Plato and Aristotle:

Mimesis, Catharsis, and the Functions of Art

Some Background: Technē Redux

- In the Western tradition, technē has usually been understood to be a kind of knowledge and activity distinctive of human beings – a capacity that distinguishes us from the rest of nature.

  Bees build hives, beavers build dams, the ocean smooths a rock into a shiny pebble...But what else can they do? Natural agents (it seems) cannot formulate or follow an intentional plan.

- So, on the one hand, technē seems to have special significance in so far as it involves (god-like?) creativity.
A Knowledge Hierarchy

- On the other hand, in the ancient Greek world, there was clear hierarchy:

  *Theoretical* knowledge (epistēmē; ‘knowing that’ – typically the preserve of aristocrats) was held to be superior to the *technical* ('know how') knowledge of artists and tradespeople (i.e., commoners, slaves, women).

- This prejudice has a long history in the West and, as we will see, it is quite unselfconsciously taken up and reinforced by Plato and (to a lesser degree) by Aristotle.

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**Plato (ca: 427–347 BCE)**

- The first philosopher in the Western tradition to write extensively about art and beauty

- A moderately well-off aristocrat; descendant of the famous noble Glaucon (namesake of his brother, the character Glaucon in the *Republic*)

- Student of **Socrates** (the main character of most his Dialogues); teacher of Aristotle.
Two Big Ideas

Plato stands at the beginning of at least two deeply influential (possibly deeply pernicious) patterns of thought in the Western intellectual tradition:

1. The idea that the temporal, material world is an inferior image or replica of a perfect, rational, changeless, eternal world. (Cf. Christianity)

   Ihde: “insensitivity to materiality”

2. The idea that art and culture are powerful but, for that very reason, potentially dangerous.

Plato’s Aesthetic Theory

Techne: Includes all skills involved in producing things, both human and divine.

So, the output of the productive arts includes:

1. **Actual objects** (shoes and sausages made by human beings; objects of nature made by the gods)

2. **Imitations** (images and representations of shoes and sausages made by human beings; dreams and visions made by the gods).
The Forms

- For Plato, true knowledge (epistēmē) is knowledge of the eternal, perfect, intelligible Forms (eidolon)

  The Forms can be known only through the intellect, not through perception or imagination. (Though, as Socrates says in the Symposium, our love for beautiful things may lead us toward a love for the Forms.)

- All created, sensible things are (necessarily) imperfect imitations of the Forms, their eternal archetypes...

Mimesis

- So, the craftsman (or physician or trainer) can have a kind of (genuine, but secondhand) knowledge about the things she does or produces: Namely, a recognition of the archetype, the Form, in the artefacts that she produces, which are (always imperfect) copies of those archetypes.

- The imitation (mimesis) of painters and poets, however, can produce only copies of copies: “imitations thrice removed from the truth” (Republic X, p. 12)
Art, says Plato, is Dangerous...

Epistemological Dangers

- Art leads us away from the truth in as much as “children and simple persons” (12) may be lead to believe that they actually have seen something when in fact they have seen only an illusory representation of that thing.

- Moreover, poets and imitative artists portray arts and skills (of cobbler, carpenters, physicians) that they do not in fact understand.

- Worse, the poets (Homer is singled out for special mention) are commonly supposed to be great teachers of, e.g., statesmanship, military tactics, moral virtue.

  But, in so far as they are as simply imitating, they do not possess real knowledge of any these things.

  In short: If we were to rely on art for knowledge, we would end up with mostly false beliefs.

- But imitative art is not only epistemologically dangerous…
Moral Dangers

- In place of real (theoretical, intellectual) knowledge, the poets and painters often seem to work on the basis of inspiration – madness, lunacy, and/or divine possession.

  **Platonic Worry:** We should be wary about being guided by inspired lunatics.

- Still worse, says Plato (15-16), the arts have a “power of harming even the good” – they may appeal to our lower nature (“an inferior part of the soul,” 16), leading us to unseemly, “umanly” indulgence of our sympathies.

Art Control

**Plato:** In short, artists are not to be trusted.

- The wise ruler (the ‘philosopher-king’; the Guardian) will rightly seek to censor their works and to control which forms of art will figure in the life and education of citizens.

- Some art forms (e.g., tragic poetry) will have no place at all in the ideal state; others (e.g., certain musical modes) will have to be carefully regulated.
The Imitation Theory
(In Plato and In General)

- Many people, perhaps most people, think that a picture must be a picture of something (a representation); that an artist is someone who can make a picture or object that “looks like the real thing.”

- But what does art imitate?

  The world (Plato in the Republic) or the Ideal? (Plato in the Symposium and the Ion).

- Also, aren’t at least some art forms strictly non-imitative?

Imitation Theory: Problems

- Occasionally, music is imitative in a straightforward sense: evocations of bird calls, sirens, gunfire, etc.

- Occasionally, writers imitate different accents or tones of voice (in something like the way an actor might imitate the speech, gait or mannerisms of a known person or a social stereotype).

- But, once again, surely quite a lot of art is not mainly (or, in any case, not only) concerned with imitation in this sense?
Still More Problems

One thing that seems to be missing from the imitation theory (even on the more ‘elevated’ view presented in the *Symposium*) is a proper appreciation for artistic creativity.

E.g., We might admire the skill with which a forger has copied (i.e., imitated) a banknote, but it is, after all, just a copy.

It seems at least plausible that one thing which distinguishes the artist from the forger (or the ‘mere illustrator’) is that the former’s work may involve originality, creativity or ‘genius’.

Han van Meegeren, *Christ with the Adulteress*, 1941?
And Yet Another Problem

- Occasionally artists do seem to take some delight in deceiving us with a successful imitation (e.g., trompe l’oeil pictures); but usually the effect is only momentary.

**Hypothesis:** If the deception (i.e., the completely successful imitation) was never noticed, could we ever have any *aesthetic* enjoyment of the work? Could it even be identified as an art work at all?

(Compare: the banknote forger, cosmetic surgery, toupees...)

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**Aristotle 384–322 BCE**

- Student of Plato; teacher of *(inter alia)* Alexander the Great

- Accepts the conventional Greek understanding of *technē*, but mainly rejects Plato’s doctrine of the Forms and partly rejects his account of mimesis.
Aristotelian Background

- Like Plato, Aristotle accepts that things have rational essences (Forms); both agree that we must grasp the Form of something in order to understand it.

- In contrast to Plato, however, for Aristotle Forms are never separate from their material instantiation:

  Everything we encounter is made of matter yet also formed in some way or other. I.e.:

  *There is no form without content (i.e., matter) and no matter (content) without form*
Mo’ Background

Plato's paradigm science: Mathematics

Aristotle's: Biology

- For Aristotle, everything strives to “grow into” its form (to realize its ‘potentiality’) and form determines what the thing can potentially become.

A fairly plausible view of biological entities (e.g., an acorn growing into an oak tree); less so for abstract objects (e.g., triangles).

Aristotle on Imitation

Like Plato, Aristotle maintains that art involves imitation (mimesis), but Aristotle thought perhaps a bit more carefully about what and how art imitates…

- Tragedy, e.g., “is an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery” (6, 27).

- Human beings have an “instinct of imitation” – it’s one way in which they learn (i.e., through mimicry) and “to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general” (4, 25).
“Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity…” (4, 25)

Plastinated body, Gunter von Hagens, Institute for Plastination, Heidelberg

- We also have, says Aristotle, an instinct for “harmony and rhythm”

“Persons, therefore, starting with this natural gift developed by degrees their special aptitudes, till their rude improvisations gave birth to Poetry.” (4, 26)

- I.e., we human beings are by nature organisms that take delight in rhythm, harmony, and imitation. Over time, with the aid of tradition, some talented people come to specialize in (imitative) “Art.”
### Distinguishing Art Forms

- Forms of poetry (including music) can be distinguished in terms of their **medium**, their **objects**, and their **mode of imitation**.

  **Dance**: rhythm; character, emotion or action; movement

  **Epic Poetry**: language; actions of good men; narration

- You could, if you liked, set a historical or scientific work in verse (e.g., Empedocles’ *On Nature*), but that wouldn’t necessarily make it (proper) poetry...

### A Defense of Poetry?

- Also, says Aristotle, “*Poetry...is a more philosophical thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.*” (9, 29)

- I.e., in contrast to historians, poets don’t simply tell us what happened, more importantly they show us “what may happen – what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity.”

  (Compare: Plato in the *Republic*; in the *Symposium*)
Aristotle on What Makes a Good Tragedy
First principles of a genre…

Tragedy: Six Elements

1. **Plot** (*mythos*) Imitation of action
2. **Character** (*ethos*) Imitation of qualities of agents
3. **Thought** (*dianoia*) Statements proved, truths enunciated
4. **Diction** (*lexis*) Metre of words
5. **Spectacle** (*opsis*) Staging, sets, costumes, etc.
6. **Song** (*melos*) Musical embellishment

Aristotle: In tragedy, plot comes first (character is the proper object of epic, dithyrambic, and nomic poetry).

The other elements ‘have emotional attractions of their own’, but, in a tragedy, all ought to be subordinate to plot.
Tragedy: Three Unities

I. Plot
One extended action, with a beginning, middle and end

II. Character
Character of the protagonists should be consistent; their actions of the sort characteristic of people in their circumstances

III. Time
“as far as possible … [confined] to a single revolution of the sun”

Catharsis

“Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narration, through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation (catharsis) of these emotions” (27)

In short, the goal (the telos) of a tragedy is to effect ‘catharsis’
Catharsis: Some Interpretive Issues

- What does Aristotle mean by “purgation”?  
  - ‘Homeopathic’/vaccinating purgation?  
  - Purification/cleansing?  
- Why not a “tragedy pill”?