

1 PLATO

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Plato's writings about the arts play a foundation role in the history of aesthetics, not simply because they are the earliest substantial contribution to the subject. The close integration of Plato's philosophy of art with his metaphysics and ethics, his antagonism towards the arts, and the mastery of writing styles that makes him "of all philosophers . . . the most poetical" (Sidney 1973: 107) also contribute to his enduring influence. From a modern point of view it is striking that Plato refuses to grant autonomous value to what we call art. For him there is a metaphysical and ethical order to the world which it is philosophy's task to discover by means of rational thought, and the arts can have true worth only if they correctly represent this order or help in aligning us with it. These principles of evaluation are at their clearest in the *Republic* whose overall question is, What is justice? Plato constructs a picture of the ideally just individual and the ideally just city-state, and gives an account of the nature of knowledge and education, culminating in the proposal that the rulers of the ideal state would be philosophers, those uniquely in possession of methods for attaining knowledge of the eternally existing Forms that constitute absolute values in Plato's universe.

The arts in *Republic* 2 and 3

Plato first considers the role of the arts in education. The young, especially those who will be the Guardians responsible for the city's well-being, must receive an education that properly forms their characters. Since the young soul is impressionable and will be molded by any material that comes its way, the productive arts and crafts will be regulated so that they pursue

what is fine and graceful in their work, so that our young people will live in a healthy place and be benefited on all sides, and so that something of those fine works will strike their eyes and ears like a breeze that brings

health from a good place, leading them unwittingly, from childhood on, to resemblance, friendship, and harmony with the beauty of reason.

(*Republic* 401c–d)

Much of Books 2 and 3 concerns the scenes and characters which poetry contains. Plato assumes that fictional tales and poetic representations will play a dominant role in education: a conventional assumption, as we see from remarks in the dialogue *Protagoras*:

they are given the works of good poets to read at their desks and have to learn them by heart, works that contain numerous exhortations, many passages describing in glowing terms good men of old, so that the child is inspired to imitate them and become like them.

(*Protagoras* 325–326a)

It is not sufficient, however, that the young read the works of ‘good poets’. While Plato consistently praises Homer as a fine poet, in the *Republic* he proposes ruthless censorship of Homer’s works. Gods and heroes must not be represented as cowardly, despairing, deceitful, ruled by their appetites, or committing crimes: hence the excision of many well-known scenes from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. A good fiction is one which (though false or invented) correctly represents reality and impresses a good character on its audience. Plato seems untroubled by the thought that an accurate representation of the way human beings behave in battle or in love could fail to impress the best character on its recipients. Is truthful representation or ethical effect the higher criterion? At one point Plato suggests it is the latter: some violent mythical tales are not true, and should not be told to the young even if they were (*Republic* 378a).

The other main topic for discussion is mimesis, which here should be taken as impersonation or dramatic characterization. There are two modes of poetic discourse: one where the poet “speaks in his own voice,” the other (mimesis) where he “hides himself,” “makes his language as like as possible to that of whatever person he has told us is about to speak,” and – at the beginning of the *Iliad* – “tries . . . to make us think that the speaker is not Homer, but the priest, an old man” (393a–c). Hiding oneself behind a pretend character is implicitly deceitful and dubious, but Plato’s objection to mimesis is more sophisticated. He claims that to enact a dramatic part by making oneself resemble some character causes one to become like such a person in real life. Given a prior argument that all members of the ideal community, and *a fortiori* its Guardians, should be specialists who exercise only one role, it follows that the city will produce better Guardians if it restricts the extent to which they indulge in dramatic enactment. Those whose dominant aim is the production of mimesis are ingenious and

versatile individuals, but the ideal state will not tolerate them. The Guardians should use mimesis as little as possible, and be restricted to enacting the parts of noble, self-controlled and virtuous individuals, thus assimilating themselves to the kind of human being the state requires them to become.

The arts in *Republic* 10

Republic Book 10 contains Plato's most prominent criticisms of the arts. Mimesis is the chief topic, but now we must understand this term in a different sense, as image-making: making something that is not a real thing, but merely an image of a thing. Both poets and visual artists are practitioners of mimesis in this sense, but the aim of this passage is to justify the banishment of mimetic poetry from the ideal city. The grounds are that mimesis is far removed from truth, though easy to mistake for the work of someone with knowledge, and that mimetic poetry appeals to an inferior part of the soul and thereby helps to subvert the rule of intellect and reason. While promising cognitive gain, poetry delivers only psychological and ethical damage to individual and community.

Plato uses his theory of Forms to explain the nature of mimesis as such. Whereas an ordinary object, such as a bed, is an 'imitation' of the single and ultimately real Form of Bed, a painted picture of a bed is an 'imitation' merely of the way some bed would appear from a certain angle. The use of the theory of Forms here is in some respects anomalous. Plato has a god bring Forms into existence, though elsewhere they exist eternally and no one creates them. Earlier in the *Republic* it seemed that philosophers alone have knowledge of Forms; here the ordinary craftsman 'looks to the Form' for guidance in constructing a physical bed.

Plato disparages mimesis in the visual arts by comparing it with holding up a mirror in which the world mechanically reproduces itself. The point of the comparison is arguably that the painter makes no real thing, only an image. His product, when compared with the bed and the Form of Bed, is thus at two moves from reality. To make such an image requires no genuine knowledge: no knowledge of the real things of which one makes an image. By a slightly strained analogy, Plato argues that a poet makes only images and is distant from knowledge: "all poetic imitators, beginning with Homer, imitate images of virtue and all the other things they write about and have no grasp of the truth" (*Republic* 600e). They produce only images of human life, and to do so requires no knowledge of the truth about what is good and bad in life. There is moreover no evidence, Plato suggests, of any good poet's manifesting ethical or political competence.

Why does it matter that poetic image-making entails no genuine knowledge? Because there are people who hold the opposite view: "they say that if a good poet produces fine poetry, he must have knowledge of the things he writes about, or else he wouldn't be able to produce it at all," on which grounds they claim

“poets know all crafts, all human affairs concerned with virtue and vice, and all about the gods as well” (*Republic* 598d-e). Plato aims to refute these claims. Fine poetry consists of image-making, and as such is compatible with the poet’s ignorance of truths about what is real.

Plato also undertakes to show to which part of the human psyche mimetic poetry appeals. The higher part of the soul uses reasoning and considers what is for the overall good, but the images of mimetic poetry are gratifying to a distinct ‘inferior’ part, which is childish, unruly and emotional, and reacts in an unmeasured fashion to events in real life and in fiction. For example, when someone close to us dies, part of us considers what is for the best and desires restraint in feeling and outward behavior. At the same time another part tends towards indulgence in unbounded lamentation. There is a conflict of attitudes towards the same object, analogous to the phenomenon of visual illusion, where part of the mind calculates that a stick in water is straight, while another part persists in seeing it as bent. Poetry affects us emotionally below the level of rational desire and judgement. The kinds of event that provide the most successful content for mimetic poetry (and tragedy especially) involve extreme emotions and actions driven by emotion. So mimetic poetry naturally addresses and gratifies the inferior, lamenting part of us and fosters it at the expense of the rational and good-seeking part that should rule in a healthy soul.

Plato’s ‘most serious charge’ against mimetic poetry also concerns its effects on the psyche. It is that “with a few rare exceptions it is able to corrupt even decent people” (*Republic* 605c). Even the individual who attains the Platonic ideal and is governed by the noble, rational, good-seeking part of the soul, is powerfully affected by the experience of

one of the heroes sorrowing and making a long lamenting speech or singing and beating his breast . . . we enjoy it, give ourselves up to following it, sympathize with the hero, take his sufferings seriously, and praise as a good poet the one who affects us most in this way.

(Republic 605c)

The distancing provided by the artistic context insidiously lulls us into a positive evaluation of responses which we should avoid in real life. We relax our guard and allow the rule of the rational part of ourselves to lapse:

only a few are able to figure out that enjoyment of other people’s sufferings is necessarily transferred to our own and that the pitying part, if it is nourished and strengthened on the sufferings of others, won’t be easily held in check when we ourselves suffer.

(Republic 606b)

The positive evaluation of our sympathetic feelings for the hero's sufferings rests on the fact that to see them brings us pleasure. So instead of regarding as valuable that which we judge to be best, we begin to value responses that happen to please us, and, Plato argues, this habit can corrode our attachment to the rational and the good in real life.

Plato makes many assumptions here, but perhaps most notable is one that has featured in recent debates about the psychological effects of television and films: that if we enjoy seeing the image of something enacted in a dramatic narrative, this causes in us an increased disposition to act or react similarly in real life. It is as if mimesis is transparent in a particular way: to enjoy or approve of a poetic image of X is not really different from enjoying or approving of X itself. Aristotle's remark in the *Poetics* that the enjoyment of mimesis is natural for human beings is the beginning of a reply to this assumption (Aristotle 1987: 34).

On the grounds that it falsely masquerades as knowledge and is detrimental to the human mind, Plato banishes poetry from his ideal city. We may wonder how much of poetry this affects. At the beginning of the discussion 'poetry that is mimetic' is to be excluded, but by the end it appears that all poetry is meant, and the intervening argument seems to tell us that all poetry is indeed mimetic, although Homer and the tragic poets (seen as a single tradition) provide the most focused target. Plato proposes to retain some poetry, namely "hymns to the gods and eulogies to good people" (*Republic* 607a). Given the earlier comments about beauty and grace, these works need not be dull and worthy, but clearly Plato prefers them because they will present a correct ethical view of the world and be a means to instill the right character in the citizens.

In his concluding remarks Plato mentions an "ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy" (*Republic* 607b). Poetry (of the kind excluded) aims at pleasure and mimesis, but if it can satisfy philosophy by producing an argument that it is beneficial to the community and to human life, then it can reclaim its place. If philosophers hear no such a justification, they will use the argument of *Republic* Book 10 "like an incantation so as to preserve ourselves from slipping back into that childish passion for poetry" (*ibid.*: 608a). It is like keeping oneself away from a person with whom one is in love, but with whom an association is not beneficial. This image, and the accompanying invitation to poetry to defend itself, reveal Plato as less authoritarian than he often appears in the *Republic*. He recognizes the power of poetry over the human soul and intimates that he has full appreciation of its pleasures. It is not through insensitivity that Plato rejects pursuit of the pleasures of poetic image-making. It is because he has an argument that shows we should resist these pleasures unless poetry or its lovers perform on philosophy's home ground and present a good counter-argument.

Beauty

According to Iris Murdoch, “Plato wants to cut art off from beauty, because he regards beauty as too serious a matter to be commandeered by art” (Murdoch 1977: 17). This may be difficult for modern aestheticians to grasp, given widespread assumptions about their discipline (such as Hegel’s view that its subject matter is ‘artistic beauty’ (Hegel 1993: 3)). Some commentators on Plato have thought, mistakenly, that a positive philosophy of art is implicit in Plato’s inspirational passages on the love of beauty as an absolute value.

Plato’s concept of beauty is arguably quite different from the modern aesthetic concept, whatever exactly that is. We translate Plato’s word *kalon* as ‘beautiful,’ but a preferable translation in many contexts is ‘fine.’ Definitions and examples from the Platonic dialogue *Hippias Major* illuminate the broad application of *kalon*: a fine girl is fine, so is anything made of gold, so is living a rich and healthy life and giving your parents a decent burial. Here even the first two may not be cases of beauty in what we might call a purely aesthetic sense: desirability and exchange value play a part in their fineness. Another aspect of fineness is ‘what is pleasing through hearing and sight’: “men, when they’re fine anyway – and everything decorative, pictures and sculptures – these all delight us when we see them, if they’re fine. Fine sounds and music altogether, and speeches and storytelling have the same effect” (*Hippias Major* 298a). This looks like a rudimentary definition of the aesthetically pleasing. But it neither embraces the whole range of *kalon* nor lends the arts a value that rescues them from the critique of the *Republic*.

Beauty finds its most significant treatment in the dialogue *Symposium*, in the speech by Socrates, which he presents as the teaching of the wise woman, Diotima. Despite this double-nesting of narrators, the speech is usually seen as revealing Plato’s own philosophical views. The whole dialogue concerns the nature of love. In Socrates’ account beauty is love’s highest object. To grasp this, we must make a Platonic metaphysical distinction between on the one hand the beauty of things and properties as they occur in the sensible world, and on the other, The Beautiful itself – as Plato calls the eternal, unchanging and divine Form of Beauty, accessible not to the senses, but only to the intellect (*Symposium* 211d). Instances of beauty in the sensible world exhibit variability or relativity: something is beautiful at one time, not at another; in one respect or relation, not in another; to one observer, not to another. The Beautiful itself lacks all such variability, it “always is and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes” (ibid.: 211a). This passage may be taken to imply that the Form of Beauty is itself beautiful. That reading seems to make best sense of Beauty’s being an object of love on a continuum with other such objects, though whether Plato thinks of Beauty as ‘being beautiful’ in the same way as a boy or girl is beautiful is a matter of debate.

Elsewhere Plato describes non-philosophers as unable to grasp that there is a single unvarying Form of Beauty. The sophist Hippias equates beauty with a beautiful girl and then with the property of being made of gold. But a girl is beautiful in one relation (to other girls), not in another (to goddesses), and being made of gold makes some things beautiful, but not others: the eyes of a statue, for instance, would be repulsive if fashioned from gold. So it looks to Plato as if no object or property accessible to the senses can be what constitutes beauty as such. A similar distinction occurs in the *Republic*, where Plato disparages “lovers of sights and sounds” (*Republic* 475d-476b) who eagerly attend arts festivals, but think there are “many beautifuls” rather than the single Form of The Beautiful that the philosopher recognizes.

In the *Symposium* the ideal lover is portrayed as ascending through a hierarchy of love-objects – first the beautiful body of a particular human beloved, then all beautiful bodies equally, then the beauty of souls, then that of laws, customs, and ideas – and ending as a lover of wisdom or philosopher. At the culmination of his progress the philosophical lover will “catch sight of something wonderfully beautiful in nature . . . the reason for all his earlier labors” (*Symposium* 210e), namely the Form of Beauty itself. (‘Fineness’ here will hardly convey the requisite fervor.) All love desires some kind of offspring. The highest form of love catches hold of a superior object and produces a superior offspring:

if someone got to see the Beautiful, absolute, pure, unmixed, not polluted by human flesh or colors or any other great nonsense of mortality . . . only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue (because he’s in touch with no images), but to true virtue (because he is in touch with the true beauty).

(*Symposium* 211e–212a)

If we recall that in the *Republic* Plato applies the phrase ‘images of virtue’ to poets, a contrast suggests itself. While the poet makes only images, and understands only images, the philosopher, who strives for and encounters the eternal unchanging Beauty, can bring genuine goods into the world because he understands what virtue is. This contrast can be hard to accept for the modern reader, because Plato’s own literary genius is fully manifest in this extraordinary and moving passage, and because we imagine that he must find a place for something like art in his hierarchy of beauties, or at least think that art enables its author to produce something immortal and universal. “Strangely enough,” one noted historian of aesthetics has written, “Diotima and Socrates do not assign a role to the arts in this process of reawakening to Beauty, though it takes but a short step to do so” (Beardsley 1966: 41). But this is an anachronistic reaction. Plato’s next step comprises the arguments of the *Republic*, probably written shortly afterwards.

Inspiration

In the short early dialogue *Ion* Plato has Socrates say that poets are divinely inspired to produce their fine works. The character Ion is a rhapsode, a professional reciter of poetry and a critic or expert on Homer. Socrates undertakes a demolition of Ion's claim that he succeeds as performer and critic because he has knowledge. An important concept in this dialogue is *technê*. The word has been translated as 'craft', 'skill', or 'expert knowledge.' Plato regards doctors, generals, and mathematicians as possessing a *technê*, meaning that they are knowledgeable about a specific subject matter, can transmit their knowledge in teaching, understand general principles or rules that apply across all instances within their field, and can give a rational account of why their practice succeeds. A further criterion of *technê*, offered in the dialogue *Gorgias*, is that it aims at the good and is based in knowledge of the good (*Gorgias* 463a–465a).

An antique translation for *technê* is 'art,' but examination of this concept will not yield Plato's 'philosophy of art,' chiefly because practices we regard as 'artistic' tend to be denied the status of *technê*. In the *Gorgias* persuasive rhetoric, tragedy, and musical performances by choruses or instrumentalists all fail to be cases of *technê*, because their aim is not to make their audiences better, but to gratify them. Plato argues that there are no principles concerning what pleases a mass audience, and that it is by guesswork that these practices succeed, rather than by rational principle or knowledge. The *Ion* takes a similar line: the rhapsode discerns what is fine and pleasing in Homer's poetry, but in so doing he works to no generalizable principles. There is no subject matter on which he is an expert solely by virtue of being a rhapsode and being familiar with Homer's fine work. Ion's preposterous claim to be an expert on 'everything,' because Homer writes finely of everything, prefigures the superficially more plausible claim, rejected in the *Republic*, about the knowledge of the poet himself.

How is it then that Ion succeeds in discerning the fineness in Homer's poetry and performing it so brilliantly as to delight his audiences? Socrates' answer is itself poetic, or perhaps mock-poetic:

the poets tell us that they gather songs at honey-flowing springs, from glades and gardens of the Muses, and that they bear songs to us as bees carry honey, flying like bees. And what they say is true. For 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 with him.

(*Ion* 534a–b)

The power of poetry is divine: the Muse attracts the poet, who is then a mouthpiece through which the divine speaks. The performer succumbs to the same attraction and transmits it to the audience. At no stage does rational thought or expert competence account for the success of the proceedings. There seems to be a mixed message here: Ion is admirable and even (if ironically) ‘divine.’ But he deserves no credit for his artistic success, because he is ‘out of his mind.’ Not only can he give no rational account of why he succeeds; he is also, Plato assumes, irrational in responding emotionally to the dramatic scene he performs, despite that scene’s unreality.

The *Ion* may surprise us because although it locates features regarded in the modern era as characterizing the ‘artistic,’ it rates them disparagingly, or at best equivocally. The later work *Phaedrus*, a literary masterpiece which explores the nature of rhetoric, writing, love, beauty, Forms, and the philosophical life, promises a more openly positive account of the inspiration of poets. Here Socrates praises ‘madness,’ explicitly including the state of mind in which good poets compose, ‘a Bacchic frenzy’ without which there is no true poetry:

if anyone comes to the gates of poetry and expects to become an adequate poet by acquiring expert knowledge [*technê*] . . . he will fail, and his self-controlled verses will be eclipsed by poetry of men who have been driven out of their minds.

(*Phaedrus* 245a)

It has been claimed that the *Phaedrus* marks Plato’s recantation of the hard-line condemnation of poetry in the *Republic* (Nussbaum 1986: 200–33), but a more sober verdict is perhaps better supported. Part of the extravagant myth Socrates enunciates concerns the fate of re-incarnated souls, who are placed in rank order. The highest, most worthy soul is that of “a lover of wisdom or of beauty... cultivated in the arts [*mousikos*] and prone to erotic love” (*Phaedrus* 248d). Sixth in rank, lower than generals, statesmen, gymnasts, doctors and prophets, is “a poet or some other life from among those concerned with mimesis” (ibid.: 248e). The contrast tests the modern reader’s intuitions. Surely the prime rank must go to the genuine artist, while some poor uninspired dabbler is relegated to the sixth? Yet there is no word for ‘art’ here, as Nehamas reminds us: “the ‘musical’ . . . is not the artist, but the gentleman who patronizes the artists and knows what to take from them” (Nehamas 1982: 60). The first-ranking soul is rather that of the cultured philosopher and lover, with whom poets, all mimetic poets, including the great Homer, cannot compete. The comparative evaluation of the *Republic* is echoed in a very different tone of voice, but it is not reversed.

Philosophy and art

When Arthur Danto writes that “from the perspective of philosophy art is a danger and aesthetics the agency for dealing with it” (Danto 1986: 13), he is implicitly treating Plato as the founder of philosophical aesthetics and generalizing Plato’s strategy to the whole subsequent discipline. The story is akin to that in Nietzsche’s influential *The Birth of Tragedy*, where the cultural force embodied in Socrates, the ‘theoretical man’ and antithesis of the artist, destroys the artistic spirit that once dwelt in tragedy but has remained lost to the modern world (Nietzsche 1968: 81–98).

There is something in the thought that Plato’s endeavor is to establish philosophy in opposition to the prevailing culture that not only prizes the arts but adopts certain ill-thought-out theoretical views concerning their value. It is a culture of sophists, rhetoricians, performers, and connoisseurs who advocate the educational value of poetry, but who lack a genuine conception of knowledge and any proper grasp on the distinction between what is fine because it brings pleasure and what is genuinely good or beneficial. Without the rigor of philosophical thinking, this culture lacks the critical distance required to assess the true value of the arts. Yet Plato’s response is not merely that of head-on dialectical confrontation. He realizes that the art-loving, pleasure-seeking soul in all of us must be charmed and enticed towards the philosophical life. To supplant tragedy and Homer he uses rhetoric, myth, word-play, poetic metaphor, and dramatic characterization. Socrates in the dialogues is an image or invention of Plato’s, who enacts for us the life and style of the ideal philosophical thinker. So if Plato is the most poetical of philosophers, it is in the service of leading us, by poetry’s means of persuasion, to philosophy proper, a place from which we may begin to understand and evaluate poetry and all the arts.

That the quarrel between philosophy and poetry plays itself out within Plato is one source of the belief that he himself provides the material for a defense of art. In the history of aesthetics there have been numerous attempts to answer Plato on his own ground by claiming that art puts us in touch with the eternal and the absolute, or that it provides a privileged form of knowledge. Others have sought to reject Plato’s criteria of evaluation as misguided, and have looked to aesthetic responses of various kinds to secure an autonomous value for art. Some have even combined both approaches (see Schopenhauer 1969: 169–267). But Plato’s writings themselves offer none of these resolutions, and for that reason continue to be a unique stimulus to profound questioning about art, philosophy, and the relations between them.

See also Aristotle, Medieval aesthetics, Beauty, Art and emotion, Art and ethics, Art and knowledge, Pictorial representation, Tragedy, Value of art.

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Further reading

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