

Critically assess Plato's objections to mimetic painting.

Art has had a long history of being perceived as imitation.¹ This is because some people consider art to be a copy of the subject matter. This also leads to people thinking that art is deceptive because it is a direct copy of the object they were painting. The long history of people thinking art was imitation was started by Plato.² Plato's idea that mimetic art is imitation and deceptive has been heavily criticised since ancient times.³ This is because people like Aristotle and Plotinus believed that art was a better representation of the universal principles than ordinary reality that Plato himself believed to be more realistic.⁴ This essay is going to examine Plato's ideas on forms and why he has objections towards mimetic painting and also whether Plato's objections are shared by everyone.

Plato believed in the idea of ideal forms. He believed that many qualities had ideal forms and that when these qualities appear in the world of sense they are only copies of the ideal form.⁵ An example of this that Plato gives is the ideal form of justice. Plato believed that in the world of sense the ideal form of justice was only imitated but never perfectly reproduced by just people or just acts. He believed that something is never as good as the model because it cannot reproduce what it was trying to reproduce exactly because it is only a copy.⁶ Plato did not believe, however, that only qualities had ideal forms, he also believed that objects had ideal forms. For example, he thought that there was a perfect form of a bed created by god.⁷ The perfect form is copied by the carpenter when he is making a bed. This means that the carpenter's bed is inferior to the perfect bed which is created by god because it is a copy. Furthermore, there is a third form which is that of the painted bed. The third form Plato perceived as being inferior not only to the perfect bed created by god, but

¹ Sheppard 1987: 5

² Sheppard 1987: 5

³ Karelis 1976: 315

⁴ Karelis 1976: 315

⁵ Plato Republic 597b

⁶ Plato Republic 597 b

⁷ Plato Republic 597b

also inferior to the carpenter's bed. This is because the third form is a copy of a copy because it copies the carpenter's bed which had already copied the perfect bed.⁸

Plato thought that mimetic art was the most inferior of the three forms. His opinion was that mimetic art was like holding up a mirror.⁹ He believed that this produces a deceptive illusion of reality. This is because he saw mimetic art as being an imitation of an imitation. Plato believed that the number of times something was copied, the further it got away from the ideal form which is why he thought that art was the most inferior of the forms. Plato believed that art was inferior because it was doubly removed from the true reality of the Platonic forms therefore art is deceptive and an illusion.¹⁰ This is why Plato himself objected to mimetic art because he thought that it was similar to lies. Plato also thought the same way about literature.

Even though Plato believed that mimetic art was deceptive, this does not mean that everyone agrees with him and has the same opinions on mimetic art. Even if one is to believe in Plato's theory of forms, it can be possible to give art a higher value than Plato did himself.¹¹ This is because there are people like Sheppard who believe that art is not an imitation of objects in the world of sense and experience in which we live but that the artist imitates the ideal form itself.¹² Sheppard writes that this would lead to the painted bed not being a copy of the carpenter's bed but a copy of the perfect bed. This would also lead to the painted bed being equal in reality and also value to the carpenter's bed. The reason for this is that the artist perceives the perfect form within his mind's eye so therefore both the painted bed and the carpenter's bed are only copies of the perfect form which

⁸ Plato Republic 597 b

⁹ Plato Republic 596 d-e

¹⁰ Plato Republic 596 d-e

¹¹ Sheppard 1987: 6

¹² Sheppard 1987: 6

makes the carpenter's and the painted bed equal.¹³ This idea can lead to a theory that is further away from Plato's original form because the artist imitates the general idea of a bed that he has in his mind instead of copying the actual bed made by the carpenter.¹⁴

I personally agree with Sheppard's theory when it comes to mimetic art and its place within the theory of forms. I think that Sheppard's theory is plausible because if the carpenter is able to perceive the ideal form of the bed within his mind's eye so that he can copy it then why did Plato think that the artist was not copying the ideal form within his mind's eye instead of copying the carpenter's bed.

To conclude, I believe that Plato's idea of mimetic art being deceptive and an illusion is flawed. This is because in my opinion the artist like the carpenter copies from the ideal form within his mind's eye. Whereas Plato believed that the painted bed was a copy of a copy because it was copying the carpenter's bed which itself was copying the ideal form. But if the carpenter according to Plato is able to copy the ideal form then there should be no reason why the artist do the exact same thing and copy the ideal form. Therefore Plato's objections against mimetic art are not shared by everyone including me.

¹³Sheppard 1987: 6

¹⁴ Sheppard 1987: 6

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