

PLATO

though some of the aesthetic issues touched on in Plato's dialogues were probably familiar topics of conversation among his contemporaries
 some of the aesthetic questions that Plato raised he may have been first to formulate
 certainly was first to formulate so clearly and penetratingly

Plato asked an extraordinary number of the right questions
 necessary and illuminating questions about beauty and the arts
 some of these questions presuppose his metaphysical theory
 others owe little or nothing to his metaphysics and must be faced in any philosophy of art

Plato did more than ask good questions
 he set forth noteworthy answers and backed them up with persuasive argument
 these lines of thought were extremely valuable to all later work

commentators disagree whether or not Plato develops a coherent philosophy of art
 without insisting upon unity of Plato's Aesthetics, we cannot ignore important suggestions

does not propose to distinguish between Plato and Socrates
 this is all the more difficult with regard to aesthetic issues

principle dialogues on aesthetics fall mostly into two groups:

- 1) the *Ion*, *Symposium*, and *Republic* from early period
 - 2) the *Sophist* and *Laws* written in the late period (last fifteen years)
- the *Phaedrus* fits somewhere in between

Art and Imitation

as Plato lets key terms shift senses according to the movement of his dialectic
 it is difficult to be sure about the consistency and coherence of his thought
 this problem arises with some of his most important terms
 another problem concerns the English words used for some of these terms

technê

this is usually, and understandably translated as "art"
 but is probably closer to what we mean by "craft"
 does not distinguish between "fine arts" and utilitarian crafts

it is skill in doing something that takes an uncommon and specialized ability
 involves knowing how to achieve a certain end

does distinguish several "arts"
 acquisitive (money-making),

productive (brings into existence that which did not exist before): carpentry, flute-playing, painting, weaving, embroidery, architecture, the making of furniture

sometimes suggests ways of subdividing these crafts
division between human and divine (*Sophist* 265b)

his own terms cannot always serve as decisive guides
mousikê : “Music”

can mean music, or fine arts in general

does not explicitly make a special category of the visual arts

Plato seems implicitly to acknowledge a distinction between arts and crafts
the guardians are to avoid some crafts, but others have prestige

highest, noblest, most all-encompassing craft is statecraft
when Plato wants to say most vividly and forcefully what task the legislator faces
always seems to compare statecraft with one of the arts
composing tragedy, coloring sculpture, painting

it is the arts that present hard philosophic problems
not much needs to be said about the justification for making shoes
but drama, music, adornments of buildings, are all puzzling to Plato
it is by no means plain why they should exist at all

with the productive crafts something new emerges
material media must be manipulated in some way
there must be a relevant skill, or set of skills
there must be a kind of knowledge
but intelligent and productive work also has a goal and follows a plan
so in very broad sense, all production is “imitation”

mimesis

it is important to Plato that the arts are imitative in some sense in which other crafts are not
in one sense it is the heart of Plato’s whole philosophy

three other relevant terms

methexis (participation)

homoiōsis (likeness)

paraplesia (likeness)

all these terms mark a relation between an image and its archetype

objects are imitated by pictures
the essences of things are imitated by names
reality by thoughts (*Cratylus*)
eternity by time (*Timaeus*)
musician imitates divine harmony

the good man imitates virtues
 the wise legislator imitates the Form of the Good in constructing the state
 the god (*demiourgos*) imitates the Forms in making the world of things

any English word we use is bound to be misleading for no English word has an equally unrestricted sense

The Senator represents his constituents, the picture represents the object, the trade-mark represents the product

Mimesis perhaps carries stronger notion of copying
 will use the term “imitation” but in a way close to “representation” in its multiple senses

the Form of an object is its essential nature
 is also its function as well as the ideal condition of the object if it were to fulfill that function properly

the ideal Form of a knife is eternal, immutable, and complete
 can never be embodied completely in a knife
 but insofar as a knife-maker makes a knife that can perform its function
 he is guided by some conceptual grasp of its function and thus the Form
 in this sense the actual knife imitates its archetype
 similarly, a painter who sketches a knife, imitates the object

In the *Sophist* Plato undertakes a further subdivision of the various products of productive crafts
 the first of these introduces a narrow meaning of “imitation” that comes closer to a theory of art
 there is production

- 1) of actual objects—plants and elements by the god; houses and knives by men
- 2) of “images”—reflections and dreams by the god; pictures by men

the craft that produces images is the strictly “imitative craft”

essential to the notion of image, or imitation, that it falls short in some way from its original
 if the image were a perfect copy it would no longer be an image
 image is both true and untrue, has both being and non-being (*Sophist 240c*)
 it is of lower order of reality than the archetype
 this holds throughout Plato’s metaphysics

the “imitative art” may give rise to two sorts of thing:

- 1) may produce as accurately as possible the actual properties of the model
- 2) may copy the way the object looks from some point of view—producing an apparent likeness, or semblance

some degree of deliberate distortion is usually part of the process of semblance-making

now we have a narrower sense of “imitation”
 the making of *deceptive* semblances

the attack on the painter in Book X of the *Republic*:
 the painter imitates the carpenter's bed not as it is, but "as it appears" (597)
 semblances are illusory, misrepresentations, or false imitations

another important distinction
 the illusionist painter or architect has a purpose in making things look different from the way they actually are: he tries to make them look *better*
 in order to please the beholder
 is, in fact, choosing between pleasure and truth
 allies himself with others who make it their business to deal with appearances
 to make things seem better than they are is to flatter them
 in the *Gorgias* Plato distinguishes four "arts of flattery" from the genuine
 gymnastics produces health, cosmetics the illusion of health
 medicine tells us what is good for us; cookery produces merely what tastes good
 genuine legislation of justice vs sophistic legislation which is pretense
 administration of justice vs rhetoric

certain conclusions are inevitable
 the expert on cosmetics must have "true opinion"
 some empirical information, but not knowledge (*epistemê*) in Plato's sense
 he does not have a craft but a knack (*tribê*)
 a pseudo-craft:
 1) not based on knowledge
 2) the craftsman does not have a very clear idea of what he is doing, it is impossible to give a rational account of what he is doing

are not the musician, the painter, and composer in exactly the same situation?
 Painter goes for deceptive semblances
 musician is an accomplice of the poet
 setting the latter's words to music so that the singer can pretend to passions not really felt
 but the poet is the most guilty
 at the end of the *Republic* Plato seems to deny them any claim to genuine knowledge
 they are dangerous because many will think they do know what they do not know
 the poet does not even have true opinions
 Similarly, the poets have a low status in the *Phaedrus*

same conclusion can be drawn from a consideration of the way the poet works
 when he writes he is "out of his senses"
 works in a mad state, with the irrational part of his soul
 a caution about Plato's comments on the poet
 his remarks are so exaggerated and ironic, hard to tell what he really thought
 in other places (*Symposium*) there is the suggestion that the nonrationality of the poet may not be beneath, but above, reason itself

but, in general, there is a denial of truth to the arts

In the *Ion*, Socrates suggests that Ion interprets without “art or knowledge”

the indictment is severe, as far as art on the cognitive level is concerned
 art is one remove from actuality, and a second remove from reality
 three steps from truth
 in terms of Plato’s four levels of cognition as represented by the divided line
 art belongs on the lowest (*eikasia*)

Beauty

another property possessed by many works of art, and also shared by objects of nature
 the quality of beauty (*to kalon*)
 individual things can be beautiful, and beauty can be in the eye of the beholder
 but beside the changing beauty, there is the one Beauty that appears in them all
 not seen with the eyes, but grasped by the “mind alone”
 in the *Phaedrus* Beauty is said to be of easier access through sensuous images

the guide leading us back to the knowledge of true Beauty
 is leading us back to a home we have forgotten
 doctrine of recollection (*anamnesis*)
 what is the role of the artist in this recollection?

In different dialogues Plato seems to think there are two ways back to the Forms
 with dialectical arguments we can convince ourselves that the Forms exist
 but this conceptual knowledge is abstract
 we also need a path that brings one into direct apprehension of Beauty
 insofar as this is possible—while our souls are still in our bodies
 this is the theme of the ladder of love in the *Symposium*
 we can progress from bodily beauty to beauty of mind
 to beauty of institutions and laws and the sciences
 finally to essential beauty, entire, pure and unalloyed

strangely enough no role for the arts is assigned in Diotima’s speech
 but takes only a short-step to do so
 as long as we admit, as Plato clearly does, that melodies and paintings can be beautiful, some of
 them in high degree, then they participate in, therefore reveal to some degree,
 the Form of Beauty
 we can become better acquainted with this Form through our participation in the arts
 they help us attain knowledge of at least one of the Forms
 even an artist who distorts shapes to make them appear more beautiful
 is an imitator of the beautiful

what is beauty then?

Here is a question Plato does not deal with fully
 two main attempts in *Greater Hippias* and *Philebus* where he leaves many questions unanswered
 Socrates examines here beauty in a sense close to what modern aestheticians are interested in

the functional concept of beauty is here *rejected*
 the dialogue is inconclusive but some part of the truth may be found in the idea that the beautiful is what is beneficial
 perhaps beauty is “beneficial pleasure” (*Philebus* 303e; *Gorgias* 474d)

also suggests “what is measured or appropriate”
 “what is proportioned and beautiful and what is perfect and satisfying”
 clear he thinks of measure and symmetry as closely associated with beauty

there is also beauty in simple things
 “audible sounds which are smooth and clear”
 similarly with colors: “pure white, not a large expanse of it...”
 Simple geometrical figures

what do all these have in common”
 unity, regularity, simplicity
 makes them allies with the One rather than the Many

from this perspective the irrationality of the artist may appear as a higher sort of wisdom
 his madness as something approaching divine inspiration
 hard to know just how to take what Socrates says in the *Ion* about Ion’s inspiration

the *Phaedrus* is more serious and it is the classic source of inspiration theory
 the madness of the Muses in the poet
 the artist may have his own insight into the nature of ideal beauty
 so even if the poet does not have knowledge of what he is doing, he may have something valuable to say

seems to perhaps be a distinction between visual arts (beauty and measure)
 and poetry (madness and inspiration)

also perhaps not all art is false or illusory
 does perhaps distinguish a poet who knows the truth from one who doesn’t
 thus poetry can be true, but the problem in the *Republic* is that there is so little poetry that is true

one further suggestion in the *Laws*
 art is to be judged by its correctness

Morality

it is the statesman, in his role as legislator and educator, who should be most deeply concerned about the arts
 what role the arts of music, painting and poetry in the social scheme?
 Must inquire into their affects upon the audience
 their true value to the whole culture
 the ultimate justification of their right to exist

here again, there is divergent lines of thought in Plato

what is the peculiar nature of aesthetic enjoyment?

pleasure?

but not just quantity of pleasure

it must be pleasure of the right audience

but many works of art derive their enjoyableness from representations of people in highly emotional states

expressing emotions violently

there is thus an important effect upon character to be considered

there is the tendency to make people more emotional, less self-controlled

drama waters the growth of the passions which should be allowed to wither

the other half of the indictment of the arts in Book X of the *Republic*

dominant movement of Plato's thought about art is strongly moralistic

insists that the final evaluation of any work of art must take into account the ends and values of the whole society

to the common good, private enjoyments will often have to yield

thus very important to study the effects, both good and bad, that art may have on the citizen

some are good

imitating goodness and stimulating good behavior

but in examining dramatic poetry (tragedy?) nearly all existing works have evil tendency

when art is right, its power to do good is as great as its potential ill

Art is too serious to be left to the artist

the legislator must supervise the composition of works of art

the poet must submit his work to censors and obtain their approval

moreover, once the rules are laid out, there is to be no innovation

Aesthetics: From Classical Greece to the Present, Monroe C. Beardsley, 1966. The Macmillan Company, New York.