
UNIT 2 PLATO ON IMITATION AND ART

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall aim to find out

- why Plato maintained this particular kind of view towards artistic representation
- how it was based upon a certain kind of metaphysics that he entertained
- about his theory of mimesis

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The easiest thing is to imagine Plato as an enemy of art because he viewed art products of all kinds, whether poetry, theatre or painting as inferior copies of the ultimate reality. But it should be borne in mind that Plato's primary aim was not to evaluate the worth of aesthetic pleasure but to point out that representation through art was inferior to the ultimate truth. His concerns were not artistic but philosophical. As we have pointed out in unit 1, he was suspicious of emotional arousal of any kind and of the use of words made to establish emotional truth to sway audiences. His views on poetry or "poesis" (making) and "mimesis" (imitation) both reflect the urge to know the truth beyond words.

In his *Republic*, he has given us a picture of what a perfectly governed state should be and how that state can be created by educating young men and women. The rulers and the helpers of the Platonic Utopia, are not mere administrators or military strategists. More than statesmen, they are philosophers who have a deep understanding of the true nature of things. The ideal state, hence, is ruled by philosophers who have received the right type of education according to his ideals. In this educational system, Plato maintained that there was no room for the teaching of poetry and drama as these were neither healthy for the creation of a strong moral character needed in an administrator nor did they provide any knowledge of the world.

Most poetry of the contemporary Greek curriculum, Homer in particular, was unsuitable as it showed gods and heroes with moral infirmities and sometimes even savagery. Such examples were not conducive to the formation of a worthy character. Also as most of this poetry was sung to the lyre in those times, Plato pointed out that only those melodic scales should be used which inculcate heroism and courage. Likewise, enacting plays was harmful because in acting a person gave up his own demeanour and adopted the behaviour of another character often not very praiseworthy. Plato thus empathised with the others. For Plato, the very purpose of art, was disruptive to the unswerving concentration of a guardian or a citizen of his Utopia.

Besides creating a morally degrading effect, for Plato, art was an untruthful representation of reality. The artist was not only imitating the imperfect objects of this world, s/he was also pretending to know things of which s/he actually had no understanding. For instance, he says, that Homer was not a military general and had won no wars but he still portrays warring heroes. Nor was Homer, argues Plato, a teacher of any reputation or following but he is said to have the last word of wisdom on everything. Though much of this criticism of art and the artist is in an exaggerated satirical vein, there was no justified role for the poet, the dramatist or the minstrel in his state as they all were the misrepresenters of truth. At this point we may look into the general Greek ideas of representation or 'mimesis' as it was called.

2.2 PLATONIC VIEW OF MIMESIS

'Mimesis', in Greek thought primarily meant 'making' of one sort or another. This is well recorded in Plato. Plato gave a new metaphysical and epistemological perspective to mimesis, enlarging its meaning from 'making' by human hands to 'making' by universal force. Yet, mimesis, not only in Plato's definition but in the use of the concept in the whole of western tradition, always retained the sense of not only 'making,' but of 'making' a copy of some original which was never totally independent of the model. (Gupt 93).

In Platonic theory, all art (*techne*) has been taken to mean some kind of manipulation close to craft. In the *Sophist*, Plato has divided *techne* into acquisitive, productive and creative categories of which the last brings into existence things not existing before. However, the highest art, in the scheme of Plato is not music or poetry, but statecraft, which is compared to the making of a tragedy in the *Laws* (817B) and to sculpture in the *Republic* (420C).

All production, in a general way, is 'mimesis'. In the Greek usage, there was not only the term 'mimesis' but others such as *mithexis* (participation), *homoiosis*, (likeness) and *paraplesia* (likeness) and which were close to the meaning, of *mimesis*. These terms were also used to show the relationship 'between an image (*eidolon*) and its archetype. Moreover, not only are objects imitated by pictures of them, but the essences of things are imitated also by names that we give to those things. For example, the essence or the dogness of a dog is imitated by the name 'dog' given to that creature (*Cratylus* 423-24). Similarly, reality is imitated or mimetised by thought, eternity by time (*Timaeus* 38b). The musician imitates divine harmony, the good man imitates the virtues, the wise legislator imitates the Form of God in constructing his state, god (*demiourgos*) imitates the Forms in the making of this world.

2.2.1 Theory of Forms

Thus, imitation is not only a production, it is a following of something which the imitator must set before himself/herself. For every kind of activity there must be an Ideal to be followed, and every Ideal or Form must have its Super-Form. But to avoid endless regression, Plato postulated that there was a primary Form, which was the essential nature of every object or even thought. The Form was immutable and complete and could not be embodied in anything of this world. Worldly objects are idols or imitative images (*eidola*) of the Ideal Forms, and artist, pictures or poetic descriptions, are, in turn, images (*eidola*) of the objects of the world. Mimesis, then always falls short of the original. If the image were perfect, that is, it expresses in every point the entire reality of its object, then it, would no longer be an image, but an example of the same thing (*Cratylus* 432 trans. Jowett, qtd. Beardsley 35). Because it leaves out important qualities, it is a lower order of reality than the archetype. In Plato's metaphysics this is the general presumption. The worldly knife falls short of the Ideal knife. Platonic mimesis, and thus, all art according to Plato, remains a turning away from the Truth.

2.2.2 The Lower Status of Art

There are many kinds of mimesis that Plato has in mind. All these, however, are images created after worldly images of the Forms. Plato postulates that sometimes mimesis is an accurate reproduction of the original, with all the properties to produce a genuine likeness (*eikon*), at other times mimesis may be a semblance (*phantasma*). *Phantasma* is a false representation and poets and painters, according to Plato, are adept at doing this. Hence in his tract called *Phaedrus*, Plato gives them a lower status. The method adopted to show the lower status of the artists is reflected in their residential location in the Underworld. When the newly arrived souls, having beheld true being, sink into various degrees of forgetfulness, and are placed on the nine levels of the Underworld, Socrates says, that the sixth (class) shall be fittingly given to a poet, or any other imitative artist (Beardsley 38). Socrates views the artists, the worshippers of true knowledge, as seducers from the truth. As a way of knowledge the arts are certainly not commendable. They also undermine morality. Plays like the *Medea*, argues Plato, appeal to the baser parts of our soul that stimulates and strengthens an element which threatens to undermine reason (*Republic* 605b). To sum up, Plato sees little good in art, and it is doubtful if he would have liked to compare the *catharsis* that he acknowledged as occurring in the ritual of Corybantes who listened to music and were purified of their diseases, with the emotional relief that the audience feel after going through an artistic experience.

2.3 PLATO'S DEFINITION OF TRUTH

It must be understood that for Plato there was no possibility of a category such as "artistic truth" as different from the Truth. There could be only one reality and that was available to the philosopher who saw things beyond the illusion. Plato had rejected the idea that poetry could communicate the truth through its own language because he had more or less rejected the traditional idea of poetry or art being a gift (*phya*) from the Muses. If all creation was a process of "making" or creation starting from the Form to the worldly objects, and then through poetic consciousness to art products, then making or mimesis can be the only process of creation leaving no room for an independent creation by the poet. The artist cannot intercept the mimetic chain. It may be argued that even while the poet is making a copy of a copy, s/he can still be credited with the status of a maker whose work brings knowledge to the world. For Aristotle this was the intrinsic value of art. But for Plato, as inspiration and *phya* were suspect, art was more of a deception or at best an emotionally manipulative make-belief and hence to be avoided. As the dialogue on art runs in Book X of the *Republic*:

"So the artist has neither knowledge nor correct opinion about the goodness or badness of the things he represents."

"Apparently not"

"So the poet too as artist, will be pretty ignorant about the subjects of his poetry."

"Completely ignorant"

"But he will go on writing poetry, in spite of his ignorance of all he writes about and will represent anything that pleases ignorant multitude."

"What else can he do?"

Well," I concluded, "we seem to be pretty well agreed that the artist knows little or nothing about the subjects he represents and that his art is something that has no serious value; and that this applies to all tragic poetry, epic or dramatic."

"Yes, entirely agreed." *Republic* (602) (Lee).

In the Platonic scheme, the way to knowledge was not inspirational but investigative. One had to reject falsehoods, misconceptions and popular notions, one by one, to arrive at the essence of the object of enquiry. In the essence lies the reflection of the Form of an object or thing. The Form alone is real as it is unchanging. All changing things can be a basis for opinions but not knowledge (*episteme*), (*Phaido*), that the immortal soul attains through virtue by controlling its appetites through resolve and reason. Virtue is hence equivalent to knowledge. Lack of virtue is ignorance, knowledge is happiness. As artistic creation and enjoyment do not work through controlling the appetites but rather tend to arouse them through emotional expansion, they cause ignorance.

2.4 PLATONIC IDEA OF SOCIAL WELL BEING

The artist as the promulgator of ignorance cannot have a place in the Utopian state that Plato envisaged in the *Republic* or later in his final work the *Laws*. Just as the appetites must be controlled and kept under constant check through resolve, reason and virtue to prepare the soul for knowledge, so should the guardians endowed with superior training and selective breeding control the general population to keep a society productive and law abiding. Beginning with the above premises, Plato could not but have given a small and highly restricted place to the poet in his *Republic*. Plato felt that for young students most epic poetry of Homer and Hesiod was weak in morals as it showed gods and heroes in a poor light. Plato did not think that the power of art to show human weaknesses and contradictions in the divine conduct portrayed in the ancient myths was part of the investigative process. Even to act a role was disastrous for a future guardian of the *Republic* as it prevented the development of single unflawed "ethos" in him. As Socrates puts it in Book III (394) :

But as we argued originally that our guardians were to be freed from all forms of manual work; their live's work was to be the provision of perfect freedom for our state, a task to which they were to devote all their energies. That, therefore, is the only role they must play, in life or literature; and with this end in view the only characters on which they must model themselves from their earliest years must be men of courage, self control, independence, and religious principles. They must no more act a mean part than do a mean action or any other kind of wrong. For we soon reap the fruits of literature in life and prolonged indulgence in any form of literature leaves its mark on the moral nature of a man, affecting not only the mind but the physical poise and intonation."

Plato shows the way to most purists and moralists who, though having their different definitions of the highest aim of life, still agree that art deflects from forming the human character for the highest purpose. Unknowingly, Plato made ground for his Christian successors like Augustine and Justin who forbade theatre, masks and acting saying that the actor gives up his/her own personality created in the image of God to take up another role, thus abetting the devil in practising deceit.

Plato accepted the traditional Greek view that experiencing emotional employment in art formed the character of audience and artist. But whereas in the Greek rituals, healing practices and traditions of performance, emotion and ethical formation were interconnected in a complex way and were considered socially useful, for Plato the relationship was simply of one kind. By experiencing or indulging in an emotion in art, the habit of reviving that emotion becomes a reflex in the audience.

"If you consider that the poet gratifies and indulges the natural instinct for tears and the desires...full vent to our sorrows both of which be restrained in our private misfortunes. Our better nature, being without adequate moral or intellectual training, releases its control, on the grounds that it is some one else's suffering it is watching and that there is nothing wrong in praising and pitying another man with some claim to godness, even though his grief is excessive; besides, it reckons the pleasure it gets as sheer gain, and would certainly not consent to be deprived of it by condemning the whole poem. For very few people are capable of realising that our feelings for other people must influence ourselves, and that if we let ourselves feel excessively for the misfortune of others it will be difficult to restrain our feelings."

"Poetry has the same effect on us when it represents sex and anger, and the other desires and feelings of pleasure and pain which normally accompany our actions. It feeds them when they ought to be starved and makes them control us when we ought, in the interest of our own welfare and happiness, to control them." *Republic Book X* (606).

For this very reason he forbade not only theatre but in general the use of Mixolydian and Hyper Lydian scales of music in songs as they were expressive of pathos used in dirges and laments, and of Lydian and Ionian modes known to be languid enough to make the guardians soft-hearted and lethargic. Continuing in this vein Socrates, sees no utility for many complicated musical instruments in his Utopia as only the heroic scales were desirable.

As a promoter of illusions, misconduct and erratic behaviour, the poet with all his fellow artists hardly deserves to be a citizen of the perfect state :

"Then we can fairly take the poet and set him beside the painter. He resembles him both because his works have a low degree of truth and because he appeals to a low element in the mind. We are therefore quite right to refuse to admit him to a properly run state, because he stirs up and encourages and strengthens the lower element in the mind at the expense of reason, which is like power and political control to the worst element in a state and ruining the better elements. The dramatic poet produces a similar state of affairs in the mind of the individual, by encouraging the unreasoning part of it, which cannot make distinction of size and confused large and small, and by creating images far removed from reality."

"I agree." *Republic (Book X, 605)*

The role of the poet is conclusively declared as subversive to the interest of the state. Her/His presence was therefore not allowed and s/he was banished. Plato's denigration of art as stated in the *Republic* has become proverbial. All purists, moralists and even dictators who feel threatened by either the emotional power of art or by its investigative acumen have upheld him as their predecessor.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

As we said at the outset, Platonic condemnation of art stems from his metaphysical and utopian premises. It has been speculated that Plato was well aware of the military weaknesses of the Athenian state in comparison with the disciplined armies of the Spartans. He, therefore, wanted no stone unturned in prescribing the strongest ideals for Athens.

It may also be added that by the time of Plato a decline in the quality of theatrical productions had already set in. Bad art and poor taste among the art lovers were

perhaps too noticeable. Even the greatest advocates of art do not recommend bad taste to uphold artistic freedom, therefore Plato, so anxious to save society from the ravages of a decadent politics, found art to be not much of an ally in his reformist endeavour. He had a justification to some extent for reminding us that "bad taste in theatre may insensibly lead you into becoming a buffoon at home." Decadent art does create weak and irresponsible human beings, as evidenced from many histories. But all said, it is also clear that the aim of his attack was not bad taste or poor standards, but art per se. Even the best of art and the highest of taste were misleading and weakening for the moral fibre in the Platonic scheme. Plato did deal a very severe blow to art. It was left to Aristotle to counter that bias and establish in most admirable terms the value and dignity of poetry and tragedy in particular to the extent that his ideas became the bed-rock of literary criticism in the classical age.

2.6 QUESTIONS

1. What is the reason for Plato's hostility towards art?
2. Give an account of Platonic attitude towards mimesis?
3. What are the reasons for the artist to be kept away from the ideal state of Plato?
4. Is there any relevance of Platonic attitude to art in our times of information and entertainment?

2.7 GLOSSARY

noitalics

General meaning of the term is knowledge. Plato uses in a special sense defining it as supreme understanding of the ultimate truth.

Plato (429-397 B.C.)

He was born into an aristocratic family of Athens. Very early in life he was captivated by Socrates. On his death in 399, along with other fellow students he left Athens for Megara and for twelve years of exile from Athens he travelled to Italy, Egypt and perhaps many other places. On his return, he established his Academy a mile outside Athens, where he spent the rest of his forty years.

His works consisting of twenty-five dialogues, an *Apology* and some letters have survived well. He is also known as a great stylist and perfecter of the philosophic dialogue. The philosophy of Plato is regarded as a transmission of Socratic ideas. As there is nothing that Socrates wrote himself, it is impossible to distinguish between what Socrates may have said and what Plato has reiterated.

Socrates (469-399 BC)

He was the son of a sculptor who had served as a foot soldier and remained rather poor in life. He married Xanthippe who was known for her foul temper. He studied physics under Archelaus but soon developed himself as an independent thinker. To his great fortune, his reputation was greatly enhanced by a pronouncement from the Delphic oracle that there was no man wiser than him. He was a brave soldier and a political critic. As a man he had remarkable physical endurance, was indifferent to comforts, full of humour, religious in conduct though not conventional, and friendly to all. His views are known only through the works of his disciple Plato.

techne

A general word for all kinds of skills and crafts including the fine arts.

2.9 SUGGESTED READING

Primary Texts

Plato. *The Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. 5 vols. 3rd Ed. Oxford, 1893.

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Secondary Reading

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