

# PLATO : PHILOSOPHY AND IMITATION

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It has been pretty traditional to hold that Plato has not accepted imitation (*mimesis*) as a source of knowledge. It is for him a play or a fun and not anything serious. It brings disarray into the soul and so needs to be banished from the state. This attitude of Plato towards imitation is apparently evident in his utter rejection of poetry in the preamble to *Republic*.

Many other considerations assure me that we were entirely right in our organization of the state and especially, I think, in the matter of poetry. In refusing to admit at all so much of it as is imitative.....that kind of art seems to be a corruption of mind of all listeners who do not possess as an antidote a knowledge of its real nature. (595 A1 B5)

A rapid stroll along the relevant texts would disentangle two separate grounds for the banishment of imitation as extensively exhibited in all representative forms of art including poetry. Firstly, it has been alleged that imitation does not fit into the ideal educational framework whose development and maintenance is the primary responsibility of the state. This charge seems to be a consequence of Plato's unyielding refusal to accept anything less than absolute knowledge in the dissemination of education. Thus the famous quarrel between philosophy and imitative arts is the setting in which it is argued that the latter is far removed from truth and reality and has its appeal to the inferior part of the soul. (*Republic* 605-ab). The effect of this interpretation has been to maximize the importance of rational dialectic of Socrates at the expense of the importance of arts in general and imitative art in particular. This led many scholars<sup>1</sup> to hold that Plato has wholly failed to grasp the nature of art. He has hardly made any serious contribution to the science of aesthetics for he seems to have regarded the work of art a reduplication of perceptible objects, whose value, so far as it has a value, is therefore the same in kind as the value of the objects which it reduplicates<sup>2</sup>. Prof.R.G.Collingwood observes that this accusation is so widespread and deep rooted that it may appear quite unpromising to look for a refutation<sup>3</sup>.

Nevertheless, the attitude of Plato towards imitative art is not that bold and uncompromising. In fact, he takes pleasure in it and his argument in Book X of the *Republic* is far exaggerated and ironical. If Plato is correct that poetry which is *mimesis* occurs only on the

vanishing point of reason, what is the epistemological status of mimesis ? Does it merely entertain us or does it have some genuine significance in his philosophy ? Besides, though in Book X of *Republic* (595a5) it is claimed that no imitative poetry is admissible in the city, the discussion of poetry in Books II and III concluded by admitting the unmixed imitator of good character (397 d4-5). Furthermore, Book X itself allows so much of poetry as consists of hymns to the Gods and praises of virtuous people. If such poetry is imitative then Book X contradicts not only Book III but itself as well. If it is not, then how much poetry is thereby allowed after all in the city.<sup>4</sup>

Prof. J. Tate<sup>5</sup> argues very forcefully that Plato uses imitation in two senses. The imitation he banishes at 595a5 is imitation of a bad sort while the imitation he admits at 397a4-5 is of a good sort, and the contradiction disappears. Cross and woosley<sup>6</sup>, following Tate, hold that Plato probably would have accepted representational art in the *Republic* provided that it had been purged of all its dramatic element and that it had proceeded from a direct knowledge of forms. Nettleship<sup>7</sup> claims that Plato has really no adequate theory of art at all and thereby immediately eliminates any possibility of self-conflict. Ferguson<sup>8</sup> absolves Plato altogether from the blame of banishing the poets and suggests that the idea originates with Socrates. Taylor<sup>9</sup> fails to see any conflict at all between theory and use and claims that Plato wanted to formulate a view of art which was subordinate to morality. Prof. I.S. Crombie<sup>10</sup> says that it is possible that Plato was enjoying himself by overstating his case and Plato may have been teasing us a little. All these divergent views on the use of imitative art in his philosophy vis-a-vis its criticisms in Book X of *Republic* seems to have failed to appreciate the integrating and complementary role of imitative art to Plato's conception of philosophy.

In this essay, efforts will be made to articulate Plato's notion of imitations as implied in his notion of poetry. Apart from clarifying some finer aspects of the concept of imitation, it would be argued here that although imitation is quite distinct from knowledge, truth and reality Plato seems to have supplemented it by a positive theory of pre-theoretic intuition which makes his philosophy and dialectic what it is. In fact, Plato takes the more conciliatory stance of one who admits rather than expels, but the quarrel persists.

Prof. R.G.Collingwood<sup>11</sup> in one of his paper argues that according to Plato there are three grades of reality; first, the absolute and eternal Form wholly real and wholly intelligible; Second, the perceptible object copied from the Form; and thirdly, the work of art, copied from the object. The Form of bed is an object of first order, the perceptible bed made by the carpenter is an object of the second order, the picture of the bed made by a painter is an object

of third order. Prof. Collingwood, here warns us not to confuse objects of one order with those of another, because if we mistake those of the third order for the second or first we will commit the error of imagining that the epic poet understands strategy and politics. This error of supposing that the artist makes nature when, in fact, he only holds the mirror upto the nature, arising out of our failure to understand that the work of art stands in a wholly different plane, belonging to a different order of being, from the objects made by the craftsman.<sup>12</sup>

The above theory of the grades or degree of reality<sup>13</sup> as referred by Collingwood seems to be quite in consonance with the simile of the divided line as exhibited in *Republic* (590D-511E). Here according to Collingwood, Plato shows that there is only one level of reality. The other levels are appearances but not mere appearances. The perceptible world (*Pistis*) is but a copy of the real world, the world of Form (*archai*), but the lowest level (*Eikasia*) is only a copy of the perceptible level, and hence, is only a copy of a copy of the real world. The lowest level is, therefore, the level of art for art is concerned with the experience of the perceptible and is in fact a copy or imitation (*mimesis*) of it.

Here the concept of imitation seems to play a crucial role in understanding the platonic notion of art in general, nay it is a key to unlock the door of the relation between art vis-a-vis philosophy and science. Let us endeavour to have a fair understanding of the Platonic notion of imitation as depicted in Book X of *Republic*.

Socrates, as his wont, asks for a definition of imitation at 597c7 of *Republic* and in reaching it he not only appeals to the theory of form<sup>14</sup> but also undertakes a discussion on painting. In 596d-597a, imitation is described as a way of "making things that appear but are not truly real". But why at all does Plato use painting to define imitation ? In fact, he seems to be using it to distinguish the three sorts of objects such as : the real objects, physical objects and painted objects. The painter cannot be said to be a maker of either of the first two but is only an imitator of what God and the craftsman make. Now a definition seems to have reached at 597c-3-4 that an imitator is one who makes thing at two removes from reality and the truth. Again at 597e10 of *Republic* and by means of distinguishing between the way physical objects really are and the way they appear, it is held that painting and imitations concern with appearance and not with truth. It is also held that what the imitators produce are quite deceitful. At 602c of *Republic* it is held that imitation appeals to the lower part of the soul.

However, in this context, a question comes to our mind that why at all Plato used the word *mimesis* in a disparaging sense such as deceitful, counterfeiting instead of emulating. Let

us make a foary into the usage of the word *mimeisthai* (to immitate) in the ancient Greek thought. According to Prof. Alexander Nehemas<sup>15</sup> the word mimesis originally seems to be connected with speech rather than with seeing. Prof. Nehmas<sup>16</sup> has also asserted that mimesis was originally connected with music and dancing and thus, it was used in the sense of representation and expression instead of imitation. He pointed out that the use of mimesis as imitation is the creation of *Republic X*. But Prof. Gerald Else<sup>17</sup> by making reference to some earlier texts pointed out that the senses of faking and the distinction between appearance and reality were very much associated with the word mimesis. Again Prof. Mckeon held<sup>18</sup> that the term mimesis and its cognates were used more in connection with speaking and acting than with painting and it is also clear that even in the latter half of fifth century they did not go hand in hand with platonic notion of imitation as counterfeit, deceitful, fake and the apparent. Alexander Nehamas<sup>19</sup> observes that "imitation" as it was traditionally applied to poetry, speaking and dancing, meant primarily acting like someone else. It did not carry with it the connotation of imitating only the appearance as opposed to the reality of the object imitated or the connected notion of deceiving and counterficting. In fact, the crucial role that poetry played in education seems to have depended precisely on a conflation between appearance and reality<sup>20</sup>.

Coming back to the question that why did Plato accorded mimesis a disparaging and negative role when there was a positive usage available in the contemporary Greek culture and thought as the history of the word suggests. Was he unaware of it ? It seems quite unlikely that Plato was not aware of it. As a matter of fact, he has enunciated a system of thought where Form or Ideas are taken to be absolutely real and rest of the things do not exist at all; they are appearances, not reality. If the Forms or the Ideas are only real they alone absolutely possess their own attributes and they are unreservedly what they are. Thus, a true account of them is quite possible. On the contrary, the rest of the things are not what they are, possessing contradictory attributes, are not amenable to a true account, not because of fault of mind or language but by reason of their own inherent unintelligibility. Any attempt to give an account of them will turn out to be a sure failure. Since Mimesis, as it appears, is a confused version of confused reality, Plato refused to allow this activity an independent status of its own. It is twice removed from reality and lies at the vanishing point of reason.

In this context it is worthnoting that in *Republic 47d* it is pointed out that it is possible to imitate a pattern of the ideally beautiful man and it is possible for such a man to exist. This statement, infact, suggests that an artist may imitate the Form not merely the object; not only the actual but the real. Some platonic scholars like David Daiches<sup>21</sup> and Grobe<sup>22</sup> claim that it is merely consistent with Plato's view that art is an imitation. But others like Tata<sup>23</sup> and Leon

Golden<sup>24</sup> argue more strongly that Plato actually believed that good art imitate the Forms. However, a close analysis of Platonic texts would reveal that the claim that forms can be imitated is more exaggerated and less documented.

Although Tate refers to a passage of *Republic* 500e-501b where it is talked about the construction of the perfect city to the work of a painter using "a divine paradigm" and thinks it as a description of a true imitation, yet there lies a point in Plato's simile that this is not a painter but philosopher. Again Friedlander<sup>25</sup> observes that *Republic* 472 is not helpful in holding that a painter imitates the Form. Although the passage shows that Plato did not think that artists are confined to reproducing merely the appearance of actual objects, yet it does not necessarily lead to a conclusion that in painting someone more beautiful than any existing person, the painter would be imitating the Form<sup>26</sup>.

However, in 596b7 of *Republic*, Plato observes that the craftsman makes things "looking toward" the Form but, this is not sufficient to establish that the relationship between the product and the Form is one of imitation<sup>27</sup>. In fact, nothing in the text justifies that there is a relationship between a physical object and its form. Thus, to imitate the form is a kind of thing which is not logically possible for the imitator to accomplish. If he does he would no longer be an artist. On this issue Collingwood remarked "what the artist produces is not a bed, or a battle or a hero or a villain, but an object sui generis, to be judged not by the standard by which these things are judged, but by a standard peculiar to itself"<sup>28</sup>. He argued that to imitate the Form of man would be to make a man, in other words, to live an actual human life<sup>29</sup>. The painter whatever he paints, paints picture and nothing but picture. A picture is judged as a picture by reference not to the ideal of humanity, the concept of man in general, but to some particular man, whether this particular man actually exists or not. As a matter of fact, the Form or Ideal which the craftsman would realise if he could, is something of which the artist knows nothing.

From the above discussion on the different facets of imitation, it may be held beyond a reasonable doubt that it is far removed from science and morality, different from handicraft as well. It is held as appearance of an appearance. The sensible objects are not real objects but were appearances. Imitation which is extensively exhibited in painting and poetry is not this appearance itself but an appearance of it only. It is not a source of knowledge as it does not embody truth necessary or accidental. It is not an opinion as it does not have any utility and its objects are not percepts. The imitator asserts neither any knowledge nor wisdom nor any belief nor opinion. The imitator neither knows nor opines rightly concerning the beauty or badness of his imitations. He does not know in which way the things, which he imitates, are good or bad

(*Republic* 602e). This exposition has led some scholars<sup>30</sup> to argue that Plato was at heart a puritan, intolerant of images, poetry, and the arts unless they could be made to serve morality and the state. He, therefore, subjected poetry, painting to expurgation and censorship, and put the poets into strait-jackets or actually exiled from his ideal state. There is of course, an element of truth in such criticisms but a dangerous half-truth as well. Plato has his negative side, and he is quite earnest about the harm that certain kinds of art can do, especially to the young, in fanning their passions and in closing their eyes to the ultimate truth. But there is also the positive side of platonism.

Thus, the question naturally arises that what exactly the positive nature of this activity i.e. imitation and its objects<sup>31</sup>. It may be called a pre-theoretical intuition. It makes a conjecture of the possible picture of the things of the world not a real picture. The phantasm regarding this possible picture which is conjured up by the intuition or the imaginative power of mind may inspire the intellect to go for its theoretical account, an account which is not been there so far. This way of looking at the platonic attitude towards intuition is very much inconsistent with the insight of the allegory of the cave. Here Plato does not suppose that it is possible to gaze immediately at the sun of truth, but that other reflection and images must intervene. Images, symbols, myths etc. are to be used, not as ultimates but as our best means of advancing towards the realm of the Ideas and the Good<sup>32</sup>. This spirit towards imitation has been exuberantly cherished in some dialogues outside *Republic* like *Phaedo* (114D) where Socrates claims that we ought to treat images and myths as if they were magic charms, since they allow us to see the established world in a new way. The Platonic imitation is something poetic that comes from nowhere and must be felt rather than understood.

In the end, it seems Plato's criticism of imitation as exhibited in his theory of painting and poetry is not strictly confined to his own period. It has its relevance even today. In fact, what he wanted to convey that it is the distinctive power of imitation to imaginatively symbolize the Forms in the charms of images, and it is the distinctive power of philosophy to develop these Forms dialectically in the medium of reason. Philosophy can not grow without argument but at the same time it loses its ability to strike us with interest without imitation or imagination<sup>33</sup>. It is true that imitation and philosophy are not equally valid sources of knowledge for Plato. Philosophy is certainly superior as it transforms the imaginative capabilities of human being into a well-accounted discourse by the help of intellect. By making use of both imitative and intellectual elements Plato exhibited that the underlying power of his thought lies not only in his ability to explain reality but to suggest it as well.

## NOTES

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