

THE RELATIONSHIP OF PHILOSOPHY AND ART IN PLATO'S REPUBLIC

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A poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him. (Plato Ion 534b)

In the Republic, Plato voices his ambivalence toward poetry and *poesis* in general.¹ Plato admires art for its great inspirational power, but at the same time detests it because its creator has “no grasp of the truth” (Plato Republic trans. Grube 600e). He states that the artist produces an insubstantial “imitation” of objects in the sensible world that are themselves less real than the forms, which comprise reality itself (Plato Republic trans. Grube 598b). Further, he argues that the appeal of *poesis* stems solely from its ability to arouse the emotions by “gratifying the irrational,” appetitive part of the soul while “destroy[ing] the rational” part (Plato Republic trans. Grube 605 b-c, 605b). Consequently, *poesis* is psychologically damaging in its subversion of reason (Plato Republic trans. Grube 441e). The vehemence of Plato’s attack results from his desire to supplant art with philosophy as the major source of education in Athenian society. *Poesis* itself, in fact, has the same advantages and disadvantages as philosophy.

Many of Plato’s charges against *poesis* apply to philosophy itself and his own methods of writing philosophy. Just as the enchanting rhythms and captivating images of *poesis* may seduce an audience with their beauty, so too may the tight syllogisms and authoritative

pronouncements in the dialectic of philosophy may elicit emotional response. It is unfair and, moreover, erroneous for Plato to conceive of *poesis* as exclusive of rationality, and similarly, of philosophy as independent of the faculty of emotion. Philosophy is a form of art, for the medium through which it operates, speech, is imitation, and art is, by Plato's definition, imitation. It follows that a philosopher is an imitator whose representation of reality is limited by the extent to which words approximate an object, and further, the approximation of the object to the reality of the forms. Conversely, *poesis* is a form of philosophy, for its comprehension too involves intellectual contemplation and an active use of the consciousness. Through thoughtful reflection, both philosophy and art are capable of evoking knowledge of the forms. Both, therefore, are valid means of operating through and yet transcending imitation in the pursuit of truth.

Although the purpose of philosophy is to attain authentic knowledge of "the good" and other forms (Plato Republic trans. Grube 505e), the word-images through which the philosopher speaks are ultimately imitations of objects that possess certain qualities of such forms. Like the representations produced by *poesis*, speech too is an imperfect mode of communication, thrice-removed from reality. The mortal soul "is perplexed and cannot adequately grasp" the forms (Plato Republic trans. Grube 505e), and so it discourses not about reality itself, but about the imperfect manifestations of reality, which are necessarily inferior. Hence, words are doubly imitations, because they describe objects that are themselves less real than the forms. Thrasymachus implies that words are inadequate to transmit truth when he says that Socrates has been talking "nonsense" and asks the philosopher to define justice "clearly and exactly" (Plato Republic trans. Grube 336b, d). After Socrates shows Thrasymachus that injustice is not more profitable than justice, the latter retaliates, "Enjoy your banquet of words!" (Plato Republic trans. Grube 352b). He implies that he has been tricked by mere technicalities, defini-

tions, into a concession. His statement hints not only at the insufficiency of words, but also at the aesthetic seductiveness of speech.

Furthermore, since speech necessarily misrepresents the truth to some degree, so too does the philosopher, who, though he may try to explain the forms, inevitably fails and remains an imitator. Plato makes Socrates confess that he has “no adequate knowledge of it [the good]” (Plato Republic trans. Grube 505a), but that he is willing to explain “what is apparently an offspring of the good and most like it” (Plato Republic trans. Grube 506e), despite Socrates’ disclaimer that it is not right “to talk about things one doesn’t know as if one does know them” (Plato Republic trans. Grube 506c). Nevertheless, the simple act of trying to explain the good without complete knowledge of it makes him an inexact imitator. The philosopher may even, consciously or otherwise, distort words for the purpose of persuading his audience and thereby make his imitation of reality only more inaccurate. Thrasymachus claims that the Socratic method of disputation lends itself to manipulation when he hostilely remarks, “You disgust me, Socrates. Your trick is to take hold of the argument at the point where you can do it the most harm” (Plato Republic trans. Grube 338d). He implies that, through the distortion of an argument for means of persuasion, Socrates can insidiously impose his views on his disciples.

Still, Plato himself uses word-images to convey his ideas and, accepting the philosopher’s status as an imitator, even relies on imitation as a valid means by which to attain knowledge. For example, the dialogical form allows Plato to manipulate each of his characters, including Thrasymachus, who may voice beliefs that are not necessarily Plato’s own. Consequently, Plato subverts reality to some degree in order to attain truth. Moreover, the story told by Glaucon about the ring of Gyges (Plato Republic trans. Grube 359c-360c), the noble falsehood about the origin of humans from gold, silver, and bronze (Plato Republic trans. Grube 415a-c), the metaphor of

the cave (Plato Republic trans. Grube 514-517c), and the myth of Er (Plato Republic trans. Grube 614b-621b) all serve as allegorical stories (and hence, imitations of reality) that are meant to aid Socrates' disciples in understanding his scheme for a just society. Thus, although word-image examples are inherently imitations, Plato does not hesitate to employ them, though this is his primary objection to the similar use of art.

One who utilizes imitations in this manner exercises his active thought processes in order to transcend the imitations themselves and discern what is actually closest to the truth. As Socrates relates about the life of a philosopher,

He looks at and studies things that are organized and always the same, that neither do injustice to one another nor suffer it, being all in a rational order, [and] he imitates them and tries to become as like them as he can. (Plato Republic trans. Grube 500b-c)

It is through imitation, “by consorting with what is ordered and divine,” and because he is “very much awake” in his active contemplation of existence (Plato Republic trans. Grube 475d), that the philosopher “becomes as divine and ordered as a human being can” (Plato Republic trans. Grube 500c-d). Specifically, when Socrates describes the work of the guardians in his ideal city, he similarly characterizes them as imitators who transcend imitations in their pursuit of the truth. The guardians

mix and blend the various ways of life in the city until they produce[d] a human image based on what Homer too called ‘the divine form and image’ when it occurred among human beings. (Plato Republic trans. Grube 501b)

In referring to his paradigmatic philosopher-king as a “painter of constitutions” who would produce “the finest sketch” (Plato Republic trans. Grube 501c), Socrates uses the word *zogaphos*, the same word he uses for a painter of visual images (Plato Republic <perseus.tufts.edu>).

Hence, while the medium of philosophy is an imitation and the philosopher an imitator, the practice of philosophy itself, when it includes the exertion of individual thought, remains a genuine means of searching for the truth.

Equivalently, the process of applying imitation to transcend to higher orders of truth is the same for art. Although the images of visual art and verses of poetry are imitations, and the artist an imitator because of his use of representations and lack of true knowledge of the forms, the comprehension of *poesis* employs the medium of art and the action of the consciousness in the quest for understanding. When Socrates outlines the education of the guardians in his ideal city, he identifies “calculation and arithmetic” as subjects that, by stirring the soul to utilize its proficiency in measurement, “lead us towards the truth” (Plato Republic trans. Grube 525a). However, representations of *poesis* also fit the definition of such “summoners” of understanding (Plato Republic trans. Grube 523c). Because they are imitations that are inherently less than real, they could cause “opposite perceptions at the same time” that could in turn provoke the “puzzled” soul to summon “calculation and understanding” in “the study of that which is” (Plato Republic trans. Grube 523b, 524e, 524b, 525a). Thus, the ambiguity of art as imitation could actually lead the soul to contemplate the nature of being and reality.

Yet, representations of *poesis* exceed even the power of summoners and extend to that of the dialectic of philosophy. Unlike calculation and arithmetic, which “cannot reach beyond [their] hypotheses” or travel “up to the first principle” (Plato Republic trans. Grube 511a), the process of comprehending art, like that of practicing philosophy, involves the consideration of “hypotheses...as stepping stones to take off from...to reach the unhypothetical first principle of everything” (Plato Republic trans. Grube 511b). Contemplation, “having grasped this principle,” and “without making use of anything visible at all, but only of forms themselves,” moves



Raphael's *School of Athens*
Matek, CSU Hayward

“on from forms to forms,” and ends in knowledge of the forms (Plato Republic trans. Grube 511b-c). Whereas skill in numbers can only help in the initial study of reality, art provokes the viewer to think about its meaning in something similar to dialogue, and, therefore can bring the perceiver closer to the forms. Just as the dialectic of philosophy allows one to discuss various objects of truth to arrive at an ultimate principle, so too can the perception of art awaken in one the desire to grasp that which is closest to reality. One who stands before a painting sees not only the entire image, but also discrete lines and shapes that strike him differently and produce both an emotional and a rational response. He speaks not to, but with the painting on a level beyond mere sense perception. He sees an apple whose color and contours question his conception of redness and roundness, and as his thoughts jump from chromaticity to luminosity and from circularity to symmetry, he wonders at the form of beauty itself. Thus in the Symposium Diotima says:

One goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty... (Plato Symposium 211c-d)

The reflection of consciousness on separate objects possessing qualities of a certain form can lead to understanding of the form itself.

Art thereby, like philosophy, both uses and transcends imitation in order to realize the truth. *Poesis* is, consequently, as useful as philosophy in the development of moral beings in Plato’s ideal and just *polis*. Art, whether good or bad, has the ability to summon consideration of what is closest to reality, for the comprehension of *poesis*, like the practice of philosophy, involves both the

faculties of emotion and reason. Therefore, since Plato himself realizes that “education in music and poetry” allows “rhythm and harmony” to “permeate the inner part of the soul...,...bringing it grace” (Plato Republic trans. Grube 401d), *poesis* merits, alongside philosophy, an exalted position in the ideal *polis*.

¹ *Poesis*, which means “making,” refers to all common forms of artistic creativity in the visual and plastic arts, in addition to cluding poetry, drama, prose fiction, and music (Plato Republic perseus.tufts.edu).

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