

The Carpenter as a Philosopher-Artist: a Critique of Plato’s Theory Mimesis

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Abstract

Plato’s theory of mimesis is expressed clearly and mainly in Plato’s Republic where he refers to his philosophy of Ideas in his definition of art, by arguing that all arts are imitative in nature. Reality according to him lies with the Idea, and the Form one confronts in this tangible world is a copy of that universal everlasting Idea. He poses that a carpenter’s chair is the result of the idea of chair in his mind, the created chair is once removed from reality and since a painter’s chair is imitation of a carpenter’s chair, it is twice removed from reality. Thus, the artist deals in illusion. Plato thus rejected imitative art on the foundation that it is a copy or imitation of the unreal. We may ask; if the Carpenter makes a chair, what does he imitate? And if he imitates reality, can we call him an artist of a kind? This article therefore argues following Plato’s analogy that carpentry is an art of a kind and a carpenter is capable of knowing reality as against the notion that only philosophers are suitable for such a task.

Introduction

This article seeks to expose the absurdity and ambiguity in Plato’s theory of forms and his foundational position on mimesis by arguing that the grounds provided for the rejection of imitative art are not sufficient when they are critically subjected to his own analogy. This article evaluates and establishes the position of the carpenter as an imitator, thereby showing his necessity and participation in Art as a philosopher-artist.

The salient questions include; what is the role of a carpenter in the acquisition of ideas? How did a carpenter acquire the ideas of a table and chair? If imitation is inferior as argued by Plato, what then is the task of the carpenter? Can we call him an imitator? If yes, does that make him an artist? Is the notion of the term ‘carpenter’ as used by Plato a metaphor? Is the carpenter/ craftsman capable of becoming a philosopher? if yes, how? What effect does this have on other workers such as

shoemakers, fashion designers, craftsmen, weavers, farmers, etc? The answer to these questions is thus the ultimate task of this paper.

Plato and Imitative Arts

The concept of mimesis lies at the core of the entire history of Western attempts to make sense of representational art and its values.¹ Plato is the first philosopher who inquired into the nature of imaginative arts and put forward theories which are both illuminating and provocative. As a poet himself, his dialogues are full of poetic beauty and dramatic qualities. Plato taught that the eternal soul existing before birth knows the essences of things, and the soul during life seeks to recollect what it knew in its former state through the apprehension of the Ideas or Forms — the immaterial essences of all that is real. Ideas are objective truths. They are substances with their own reality. The Ideas have their whole beings in themselves. The reality of an Idea does not flow into it from anything else. Ideas are first principles and absolute ultimate realities. The everyday world, Plato thinks, is a changing imperfect and vague imitation of the perfect beauty of universal concepts or the “World of Forms.” In his dialogue *Ion*, Plato debunks the classical ideal of the artist having an irrationally inspired intuition of the eternal world of the Ideal Forms.²

In his Book X of *The Republic*³, Plato argues that artists and poets threaten the stability of an ideal government, and the works of painters, musicians, and poets should be censored since they can irrationally inflame the passions of the populace. He thus rejected Imitative art on the basis that the imitative art is an inferior who marries an inferior, and has inferior offspring.⁴

Plato being a moralist disapproves of poetry because it is immoral. As a philosopher he disapproves of it because it is based in falsehood. To him, philosophy is better than poetry because the philosopher deals with idea/ truth, whereas the poet deals with what appears to him an illusion. He believed that truth of philosophy was more important than the pleasure of poetry.

According to him, all arts are imitative in nature and the foundation to this is traceable to *The Republic* where he argues that ‘ideas are the ultimate reality’. Things are

¹ Stephen Halliwell (2002), *The Aesthetics of Mimesis; Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, Oxford: Princeton University Press, p. vii

² Lee Archie & John G. Archie (eds) (2006), *Readings in the History of Aesthetics; An Open Source Reader Ver. 0.11*, p. 1

³ Plato. *The Republic*, 360 B.C. in *The Dialogues of Plato Translated by Benjamin Jowett*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1875.

⁴ Plato. *The Republic Book x*, line 603, b-c

conceived as ideas before they take practical shapes. This implies that idea is original and a thing is copy of that idea.

Plato in his attempt to refute imitative arts uses two simple physical objects, a bed and a table to convey his idea: “there are many beds and tables in the world, but there is only a single idea of a bed and of a table. The carpenter produces each of these two objects according to an idea, but it is not the idea itself that is produced.⁵ He further poses that a carpenter’s chair is the result of the idea of chair in his mind, and this is an implicative acknowledgement from Plato that a carpenter is capable of having ideas. And by so doing, we can safely conclude that the carpenter who has the ideas of table and chair was able to grasp the realities.

A good look at the position of the carpenter presupposes that the carpenter is capable of acquiring ideas at first hand. If this is the case, we may then ask; how is the carpenter able to grasp the idea of realities, the originals as against the notion that only philosophers are suitable for such task?⁶ This takes us to answering our first question dealing with the role of a carpenter in the acquisition of ideas.

Plato in his further argument holds that the created chair by the carpenter is once removed from reality. This implies that it is the first empirically created chair by the carpenter from the idea of chair, and since the chair is created the carpenter is once removed from reality which is the idea. By so doing, when a painter paints a chair, he is twice removed from reality because he paints from the created work of the carpenter who created from the idea. Plato thus opines that artist/ poet takes man away from reality rather than towards it. Thus artist deals in illusion.⁷

According to Plato, “The imitator or maker of the image knows nothing of true existence; he knows appearance only... The imitative art is an inferior who marries an inferior and has inferior offspring.”⁸ Evidently, there is already a contradiction observable. If ideas are true existence, then we cannot refute the notion that the carpenter as a maker of a chair knows something of true existence, since he makes the bed, chair and table from ideas. This consequently answers our question on how the carpenter acquired the ideas of a table and chair. We can however at this juncture safely argue that the carpenter is an imitator of a kind since he imitates ideas which are also the realities of things. This likewise answers the question whether we can call the carpenter an imitator. The carpenter is evidently an imitator and what he imitates is

⁵ Plato. The Republic Book x , line 596 b-c

⁶ Santiago Juan-Navarro (2007), The Power of Mimesis and The Mimesis of Power: Plato’s Concept of Imitation and His Judgment on The Value of Poetry and The Arts, STVDIVM. Revista de Humanidades, 13, p. 99

⁷ Plato. The Republic Book x , line 598 a,b

⁸ Lee Archie & John G. Archie (eds) (2006), Readings in the History of Aesthetics; An Open Source Reader Ver. 0.11, p. 12

cannot be said to be inferior. What then is the relationship linking the carpenter, philosopher and the ideas together in Plato's work?

The Carpenter, Philosopher and the World of Ideas

In Plato's theory of Forms or theory of ideas⁹, particular things possess some characteristics because they participate in the relevant Forms; for example, beautiful things are beautiful because they participate in the Form "beauty." So, particular things are only the less complete realization of the Form.

However, the Form is one, and particular things are many. Plato believed that only philosophers understand what the world is truly like. Access to the superior realm of the Ideas is the exclusive privilege of the philosopher.¹⁰ They discover the nature of reality by thinking rather than relying on their senses.¹¹ Philosophers are the people who are best suited to thinking about the Forms in this abstract way; ordinary people get led astray by the world as they grasp it through their senses. Because philosophers are good at thinking about reality, Plato believed they should be in charge and have all the political power.¹² This is evident in Plato's imaginary perfect society where philosophers would be at the top and would get a special education,¹³ sacrifice their own pleasures for the sake of the citizens they rule,¹⁴ where beneath them are the soldiers who were trained to defend the country, and likewise beneath the soldiers would be the workers.¹⁵

Hence, if those capable of grasping ideas from the world of forms are philosophers, and evidently, the carpenter is able to grasp ideas, we can safely conclude that the carpenter is a philosopher. From the foregoing, obtainable from Plato's classification of soul and in the long run a classification of a state, a carpenter/ craftsman is

⁹ Modern English textbooks and translations prefer "theory of Form" to "theory of Ideas", but the latter has a long and respected tradition starting with Cicero and continuing in German philosophy until present, and some English philosophers prefer this in English too. See W D Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas* (1951) and this (<http://www.philosophyprofessor.com/philosophies/platos-theory-of-forms.php>) reference site.

¹⁰ Santiago Juan-Navarro (2007), *The Power of Mimesis and The Mimesis of Power: Plato's Concept of Imitation and His Judgment on The Value of Poetry and The Arts*, *STVDIVM. Revista de Humanidades*, 13, p. 99

¹¹ Nigel Warburton (2011), *A Little History of Philosophy*, London: Yale University Press, p. 5

¹² Nigel Warburton (2011), p. 6

¹³ Plato. *The Republic Book iv*, line 441, e

¹⁴ Karsten Friis Johansen (1998), *A History of Ancient Philosophy; from The Beginnings to Augustine*, London: Routledge, p. 214

¹⁵ Nigel Warburton (2011), p. 6

classified as a non-philosopher belonging to the category of appetitive/ workers.¹⁶ How then is a carpenter able to grasp the realities if he is not suited for it? The implication of this is that Plato's classification of the state is unnecessary and at the same time unjust.

To avoid this implication, Plato needed to argue that ideas are classified in such a way that there are certain ideas that can be grasped by the three categories of the soul. But unfortunately, this is not the case.

However, Plato in Book IV has an objection to the carpenter being a philosopher by asking if the knowledge possessed by carpenters is enough to call a city wise and prudent?¹⁷ His response is that a city shouldn't be called wise, reason being that the carpenter has the knowledge that deliberates about how wooden things can be best.¹⁸ This response by Plato can only be meaningful if we are subjected to following his classification of the state without recourse to its foundation since his argument flows from his theory of justice which involves the each part of the state doing its own work dutifully.

Since there is no classification of any kind restricting the ideas we can acquire from the world of forms, therefore, restricting the carpenter solely to the acquisition of the ideas of a chair or a bed would be unjust. On another thought, it is not impossible that the carpenter leads his family well enough in his home. Such leadership role requires some leadership skills which must be from the idea of leadership and not carpentry.

That being said, there is a need to determine the relationship between the carpenter who is also a philosopher and imitative art.

Plato in Book X of *The Republic* opines that “imitation is only a kind of play or sport, not something to be taken seriously”¹⁹ and by so doing, imitative art is “an inferior who marries an inferior, and has inferior offspring”. The imitative artist... “imitates only that which appears to be good to the ignorant multitude”²⁰. Judging by the analogy of Plato on imitation and considering our establishment of the carpenter as an imitator of ideas or realities, which in turn makes him a philosopher, then the task of a philosopher in grasping an idea is a kind of game not to be taken seriously. Of course, this becomes an inherent contradiction in Plato's analogy.

¹⁶ Plato. *The Republic* Book ii , line 370, c-e

¹⁷ Plato, *The Republic* Book: IV, Line 428, b

¹⁸ Plato, *The Republic* Book: IV, Line 428, c

¹⁹ Plato. *The Republic* Book x ,Line 602, b-c

²⁰ Lee Archie & John G. Archie (eds) (2006), p. 25

In the Book VI of *The Republic*, Plato uses the term ‘imitation’ to refer to the behaviour of the philosopher:²¹ “As he looks upon and contemplates thing that are ordered and ever the same, that do no wrong, are not wronged by, each other, being all in rational order. He imitates them and tries to become like them as he can.”²² This further establishes the fact that the carpenter who is also a philosopher by implication imitates ideas which are also realities. What then do we call the end product of his imitation?

There have been convincing and satisfactory evaluations of carpentry involving woodworking and wood joinery as an art in itself. Wood Joinery is an art, whereby several pieces of wood are so fitted and joined together by straight line, squares, mitres or any bevel, that they shall seem one entire piece.²³ And this is the sole task of a carpenter, except we are bound to create categories of art in question which would also be unfair to our intellects.

Moreover, if some carpenters are imitators on the condition that they imitate ideas and some imitators at least are artists, which is true, though according to Plato, what they imitate is not true, we can by deduction arguably claim that some carpenters are artists.

Thus referring to the carpenter as an artist is not yet a contradiction, and likewise, to also hold that the carpenter is a philosopher-artist is not completely deniable.

Conclusion

Despite the debates amongst scholars regarding the abstractness in Plato’s theory of forms on one hand, and on the other hand the sentiments portrayed in the area of arts, classification of soul and the state in Plato’s political philosophy especially in the area of education and governance, this research in its attempt to divulge the logical inconsistencies in Plato’s *theory of forms* and his *theory of mimesis* has also shown that his basis for rejecting imitative art is unfair. Though this article also showed that Plato’s aesthetics has its roots buried deep in the soil of his metaphysics and epistemology, in as much as this article has been proposed as a refutation of Plato's argument, it would be wrong to conclude that the ancient notion of artistic imitation is to be rejected.

²¹ Hasan Baktir, The Concept Of Imitation in Plato and Aristotle (Aristo Ve Plato'da Taklit), Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi Sayı : 15 Yıl : 2003/2 (167-179 s.) p. 170

²² Plato, The Republic Book: VI, Line 500, c

²³ Joseph Moxon (2013), The Art of Joinery, Kentucky: Lost Art Press LLC, p. 1

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