

The Insubstantial and Exclusionary Nature of Plato's Aesthetic Theory

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that Plato's conversance with art is insubstantial and exclusionary. Art warrants not only subjects in virtue of utility, morality, and pleasure, but also subjects in virtue of feeling, impression, spirituality, and art itself. I will begin by providing Plato's view and then provide my threefold objection, utilizing examples from art history and the history of aesthetic theory.

PLATO'S DOCTRINE OF THE ROLE OF ART

Plato's view of art begins and ends with this single tenet: art of any kind is an imitation, and the creator of this imitation, or the artist, is an imitator. This view is central to Plato's further discussions on art and poetry; thus, I will begin by transmitting Plato's doctrine of forms in respect to the spectacle of art and its artist as he expresses in Book Ten of *The Republic*.¹ This will be beneficial not only to gain an understanding of Plato's forms in respect to art but also to provide a framework for the rest of the discussion.

In Book Ten of *The Republic*, Plato's view of imitation can be thought of in two ways. In one way, it can be thought of as a reduction toward imitation based on the quality of the object itself. In a second way, it can be thought of as a reduction toward imitation based on the validity, or truth-value, of the object; the work of art resting at third remove from truth. Here is the first method of thinking about the view of imitation as it relates to the practice of painting:

1. The form (of an object) is made by god.
2. The individual thing (the object itself) is made by humans.
3. Paintings (of objects) are made by imitators.

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. H.D.P. Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).



Here is the second method as it relates to the practice of music:

1. The user of an instrument is one who knows or has knowledge of Beauty.
2. The maker of an instrument is one who has correct belief of the form of Beauty.
3. The imitator (a painter, sculptor, or poet) of an instrument is ignorant of Beauty.

In this light, it is clear that Plato asserts that art, without utility, is quite pointless due to its incapability of serving a dialectical purpose. In this regard, the reproductive painting of a physical object can tell us nothing noteworthy or new about that particular object; the object being represented is sufficient in itself to accomplish these things. Secondly, the artist is only capable of providing ephemera of truth about a physical object. The artist is ignorant and thus a corrupting agent, repudiating the value of the physical object by copying it unsatisfactorily. The artist's ignorance of reality is thus capable of infringing upon the beliefs, or even the morality, of other people. Therefore, in Plato's view, artists and their art, in all its facets, are disreputable. In Plato's terms, it is easy to see that once art is "stripped of its poetic coloring" it amounts to little.²

The only instance in which Plato speaks of art or the artist as something good and acceptable is during the instantiation of their pleasurable faculties. Plato states, "If drama and poetry written for pleasure can prove to us that they have a place in a well-run society, we will gladly admit them,"³ and that "we shall gain much if we find [poetry] a source of profit as well as pleasure."⁴ It seems here that Plato dismisses art on account of its lack of necessary utility and denounces the idea that it can make any claim about truth or morality. However, Plato claims that art possesses the function of being pleasurable; that is, someone is capable of finding pleasure in some sort of art.

² Ibid., X 601a.

³ Ibid., X 607c.

⁴ Ibid., X 607e.

ARTS OF FEELING OR IMPRESSION

In this section, I will begin my argument against Plato’s judgment of art; that is, there is more to art, or the artesque, than just the objective functions of utility, morality, and pleasure. The first objection lies in the idea that art has the quality of producing feelings and impressions apart from Plato’s triad of functions.

Plato’s notion in Book Ten of *The Republic* is insubstantial. It fails to realize art’s possibilities beyond the simple event of copy making. To support his view, Plato appeals to examples such as the painting of an instrument. Here, Plato’s painter is caught up in the act of copying that which already exists as a physical thing. Plato’s painter visualizes the instrument at hand and recreates an imperfect semblance of the instrument. However, is it possible for a painter to paint that which does not already exist in reality, or further, to paint something that is truly demiurgic? Plato makes no mention of this possibility. It is clear, throughout the history of art, examples have arisen wherein an artist has produced a piece of art that does not intend to replicate that which exists physically. To demonstrate this point, I will reference the twentieth century movement known as Abstract Expressionism, specifically the work of Mark Rothko, an American painter of this period. Abstract Expressionist art, as defined by the Encyclopedia Britannica, depicts form not drawn from the visible world, emphasizing free, spontaneous, and personal emotional expression.⁵ It is a practice of art that intends to elicit responses as opposed to pronouncing ideals. It invites the viewer to observe and respond, but it does not make any claim on its own of what that view or response should be. Mark Rothko produced a series of paintings during this period called “multiforms.” These paintings employed various blocks or rectangles of color on broad canvases, producing an experiential sense of intimacy, awe, and transcendence.⁶ An example of one of these works is *No.3/No. 13*, produced by Rothko in 1949. The work is indeed no representation of some physical object, though it utilizes lines and shapes that are evident in reality.

One could say that such art simply did not exist in Plato’s day, that it is irrelevant to produce an objection to Plato’s view using an example of art that postdates the period in which Plato is writing.

⁵ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “Abstract Expressionism,” accessed October 24, 2013, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1963/Abstract-Expressionism>.

⁶ Jeffrey Weiss, *Mark Rothko* (Yale UP, 1998), 262.



Or one could say that Plato only excluded art that produced bad or wicked impressions and feelings. I will respond to the first objection by saying that whether or not the possibility of abstract art was obvious to Plato, it is made obvious in *The Republic* that there is no room in Plato's aesthetic theory for anything of the kind, for he strictly speaks of art in terms of imitation.⁷ Joseph P. Maguire, in a discourse on Plato's aesthetics, proposes that the extent of our inquiry is to elicit from Plato's works "an implicit theory of aesthetics"; that is, what Plato "*would*, perhaps, have said, did he agree that art and the beauty of art could be studied in isolation from other things."⁸ However, I do not believe this is a sound objection to my claim. Even if we were to grant Plato the benefit of the doubt, proposing that if this type of art (of which the chief aim is not in the replication of physical things but concepts over and above the physical) were known to Plato, he would grant it passage based on its upwards trajectory (toward the truth, or the non-physical, or the Good), we would be guilty of extrapolation. To respond to the second objection, it is made clear in Book Ten of *The Republic* that whether good naturedly or bad naturedly, *all* works of art "have a low degree of truth" and encourage only "the unreasoning part of the mind of the individual."⁹ Thus, all such works are proposed to produce bad effects on their audiences, no matter the content or context of the work.

ARTS OF SPIRITUALITY

A second objection to Plato's view is that it excludes some spiritual arts that are foundational to religions and cultures and it in turn unreasonably denounces divine inspiration as a means of interaction between truth and art. Whether one is a theist or not, it can still be reasonably thought that, if god or some divine agent were to exist, this agent could express its truth by means of interpolation. As it is in the case of works of Hesiod and Homer, various poets have claimed that their works are inspired by the Muses, or more generally, the divine, providing a sense of an epistemic foundation for the poet's

⁷ Plato also speaks briefly about the possibility of divine inspiration in art, specifically in the *Meno* and the *Laws*, and this will be expounded on later.

⁸ Joseph P. Maguire, "The Differentiation of Art in Plato's Aesthetics," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 68 (Harvard University Department of the Classics, 1964): 390.

⁹ Plato, *The Republic*, X 605b-c.

work.¹⁰ Whether or not the truths the poets suppose were introduced to them by the divine are actual truths themselves is not my subject of inquiry in debating this point. What is unsettling is that Plato refutes this as a possible form of art because his artist or poet is fastened exclusively to the practice of imitation. Before the poet can make any epistemological claim, Plato simply renounces him as an ignorant imitator. Plato uses this tactic in his work, the *Laws*:

When the poet sits on the Muse's tripod he is not in his right mind but ready to flow like a fountain; and because his profession is that of imitation, then in creating people who are set against one another he is compelled to contradict himself frequently, and he does not know whether these or the other thing of what he says are true.¹¹

In this instance, the poet is incapacitated to speak truthfully or nearly accurately on the subject of his inquiry. However, in Plato's dialogue the *Meno*, something quite different is said. In the *Meno*, though one is capable of speaking truthfully through divine inspiration, it is proposed that the speaker is not disposed to a suitable comprehension of his truth speaking:

As regards knowledge, [statesmen] are no different from soothsayers and prophets. They too say many true things when inspired, but they have no knowledge of what they are saying...We should be right to call divine also those soothsayers and prophets whom we just mentioned, and all the poets, and we should call no less divine and inspired those public men who are no less under the gods'

¹⁰ William W. Minton, "Homer's Invocations of the Muses: Traditional Patterns," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 91 (1960), 292

¹¹ Plato, *The Laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 719c.



influence and possession, as their speeches lead to success in many important matters, though they have no knowledge of what they are saying.¹²

In the first quotation, Plato purports that the poet is always in contradiction, for there is always the possibility that he is misinterpreting the divine. In the second quotation, it is said that the poet, though he or she may not have correct or full understanding of the truth, is capable of accurately reiterating divine truth without contradiction. Thus, in virtue of what seems to be a contradiction in Plato's examination of divine inspiration, Plato does not satisfactorily explain the capability of divine validation within his schema of art. It seems that Plato at once denounces and allows the poet's potential to make truth claims, qualifying both statements by saying, truthful or not, poets have no understanding anyway of what they are saying.

At this point I would like to put this instance of discrepancy aside and focus more directly on praxiological correlations between spirituality and the aesthetic. As opposed to Plato's view, art is capable not only of depiction and description but of union. In some cases, art possesses the ability to reach over and above physical particulars and reach toward universals and thus come into correlation, or union, with the divine, god, the Good, etc. An example of this lies in the lasting tradition of Indian aesthetics, specifically within an early Vedic text known as the *Nāṭyasāstra*.¹³

The *Nāṭyasāstra* was composed by Bharata Muni sometime between the years of 200 BCE and 200 CE.¹⁴ The title of this ancient Hindu text may be translated from the Sanskrit as "A Manual of Dramatic Arts." At the apex of this work, which provides instruction on proper methods concerning the religious performing arts of dance,

¹² Plato, *Protagoras and Meno*, trans. Adam Beresford (Penguin, 2005), 99c-d.

¹³ Manomohan Ghosh, *The Natyasastra: A Treatise on Ancient Indian [Hindu] Dramaturgy and Histrionics Ascribed to Bharata-muni* (Calcutta: The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1967).

¹⁴ The exact date of composition of this work is debated, as are the exact dates of the life of Bharata Muni. Varying theories conclude that either the work was singly composed by Muni during the noted 400-year period or that numerous Indian scholars composed it. However, the exact authorship and dating of the work are not necessarily important here, apart from previous dates placing the work closer to the period of Plato and his contemporaries.

music, and theatre, are the Indian aesthetic principles of *bhava* and *rasa*. *Bhava* is the principle of the excitement of divine truth or emotion in the dancer, musician, and actor. *Rasa* is the divine, essential mental state, or the correct knowledge of a certain Hindu deity, achieved through the act of viewing *bhava*. Here, there is a unique correlation between art realized through dance, music, and theatre and the divine agent who bestows the notion of the emotive truth being performed. This tradition can be thought of as a close relation, or even a precursor, to more modern traditions of art rooted in feeling, impression, or emotion, such as Abstract Expressionism described above. However, what is important to note is that this is an exemplary tradition of art that embeds itself in spirituality in an attempt to achieve harmony with the divine or truth about the divine.

By example, the *Nāṭyasāstra* and this heritage of Indian aesthetics illumines the possibility, if not the validity, of a case in which art is used to exhibit the divine and, further, a case in which art strives to commune with the divine.

ART FOR ART’S SAKE; ART AS COMPLETE IN ITSELF

The third and final objection I will make to Plato’s view of imitation is this: art is capable of existing in its own right as a particular thing and also capable of dialoguing plainly with Beauty for the sake of art itself; that is, it is capable of existing for the sake of its beauty alone. The two forms of art referenced thus far, the abstract movement and the art of ancient Indian performance, both shared this unique quality: the expression of art over and above the form of physical particulars through certain emotions, non-physical states like transcendence, and attributes of the divine. Art that exists for the sake of itself, if such is said to exist, takes this a step further. This manner of describing the work of art, as we will see, has less to do with the subject of the work itself and more to do with its direct relation to Beauty as a universal. Therefore, my objection here to Plato’s schema implies that, whether or not a work of art is a direct copy of a physical particular, the work is nevertheless validated by the universal of Beauty and can thus proceed to exist autonomously, apart from any utilitarian, moral, didactic, or pleasurable purposes. A similar objection was made by the nineteenth century European movement known as Aestheticism. To explain this objection further, I will reference one of the movement’s philosophical precursors, Karl Philipp Moritz.



Karl Philipp Moritz, a German eighteenth-century essayist, is one of the first among a variety of writers and philosophers who questioned imitation and pleasure as being the chief purposes of art. In an essay titled “An Attempt to Unify All the Arts and Sciences under the Concept of That Which Is Complete in Itself,” published in 1785, he purports that the work of art does not signify anything outside itself and that it is emphatically non-instrumental; that is, it does not serve any purpose outside itself:

While the beautiful draws our consideration entirely to itself, it draws us for a while away from our self, it is the highest degree of pure and unselfish gratification that the beautiful affords us. In the moment we sacrifice our individual, limited existence to a sort of higher existence.¹⁵

This new view projected by Moritz (and a similar view transmitted later by his contemporary, Immanuel Kant) influenced a number of art movements; one of these was Aestheticism. Aestheticism, or, as its proponents were called, The Aesthetes, worked under this notion that art was to be done for the sake of art, for the sake of Beauty. As Moritz proposed, these artists did not then simply paint Beauty as a thing but believed this principle was fundamental to producing good and true works of art that existed to reflect Beauty as a sole purpose. The movement was exemplified by artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and by writers such as Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater.¹⁶ Therefore, there lies the potential case that the work of art is capable of existing without external purpose besides its aim at reflecting Beauty. The work as such exists independently from the so-called beautiful, physical particulars of nature in so far as the work is completed for the sake of itself—for the sake of art. Where Plato assumed that Beauty is a universal ideal, untouched by any such particular of nature, let alone a work of art, Moritz and the Aesthetes believed such a notion could become particular in the event that it represents said Beauty for its own sake. Similarly, Hegel was not satisfied with the Platonic notion of

¹⁵ Karl Philipp Moritz, “An Attempt to Unify All the Sciences under the Concept of That Which Is Complete in Itself,” *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association [PMLA]*, 127, no. 1, trans. Elliot Schreiber (2012): 98.

¹⁶ Richard Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas* (New York: Norton, 1977), 291-97.

Beauty as an abstract Metaphysic. Though Hegel does accept Plato as a “foundation and guide”¹⁷ for any inquiry into the aesthetic (a claim I am wont to dismiss), he believed that the discussion must become more concrete and tangible and, further, that “the emptiness of content which characterizes the Platonic idea is no longer satisfactory to the fuller philosophical wants of the mind today.”¹⁸

A MISUNDERSTANDING OF PLATO’S EPISTEMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTATION?

Modern scholars have pronounced a new interpretation of Plato’s critique of art and poetry in Book Ten of *The Republic*, in reference to certain Platonic dialogues such as the *Ion*, the *Meno*, and the *Phaedrus*. Placing itself above the surface of a so-called cursory reading, this argument states that Plato’s intention in Book Ten of *The Republic* is anything but pedagogical. Rather, his position is aimed at dividing domains of knowledge, and thus his critique is of a purely epistemological basis. Hermann Wiegmann writes that Plato’s critique of the artists and poets “is not formulated in terms of any ethical, political, or pedagogical intent—indeed not in terms of any psychological intent at all,”¹⁹ and, further, that the orientation of *The Republic* leads not to a critique of the artists and poets necessarily. Rather, it leads to “a critique of an unsophisticated mixture of noetic criteria with those of *doxa*.”²⁰ However, Wiegmann affirms the previously stated Platonic axiom, that the true role of art consists in *mimesis*, or imitation, and also states that “we cannot demonstrate that art is true in a rationally grounded way.”²¹ Though Wiegmann’s epistemological reappraisal of Plato’s intent stands as a viable possibility in our discussion, I fear this approach is an idealized one, an extrapolation. Is it possible to say that Plato’s direct critique of the artists and poets based on their mimetic and tantalizing qualities was instead directed at an overall tainting

¹⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* (Penguin Classics, 2004), 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Hermann Wiegmann and Henry W. Johnstone Jr., “Plato’s Critique of the Poets and a Misunderstanding of His Epistemological Argument,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 23, no. 2 (1990): 119.

²⁰ *Ibid.* Common belief or popular opinion.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 120.



of dialectical knowledge? I do not believe so, based on the evidence found in Book Ten of *The Republic* and Plato's firm assertion that art consistently stands at third remove from truth. I do not find it adequate to alleviate Plato's assertion this way, for it still remains, according to Plato and Wiegmann, that art is reduced to a form of imitation, reduced to a form far from the truth. Further, even if we were to grant that Plato's critique is of a benignant nature, it still remains, again, that art is placed at an epistemically lower place than that of physicals and absolutes of Truth or Beauty, a claim notably refuted throughout these previous three objections. My stance on this argument is best stated by means of Gadamer, in that Plato's critique does not "follow conclusively from its basic ontological presuppositions," and thus it is a consequence of Plato's system, disallowing him "a fairer evaluation of poetical truth."²²

CONCLUSION

As it has been demonstrated, Plato's view of art is insubstantial, exclusionary, and even, in the case of divine inspiration, self-contradictory. In order to encompass the entirety of art across all ages, cultures, and religions accurately and conclusively, Plato's theory would require some revision, specifically in the domains of impression, spiritual inspiration, and the ability of art to exist in and for itself. In closing, without such a revision, I believe the proponent of Plato's Forms inadvertently risks the acceptance of these controversial, aesthetical claims:

1. The artist is incapacitated to produce a work of art that is not something existent in nature.
2. Every work of art is a convoluted copy of something already existing in the form of physical particulars.
3. There is no instance wherein the divine undoubtedly inspires epistemologically sound works of art or poetry.
4. Beauty, as a form, is incapable of revealing itself accurately in anything besides what is already existent in nature.

²² H.G. Gadamer, *Platon und die Dichter* (Hamburg, 1934).