

# The Art of Imitation in Plato

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This is an examination of Plato's use of *μίμησις* (mimicry, imitation, art) mainly in the *Republic*, *Sophist*, and *Timaeus*.<sup>1</sup> I here treat *μίμησις* as the link between what Plato calls the Forms (or reality) and the sensible particulars (or appearances). Plato often cites *μίμησις* as dangerous—that it leads the soul away from the Forms and fastens it to the realm of sensible particulars. This however, would be too simple an analysis. It is not just that an art is an imitative one that Plato finds troubling, but the relationship between the art and knowledge. Yet, it is more complex than such a statement shows and I believe Plato develops his ideas through his writings.

I provide a developmental account of *μίμησις* here because I contend that while the *Republic* shows us a basic framework in which to understand *μίμησις*, it is further developed in the *Sophist*, with some of the remaining questions being answered in the *Timaeus*. The *Laws* seems to provide at least one passage in which the arguments presented here are rounded off.

First, the *Republic*. There are at least two uses of *μίμησις* in the *Republic*. The first is used in Book III and is generally used to mean mimicry rather than imitation. I will not pursue this definition here. I instead focus on its use in Book X, more properly translated imitation.<sup>2</sup>

Here, Socrates (Socrates presented by Plato, not the historic Socrates) begins by congratulating himself and his interlocutors for the creation of a city in which all imitative arts are to be forbidden and he says, 'all such poetry is likely to distort the thought of anyone who hears it, unless he has the knowledge of what it is really like, as a drug to counteract it.' (*Rep.* 495b).<sup>3</sup> Thus, it seems that Plato is setting the reader up to accept all imitative arts as dangerous, for the emphasis is on *all such poetry*, not a part or category within such poetry, but all imitative ones.

Yet, I hope to show, that by examining Plato's use of *μίμησις*, it will become clear that this is not what he means. Imitation is not in itself dangerous, but

<sup>1</sup> Here I assume that the order in which Plato wrote these texts are *Republic*, *Sophist*, and *Timaeus* as appears in (Brandwood 1992, 98–99).

<sup>2</sup> Briefly put, the use of *μίμησις* in Book III tends to describe imitation as form of role-playing, or mimicry. Imitation occurs here when one person takes on the characteristics of another. In Book X, imitation is applied to things (and maybe to people to the extent that they are things), and is one thing taking the image of another. Thus, a painting of a rose imitates a rose to the extent that it takes its image from the rose. Without a rose, there could not be a painting of one, and if there were, it would not be known as a rose. Another way to distinguish these two uses is to follow Julia Annas and say that In Books II–III, it would be better to translate *μίμησις* as 'represent' or 'express' and in Book X use the term 'imitation' (Annas 1981, 94). In either case, the important thing to remember is that Plato is not talking about the same thing in Books II–III and X.

<sup>3</sup> All citations to Plato's texts come from (Cooper 1997).

rather, imitation through ignorance is.

First, in Book X, imitation is said to be the holding of a mirror to the world (*Rep.* 596b–e). Therefore, to imitate a chair, is to make an image of it. Now, as all things can be imitated, and as imitation is the making of a copy, should it not be the case that the image of something good and beautiful should itself be good and beautiful? I believe this is the conclusion Plato reaches later, but for now, let us keep to the *Republic*.<sup>4</sup>

Here, Plato distinguishes between two kinds of craftsmanship: φυτουργία (working with plants: begetting, creating natural things such as plants) and δημιουργία (working with manmade things: making or creating) (*Rep.* 597de). Plato uses φυτουργία to mean things made by god and δημιουργία to mean things made by human beings. God is the first kind of craftsman, he makes the Forms or εἰδώς (*Rep.* 597b). The second kind of craftsman makes not the Forms, but the sensible particulars, and in the case of a bed, is known as a carpenter (*Rep.* 597de). Thus, there are two kinds of craftsman, one that makes the Form and the other, who makes the sensible particular that is, in one sense, an imitation of that Form.<sup>5</sup>

The next category is not of a craftsman, but an imitator. Within this category, Plato includes the poets and painters. They are the ones that hold up a mirror to the world. Yet, the reflection they give is not one of the Forms, but of the sensible particulars and it is this that Plato finds problematic. For from Forms to images, there is a steady regression in knowledge. The god has full knowledge and makes the Forms, the craftsman has right opinion (through communication with users who have practical experience using the manufactured goods) (*Rep.* 601e–602a), and the imitator who has only ignorance (as he has no access to any truth) (*Rep.* 602a).

Therefore, the reason why imitators are dangerous is due to the fact that they have no access to the truth, yet by claiming to have knowledge, fool the majority into thinking what they say is true (*Rep.* 600e–601b). ‘Then imitation is far removed from the truth,’ writes Plato, ‘for it touches only a small part of each thing and a part that is itself only an image. And that, it seems is why it can produce everything. For example, we say that a painter can paint a cobbler, a carpenter, or any other craftsman, even though he knows nothing about these crafts. Nevertheless, if he is a good painter and displays his painting of a carpenter at a distance, he can deceive children and foolish people into thinking that it is truly a carpenter.’ (*Rep.* 598bc). Therefore, I contend that Plato does not find imitation dangerous in itself, but as an analysis of the *Sophist*, and *Timaeus* I hope will make clear, imitation is dangerous if it is unconnected to truth or the Forms.

The *Sophist* also divides craftsmanship into two categories, human and divine (*Soph.* 265b). And imitations are again of copies, not of the things themselves

<sup>4</sup> This does not have to mean that an imitation is an exact copy. As it should be noted that mirrors were not an exact reflection. Just like a pool of water—the reflected image was heavily distorted. Thus, when Plato uses the analogy of a mirror, he cannot mean an exact image because mirrors in his day could not provide one, but would merely provide a dim and distorted image. Even about five hundred years ago were mirrors of such poor quality that they could not be relied upon to provide an exact image. As a passage from I Corinthians shows: ‘For now we see through a glass; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.’ (I Corin. 13.12).

<sup>5</sup> How the craftsman has access to the Form is not clear. Plato says that the craftsman is given information of how to make objects from the people who use those objects (*Rep.* 601cd), but how the users then have access to the Forms is left unanswered.

(Forms) (*Soph.* 265b). But a difference is that imitation, as it was in the *Republic*, is not outside the scope of production, but another kind of production (*Soph.* 265b).

Plato puts in the mouth of the visitor, ‘I’ll assume divine expertise produces the things that come about by so-called nature, and that human expertise produces the things that humans compound those things into. According to this account there are two kinds of production, human and divine.’ And each of those kinds of production is further divided into two categories—the production of originals (ἀυτοποιητικόν) and ‘copy making’ (εἰδωλοποιικώ) (*Soph.* 265e). So that there are for each of the producers (human and divine) two kinds of production (originals and copies).

Yet, the reader again comes upon a divergence from the *Republic*. Plato writes in the *Sophist*, that the originals made by the divine craftsman are not the Forms (εἰδώς) but the natural sensible particulars of this world (*Soph.* 265cd). The divergence here, I believe, has to do with the fact that Plato is no longer talking exclusively of manufactured goods, like beds, but is also including natural things. Therefore, gods produce natural things, such as ‘human beings and the other living things, and also fire, water, and things like that, which natural things come from.’ (*Soph.* 266b). Yet, the gods also produce copies of these things, such as ‘Things in dreams, and appearances that arise by themselves during the day.’ (*Soph.* 266b). And in this way gods produce both originals and copies, but the copies are founded on the originals.

Humans, too, produce both originals and copies. Plato writes, ‘And what about human expertise? We say house building makes a house itself and drawing makes a different one, like a human dream made for people who are awake.’ (*Soph.* 266c).

Now, from here, a further division is made of ‘copy making’ (εἰκαστικόν): ‘likeness making’ (εἰδωλουργικῆς) and ‘appearance making’ (φανταστικόν) (*Soph.* 266d). Next, appearance making is divided into two further categories as likeness making is set aside. Thus, appearance making is split into ‘one sort that’s done with tools’ and ‘one that uses one’s own self as the tool of the person making the appearance.’ (*Soph.* 267a)

Plato writes in the voice of the visitor, ‘When somebody uses his own body or voice to make something similar to your body or voice, I think the best thing to call this part of appearance making is “imitating.” (μίμησις)’ (*Soph.* 267a). Thus, imitation has been defined as the human production of a copy through appearance making with one’s own body (or oneself).

Yet, Plato’s investigation into the productive arts does not stop there in the *Sophist*. For, he goes on to say that this imitation also has two parts: ‘belief mimicry’ and ‘informed mimicry’ (*Soph.* 267be). In this way knowledge and ignorance is divided within imitation itself, a move Plato did not make in Book X of the *Republic* where he seemed to say that *all* imitation was belief that is ignorance-based. Here, it seems that some imitation can be based on knowledge, or if not knowledge then true belief. But it is not the distinction between knowledge and true belief that I am here concerned with, but whether or not imitation has any connection to truth.

The *Timaeus* seems to take the account of μίμησις provided in the *Sophist* and add another layer. The craftsman’s creations are based on the Forms.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the

<sup>6</sup> Here, Plato distinguishes between ‘that which always is and has no becoming, and what is that which becomes but never is’. The former is Plato’s conception of the Forms and the latter

Forms are the paradigms from which everything else takes its being. Therefore, everything else, to some extent, is an imitation. Thus, a connection to truth is satisfied and the goodness or beauty of the imitation depends on whether it is an imitation of the Forms or of the sensible particulars. Plato writes, ‘Now everything that comes to be must of necessity come to be by the agency of some cause, for it is impossible for anything to come to be without a cause. So whenever the craftsman (δημιουργός) looks at what is always changeless and, using a thing of that kind as his model, reproduces its form and character, then of necessity, all that he so completes is beautiful. But were he to look at a thing that has come to be and use as his model something that has been begotten, his work will lack beauty.’ (*Tim.* 28ab). This does not hold for only gods, but for both gods and humans. For the terms used in the passage for craftsman is δημιουργός and the use of this term in the *Republic* was used to indicate human craft. Thus, since even imitations made by humans are related to the Forms, they too can be beautiful and share in reality or truth.

The extent to which anything is not an imitation of the Forms is to how far removed it is from the Forms. So when the gods create something, it is based on that which always is, for if everything created needs to be caused by something, only the Forms are eternally there to be copied. And therefore, both the originals and copies discussed in the *Sophist* are imitations of the Forms, but the copies are further removed, as the productions of humans, both originals and copies, are even further removed. Therefore, in some sense, all things are imitations of the Forms, the distinction between them being how far removed they are from the Forms.

Imitation, it can here be said, cannot in itself be bad, because if some things perceived by the senses are simply imitations of reality, rather than reality itself, then those things that are good in the material world are good despite (or maybe even because) they are imitations. If all imitations were bad, no city, however ideal or utopian could be good, for any city is an imitation, according to Plato, as the following shows. In the *Laws* the tragic poets take up the challenge put to them by Plato’s Socrates in the *Republic*, that if poetry can be proven by the poets to be useful and not only pleasurable, they will be permitted into their city (*Rep.* 607a–e). In the *Laws* the poets are received by the lawmakers and told that they too are ‘poets’, but their poetry creates the city, for the city is itself ‘an imitation of the most beautiful and best life.’ (*Laws* 817a–d).<sup>7</sup>

If Plato is correct about what some appearances are (just imitations of reality) and all things perceived in the material world are these appearances, then if all imitation is bad, one might conclude, as Plato does not seem to want, that all things are bad. For then there would be no good in the utopian city created by Socrates and his interlocutors in the *Republic*.

This essay was just a brief sketch of the role μίμησις plays in some of Plato’s texts. Plato seems to develop his idea of μίμησις from the *Republic* to the *Laws* in a progressively less negative structure. For, it seems that as soon as that which is imitated are the Forms, then the imitated thing, strictly speaking, cannot be bad in itself. It might still be dangerous because of misinterpretation, but this is not

is the sensible particulars. He continues to write in the voice of Timaeus, ‘The former is grasped by understanding, which involves a reasoned account. It is unchanging. The latter is grasped by opinion, which involves unreasoning sense perception. It comes to be and passes away, but never really is.’ (*Tim.* 27d–28a). It is these two realms that imitation is supposed to link.

<sup>7</sup> See (Asmis 1992, 338) for further discussion.

a fault of imitation, but of people's understandings.

## References

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