Leading Plato into the darkroom

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Abstract

Even though Plato’s philosophy predates photography by over two millennia, there are at least four correspondences between it and photography, especially photography as something which invites or demands perfection: (1) perfection lies at the heart of Plato’s metaphysics; (2) his philosophy is organized by images of sunlight and dark chambers; (3) according to his metaphysics, in order for the good life to prevail, visual representation must be banned; and (4) he also suggests that technology can assist human being in pursuit of the good life. Ultimately, his philosophy is a metaphysics of perfection inclined against the value of photography. However, it also offers concepts and claims that can be respectively worked with and challenged to arrive at a positive evaluation of the ontological value of photography, by which I mean the value of photography as a technological practice which can upset the stable distinctions of reality. I explain how Plato’s concept of technē leads to a splitting of photography into at least four different photographies. This though is a prelude to photography’s response. I argue that these four photographies are strongly intersecting and, as such, are evidence of photography’s capacity to challenge Plato’s metaphysics. With support from Heidegger’s philosophy of technology, I show that the intersecting photographies lead to a concept of photography which rejects perfection in favour of seeing what is possible.

Perfection lies at the heart of Plato’s metaphysics, his theory of the fundamental nature of being. He argues for the existence of a higher realm occupied by the Forms. Every kind of thing we experience in our world – physical or abstract –
obtains its origin and shape from its higher, singular, perfect Form, much as if our world were made of dough cut into shapes by stencils. However, we ordinary mortals are not aware of this higher realm because we are tantalized by the senses, and representational art only makes things worse by glorifying appearances. Plato likens our situation to being prisoners in a cave, mistaking shadows on the walls for reality, and not realizing that ultimate existence lies outside in the light. The best we can do, he argues, is to lead a moral life, to excel, to approach the perfection of our Form. But then the Form of photography appeared, and led Plato back deeper into the cave, into the darkest space possible. This chapter considers the impact of photography on Plato’s metaphysics and, in so doing, demonstrates the capacity of technology to challenge and generate philosophical thought.

To be perfect: the exemplary form of something; free from any blemish or flaw, and complete in the sense that you have all the required elements, properties or characteristics. Photography invites, points towards or demands perfection (I comment upon these relationships below) in a number of ways. Photographs of the human form, especially in advertising, are idealized (blemishes removed, height-to-width ratios made more pleasing) to denote beautiful people enjoying beautiful lives. In the countryside, if an object is present which upsets the (uncritical) sense of ‘perfect nature’ that is taken to pervade the scene, the photographer might have to move to the left a bit or down a bit so that the object is out of shot or, failing that, it can always be edited out later. In the case of documentary photography, have I done justice to the scene? Do my photographs contain a complete record of the situation? Have they captured what was there? Did I capture the moment?

If these forms of perfection occupy photography’s relationship with the world, then there are others which belong to the technology of photography, photography as a process in itself. The photograph should be speck-free. Areas of tone or colour which refer to continuous, blemish-free surfaces or expanses in reality, for example, a clear blue sky or reflections off glass, should not be
interrupted by a dot or scratch. This tells us that a speck of dirt got in between the light and the photo-sensitive paper. Another element is the sharpness of lines, edges and borders between areas or objects. This is vital since it determines the contrast between in-focus and out-of-focus, helping to create a figure–ground relationship and to instill a sense of depth. It used to tell us whether the camera was focused at the time the image was taken, but this can now be corrected digitally. Instead, sharpness can now be a matter of whether an image has been enlarged beyond the point where its pixels become visible. With digital photographic technology, cameras are caught within the drive to produce images made up of an ever-increasing number of megapixels. While this makes it possible to print and project photographs on an increasingly larger scale (the more pixels per square centimeter, the larger an image can be viewed before the pixels that make it up become visible), it is also wedded to the desire that, if the numbers were large enough, we would be able to record appearances with a precision which ensured that every visual aspect of the scene was recorded.

Conventions of composition, lighting, tone, contrast, and depth of field set up the distinction between professional and amateur photography. These give professionals a set of criteria with which they can measure their professionalism but create problems of evaluation and classification for anyone wishing to challenge those conventions. Artistic departures from convention which might appear amateurish to a professional eye because they are blurred, poorly lit or ‘uncomposed’ invariably go under the name ‘art photography’. Compositionally, once a frame has been placed around a series of objects, relationships – lines of connection or opposition – emerge, often demanding judgments as to the perfect state of balance or imbalance. Whether it happens consciously or unconsciously, there is a tussle over the extent to which one should work with or against arrangements governed by classical, numerical qualities such as rhythm, asymmetry and the golden section.¹
Even though Plato’s philosophy predates photography by over two millennia, there are at least four correspondences between it and photography, especially photography as something which invites or demands perfection:

1. Perfection lies at the heart of Plato’s metaphysics.
2. His philosophy is organized by images of sunlight and dark chambers.
3. According to his metaphysics, in order for the good life to prevail, visual representation must be banned.
4. He also suggests that technology can assist human being in pursuit of the good life.

Within Plato’s philosophy as it can be applied to photography today, there are ideas, arguments and images that are thematically close to photography, that argue vehemently against it, and that create intriguing collisions between photography and philosophies of technology. Ultimately, his philosophy is a metaphysics of perfection inclined against the value of photography, but which nevertheless offers concepts and claims that can be respectively worked with and challenged to arrive at a positive evaluation of the ontological value of photography, by which I mean the value of photography as a technological practice which can upset the stable distinctions of reality. This helps to place photography within the wider, cultural project of demonstrating that things might be otherwise than they are, and calls attention to capacity of photography to be the creator of other worlds rather than the representation of the one we already have.²

Plato’s philosophy is organized by images of sunlight and dark rooms or chambers. As ordinary mortals, we do not or cannot detect the existence of a higher realm beyond our sensory, physical reality. Plato likens our situation to being prisoners in a cave, mistaking shadows on the walls for reality, and not realizing that ultimate existence lies outside in the light. Because his entire metaphysics is structured by concepts of excellence and perfection, and about what we have to do in order to achieve excellence, goodness or ‘the Good’ plays a
pivotal role. The Form of the Good, for Plato, ‘gives the objects of knowledge their truth and the knower’s mind the power of knowing’. The Form of the Good is active within us in that it allows us to understand things clearly, where there is a triple-action in the sense that (1) the object, (2) the power to know the object for what it is, and (3) the Form of the Good as the enabling condition of both the object and knowledge of the object are present. Plato explains it by analogy again to the sun: ‘The sun, I think you will agree, not only makes the things we see visible [1], but causes the processes of generation, growth and nourishment [2], without itself being such a process [3]’ (1987b: 509b). Thus the Form of the Good enables knowledge of the essence of things i.e. the Forms, without it (the Good) being the essence of things. Because the Good allows perception of the perfect state of being to which we aspire, it serves as a bridge between knowledge, morality and politics in Plato’s metaphysics, a condition of knowing well essential for leadership and the conferral of order in the interests of greater acquaintance with the Forms.

It does not take much interpretive work to read Plato’s philosophy as an attack on photography in as much as it denies that visual representation is a form of knowing well. The visual representation of reality, Plato avows, is a ‘at a third remove from the truth’ because it is the product of imperfect knowledge about the physical world. Empirical knowledge, that is, knowledge via the senses, of our everyday, physical reality is at one remove from the truth because, as far as Plato is concerned, it is indirect (via the senses) acquaintance of a secondary level of existence. To create representations of this secondary reality, as the photographer does, is not only at a second remove from the truth but at a third (a) because it is a copy of a physical object (a copy of a copy of a Form), and (b) because photographic reproduction of an object will have been produced without proper knowledge of the object in question. Plato makes the point most forcefully through the dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon. What is it, Socrates asks, that a painter represents when they produce an image of a bed: is it the bed-in-itself as it is in nature, i.e., the Form of the bed, or the mere appearance of a physical bed?
SOCRATES: If you look at a bed, or anything else, sideways or endways or from some other angle, does it make any difference to the bed? Isn’t it merely that it \textit{looks} different, without being different? And similarly with other things.

GLAUCON: Yes, it’s the same bed, but it looks different.

SOCRATES: Then consider – when the painter makes his representation, does he do so by reference to the object as it actually is or to its superficial appearance? Is his representation one of an apparition or of the truth?

GLAUCON: Of an apparition.

SOCRATES: The art of representation is therefore a long way removed from the truth, and it is able to reproduce everything because it has little grasp of anything, and that little is of a mere phenomenal appearance.

As well as being the result of a lack of knowledge, of knowing well, visual representation can also be done quite quickly. As if to anticipate the portable and instantaneous properties of photography, Plato declares that the quickest way to create representations ‘is to take a mirror and turn it around in all directions; before long you will create sun and stars and earth, yourself and all other animals and plants’. The art of representation is therefore ‘a long way removed from the truth’ because, rather than attempting to know its objects well, it produces another reality, moving away from the reality of the Forms. This prompts Plato to judge the work of artists as morally reprehensible and to declare that all artists should be banished from the state.

So far, it would seem that Plato is against photography because of the wedge his philosophy places between representation and perfection. But he should in fact be congratulated for anticipating some of the ethical doubts surrounding photographic representation. If we recall the perfections I listed above regarding photography’s relationship with the world, for example, idealized images of beautiful people, the perfect landscape, a moment captured, these are all
questionable ethically to a greater or lesser degree. One of Plato’s concerns with visual representation is that it may trick people into mistaking the image for reality. ‘If [a painter] is skilful enough’, he writes, ‘his portrait of a carpenter may, at a distance, deceive children or simple people into thinking it is a real carpenter’. This is arguably what happens when people experience feelings of inadequacy in the face of depictions of beautiful people leading perfect lives. My life should be like theirs, and I cannot be happy and fulfilled until I attain the state depicted in the photograph. A similar principle is central to censorship (Plato’s declaration that artists should be banished from the state is the first step towards censorship in the history of Western thought): a film, a censor might argue, should be banned if it depicts actions that, when enacted in real life, are illegal, harmful, degrading, etc., in other words, if viewers mistake the material in the film for reality or actions which may be performed in reality. Although Plato reasoned that it is only the very young or ‘simple’ who might be prone to such deception, the media-saturatedness of our culture makes it difficult for any individual not to assign reality or importance to the vast number of visual representations which fill pages, screens, windows and billboards.

Another perspective is introduced by the concept of technē. The concept is ambiguous in Plato’s writings. It does not receive a systematic treatment but is rather given a number of overlapping meanings across his dialogues, and achieves some consistency as a result. What is consistent is the definition of technē as knowledge of how to use an instrument well; it is more often than not translated as ‘craft’ or ‘skill’. There is a duality here: knowledge, something we possess as...
human beings, of how to use an instrument well. Two points follow from this. First, *technē* is a form of what we might today think of as the integration of theory and practice: the doing and knowledge about doing. Second, the duality introduces the idea that technology has ontological significance, that is to say, it requires us to consider the kinds of being or process at work in any technological activity, and the broader metaphysics or theory of existence which these beings or processes serve. For Plato, *technē* involves the excellence or well-being of two entities: *ours*, as human beings who are trying to live in accordance with our essence, by expanding our knowledge, and that of *the instrument*. Any instrument or anything with a function, Plato argues, has an ‘excellence’ or a ‘virtue’, what we might call a ‘perfect operation’, that which it does best:

SOCRATES: Could you cut off a vine-shoot with a carving-knife or a chisel or other tool?
THRASYMACHUS: You could.
SOCRATES: But you would do the job best if you used a pruning-knife.
THRASYMACHUS: True.
SOCRATES: Shall we then call this its ‘function’?
THRASYMACHUS: Yes, let us.
SOCRATES: And I think you may see now what I meant by asking if the ‘function’ of a thing was not that which only it can do or that which it does best.
THRASYMACHUS: Yes, I understand, and I think that is what we mean by a thing’s function.
SOCRATES: Good. And has not everything which has a function its own particular excellence? Let me take the same examples again. The eyes have a function, have they not? The ‘excellence’ or ‘virtue’ is the essential property which allows any instrument to perform its function well, which allows a pruning-knife to be better a cutting a vine-shoot than a carving-knife or a chisel. The split between knowledge and
instrumental excellence occurs in Plato because he is primarily concerned with the life of the mind, and the good life or living well (what he refers to as ‘statecraft’), in the interests of gaining knowledge of the Forms. The good life is ultimately a life of the mind for Plato since he takes justice to be the excellence which drives the mind’s ability to deal with life.

For our purposes, if we apply Plato’s concept of technē to photography, we get a division between the knowledge of the photographer on the one hand, and the excellence of the photographic equipment, be it the camera, enlarger, printing technology, or associated software, on the other. But what is the function of photography, and the excellence which powers it? One might be tempted to say its function is representation, in which case we would remain with the idea that Plato’s philosophy is opposed to photography. But I don’t think we can straightforwardly say that photography’s function is representation. As I demonstrated at the start of the chapter, looking at the perfections of photography, photography opens onto two sets of properties: those connected with representation and others tied to its own operation. The distinction continues even with a broader consideration of photographic practice, one not immediately focused on the perfections of photography. Which camera should I take with me? Which format or film or lenses should I use, and where should I settle on the trade-off between the size and the portability of the camera? The ‘should’ in all three cases will be a matter of either what kind of technology I think is appropriate to the setting or situation in which I shall find myself, or the determination of what is possible photographically during the project, the manipulations, settings and the kind of handling which the camera will permit. Notice the opposition at work: my photographic equipment is selected either because I think it is the right kind of kit for the situation (but what determines rightness here?) or because it is calling the shots, that is to say, I want the properties introduced by the technology to determine or influence the work or be prominent within it.

The contrast between representation and photography’s own operation suggests a number of functions are possible. To give just four (others may be conceivable):
on the side of representation, (1) capturing or reproducing an appearance or event; and on the side of photography’s own operation, (2) determining the range of technological settings, sensitivities and effects that are possible; (3) introducing properties into photographs which display its own operation, such as the selection and arrangement of objects, lighting, the grain of the image, contrast, colour density, sharpness or blur; and (4) promoting the creation of meanings through the combination of elements within a frame. The split between knower and instrument occurs within Plato’s concept of *technē* because he is preoccupied with the life of the mind. The ambition is for the knower to become acquainted with the excellence behind the function of the instrument. But with photography, we have at least four functions. This suggests that photography poses a challenge to Plato’s philosophy. The function of an instrument as far as Plato is concerned has to be singular, driven by an excellence which is a manifestation in this world of the instrument’s perfect Form. The easiest way to enable Plato’s thought to accommodate photography (which is not necessarily my intention) is to divide photography into four (or more) sub-practices, along the lines of the functions described above – we might call them ‘representation’, ‘photographic self-determination’, ‘the display of technically-generated properties’ and ‘frame-based meaning generation’ – so that each function has its own excellence.

But the more important issue, I think, is the fact that photography, considered in the light of Plato’s thought, creates these splits. Photography brings complexity and manifoldness to a metaphysics which is predicated on simplicity and singularity. This is not considered by Plato because he does not get this far. Visual representation, as he understands it, does not have a *technē* because, even though it is something that can be done well, as in producing a life-like portrait, it works against the greater metaphysical imperative of promoting knowledge of the Forms. Prior to the camera, visual representation was the mind (misguided, as Plato saw it) directing the hand which held a paintbrush, but the function of a paintbrush is to distribute paint, not to create likenesses. Rather than being a process in its own right, representation for Plato was simply movement in the wrong metaphysical direction. The only kind of representation that Plato valued was the literary form
of epic poetry. It tells stories of individuals behaving courageously and ethically in the face of adversity, and therefore offers exemplars of how to live. But even epic poetry does not possess a technē. Rather, epic poets are able to speak well of heroic figures, Plato declares in the Ion, because they are men possessed by a divine power, much in the same way that a magnet is invested with the power to attract iron.

The arrival of photography is not the arrival of just another instrument with a function but the emergence of a complex of operations which resists reduction to a single aim or thing. It might sound as if this would be news only for philosophers, especially Platonic ones, keen to establish the perfect photograph or the essence of photography. But what is novel is the result that by approaching photography through Plato, by pressing it to see if it has an excellence, we find it fracturing into a number of different essences, different drives towards perfection. As we saw at the start, photography invites, points towards or demands perfection. Maybe the senses of ‘invitation’, ‘pointing towards’, and ‘demand’ are manifestations of photography’s propensity for fracturing into individual operations. Anything can be done well but with photography we have a technology that demands excellence in a number of different directions, where that sense of demand is the quantity of operations manifest as a felt quality. We think, when we pick up a camera, we are embarking on one activity, when in fact we are opening ourselves to many, where each makes very different demands upon us.

What are we to make of the splits in photography? If we work on Plato’s terms for a moment, to see what the implications of his metaphysics might be, they entail that we, as knowers, know each thing as one thing, and we know it well. These things are not different aspects of one thing, not splinters from a larger whole, but entirely different things. This is photography multiplied. For some, this might be an accurate description of how they think about photography: of the several photographies available, there is one which dominates and drives the practice, and which, for that photographer, is photography, such as trying to capture the moment. But are these multiple photographies truly different things? Could it not be the
case that what we are here obliged to refer to as ‘photographies’ are in fact aspects of a larger whole, that photography possesses an integrity of its own which works against any philosophical ambition to identify and enumerate essences? I say this because it is by no means certain that the different photographies identified above – capturing the moment, technical settings, the display of technical properties, and meanings within a frame – can be separated out from one another as discrete objects or processes. There will be some arrangements of technical settings that are more amenable to capturing the moment than others. What those settings are, for example, whether a comparatively long or short exposure is set, will depend on the situation and the moment ‘captured’ from it; the moment may lend itself to a blurred image or crisp, frozen one. Similarly, determining the range of technological settings, sensitivities and effects that are possible (listed as 2 above) cannot be easily separated from an interest in how these internal operations are displayed or become visible in the resulting photographs (3 above). The composition of a photograph, deciding which elements are included within the frame ostensibly as a record of ‘what was there at the time’ (1 above), may be influenced by the meanings generated when these elements when placed side-by-side one another in a frame (4 above). In other words, signification can precede or determine representation. This suggests that photography challenges the metaphysical structure of Plato’s philosophy by being a technology that resists singularity. It can do this, I propose, because its various functions do not operate purely within their own boundaries but are always in a state of requiring or enabling other functions, as in the case of the correct settings required for representation or the generation of meaning from elements arranged within a pictorial frame. Instead of a single path towards an essence, we have a series of criss-crossing operations.

The splitting-action exercised by *technē* is present in the sunlight metaphor that underpins Plato’s philosophy of the Forms: (i) the sun is the power by which we know; (ii) the sun generates the things we know; but (iii) the sun is not itself a process of generation but an entirely different object, therefore allowing it to play the role of the independently existing Form of the Good. These divisions affect
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how technology is conceptualized, how it is understood to operate in the world with us; in more philosophical terms, they cut-up technology according to a specific, Platonic ontology. The three-way division serves a metaphysics which explains reality by illustrating how lots of different, earthly beings and objects, e.g. humans, cats, trees, knives, can know or be known at an earthly level (we might picture the knower and known as defining the base of a triangle), while simultaneously illustrating how they are all shadows of higher Forms, with some (humans) working towards knowledge of their original Form (with the sides of the triangle serving as lines of descent and ascent).

There are two ways in which this carving up of technology could be challenged: contest the metaphysics of the Forms, especially the Form of the Good (since it is the Form of all Forms), and question the division between the knower and the known. I intend to pursue the latter because: (a) there is no shortage of accounts attacking the Forms; all the commentaries on Plato consulted so far include criticisms; (b) the division between the knower and the known fails to acknowledge an important aspect of the creative relationship we can have with technology; and (c) there is an alternative theory of technology which not only does justice to this creative aspect of technology but also does so in terms of an organic, sunlight-related metaphor, except that ‘the processes of generation, growth and nourishment’ are put to different use. The alternative theory in question is provided by the twentieth-century German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger. Heidegger’s phenomenology is very different from, and arguably opposed to, Plato’s idealism. Whereas Plato presents the universe as organized by a set of singular essences, Heidegger’s phenomenology is rooted in a tradition which rejects the idea that reality divided into objects is a valid basis for metaphysics. For Heidegger, neither an object, an objective essence nor human subjectivity serves as the foundation for a theory of existence. Neither is knowledge or the acquisition of knowledge in pursuit of an end assumed to be the basis of human life. Although it is not readily associated with him, a shorthand term for Heidegger’s philosophy might be ‘ecological’: he makes our condition as
beings rooted in and engaged with the world the foundation for his thought, and
asks what is possible in a situation given the potentialities that lie within it.

Heidegger’s philosophy of technology is largely a negative one in that he thinks
that technology puts us in the position of being manipulators of nature. While we
might generally talk of technology being a means for us to organize and cope with
the world, Heidegger finds greater significance in these activities. Technology, he
writes, is ‘no mere means’. The essence of modern, instrumental technology, he
declares, ‘lies in enframing’: ‘the energy concealed in nature is unlocked’,
‘transformed’, ‘stored up’, ‘distributed’, and ‘switched about’ according to human
needs. An aeroplane waiting on a runway is the result of enframing in as much ‘as
it is ordered to ensure the possibility of transportation. For this it must be in its
whole structure and in every one of its constituent parts itself on call for duty, i.e.,
ready for takeoff'. Human technological action is significant here: we with our
tools (in fact, this could be hyphenated as ‘we-with-our-tools’ to emphasize the
sense of rootedness and engagement underpinning Heidegger’s thought) are
involved in the unlocking, transforming, storing, etc. Humans as technological
beings are ‘revealers’ of nature; we-with-our-tools engage with nature in such a way
as to allow it to present itself in different forms. For example, modern physics,
Heidegger claims, is dependent upon technical apparatus for the disclosure or
‘bringing-forth’ of a realm of representation beyond human visualizability, ‘the
bursting of a blossom into bloom’, as he describes it. His warning to us is that
unless we are we aware of the fundamentally disclosive nature of technology, we
stand to lose sight of the fact that for each realm which is revealed to us, other
potential realms remain undisclosed. The danger is that technology is viewed as
that which serves us as manipulators or ‘master locksmiths’ of nature, when
Heidegger’s ambition is that recognition of the revelatory, disclosive relation will
promote a culture of working with nature.

The idea that technology is disclosive gives it a very different metaphysical status.
Rather than technology being a means to a singular, predetermined end exercised
by a knowing individual, it is instead a state of interaction in which there is
awareness and examination of what might be possible given the items which are to hand in the situation. Heidegger intends this not to have the quality of a ‘subject meets object’ encounter, since this relies on a metaphysics of discrete, individual entities, but instead to acknowledge (and even promote) the difficulty involved in describing an experience in non-dualistic terms, and to present experience as something generative, an occasion where new things or aspects become possible through the attention that is paid to a situation. We can plot the change in the metaphysical status of technology through Heidegger’s use of the sunlight-related ‘generation and growth’ metaphor. Whereas it serves a dualistic, if not trilogistic, system in Plato – illumination is divided to become the light with which the knower beholds the light-sustained object, with the sun all the while abiding as the origin of both – with Heidegger, the idea is that new things arise, possibilities emerge, hitherto unimagined actions are invited like ‘the bursting of a blossom into bloom’ (although it has to be recognized that not all of them will necessarily be good). This is not a ‘process of generation’ emitted by an essential sunlight but one that is an opening constitutive of experience conceived in non-subject–object terms. Think of all the things and actions that become possible when a favourite tool is to hand, and all the things or actions that are closed off when that tool is lost or broken. These are not simply new things laid before us to consider casually. For Heidegger, their becoming possible is intimately tied to our being. ‘Possibility’ is the most appropriate (and very Heideggerian) word for them, in as much as they are prospects or potential lines of action that are open for us to explore, with each exploratory step revealing new aspects inviting further enquiry, and where the state of ‘being open for us’ defines our existence in relation to them. We are not reviewing them as a detached bystander but rather, in this moment, are consumed by questions: ‘Do I try this?’, ‘Do I try that?’, ‘What happens if I push here?’. To put the point more strongly still: we become the questioning.

The Platonic division between the knower and the known, I think, fails to acknowledge the creative relationship which we can have with technology, and it is this aspect which Heidegger makes central, not only to his philosophy of technology but also to his phenomenology. Let us look at this in relation to
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photography. What I have in mind draws upon on the criss-crossing of the different photographies which we reached with Plato: capturing the moment, familiarity with all possible technical settings, the capacity for the camera’s technical condition to be manifest in an image, and the meanings created within a frame. Plato’s knower–known relationship works on the understanding that a knower can approach complete knowledge of the known; these are the two sides of the triangle moving upwards to come together at the summit, the sun. But working with a camera creatively, I am looking to see what it can do, what it reveals. There are three parts to this: ‘looking’, ‘to see’, and ‘what it can do’. In reverse order: ‘what it can do’: the camera is active. The settings it permits (2 above) affect what is displayed (3 above). ‘I am looking to see…’: I don’t know in advance the results of what it can do in that situation, the images generated through the interlocking of its settings and my handling of it in the environment. I want to see the results because they are unexpected. All four photographies are active here: (2) intermingling with (3) as before, but I am also attentive to how they represent or transform the setting (1) and the new meanings which might arise (4). Thirdly, ‘I am looking to see…’ in that all of the above is an appetite. My attention, my being, is not just given to seeing what is possible; I do not just casually survey what might have been revealed. Rather, during the process of making photographs, my being is the seeing what is possible. This description, in terms which deliberately avoid a clear subject–object partition, is a manifestation of the rootedness in the environment that is the ground of human being (or Da-sein, ‘being-there’) for Heidegger. When one is creatively exploring what a camera can do, as opposed to, say, practising with it in order to perfect its supposed singular function, one is working across all these different functions, experimenting with how they intersect, how one operation might bring a new possibility to another.

I have been exploring the network of themes created by photography, perfection and Plato. Perfection is the basis of Plato’s metaphysics, and prompts him to reject visual representation as a form of knowledge. The drive to know something as one thing well, expressed by the concept technê, leads to a series of divisions: between knower and known, and between different aspects of photography or different
photographies. The latter show that photography is not just one more function among others but a technology which resists Plato’s metaphysics on account of the fact that it is a complex of interacting functions. The key point here is that the functions are interacting, contributing to one another, rather than serving the Platonic ideal of working in a single direction upwards towards the perfect Form of each individual photography. It was unlikely that Plato was ever going to be made out to be the photographer’s friend due to his dismissal of representation. What this study has done is give the photographer a reply to Plato: my practice challenges your metaphysics. Photography’s different functions or identities, working across the division between ‘being about the world’ and ‘being about itself’, not only frustrates the desire for unity but rejects the notion of representation as a mere copy of reality, since representation cannot be divorced from the other, ‘internal’ functions of photography.

Maybe photographers ought to give Plato some credit. His metaphysics has allowed us to recognize that different excellences are at work in photography. Technically, we should refer to ‘photography’ in the plural. As I have suggested, it is possibly the number of photographies at work in the practice we ordinarily call photography, each with its own requirements, that is responsible for its inviting, pointing towards or demanding perfection. The thrust of my argument though has been to assert that these photographies criss-cross one another and, in so doing, resist Plato’s philosophy. This gives us an instance of technology (including our relationship with it) impinging upon the metaphysical distinctions with which we carve up reality. It also shows how the pieces into which photography is cut by Plato can be put to different work by another metaphysics. Just as Heidegger realigns the metaphor of sunlight and growth, so his emancipatory philosophy of technology lets us witness how the various photographies intersect with one another as part of a rooted, creative exploration of what photographic technology makes possible. The tension between the two philosophies might be summed up as the difference between endorsing (with Plato) and rejecting (with Heidegger) a sense of ‘belonging’, ‘ownership’ or ‘oneness’. In making or looking at a photograph, a positive Platonic assessment (in contrast to a negative one which
would dismiss it as representation) might look for whether one of the
photographies was approaching perfection or oneness, whereas a Heideggerian
one would be preoccupied with what the various photographies had revealed, had
made possible, fully mindful of the impossibility of trying to ascribe the revelation
to one photography or another. This will be a photography which rejects
perfection and turns instead to see what is possible.

Endnotes

1 I owe many of the points here to discussions I had with my photographer
friends Mal Bennett and Chris Short on the theme of perfection in photography.
2 Susan Sontag considers photography in relation to Plato in her essay ‘In
Plato’s cave’. She explores photography’s promotion of subjectivity, its power to
stand-in for experience, its multiplication of representations, its capacity for
generating moral outrage, and its ability to become a thing in itself – all Platonic
themes. But she does not pursue the concept of perfection at length. See Susan
4 Plato, Republic, 597e.
5 Plato, Republic, 598a-b.
6 Plato, Republic, 596d-e.
7 Plato, Republic, 605a-c.
8 Plato, Republic, 598c.
9 This is taken further by Baudrillard’s hyperrealism thesis. See, for example,
Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, trans. S.F. Glaser, Ann Arbor: University
of Michigan Press, 1984; Rex Butler, Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real, London:
Sage, 1999; and Andreas Huyssen, ‘In the shadow of McLuhan: Jean Baudrillard’s
10 For accounts of the various meanings of technē in Plato’s philosophy, see

11 See, for example, Gosling, Plato: Arguments of the Philosophers; G.M.A. Grube, Plato’s Thought, London: Methuen, 1935; and Harvey, ‘Technē and the Good in Plato’s Statesman and Philebus’.

12 This aspect of technē is prominent in Plato’s dialogue Gorgias, as Gosling observes:

A technē will yield an account of the nature of its subject and an explanation of its activities, and will consider what is best for its subject. This latter is a matter of finding the right order and arrangement. For each thing has its proper order that constitutes its excellence, and is investigated by the skill covering it.

See Gosling, Plato: Arguments of the Philosophers, p. 56.

13 Plato, Republic, 353a-b.

14 The dialogue goes on to affirm that anything which has a function has that function as a result of an essential virtue or excellence, including the examples of the eyes and ears (whose respective functions are seeing and hearing). It is a step towards the conclusion that the business of life, such as management, control, deliberation, is the function of the mind or soul, behind which lies the excellence of justice.


16 It could even be argued the other way: that signification cancels or prevents representation, on the understanding that a photograph offers not the moment as it happened but an appearance determined heavily by a series of interpretive decisions. We never witness the event as it happened; we only get to see an arrangement of elements composed by the photographer. In terms of the larger
discussion underway here regarding the relationship between the various
photographies created by Plato’s metaphysics, this would amount to the need for
photography’s supposed re-presentational function being discarded in favour of a
notion of constructed meaning or world-construction.

17 Martin Heidegger, ‘The question concerning technology’, in Basic Writings, ed.
21 The importance of tools and technology to Heidegger’s philosophy is
signalled by Harman who entitles his study of Heidegger’s metaphysics Tool-Being.
See Graham Harman, Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects, Chicago:
Open Court, 2002.
22 I am drawing on conversations with photographer friends and colleagues, and
on a combination of reading Heidegger and my familiarity with photography from
my fine art degree practice.