

Critically assess Plato's objections to mimetic painting

Art is a creative activity that so many enjoy, it is a way to express yourself, and create things that do not exist in reality. But is art truly good? Does it help people thrive or does it create illusion and mislead people away from the path of wisdom? In this essay I will be looking at this dilemma, specifically at Plato's objections to mimetic art. I will be providing a critical assessment of Plato's main arguments and sharing my views on why art is important within society in the second half of this essay after highlighting Plato's key objections in the first section.

Before I can go into an in depth analysis to ensure my critical assessment of Plato's objections is educated and concise, I first must determine what is meant by the term mimetic painting. Cambridge dictionary describes the word 'mimetic' as 'representing or imitating something, especially in art.' (*Cambridge Dictionary*). This means that 'mimetic art' is a copy of something in reality, this is an important definition to remember as Plato's objections rely heavily on the fact art is an imitation of an imitation.

One of Plato's main objections stems from his theory of forms, which puts forth the notion that nothing is perfect within our reality, there is no such thing as a perfect circle, a perfect tree but perfect versions of objects in our reality exist within the realm of forms, a realm that we cannot reach. Plato explains that everything in our reality is an imitation of the real object in the realm of forms. 'For everything in the real world, there is a "perfect" image somewhere in the world of Forms.' (Matthias). Plato goes on to argue that since everything in our reality is an imitation of the forms, then art is an imitation of that imitation therefore a painting which simply imitates the physical world is a copy of a copy, hence it is twice removed from reality. In Plato's mind this makes the painting inferior as it is a more diluted copy of the perfection that is within the world of forms.

One of Plato's most outward and seemingly offensive objections to mimetic painting is that it corrupts the soul. Since art impacts the emotions, Plato argues that it is ethically dangerous. This conclusion also derives from the fact that art according to Plato is irrational which also ties to the emotional element as the majority of the emotions that are raised are that of an irrational nature, such as fear and desire. Plato argued that by having these emotions stimulated we undermine reason and self-control. Due to this Plato advocated for a strict enforced censorship of art in his 'ideal city' as a way to ensure that such irrational emotions are not overstimulated.

The final point that I will be mentioning before I go into the critical assessment is that art contains little to no knowledge and instead promotes illusion. This to Plato is a significant issue as knowledge is vital especially in regards to philosophy. He argues that art promotes illusion as it heavily appeals to the senses and emotions which means it does not promote knowledge but instead illusion. He explains that an illusion is created when the viewer mistakes what is contained in the painting as reality, thus he believed that this misunderstanding would lead to ignorance rather than building wisdom and knowledge especially around the forms. 'Neither painter nor poet have any knowledge of what they imitate. Pictures and poems are secondhand, unreal and tell us nothing about life' (Plato).

This quote supports this notion, however it seems that Plato is calling the artists uneducated since they do not know what they are imitating, which could be due to the artist being driven by emotion rather than reason but it can also be seen as ignorance on the part of Plato.

Over the years many philosophers and academics alike have discovered problems within Plato's objections to mimetic painting. In this section of the essay I will explore said criticisms and add my own opinions and insights into why Plato's objections can be deemed as somewhat problematic.

My first criticism, and one of the most important ones, is that Plato is misunderstanding and minimising artistic value. Art is often seen as an insight into the soul, a way to interpret what not only the artist is feeling but also the audience as art is subjective. By Plato claiming that art is simply an imitation, he is minimising the beauty, story and truths that are hidden within it. During Plato's objections he compares and holds art within the same category as Philosophy and or science, which is where his interpretation that mimetic art is problematic. As this conception, would cause art to seem lesser than that of philosophy or science when in actuality is on equal ground. Many philosophers have highlighted this point, for example Aristotle emphasized the importance of art, specifically theatre, as it can reveal universal truths through representations that the audience can either relate to or be entertained by.

Art can also be seen as educational especially in modern day, as paintings are often used to tell stories and can be used as a communication across different cultures, Images and paintings have been used throughout history to communicate. For instance, cave paintings are vital when we are trying to understand early human life and can teach us important details and facts about the past that we would never have known without them.

Plato's view of art is also rather two dimensional which is far from the truth, as if art were simply imitations of objects and people we see in day to day life, there would be no such works that reflect unrealistic or surrealistic art. For example, we can use the work of Salvador Dali as an example, specifically his painting; 'The Persistence of Memory'. This renowned painting features a number of melting clocks which would simply not happen in reality, even if it did, the watches melting would not occur in the way depicted by Dali since they defy physics, therefore we do not see such surrealism in reality. Whilst there may be some degree of inspiration behind the contents within the painting, such as the clocks and the landscape, there is a degree of creativity that comes from the artist, which is the melted and warped nature of the clocks. Since we have real world evidence of this surreal/unrealistic type of art by artists such as Dali, Plato's objection that art is simply mimetic is proven false, whilst the art is still some degree of mimetic whether that be through inspiration, it still holds deeper value which Plato is dismissing.

Another criticism that many philosophers raise is that Plato is focusing too much on rationalism, whilst having a focus on rationalism is good especially for that of a philosopher he is unfortunately viewing art from a perspective of bias as he is trying to perceive art from a purely rational way. We can link the problem with this back to my previous point about art being educational, as some paintings can be intellectually stimulating or even morally enriching as art can provide an insight into parts of our being that we did not know about and can teach us more about ourselves and the world around us.

The final criticism that I will be analysing is the view that Plato's notion that art should be censored, can be deemed repressive especially in modern society. As we can see similar debates to his own in modern debates such as propaganda. If we were to repress those who partake in the arts, we would find ourselves in a much more dilute and depressive world where people would not feel capable or free to express their creative sides. Another issue is that in Plato's time, education would not have been accessible to all and many would learn through creative means, therefore if art was censored then there would be even more of a lack of education then there already was.

Furthermore, whilst Plato's objections of mimetic art are compelling upon first glance, the very notion that art is simply mimetic and should not be partaken in due to it being an imitation of an imitation is both problematic and somewhat offensive, as this notion dismisses and underestimates the complexity, creativity and emotional value of art by minimising it to be just a diluted imitation of an imitation. Also the notion to enforce censorship around art is an abuse of power as it would repress the population from reaching their full potential.

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