

Plato's objections to mimetic painting: a critical analysis

Plato's objections to mimetic painting are grounded in his broader metaphysical and epistemological theories, particularly the Theory of Forms and the Divided Line. In *Republic* Book X, he argues that painting is three times removed from the truth, encouraging illusion and emotional indulgence rather than rational inquiry. This essay critically analyses the key arguments Plato makes against mimetic painting, evaluating their internal consistency and broader implications, before contrasting his views with Aristotle's more affirmative account of mimesis and artistic value.

In Book X of *The Republic*, Plato's Socrates discusses the nature of mimetic painting concerning his broader *Theory of Forms*. For Plato, mimetic art, including painting, is the imitation (*mimēsis*) of physical objects, which are themselves imitations of eternal Forms. The Forms are ideal, unchanging originals of all things, existing in the intelligible realm, from which the material world derives.¹ Using the example of a bed, he explains that the Form of the bed exists in this higher realm, the carpenter constructs a physical bed based on it, and the painter reproduces the physical bed's appearance. Thus, the painter's work is an imitation of an imitation.²

Plato's mirror analogy reinforces this view: holding a mirror up to the world reflects everything indiscriminately but conveys no understanding of the objects themselves.³ Mimetic painting, then, imitates the visible realm without engaging the intellect or the essence of the things it represents. As McAleer notes, the painter is concerned not with reality but with how things appear, which distances painting from truth and reason.⁴

Plato's objection to mimetic painting rests on the idea that it leads the soul further away from truth and knowledge. His Divided Line analogy in *Republic* Book VI illustrates a hierarchy of reality, where the highest form of knowledge (*epistēmē*) concerns the intelligible realm of unchanging Forms, while the lower levels depend on sensory perception. It is through the process of dialectical reasoning that the soul moves beyond opinion and perceives the actual reality of the Forms. At the lowest level of this hierarchy lies the realm of illusion (*eikasia*), which includes images, shadows, and reflections. These are mere appearances that are furthest removed from truth.⁵ Mimetic painting belongs to this lowest level: it deals only in surface appearances, and wrongly assumes to represent reality when, in fact, it reflects illusion.⁶

¹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. from the New Standard Greek Text, with Introduction, by C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), VI.507b–511e.

² Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (2004), X.596a–598a.

³ Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (2004), X.596d–e.

⁴ Sean McAleer, *Plato's Republic: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 277.

⁵ Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (2004), VI.509d–511e.

⁶ Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (2004), X.597a–598b.

Rowe explains that, for Plato, the part of the soul misled by appearances must differ from the rational part that "relies on measure and calculation"⁷ and therefore mimetic art "will be a low-grade mistress, consorting with the low-grade".⁸ If people are deceived into mistaking images for reality, they are led away from true knowledge and philosophical development. Moreover, painters imitate objects without understanding their function or purpose, which renders their representation shallow and potentially misleading. Sean McAleer comments that "paintings and poems are too metaphysically thin, too much like the shadows and reflections one sees on the wall of the Cave."^{9 10}

Plato also argues that mimetic art stirs the emotions and undermines reason. It "nurtures and waters them, when they should be dried up, and establishes them as rulers in us"¹¹ For Plato, this is dangerous because emotion belongs to the lowest part of the soul, opposite reason, and is associated with the realm of illusion in the Divided Line.

Plato's objections to mimetic painting are consistent within his metaphysical framework. Given his prioritisation of reason and truth, it is logical that he would reject painting as deceptive and misleading. The idea that illusion can be mistaken for reality remains relevant today in cases such as fake news and conspiracy theories, where misleading representations shape public perception.¹² As Plato feared, illusions can have serious consequences when used to influence society.

However, Plato's objections to mimetic painting rely on certain assumptions. One of the most significant is the implication that all painting imitates a physical object. This excludes the possibility that an artist may paint by working from what Plato elsewhere calls the "mind's eye" - the same inner vision by which craftsmen are said to replicate the Form of their object. Anne Sheppard argues that if an artist works from their mind's eye, they might be said to access the Form directly, putting them on the same level as the carpenter. Furthermore, Sheppard writes, Plato overlooks art that doesn't copy physical objects, such as abstract painting.¹³ Plato also assumes that painters lack practical knowledge of their

⁷ Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (2004), X.603a.

⁸ Christopher Rowe, 'Plato: Aesthetics and Psychology', in *From the Beginning to Plato*, ed. by C. C. W. Taylor (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 406.

⁹ McAleer, *Plato's Republic: An Introduction* (2020) p. 277.

¹⁰ Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (2004), VII.514a–520a. Though not expanded on here, the Cave Analogy in Book VII metaphorically describes ignorance as prisoners mistaking shadows on a wall for reality. He describes prisoners chained inside a cave, watching shadows cast on a wall by unseen objects. Believing the shadows to be real, they remain trapped in ignorance. The analogy illustrates the deceptive power of appearances. Like the shadows, mimetic painting offers only superficial images of reality, reinforcing illusion rather than leading toward truth.

¹¹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (2004), X.606d.

¹² Seán Radcliffe, 'Plato's Cave and Social Media', *Philosophy Now* (2024).

https://philosophynow.org/issues/165/Platos_Cave_and_Social_Media [accessed 11 May 2025].

¹³ Anne Sheppard, *Aesthetics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 7-8

subjects, which seems questionable.¹⁴ A lack of functional production doesn't mean a painter doesn't understand an object's appearance, structure, or meaning.

The greatest weakness in Plato's argument lies not in its content but in its form. While condemning *mimēsis*, he relies heavily on mimetic techniques to present his own ideas. The *Republic* is structured as a dramatic dialogue, complete with characterisation and metaphor. As Voula Tsouna observes, Plato's own philosophical method depends on a mimetic mode of communication, making his attack on *mimēsis* inherently self-undermining.¹⁵

Aristotle offers a fundamentally different view of *mimēsis* in his *Poetics*, arguing that imitation is both natural and educative. "Imitation is natural to man from childhood," he writes, "and through imitation he learns his earliest lessons."¹⁶ Unlike Plato, Aristotle does not view mimetic art as misleading; instead, he sees it as a means of engaging with reality and uncovering universal truths. In direct contrast to Plato, Aristotle argues that the emotions stirred by art are not dangerous but are instead purged through *catharsis*.¹⁷ This process makes emotional engagement with art constructive rather than corrupting. From this perspective, imitation enhances knowledge, serving as a valid means of understanding reality and human nature.

While I understand Plato's critique of poets due to their influence in ancient Greek culture, I disagree with his concerns about mimetic painting. Poets were the primary educators of the time, shaping public perceptions of history, morality, and the divine. In that context, Plato's mistrust of their influence is understandable. However, if his concern was truly with truth, it would be more appropriate to demand greater rigour from politicians, historians, and religious leaders, rather than targeting art itself. As an advocate of reason, Plato saw mimetic painting as trivial or distracting, but I believe this view is too limited. I agree with Aristotle that mimetic painting can express universal truths and enhance human understanding.

I do agree with Plato's scepticism toward sensory perception. Modern cognitive psychology shows that the senses are often unreliable and prone to distortion. However, this does not justify the rejection of all mimetic art. I also reject the Theory of Forms and the structure of the Divided Line. The idea that we live in a shadow-world removed from a more "real" realm of Platonic Forms raises more problems than it solves. Where are these Forms situated, and who defines them? Plato's framework feels overly abstract and disconnected from human

¹⁴ Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (2004), X. 598c.

¹⁵ Voula Tsouna, 'Mimēsis and the Platonic Dialogue', *Rhizomata*, 1.1 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1515/rhiz-2013-0001> [accessed 6 May 2025].

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by S. H. Butcher (c. 335 BCE; repr. Cambridge, MA: The Internet Classics Archive, MIT, n.d.) <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html> [accessed 5 May 2025].

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b24–28.

experience. Similarly, the opposition between imagination and truth is reductive. In my opinion, imagination and emotion are not obstacles to knowledge but central to how we understand the world.

Plato's objections to mimetic painting align with his philosophy but are ultimately unconvincing due to flawed metaphysical assumptions and a narrow view of knowledge and art. Based on the Theory of Forms and the Divided Line, his argument establishes a strict hierarchical view of reality, dismissing painting as imitations of imitations. Although coherent, his theory excludes abstract art, assumes painters lack knowledge of their subjects, and treats imagination and emotion as inherently inferior.

I acknowledge the strength of Plato's scepticism toward sensory perception and the dangers of illusion. These concerns remain relevant, especially in a contemporary context where misleading images can shape public belief. But this does not justify the rejection of mimetic painting as a whole.

Plato also overlooks the possibility that painting can offer its own philosophical value. Aristotle presents a more generous view of mimesis as a natural and meaningful activity. He argues that imitation reveals shared insights and emotional reactions to art bring catharsis. While Plato's views on truth and reality provoke valuable debate and deeper thinking, I am more drawn to Aristotle's inclusive approach to the value of mimetic arts in society.

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