Journal of Philosophy and Religion

[ISSN 2958-1133]
Volume: 04 Issue: 01 | June-2025

JPR

Examining Knowledge and Visual Disability in the Light of Plato's Doctrine of Forms

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Cite this article in APA
Kigame, R. (2025). Examining knowledge and visual disability in the light of Plato's Doctrine of Forms. *Journal of philosophy and religion, 4* (1), 68-77. https://doi.org/10.51317/jpr.v4i1.740

OPEN ACCESS
A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history
Received: 2025-04-17
Accepted: 2025-05-14
Published: 2025-06-16

Scan this QR to read the paper online

Abstract
The purpose of this article is to examine knowledge and visual disability in the light of Plato's doctrine of forms. Using speculative philosophy, the study questions the assumption that sighted individuals possess superior knowledge and explores what distinguishes partial from comprehensive understanding. Using John Godfrey Saxe's poetic version of the Indian parable of six blind men touching an elephant as a prelude, the paper examines the epistemological implications of partial perception and the belief that sensory experience connects to comprehensive understanding. The analysis reveals that visual disability does not hinder cognitive capacity, as both sighted and blind individual's access universal truths through shared mental processes, with sight serving merely as a data-entry mechanism. Plato's Forms suggest that sensory perceptions are inferior to pure ideas, and Baudrillard's simulacra highlights how visual representations can obscure reality. The paper concludes that Plato's Theory of Forms provides a robust epistemological foundation, viewing visual disability as a privation rather than a cognitive defect. By examining this doctrine, the paper seeks to determine the usefulness of sight in the comprehensiveness of how we know.

Key terms: Cognition, epistemology, simulacra, theory of forms, visual disability.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Common assumptions suggest that sighted individuals possess an epistemic advantage, raising questions about the nature of knowledge and the cognitive capacities of those with visual disabilities. There is a poem attributed to John Godfrey Saxe that lyricizes an old Indian story about six blind men who went to "see" an elephant. Depending on what each touched, they all came up with different conclusions about what the elephant was like. Saxe wrote:

It was six men of Indostan.
To learn is inclined,
Who went to see the elephant
Though all of them were blind,

That each observation might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the elephant
And, happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
"God bless me, but the Elephant Is very like a wall!"

The Second, feeling the tusk,
Cried, "Ho! What have we here? So, very round and smooth and sharp? To me, 'tis very clear.
This wonder of an Elephant Is very like a spear!"

The Third approached the animal
And, happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands, thus boldly up he spoke:
"I see," quoth he, "The Elephant
Is very like a snake!"

The Fourth reached out an eager hand and felt about the knee.

"'Tis clear enough the Elephant is very like a tree!"

The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said, "Even the blindest man can tell what this resembles most; Deny the fact who can:
This marvel of an elephant Is very like a fan!"
The Sixth no sooner had begun.
About the beast to grope
Then, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant Is very like a rope!"
And so, these men of Indostan.

Disputed loud and long, each in his own opinion exceeding stiff and strong. Though each was partly in the right, they all were in the wrong.

With this poem as a blueprint for the prevalent idea that nobody has a complete understanding of reality, we raise three philosophical questions in this paper. First, how do we acquire knowledge? Our understanding of how we obtain knowledge is useful in judging whether Saxe was justified in concluding that when we have partial knowledge of reality, we are all partly in the right and, hence, all in the wrong.

Second, what kind of knowledge do blind people possess? In fact, is there any epistemic justification for the common assumption that someone who can see has a superior knowledge of things in the universe than someone with a visual disability, or can a man "see how this world goes without eyes" as Shakespeare intimates in his play titled *King Lear*? (Gardner, 1995). Third, we ask what Plato's doctrine of the Forms can lend to the question of how our different approaches to knowledge can be dispensed theoretically as an epistemological foundation for a universal perspective on knowledge for all, whether sighted or blind.

2.0 How Do We Know What We Know?

The definition of what knowledge is remains elusive in view of various approaches to sources of what we know or claim to. The age-old philosophical question has remained whether we acquire knowledge a priori through rational reflection, as suggested by Plato, René Descartes, and Baruch Spinoza or if we acquire knowledge a posteriori through our senses, as suggested by Aristotle, John Locke, and David Hume.

Like Plato, French philosopher René Descartes postulated that our ability to think is the source of our knowledge and that the senses play a very small part. He developed his famous maxim, *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am), which held that thinking is the foundation of our existence. His philosophy included the desire to develop certitude by doubting everything first. To quote him, "I can do nothing else, until I have learned for certain that there is nothing in the world that is certain" (Descartes, 1993).

According to Augustine (354–430 CE), we cannot rely on reason or the senses alone to know anything. He argued that we acquire knowledge through divine illumination. Borrowing heavily from Plato's theory of Forms, Augustine argued that, indeed, the senses are at the bottom of the ladder of providing knowledge, superseded by the mind and divinity, respectively, but added that the senses were still important in that they provided knowledge which the mind could then synthesise with the help of the divine. He argued that, even though a stick may look bent in water, that appearance gives us a true view of how our minds can be deceived regarding reality (Gilson, 1960). (Spinoza, 2011) continued this view, arguing that all the ideas which are in God always agree with those things of which they are the ideas. He concluded, therefore, that all ideas, in so far as they are related to God, are true.

Later philosophers continued this debate, although they tended to run away from the synthesis Augustine achieved. While René Descartes belaboured the aspect of appearance and reality, Kant seemed to push the idea of illumination via what he called the noumenal world. Augustine's balance, thus, remains one of the most comprehensive in past and contemporary philosophy (Kigame, 2018). (Spinoza, 2011), agrees with Augustine when discussing how we know. He wrote:

> *...we do but say that in the divine intellect itself an idea exists of which God is the cause, not in so far as He is infinite, nor in so far as He is affected by the ideas of a multitude of individual things, but in so far only as He constitutes the essence of the human mind.*

Augustine offers another blow to scepticism by giving the example of mathematical truths, which he says are independent of sense perception. These hold true whether one is dreaming, hallucinating, or awake. In other words, 2 plus 3 is 5, whether one is asleep or not and whether one accepts it as a fact or not (Kigame, 2018).

Most definitions of knowledge revolve around the traditional view that knowledge is justified true belief, but differ on how to arrive at that final point of knowledge. (Gettier, 1963) challenges this view, though, arguing that it is possible for someone to be justified in believing a proposition that is, in fact, false. A more contemporary approach has been to attempt the harmonisation of the two prevailing models. Some Japanese thinkers have suggested a possible integration of the rational and the empirical via three overarching premises, i.e., the oneness of humanity and nature, the oneness of body and mind, and the oneness of self and others (Bolisani & Bratianu, 2018). According to this view, mind and body are not two distinct entities but an integration that forms the whole. Like several African communities, knowledge is, therefore, equated to wisdom, which is acquired from the entire personality.

From the foregoing, it may be concluded that visual disability affects very little of what we know and how we know it. Without physical vision, it seems plausible to deduce that if knowledge were acquired purely on the basis of reason, then mental processes could proceed unhindered by lack of vision. Again, were we to switch off every possible light in the universe, there would be no distinction between what seeing humans know and what blind humans know. If Descartes were to live by applying the principle, "I think, therefore I am," visual disability would be considered irrelevant to knowledge acquisition. As a matter of fact, Descartes himself spent a lot of hours in bed thinking, and the German philosopher Hegel spent so much time in the Black Forest simply reflecting. Borrowing from Buddhist enlightenment, Arthur Schopenhauer drew the conclusion that we gain a lot from the stillness of meditation.

On the other hand, were we to say with empiricists that we acquire knowledge a posteriori via the senses, the visually disabled would have everything in the world of the senses working except for sight. It is at that point that one would ask whether sight adds any more cognitive significance to knowledge, seeing that the eyes, in and of themselves, do not process anything without the mind. They serve as mirrors to the mind, simply bringing data that one can only make sense of through mental interpretation. Thus, there is nothing like the understanding of colour, a smile, distance, or beauty that happens only via the physical opening or closing of eyes. Indeed, the component of dreaming while all are asleep at night is a sure testimony to the bulk of our knowledge happening at the level of the mind and not via independent senses. Whether we are born tabula rasa or with innate imprints of knowledge which mature with time, the visually challenged person is not exempt from either endowment.

Were we to apply the integrated approach to knowledge acquisition, the same applies, viz, the blind person may still acquire synthesised knowledge as would anybody else because the acquisition culminates in the consolidation of facts about the universe and all its diverse processes. In fact, the inability for everybody to know everything confirms knowledge as a cumulative process which varies from person to person, including variations of comprehension and interpretation, even by several people looking at the

same thing. In fact, if we were to take Augustine's point of the possibility of our senses deceiving us in view of a straight stick in the water looking bent, then our eyes, as well as our ears, can deceive us. The difference is made by our minds, helping us to process this information, including its critique of our sense perceptions. Therefore, if eyes are capable of perceiving such things as mirages and straight sticks in the water looking bent, they cannot be entirely depended upon as reliable sources of knowledge independent of the mind.

(Dombrowski et al., 2013) Elucidate the application of integration in knowledge acquisition by distinguishing three sources: Experiential, Skills, and Knowledge claims. Although they are interconnected, they have unique features of their own. They explain that experiential knowledge is what we get when we interact directly with the environment via our senses, and then it is processed by our brains. They give an example of how people know what snow is. They have to travel to where it is and handle it in order to claim knowledge. Experiential knowledge cannot be gained simply by reading books or talking with people about it. Such knowledge is based on reflection and perception.

On the other hand, skills are based on how to do something. It entails what people call the "know-how." Although it overlaps with experiential knowledge, it is acquired through practical and repeated action. Motor skills such as swimming, playing the piano, or cooking are acquired in this way via learning and repetition. Sometimes, it is called procedural knowledge because it follows a particular pattern.

Lastly, knowledge claims are what we know or claim to know. This includes explicit and tacit knowledge. This category helps us to share experiences and build what is called shared knowledge. Integration in these three kinds of knowledge shows us once again that there is no monopoly of knowledge, nor how it is acquired or even interpreted. Language, cultural, and philosophical traditions tend to shape this integration.

3.0 Epistemology and Visual Disability

If knowledge is viewed in the Platonic sense of justified true belief, then visual disability does not seem to be a significant impediment to the acquisition of and discourse over what is known or how it is known. When viewed as a discipline that is rooted in inquiry, philosophy carries with it an interrogative component, which implies that there is so much to learn about the universe and that no individual has a monopoly on what is knowable. The blind person is as capable of justifying true belief as the seeing person.

The closing lines of Saxe's poem cited earlier raise innumerable questions of significance to our discussion: "And so these men of Indostan Disputed loud and long, each in his own opinion exceeding stiff and strong. Though each was partly in the right, they all were in the wrong" (Gardner, 1995). The fact that they "disputed stiff and strong" among themselves implies that they compared their views. Such a disputation must have ended up giving them a bigger picture of what the elephant is. They ended up with a comparative position that unveiled the whole. If each had a part of the knowledge and the comparative disputation delivered the whole picture, then Saxe would have made a wrong logical conclusion. If the parts are right to whatever degree, then the product of the disputation cannot be "in the wrong." Only if the six blind men were all wrong in their conclusions – as they actually were – would they be "all wrong" in the ultimate conclusion.

Again, even if one reinterpreted this poem in the light of our discussion, given the massive body of knowledge in the universe with all the creatures in it having only microcosmic access to that knowledge, then both the man with sight and the one without fall short of this total picture. This is where Plato's theory of Forms becomes extremely useful. Indeed, might we all not be mere limited recipients of purer ideas beyond this universe in which we participate?

What kind of knowledge do visually challenged people have, and is it an inferior type? To partly answer this question, some recent scientific observations may be called to bear on our epistemological interest. If at all the neuroscientific elucidations on how our brains receive and process information are anything to go by, then there is no epistemic superiority when it comes to the question of how we know whether we are blind or sighted.

A study titled "Do we really need vision? How blind people 'see' the actions of others" (Ricciardi et al., 2009) states that in our daily lives, we learn behaviour from others by observing their actions and intentions. They add that although humans depend significantly on their sense of sight, individuals who are born blind are still capable of learning actions and behaviours from others just as effectively as those who can see. In their study, which was carried out on monkeys, they noted that a particular class of neurons discovered in the monkey's premotor and parietal cortex activated both when the monkey performed a goal-directed action and when it observed another monkey performing the same action. These neurons, referred to as mirror neurons, are similar to humans in response. Ricciardi and colleagues observed that these mirror images were more activated when subjects observed movements for which they had developed a specific competence or when they listened to rehearsed musical pieces in comparison with music they had never played before.

(Ricciardi et al., 2009) Conclude that, having observed learning activities and behaviours from others, both blind and sighted persons exhibited the same kind of stimulation of the mirror neurons when examined for the possibility of repeating them in a controlled environment. They write:

> *To determine whether vision is a necessary prerequisite for the human mirror system to develop and function, we used functional magnetic resonance imaging to compare brain activity in congenitally blind individuals during the auditory presentation of hand-executed actions or environmental sounds and the motor pantomime of manipulation tasks, with that in sighted volunteers, who additionally performed a visual action recognition task.*

Congenitally blind people activated a premotor–temporoparietal cortical network in response to aurally presented actions that overlapped both with mirror system areas found in sighted subjects in response to visually and aurally presented stimuli and with the brain response elicited by a motor pantomime of the same actions. Furthermore, the mirror system cortex showed a significantly greater response to motor familiar than to unfamiliar action sounds in both sighted and blind individuals (Ricciardi et al., 2009).

The implication of this for epistemology is big. It implies that there are shared perceptions, interpretations, and actions with regard to knowledge acquisition and dissemination, whether one is blind or not. It further illustrates that eyesight is simply a data entry system for the brain. We may argue that if data received by a sighted person as a result of looking at something is passed on to a blind person, both the perception and conception of the data are comprehensible and processable without distortion. Should any distortion

appear, chances are that the sighted person has not clearly disseminated the information. Therefore, there is really nothing a sighted person can possess with regard to knowledge that a blind person cannot.

When speech is evoked, the sound of words which carry specific symbols and meanings travels to both the sighted and the blind with equal intensity. If someone utters a word such as "dog" or "bulb," it is unlikely that the sighted and the blind would think they were bananas and bicycles, respectively. As the sighted person may process these sounds by recalling a favourite dog or a missing bulb that his eye has seen, the blind person focuses on the same symbols by recalling a furry guide dog that he has touched before or the object he pulled out of a package he brought home from the supermarket. The two discourses are dispensed well by Plato's Forms again, for he would argue that there is a perfect dog and a perfect bulb beyond our minds that we simply tap into, and so none of us has the complete pure essence of anything (Ricciardi et al., 2009).

Thus, the mirror system in humans can develop in the absence of sight. The results in blind individuals demonstrate that the sound of an action engages the mirror system for action schemas that have not been learned through the visual modality and that this activity is not mediated by visual imagery. These findings indicate that the mirror system is based on supermodel sensory representations of actions and, furthermore, that these abstract representations allow individuals with no visual experience to interact effectively with others

4.0 Visual Disability and Plato's Theory of Forms

All classical and modern philosophers owe much more to Plato on the theory of knowledge than they ordinarily do. This is because it is Plato who set out to preserve in writing the first major reflections on sources and the nature of knowledge. Both his epistemology and metaphysics have influenced later thinkers, right up to the structuralists of our modern era.

Before discussing his theory of the Forms, let us observe here that Plato began with the assumption that knowledge is attainable and must possess at least two qualities, i.e., infallibility and reality. Plato believed that absolute and infallible knowledge is attainable but is not realisable through sense perception because such perceptions are relative. Plato agreed with Heraclitus that information obtained through the senses is in a state of flux (or becoming) and therefore concluded that only universals possessed true knowledge and not the particulars (Copleston, 1993).

According to Plato, universals possess pure ideas that make up the original composition of the material copies of reality that we experience in the world. Plato postulated that if someone sees a horse or a tree, these are representations of the pure, universal forms beyond our cognition. What we experience are copies of the original universal ideas. Plato argued that one could ascend via philosophical reflection from lower, imperfect pictures of the real to the universal ideas beyond our minds. Accordingly, opinions are not part of the real. Even reproductions of the original ideas found in the world of Form become imperfect because they often are just copies of other copies. When one draws a triangle, for instance, one reproduces a copy of the original, but that copy may not be accurate.

Augustine followed this Platonic understanding but proposed that the forms emanate from the mind of God. He follows the Platonist tradition in stating that indubitable truths from God are impressed upon our

minds a priori and, hence, not from our senses or experiences. He adds that the Platonic forms are immutable but that the truths we perceive simply participate in them (Furley, 2012).

What have these forms got to do with our epistemological interest with regard to visual disability? We argue here that since all sense perceptions are inferior to the infallible and real ideas found in the world of forms, whether one uses his eyes to see, his nose to smell, or his ears to listen to and interpret what comes through these senses, whatever is perceived is inferior to the purer universal truths that are borne in the world of forms. In this case, as shall be demonstrated below, visual disability does not hinder access to and interaction with the world of universals. The mind of the sighted person, as well as that of the blind person, is a mirror or a window into the world of forms. Thus, blindness, as a manifestation of the outworking of bodily limitations, must be recognised as a privation of sight and not a total absence of the ability to see the light philosophers see.

Let us observe that, according to Plato, blindness is of two types. This is explained in the parable of the cave (or den), which is found in Book VII of his work, *The Republic*. Plato describes blindness as being of two kinds, caused either by passing out of darkness into light or out of light into darkness, and a man of sense will distinguish between them and will not laugh equally at both of them, but the blindness which arises from fullness of light he will deem blessed, and pity the other; or if he laugh at the puzzled soul looking at the sun, he will have more reason to laugh than the inhabitants of the den at those who descend from above (Plato, 1961).

In view of this description, it is evident that visual disability, seen analogically, symbolises everyone without the ability to think philosophically. Plato insinuates that philosophers live in the light and are capable of having a better and purer perspective on life than those who are not. In his cave analogy in *The Republic*, those chained to the walls of the cave are vaguely enlightened by the tiny amount of light brought into the cave by a fire, and so they see things in shadows. He says that if such people were brought out to the light, first, the light would blind them, but again, after some time, they would be able to see better because the sun lights everything and makes them appear clearer.

If we transpose visual disability into this analogy, there is a subtle implication that if a blind person can become a philosopher, then he is more enlightened than his seeing counterpart. Plato says that a sensible man will not laugh at anyone who is blinded by moving from darkness to light or light to darkness, but will deem him blessed who is blinded by movement into the light.

From a purely epistemological perspective, it may be argued that it is better to be overwhelmed by knowledge than to have no knowledge at all or to merely have glimpses. To use Plato's cave analogy, there is a sense in which visual disability can be equated with being in the world of shadows. If a blind man were to see, at first, he might look at people and see them as "trees", just like the man whose eyesight Jesus restored.

Christian philosophers such as Justin and Augustine borrowed heavily from Plato's philosophy, but the person who really utilised the cave analogy was Paul of Tarsus, who, in 1 Corinthians 13:1–12, insinuates that being in the world is like being in the cave and restricts us from the celestial view of things. He likens life on earth to people who possess a vague image of the real, hence surrounded by Plato's cave shadows.

He also likens our being in the world to the immaturity of childhood and the better celestial view of maturity. He wrote:

> *For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, and I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now, we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then, we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

Among the modern philosophers, perhaps the person who typifies this analogy well is French structuralist Jean Baudrillard in his essay titled "Simulacra and Simulation." Simulacra (singular simulacrum) are copies of originals that were once there but are no longer there or imitations of originals that still exist. In his essay, he gives the example of a territory and the map that represents it. In his view, the map is a poor reflection of the territory and may, in fact, conceal the real identity of the territory. A simulation is the imitation of any process that takes place in the world.

The essay discusses the use of signs and symbols in today's world, arguing that today's society has replaced the world of reality with symbols and signs, thus blinding us from the real experience of life in its original Form. (Baudrillard, 1994) complains:

> *Today, abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map.*

5.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is clear that philosophers and social critics in general throughout history have tended to employ the imagery of seeing and blindness to communicate enlightenment or lack of it. Plato utilises it in the cave analogy. Shakespeare employs it in King Lear to show that a man may see how this world goes without eyes and that, in fact, those who claim to see may be viewed as blind, as the case is when both King Lear and Gloucester fail to see their own mistakes in decision-making and hence excuse the guilty and punish the innocent. Saxe brings it out in his poetic discussion of relativism as typified by six blind men touching an elephant. Of all these, only Plato gives us a sufficient epistemological ground for comprehending sources of knowledge as well as their nature. The theory of forms is a useful tool in engaging nearly all our epistemological concerns in that it combines both knowledge concerns as well as ontological solutions to the relationship between appearance and reality.

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