

AS IN A MIRROR...

Fundamental categories human beings apply to capture the world and understand themselves often incite the mind to move in opposite directions thus enabling, at a closer scrutiny, a discovery of the dual nature of such concepts. We consider, for instance, memory as ephemeral and, at the same time, enduring or as a source of solace and a burden too heavy to be carried.¹ The category of seeing calls to mind similarly opposing representations.

On the one hand, seeing, in its primary sense of the function of physical sight, is regarded as a metaphor of cognition in general. To see means to come into a direct cognitive contact with an object and to know it with certainty. Seeing an object “with one’s own eyes” transforms what Plato called a true belief (*doxa*) into knowledge (*episteme*)² in the proper sense of the word. A belief acquired in any possible manner³, formed, for example, on the basis of information obtained from others or drawn from conclusions, is confirmed by the subject’s vision of the object present before him or her. On the other hand, as common experience teaches, direct evidence of the senses must not be uncritically trusted. The unreliability of such evidence is among the roots of skepticism present in the history of philosophy from its beginnings. Although we may be led astray by all our senses, it is vision, our dominant sense⁴, that is the first to be mentioned among the examples of illusions. At least this is what René Descartes does in his first “Meditation” entitled “On Those Things That May Be Called into Doubt”, by indicating how easily one may be deceived by the sense of sight as to things that are little and placed far away from us.⁵ However, he justifies his doubt giving other reasons, such as the vividness of our dreams (he writes: “It must nonetheless be

¹ See Patrycja Mikulska, “The Present of Past Things,” *Ethos* 34, no. 3(135) (2021), 18.

² See Plato, “Meno,” 97 d–e, in Plato, “*Meno*” and *Other Dialogues*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 138.

³ “The question how it happens that a new idea occurs to a man—whether it is a musical theme, a dramatic conflict, or a scientific theory—may be of great interest to empirical psychology; but it is irrelevant to the logical analysis of scientific knowledge.” Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 7.

⁴ The role different senses play in the process of perception is investigated by different scholarly disciplines. On the dominance of the sense of sight over that of touch and the interdependence of the two senses, see Dustin Strokes and Stephen Biggs, “The Dominance of the Visual,” in *Perception and Its Modalities*, ed. Dustin Strokes, Mohan Matthen, and Stephen Biggs (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 350-378.

admitted that the things we see in sleep are, so to speak, painted images, which would not be formed except on the basis of a resemblance with real things”⁶). Also, skepticism is not the end of his intellectual path, but its beginning, one of the first stages in the application of his method which is to lead him to true and certain knowledge. The rules he adopted included an admonition to accept nothing other than that which presented itself to his mind so “clearly and distinctly”⁷ that he would have no occasion to doubt it. By the same token, Descartes recognized again the fundamental role of vision, but considered not literally, i.e., as the sense of sight, but, as it were, metaphorically. According to that metaphor, deep-rooted also in everyday language, the eye gazing at an object is not a sense organ, but an intellectual faculty that enables a direct insight into the essence of things. Husserl calls such a way of knowing objects the “pure ‘seeing’”⁸ (“reine Schauen”)⁹ and states: “Whenever we have [...] the pure viewing and grasping of something objective directly and in itself, we have [...] the same certainties.”¹⁰

However, Husserl does not contrast sense perception with intellectual insight, but individual knowledge and universal knowledge: “Let us now consider some cases in which a universal is given, i.e., cases where a purely immanent consciousness of the universal is built up on the basis of some ‘seen’ and self-given particular. I have a particular intuition of redness, or rather several such intuitions. I stick strictly to the pure immanence; I am careful to perform the phenomenological reduction. I snip off any further significance of redness, any way in which it may be viewed as something transcendent, e.g., as the redness of a piece of blotting paper I on my table, etc. And now I fully grasp in pure ‘seeing’ the meaning of the concept of redness in general, redness *in specie*, the universal ‘seen’ as identical in this and that. No longer is it the particular as such which is referred to, not this or that red thing, but redness in general. If we really did this in pure ‘seeing,’ could we then still intelligibly doubt

⁵ See René D e s c a r t e s, “*Meditations on First Philosophy*” with *Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. Michael Moriarty (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13.

⁶ Ibidem, 14.

⁷ René D e s c a r t e s, *A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One’s Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, trans. Ian Maclean (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 17.

⁸ Edmund H u s s e r l, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, trans. William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian (Dordrecht, Boston, and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 6, 44. The translators deemed it necessary to enclose the term “seeing” in quotation marks; in Husserl’s original text, however, the word “Schauen” is used without them.

⁹ Edmund H u s s e r l, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, *Die Idee der Phänomenologie: Fünf Vorlesungen*, ed. Walter Biemel (Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950), 56.

¹⁰ Edmund H u s s e r l, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, 6.

what redness is in general, what is meant by this expression, what it may be in its very essence? We truly ‘see’ it; there it is, the very object of our intent, this species of redness. Could a deity, an infinite intellect, do more to lay hold of the essence of redness than to ‘see’ it as a universal?”¹¹

The possibility to grasp an object (be it individual or universal, material or non-material, the object’s property or its essence) purely, in a manner free from any contextual determinants— as it were, in the way in which the object could be grasped by a deity—met with extensive criticism made from ontological, anthropological, epistemological, and ethical perspectives. It was pointed out that a “disincarnated, absolute eye”¹² does not exist in reality, but is a social, or individual, construct, while physical objects that can be known through the sense of sight and essences of all cognizable objects are grasped (if they can be grasped at all) within a particular cultural context whose influence upon such cognition must not be put between phenomenological brackets. Some critics observed that the gaze, being anything but innocent, is not indifferent to the object. To cite well-known examples: Jean-Paul Sartre described the process of disintegration of “my” world, i.e., the world constituted by my gaze, as a result of the intrusion of another gazing subject;¹³ Jacques Lacan analyzed fear caused by the gaze and believed the latter to be a disguise of power and a tool to exercise it;¹⁴ while feminist theorists denounced “a reifying male look that turned its targets into stone.”¹⁵

Despite criticism and doubt, the desire for direct vision persists. We continue to be like Plato longing to see “things as they really are,”¹⁶ and not just their sensibly perceptible copies or reflections (those, however, we also wish to behold); or like Descartes who attempts, with the method he developed, to break through the chaos of vague theories and unreliable moral precepts; or like Husserl. The desire, accompanied by reflection on what it really means to

¹¹ Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, trans. William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian (Dordrecht, Boston, and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 44f.

¹² M. Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 8.

¹³ See Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1978), 254–9.

¹⁴ See *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI, Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 67–78; see also Norman Bryson, “The Gaze in the Expanded Field,” in *Vision and Visuality*, 108.

¹⁵ See Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” 8.

¹⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248 b, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 31.

see, pervades all human culture, or – more exactly – runs through different cultures, sometimes leading to dramatic clashes.

Such a violent encounter is described by Orhan Pamuk in his famous book *My Name Is Red*.¹⁷ The novel is set in sixteenth-century Stambul, at the time when the art of book illumination both flourished and faced an imminent crisis. Rooted in the Persian tradition, the art of illumination depicted the world as if “watched from above, from the vantage point reserved for Allah alone.”¹⁸ Struggling with the first signs of the crisis, the characters in the novel identify the influence of Western art as a factor contributing to the decline of their tradition. One of the numerous personages-narrators (they include not only human beings but also animals and plants represented in miniatures, inanimate objects, and the eponymous color red) employed by the author to tell the story, is an old master of traditional miniature painting. He had once visited Venice and could not forget, nor reject, the pictures he had seen there, for which he ultimately pays with his life. „Attempting to imitate the world directly through painting,” the master says, “seems dishonorable to me. I resent it. But there’s an undeniable allure to the paintings they make by those new methods. They [Venetian painters] depict what the eye sees just as the eye sees it. Indeed, they paint what they see, whereas we paint what we look at.”¹⁹ He was particularly impressed by the Venetian portraiture: “Just a glance at those paintings and you too would want to see yourself this way, you’d want to believe that you’re different from all others, a unique, special and particular human being. Painting people, not as they are perceived by the mind, but as they are actually seen by the naked eye, painting in the new method, allows for this possibility.”²⁰ The miniaturist speaks those words in an intensely dramatic scene—it is the scene of murder, and the old man, by holding a conversation on art, vainly attempts to stop his collaborator and former pupil from killing him.

When Pamuk allows the color red to speak, to present itself in a language (which a Persian miniaturist red had one day overheard believed essentially impossible: “The meaning of color is that it is there before us and we see it. [...] Red cannot be explained to he who cannot see”²¹), the reader is given a description—one might call it “phenomenological,” albeit

¹⁷ See Orhan P a m u k, *My Name is Red*, trans. Erdağ M. Göknar (London; Faber and Faber, 2001).

¹⁸ Piotr K o f t a, *Kolor przeznaczenia według Pamuka*, Dziennik.pl, 13 October 2007, <https://kultura.dziennik.pl/ksiazki/artykuly/211263,kolor-przeznaczenia-wedlug-pamuka.html>. Translation mine.

¹⁹ P a m u k, *My Name is Red*, 272.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Ibidem, 301.

the writer is careful not to perform any reduction—of the essence of redness. “I hear the question upon your lips: What is it to be a color? Color is the touch to the eye, music to the deaf, a word out of the darkness ... “I am so fortunate to be red! I’m fiery. I’m strong. [...] I do not conceal myself. I’m not afraid of other colors, shadows, crowds or even loneliness. How wonderful it is to cover a surface that awaits me with my own victorious being! Wherever I’m spread, I see eyes shine, passions increase, eyebrows rise and heartbeats quicken. Behold how wonderful it is to live! Behold how wonderful to see!”²²

The triumph of red over the distance between the seeing and the seen, its self-giveness so intense that a subject cannot consider it a mere reflection and finds doubt impossible, or, to use Husserl’s words, so evident that even a deity could do no more to lay hold of the essence of redness – that victory is gained in the world where others still pose a threat and where one can reasonably be afraid of shadows, crowds, and loneliness; it is the world in which the gaze all too often destroys, enslaves, and turns others into stones. In such a context the song in praise of life and seeing that Pamuk makes the color red sing, calls to mind, while extolling earthly life, the longing similar to that expressed by St. Paul in the conclusion of his hymn to love: “At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known.” (1 Cor 13: 12).

Patrycja Mikulska

²² Ibidem, 298.