hold it absurd to bestow extraordinary pains on the endeavour to apprehend their true condition?

b (Glaucón) Yes, I quite think so, now that I hear you suggest it.

5 (Socrates) Hence we shall pursue astronomy with the help of problems, just as we pursue geometry: but we shall let the heavenly bodies alone, if it is our design to become really acquainted with astronomy, and by that means to convert the natural intelligence of the soul from a useless into a useful possession².

The most interesting and subtle part of this passage (529a9–c2), wherein we find the aforementioned simile, needs to be presented in Greek if we are to retain its

literary ingenuity (in the translation this part is indicated by a vertical line):

Οὐκ ἀγεννώς μοι δοκεῖς, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, τὴν περὶ τὰ ἄνω μάθησιν λαμβάνειν παρὰ σαυτῶ ἢ ἔστι κινδυνεύεις γὰρ καὶ εἴ τις ἐν ὄροφῇ ποικίλματα θεώμενος ἀνακύπτων καταμανθάνοι τι, ἡγείσθαι ἂν αὐτὸν νοήσει ἀλλ' οὐκ ὀμμασι θεωρεῖν. ἴσως οὖν καλῶς

² Plato, *Republic*, translated by John Llewelyn Davies and David James Vaughan. With an Introduction by Stephen Watt. Ware, Hertfordshire, 1997.

ἡ γῆ, ἐγὼ δ' εὐθηθικῶς. ἐγὼ γὰρ αὐτὸ οὐ δύναμαι ἄλλο τι νομίσειν ἄνω ποιοῦν ψυχὴν βλέπειν μάθημα ἢ ἐκεῖνο ὃ ἂν περὶ τὸ ὄν τε ἦ καὶ τὸ ἀόρατον, ἐάντε τις ἄνω κεχηνῶς ἢ κάτω συμμεμυκῶς τῶν αἰσθητῶν τι ἐπιχειρῆ μανθάνειν, οὔτε μαθεῖν ἂν ποτέ φημι αὐτόν, ἐπιστήμην γὰρ οὐδὲν ἔχειν τῶν τοιούτων, οὔτε ἄνω ἀλλὰ κάτω αὐτοῦ βλέπειν τὴν ψυχὴν, καὶ ἐξ ὑπτίας νέων ἐν γῆ ἢ ἐν θαλάττῃ μανθάνει.³

The most important segment here is the underlined phrase *ἐάν τε τις ἄνω κεχηνῶς ἢ κάτω συμμεμυκῶς τῶν αἰσθητῶν τι ἐπιχειρῆ μανθάνειν*. We should notice the symmetry between *ἄνω κεχηνῶς* and *κάτω συμμεμυκῶς*, that is, the symmetry between a glance directed upwards and a glance directed downwards. To say that someone looks upwards certainly means that he or she looks with open eyes, but to say, as Plato – or Plato’s Socrates – does, that someone looks *κεχηνῶς*, also means that he or she looks upwards *with open mouth*, not only with open eyes, which is certainly the case. It means, therefore, that this person is *gaping* upwards, at the sky or carved ceiling, and is *looking like a fool*. Aristophanes, for example, ironically speaks of the Athenians as *οἱ κεχηνότες*, which means the Gopenians, that is, the Fools⁴. As

³ Quoted from Slings’ edition: [Platonis *Respublica*]. Platonis *Rempublicam* Recognovit Brevique Annotatione Critica Instruxit S. R. Slings in Universitate Libera quae Amstelodami est Professor Ordinarius Linguae et Litterarum Graecarum. Oxonii, MMIII.

⁴ Ar. *Ra.* 900, *Eq.* 261, in the sense of “gaping fools”; in Ar. *Nu.* 172 (and cf. Ar. 51) *ἄνω κεχηνῶς* means a *stargazer* (LSJ, s. v. *χάσκω*; see also Ar. *Eq.* 1263, where Aristophanes uses *Κεχηναῖοι* as a pun on *Ἀθηναῖοι* (it is a specially coined comic word, from *κέχηνα* – LSJ, s. v. *κεχηναῖοι*). On the primary meaning of *χάσκω* (from *χάσσω*) as “gaping hole”, see J. P. Mallory and D. Q. Adams, *The Oxford Introduction to Proto-Indo-European and Proto-Indo-European World*, Oxford, 2006, 220, 222, 363.

Plato observes further, someone who is looking at the sky *κεχηνῶς*, learns nothing not only about *τὰ νοητά*, the intelligible entities, but also about *τὰ αἰσθητά*, the sensible things, for the reason alone can comprehend both the intelligible and sensible objects. The visual intensity of someone’s staring at the sky with the three obvious openings in his or her face, as we might say, with *three widely open holes*, is in sharp contrast to that person’s inability to see what one ought to see and to comprehend mentally what one ought to comprehend. Bearing in mind that this practical astronomer or lover of arts understands nothing, we may even imagine that this foolish person is looking upwards not with two open eyes and an open mouth, but *with three blind eyes* or – what is essentially the same – *with three hungry mouths* that cannot be satiated. Maybe that person, figuratively speaking, “eats” – or aesthetically consumes – with those three open mouths what one tries and fails to see. Staring with one’s eyes and gaping with one’s mouth, or – if we dare to use a pun intended by Plato – *gaping with one’s eyes and staring with one’s mouth*, that person takes delight in observing the sky, yet that delight is only and essentially the delight of the stomach – not the delight of the reason nor even the one of the sight, having in mind that he or she, staring upwards with three blind eyes or with three gaping and always hungry mouths, *really sees nothing*. The haunting sense of sheer futility of such gaping is intensified by the fact that someone who takes aesthetic delight while gaping is finally left hungry not only intellectually – for one understands nothing – but also, and that is a paradox, also *physically* – for nothing really falls into the gaping mouth.

The other part of the phrase is *κάτω συμμεμνκώς*. As *κάτω* is in relation of, so to speak, asymmetrical symmetry with respect to *ἄνω*, so *συμμεμνκώς* is in much the same relation of asymmetrical symmetry with respect to *κεχηνώς*. The participle *συμμεμνκώς* (from the verb *συμμεμύω*) usually means “with closed eyes” or “with half-shut eyes”⁵: it may, for example, refer to someone squinting or blinking. Therefore, *συμμεμνκώς* usually and naturally refers to that person’s eyes, not to his or her mouth. Yet the symmetrically corresponding participle *κεχηνώς* (from the verb *χάσκω*) certainly refers to the mouth – the gaping one: if someone looks upwards, one inevitably, by way of logical necessity, looks with open eyes, so the only function of the participle *κεχηνώς*, if it is not to be used here redundantly, is to refer to the mouth, not to the eyes. But the paradoxical and ironic corollary of saying that the mouth of someone who is gazing at the sky is widely open, that is, gaping, takes the form of implication that the person’s eyes are also open – not *simply* open, which is certainly the case – but *very widely* open, so to speak, gaping. Therefore, the impression is that the observer of the sky is not simply looking but intensely staring – or gaping, if you want – with three very widely open holes: with three staring eyes or three gaping mouths.

⁵ Lee translates *κάτω συμμεμνκώς* as “blinking downwards”. He observes that “the word is commonly taken in this context to refer to the eyes, but more usually refers to the mouth” and suggests that it is possible that the phrase *ἔάντε τις ἄνω κεχηνώς ἢ κάτω συμμεμνκώς* means “whether by looking up with his mouth open or down with it shut” (Plato, *The Republic*, translated with Introduction by Desmond Lee. Second Edition, London, 2003, p. 402, n. 11).

So, if *κεχηνώς* is not here used redundantly, it certainly refers to the mouth. Then, bearing in mind the symmetry between *ἄνω* and *κάτω*, “upwards” and “downwards”, we should naturally expect that the participle *συμμεμνκώς*, which stands in relation of symmetry with respect to the participle *κεχηνώς*, must also refer to the mouth. Of course, this conclusion, drawn from the considerations of symmetry, is at odds with our previous observation, namely, that *συμμεμνκώς* usually refers to the eyes, not to the mouth. Therefore, we are left here with ambiguity and should acknowledge the semantic ambivalence of the participle *συμμεμνκώς*⁶. There is very little doubt that this ambiguity is consciously and deliberately created by Plato and employed here as a subtle literary device. The semantic ambivalence of *συμμεμνκώς*, which in the context of the cited passage has *two simultaneous meanings* – “with shut eyes” and “with shut mouth” – even more dramatically reinforces the analogy between the eyes and the mouth.

So what is the true meaning of *κάτω συμμεμνκώς*? There are obviously three (or at least three) possibilities:

- 1) looking down *with open eyes and shut mouth*;
- 2) looking down *with shut eyes and open mouth* (which in such case would be left gaping – as in the previous episode when someone looks *ἄνω κεχηνώς*

⁶ On this ambivalence, see H. Frisk, *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg, 1970–1973), s. v. *μύω*. Frisk observes that the meaning of *μύω*, which is derived from *μύω*, is also rather ambiguous, “die Lippen (die Augen?) zusammenschliessen”, giving an example from Ar. *Lys.* 126, *τί μοι μῦᾶτε* (ibid., S. 208).

the only difference being the fact that when the person turns one's face downwards, he or she also shuts or half-shuts his or her eyes);

3) looking down *with shut eyes and shut mouth*.

We should notice that in the case of ἄνω κεχηνώς we had only one real possibility – to treat the person as looking *with open eyes and open mouth*, for gaping as such inevitably implies both intense stare with open eyes and gaping, that is, open mouth. So we must choose one of the three possibilities indicated above and referring to the phrase κάτω συμμεμυκώς. In my opinion, the third possibility is the most elegant one, for in this case we would have a perfect symmetry – a perfectly asymmetrical symmetry – between ἄνω κεχηνώς and κάτω συμμεμυκώς: looking ἄνω κεχηνώς in this case means *looking upwards with three open holes* (be it two eyes and a mouth, or three blind eyes, or three hungry mouths), while looking κάτω συμμεμυκώς means *looking downwards with three shut holes* (two eyes and a mouth, or three blind eyes, or three hungry mouths). As I have said before, my choice is based mainly on the assumption of symmetry.

The analysed simile and analogy between the eyes and the mouth is even more ironic and playful for the simple reason that the *foolish* person who is looking upwards with staring eyes and gaping mouth, or with three staring eyes that cannot really see anything, or, for that matter, with three gaping mouths that are ultimately left unsatiated, is in sharp contrast with the supposedly “serious” looking downwards with shut eyes and shut mouth, as when someone is *deeply thinking*.

We may even imagine a person who is being initiated into the mysteries, for there may be a wordplay between *συμύω* and *συμμέω* (the latter verb means “to initiate (into the mysteries) together”). These two verbs are also related etymologically⁷.

So who – or what – is being, ironically speaking, initiated into the mysteries? Maybe someone who is looking upwards at the sky, that is, someone who belongs to the circle of those engaged in innovative research typical of *sophoi* or *philosophoi*, such as Thales and Anaxagoras, is being initiated together with some other person who is looking downwards, at the earth, and belongs to the circle of those engaged in traditional wisdom and spiritual enlightenment typical of the professionals in the sphere of traditional religion, for example, *manteis* and *mustai*? Or maybe *sophos*–the scientist who looks upwards and *mustēs*–the traditional seer who looks downwards, towards the Earth, the Goddess Gaia who bestows prophetic inspiration, is the same person? Or maybe the eyes and the mouth are together being initiated into *μυστήρια* of understanding, *ἐπιστήμη*, – yet are being initiated in vain, for neither the scientific endeavour of observational astronomy nor the traditional practices of religious cults but the reason alone can truly and properly be called both *sophos* and *mustēs* capable of understanding the secrets of both the sky and the earth?

It comes without saying that the literary subtlety of the asymmetrical symmetry between ἄνω κεχηνώς and κάτω συμμεμυκώς is fully apparent only in the

⁷ See Frisk, *op. cit.*, s. v. *μύω* (S. 280).

original Greek text. It cannot be satisfactorily rendered in any translation⁸. Of course, the interpretation of this passage that I have proposed here may simply be an instance of extravagant overinterpretation. Yet, while reading Plato, we should be aware of any interpretative possibility that cannot be decisively proven or disproven. Attempting to uncover all interpretative possibilities that come to mind and seem probable we at least are trying, as Charles Kahn has put it, “be as cunning in interpreting a dialogue as the author has been artful in composing it”⁹, because, in Kahn’s opinion, the authorial design of Platonic dialogues is only conveyed indirectly – Plato very rarely spells out for the readers what he intends to say¹⁰. In the case of the cited passage Plato creates a situation of inherent ambiguity using such means:

- 1) he deliberately chooses the verbs, *χάσκω* and *συμμύω*, that may refer to *both the eyes and the mouth*, instead of the verbs, such as *οἴσσειμι*, *συγκλείω*, and others, which are not so ambiguous;

⁸ For slightly different renditions of this passage, see also the translations of Plato’s *Republic* by G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis–Cambridge, 1992), by T. Griffith (Cambridge, 2000), by R. Waterfield (Oxford, 1993), and by R. E. Allen (New Haven–London, 2006).

⁹ Kahn, *op. cit.*, 59.

¹⁰ Kahn turns our attention to the inherent conflict between philosophical interpretation and the very ethos of empirical philology which all too often tends to impose unnecessary constraints on every hermeneutical attempt to rise above literal meaning: “Some readers may balk at my suggestion that we can attribute to Plato an authorial design that is only conveyed indirectly. Appealing to rigorous principles of philological method, they may well ask: what right do we have to ascribe to Plato an intended meaning that is not explicitly spelled out in the text?” (*ibid.*, 64)

- 2) in the crucial segment of the phrase he does not indicate the indirect object of *ἄνω κεχηνώς* and *κάτω συμμεμκώς* (he might have indicated this object, for example, with *accusativus Graecus*, saying, for instance, *ὄμματα κεχηνώς, στόμα κεχηνώς, χεῖλη κεχηνώς*, or, respectively, *ὄμματα συμμεμκώς, στόμα συμμεμκώς, χεῖλη συμμεμκώς*, and so on);
- 3) he deliberately creates a linguistic situation where the considerations of symmetry are to be taken into account and by way of these considerations provides us with some important clues, which make possible the interpretation of that ambiguous linguistic situation in the context of Plato’s philosophical views.

The interpretation of passage that I have proposed fits fairly well into the overall context of Plato’s philosophical message given in the Seventh Book of the *Republic*. The philosopher might as well have said together with Heraclitus that *κακοὶ μάρτυρες ἀνθρώποισιν ὄφθαλμοὶ καὶ ὦτα βαρβάρους ψυχὰς ἐχόντων*, “the eyes and ears are bad witnesses for those people who have barbarian souls” (107 DK). Plato, extolling the virtues of pure theoretical reason, downgrades the role of empirical research which for the most part is conducted with the help of bodily vision, that is, the eyes, to the level of the lowest faculties of human body associated mostly with eating and the pleasures of the mouth. Only in later dialogues, such as the *Laws*, *Timaeus*, and *Epinomis* (the attribution of the latter dialogue to Plato is very dubious),

does observational astronomy and cosmology in general assume more prominent philosophical status. Meanwhile, in the context of the Republic (which is one of the middle dialogues), there is – ironically! – one and the same thing for a person to *look upwards with three open holes* or *downwards with three shut holes*: unless

that person is able to cultivate pure theoretical reason and, consequently, pursue pure theoretical astronomy, in both cases he really sees nothing. In both cases his soul is *looking downwards* (κάτω) – and it is only natural that every true philosopher should *look down* (καταφρονεῖν) upon him.

PRAŽIOTOS AKYS IR SPOKSANTI BURNA:

APIE LITERATŪRINĮ PLATONO SUBTILUMĄ VALSTYBĖJE (RESP. VII, 529 A–C)

Naglis Kardelis

S a n t r a u k a

Platonas, septintojoje *Valstybės* knygoje kritikuodamas praktinę astronomiją, kurios pagrindas – empirinis dangaus šviesulių bei reiškinių stebėjimas, ir priešpriešindamas jai grynųjų mąstymu besiremiančią teorinę astronomiją, pajėgią atskleisti tikrąją, gelminę dangaus prigimtį, savąją kritiką subtiliai perteikia pasitelkdamas ironišką sąsają tarp *burnos* (kaip vienės didelės „akies“) ir *akių* (kaip dviejų mažų „burnų“), kuri ypač išryškėja frazėje *ἐάντε τις ἄνω κεληνῶς ἢ κάτω συμμεμνωκῶς* [...] („ar kas nors į viršų *atsimerkęs* /

prasižiojęs ar žemyn (*užsi- / prisi-)*merkęs / *užsičiaupęs* (žiopsotų? / vėpsotų?) [...]). Straipsnyje, remiantis artimuoju šio fragmento kontekstu ir filosofinėmis sąsajomis, analizuojamos minėtos frazės interpretavimo ir vertimo galimybės, atskleidžiama, kad fizinių akių prilyginimas burnai (dviem mažoms burnoms) subtiliai išreiškia Platono įsitikinimą, jog empiriniu stebėjimu besiremianti praktinė astronomija, vien gurmaniškai „skanaujama“ dangaus gardesius, nėra pajėgi suvokti tikrąją dangaus reiškinių prigimtį.

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