

MIMESIS AND PLATO'S DIALECTIC

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In the history of aesthetics Plato's concept of mimesis has undergone much transformation and misunderstanding. This treatment of Plato's discussion of the arts has culminated in a rejection of the traditional art imitation theory by modern aesthetics. I think this rejection is unfortunate for two reasons; it is based on an interpretation of Plato's thought which could not stand up to sound Platonic scholarship, and it deprives contemporary aesthetics of much that is of value in Plato's treatment of the arts.

In this paper I will analyse Plato's concept of mimesis in terms of the dialectic. I wish to show that, like other key concepts in Plato's thought, mimesis can only be understood after engaging in the dialectical process, which was specifically designed by Plato to elicit various shades of meaning. This does not mean that mimesis has no meaning, but it does mean that in order to grasp the full significance of the concept, one must be able to see the various possibilities of its uses. Plato accomplishes this goal with his dialectical method because it involves a process of not only abstraction of a Form or generic principle, but also the process of concretion. The abstraction phase is a combination or process of generalization performed by the intellect upon particular concepts. The concretion phase is the intellect's movement by division or inference toward a particular way that a Form is in fact combined with other forms and which defines a particular object. This often neglected side of the dialectic in Plato defines the specific differences of an instance of a Form. The abstraction phase defines what something is, while the concretion phase differentiates the object from what it is not. Plato considered this kind of definition an important part of dialectical inquiry, so we can assume that the Platonic concept of mimesis must involve an ability to determine in what sense what Plato is describing is collectively mimetic, while at the same time inferring in what sense it is not mimetic. This is not a contradiction, because the point is simply that in one context Plato may use the concept in one of its possible meanings, while in another context he may legitimately use the concept in another of its possible meanings. In both cases Plato would be using the same concept, but its specific application distinguishes the sense of the concept from other senses. Plato defines his concepts by his dialectical method in his dialogues, so we could not expect to fully grasp his notion of mimesis, or imitation, unless we had undergone the dialectical excursions of the dialogues. Only then would we have a thorough understanding of Plato's concept of mimesis, especially as it functions in his philosophy of the arts.

Unfortunately, many of Plato's commentators have failed to define Plato's concepts by his own method of definition. The results, of course, is usually an attempt to apply the meaning of mimesis as it is used in one context to other contexts where it is inappropriate and misleading. This seems to have been especially true of interpreters of Plato's critique of the arts. Instead of allowing Plato's dialectic to expand and contract the concept of mimesis, they have often frozen its meaning into a narrow and univocal term, devoid of its Platonic fluidity and poetic symbolism. Since the dialectical method of definition is important for my thesis, I think a closer look at this method is in order.

In the *Republic*, Plato states that education in the sciences is a preparation for dialectic and is necessary to make the Guardians become dialecticians (531-2). Plato has Socrates say that the aim of the dialectic is "the point at which reflection can take a comprehensive view of the mutual relations and affinities which bind all the sciences together" (531). These two comments suggest some important features of Plato's concept of the dialectic as a method of definition and inquiry. The method of the sciences contains the methodical germ which will achieve its greatest use in the hands of the dialectician. The dialectician attempts to synthesize the achievements of the sciences in order to grasp a vision of the organic whole. The unifying thread in the proper development of this ideal inquirer is the method employed at every stage in his growth.

Since Plato considered himself an educator of Guardians, we can assume that the *Dialogues* are educative devices attempting to instill in the reader a sensitivity for the dialectic, which, as devices employing a method, are themselves effective uses of it.

Plato's commitment to this method seems quite strong. If he was consistent in his application of it, then we can assume that his own terms and theories must be explained and defined in terms of his own method of explanation and definition. I think this is especially true of his more basic concepts like mimesis, which extends in use from explaining the superficial mimicry of drama to the metaphorical explanation of the imitation of Forms by particular objects. Mimesis, then, must be seen as a concept which, like other important concepts, expands and contracts with the movement of the dialectic. An understanding of the indeterminate concept comes only after the specific and determinate uses have been "collected" into a concept for similarities and then "divided" into individual instances. A definition of mimesis, or any other concept, is thus the end result of the dialectic, and not a preliminary step for using it. I think Plato revealed the broader meanings of his concepts in this step by step, question and answer method.

The Platonic dialectic seems to have had its source in Socrates' use of

the term. Socrates said that the word "dialectic" came from the practice of men meeting together to deliberate by laying apart the things they discussed according to their kinds.¹ With Socrates and Plato, dialectic came to mean the true logical method of oral discussion, as opposed to false methods. It also seems to have meant the result of the true method, or what we could imagine would be the result if the true method had been carried out completely through all branches of knowledge.

In the first of these senses "the word has passed from meaning simply discourse to meaning discourse with the object of attaining the truth, and this discourse may be carried on by words between two persons or be a 'dialogue silently carried on by the soul with itself' (*Sophist* 263e)."² For Plato this sense of discourse is well suited for illustrating the true method of gaining knowledge. He thought that the only way to attain truth is to advance step by step and each step must be made by our own thinking before we go on to the next. For this purpose the process of question and answer is particularly appropriate.

Plato's confidence in this method explains why he has such a distrust for the written word.³ Plato considered the written word inferior to the spoken, because it cannot actively engage in the dialectic. A book, for example, cannot answer the questions that arise in the reader's mind. Accordingly, it would be a mistake to think of education as putting something into the mind as if it were a box, because, for Plato, learning is a process of eliciting from the soul what, in a sense, it already knows. It is a process where the soul which learns must itself be active in thought. Such active thought is also necessary to generate appropriate questions and to give appropriate answers. The same principle applies to thinking of the individual mind. If we are to learn, we must not simply put the facts of a book into our minds, we must dialectically question and answer ourselves.

Plato seems to have thought that his method, if carried out to its ideal end, would reveal reality as an articulated whole. This is an organic whole of parts in which each part is only understood by reference to both the other parts and to the whole. Each part exhibits on a small scale the fundamental characteristics of the whole and the whole exhibits on a large scale the fundamental characteristics of each part. Accordingly, Plato tells us (*Philebus* 16 c-d) that in any inquiry, we must approach things expecting to find such an order. Every organism is a one in many, and each part can only be conceived with reference to the whole. The whole is also present in the parts, so that to understand the whole, we must not look at the one alone. But we must not look at the many either, because the interdependence always points towards both. It is this unity and multiplicity prevailing all things and concepts that gives rise to the dialectic as a method of inquiry. Wherever we look at the world it presents itself as a

one in many. Wherever there is something of which we predicate being, we always find that more than one thing may be predicated of it. Also, everything is either a particularized form of some generic form, principle, or law, or it is itself an abstract principle or property of things. It may exist in many different instances, but it maintains its unity throughout its diversity. A method of acquiring knowledge and of defining concepts must recognize this fundamental fact. Accordingly, dialectic, as a method of knowledge and definition, will be a double process consisting of combination and division (*Phaedrus* 265-6). Any truth will always be a one in many, and the way to realize it will be to start from many instances and gradually collect the unity which prevades them all. Then we can divide this unity into its many instances. Division involves beginning with a given conception, and then following it out to its particular applications of occurrences in order to see how the one particularizes itself in the many. Combination is inducing or collecting the form out of many objects of sense, or at a higher level, of other forms. Division is inferring how the form appears in a number of particular objects of sense or combination of forms.

Even though this is essentially the scientific method applied to objects of sense and particular concepts, it is important to note that, for Plato, this method applies to the metaphysical level too. The properly educated advanced dialectician must employ this method in order to grasp Good, or how each form is itself related to other forms, and ultimately how all the forms of things are connected together and make the universe one organic system.

What is especially important about Plato's dialectic is that he thinks it should be employed at every level of education. It is not limited to the Guardians. They engage in true dialectic, but all others who fall short of such intellectual realization must employ the method if they are to grow in the right direction. Socrates thus says to Glaucon "if you should ever be charged in actual fact with the upbringing and education of these imaginary children of yours . . . you will make a law that they must devote themselves especially to the discipline which will make them masters of the technique of asking and answering questions" (*Rep.* 534).

We may look upon Plato's dialogues as sometimes engaging in elementary dialectic and at other times as engaging in advanced dialectic. In its elementary form Plato is attempting to engage his readers in the process, mostly by sorting out concepts and definitions by collection and division. At the advanced level the dialectician is thinking about how the Form can and cannot combine and divide. This is essentially a study of the Good or the organic whole of the universe. We must keep in mind, then, that a specific use of a concept (e.g., mimesis) is a

particularization or concretion of that concept, and that it has other very different uses in other contexts. A definition of mimesis is not a preliminary step to reading Plato, but is the end result of his dialectical process. The dialogues provide the dialectical context whereby Plato's key concepts gradually take on meaning, and the more one studies them, the clearer they become and the more they gradually unfold the nature of the reality they are supposed to reveal.

Plato uses the presentation of quandaries and their resolutions as an important part of his dialectical method. When Plato is discussing the inferiority of the "mimetic" arts he is clearly rejecting their "imitativeness." But the less than perfect states "imitate" Justice, and Plato praises them for their high degree of "imitativeness." In the one context "imitativeness" is bad, while in the other it is good. Both uses of the term express a similar generic meaning, but they also are very different species of the genus. In collecting the meaning of the generic concept it is easy to see a similarity in the various uses of "imitation." But Plato deliberately presents us with such contradictory divisions of the term because they provoke thought by generating questions and implanting a wonder about the explanation that would resolve the quandary. The contradictions in the progress of the dialectic perform the same function in stimulating thought as do contradictory perceptions. This was the point of Socrates saying "that reflection is provoked when perception yields a contradictory impression, presenting two opposite qualities with equal clearness, no matter whether the object be distant or close at hand. When there is no such contradiction, we are not encouraged to reflect... So it is natural... for the mind to invoke the help of reason with its power of calculation, to consider whether any given message it receives refers to a single thing or two" (*Rep.* 523-524). Plato often resolves such puzzles by the distinctions of reason.

The importance of the dialectical method in Plato's thought and writings cannot be overemphasized. In fact, I believe that all of the dialogues must be read as actual exercises in dialectical inquiry for the reader. Plato has us read not simply fiction as straightforward narration, but a dialogue of question and answer which forces the reader to become a participant by thinking through the dialogue. The *Republic*, for example, attempts to engage the reader in a dialectical process designed to bring him to an understanding of Justice. It would be a mistake, then, to overlook the presence of this method at work in the dialogues, and to assign univocal meanings to Plato's basic concepts. Just as there is no simple definition of Justice, there is no simple definition of mimesis.⁴ Plato distrusted language and deliberately avoided technical definitions because of their inadequacies. We should, therefore, distrust definitions of mimesis,

because the word "mimesis," as Plato uses it, is at no time established in a literal meaning or limited to a specific subject matter.⁵ It is sometimes used to differentiate some human activities from others, or some part of them from another part, or one aspect of an act from another. It is also used in a broader sense to include all human activities. It is even sometimes applied to all natural and cosmic processes. Like most of the terms that figure prominently in the dialogues, "mimesis" as a term is left universal in scope and indeterminant in its application. The dialectical method is used to determine its meaning in particular contexts, sometimes bringing out a meaning according to which any given statement in which it may occur is true, sometimes, with equal force, the meanings in which the statement is false. Often both ends are accomplished in the same dialogue. Because Plato used the term to express concepts as diverse as mimicry and participation we should be alert to the dialectic in determining the sense in which he uses it.

But to require Plato to conform to an Aristotelian conception of ideal definitions in which words or terms are assigned univocal meanings, would distort his inquiry and make nonsense of much of his dialectic. In Aristotle's usage, not only does the term "mimesis" have a different definition from what it had for Plato, but, more importantly, Aristotle's method of defining terms and his manner of using them is much different from Plato's devices in the dialogues. For Plato the term may undergo a series of gradations of meaning, developed in a series of analogies. For Aristotle the term is restricted to a single literal meaning. With Plato an exposition of "mimesis" as a term involves an excursion through all the dimensions of his thought. For Aristotle, however, it is relevant only to one restricted portion of philosophy, and it never extends beyond it. For Plato the dialectic is a device by which words, normally opaque, may be made translucent so that reality which is beyond words may shine through them.

Even though the dialectic is a device formulated in terms of words and conceived for the manipulation of words, it is the ideal form which is held constant and to which the attention of the mind is directed. The word varies and should be discarded once it has served its function as a stage in the progress to truth. In the *Cratylus* (439 a-b) Socrates says that things can be learned either through names or through themselves, but although one may learn from the name, which is a copy, it is better to learn from the truth both the reality itself and whether the copy is properly made. The end of Plato's dialectical process may, in a sense, be the definitions of words, but any word may have many definitions. For Aristotle, however, the definition of terms and the establishment of principles are the starting points of the scientific enterprise. Aristotle recognized that words may have many meanings and he frequently explains the divergent

senses of a given word. But in science he insisted that the terms need to be univocal.

A term is a word plus a meaning for Aristotle. Consequently, although the Aristotelian sciences are distinguished according to their subject matters, it is the term which is held constant. But a given object, under different aspects isolated by different terms, may move from science to science. For example, as a mind, man would be a subject for psychology; as an animal, a subject for biology; as a natural thing, a subject for physics; as a moral agent, a subject for ethics; as a tragic actor, a subject for poetics. But Plato may ask of a given thing in different contexts whether or not it is an imitation, and he may arrive at two answers without inconsistency, that is the thing is an imitation and it is not an imitation.

In doing this Plato does not violate any logical principles. He does however, allow terms like "mimesis" to vary in specific meaning according to the fluidity of the dialectic. It would be difficult, therefore, to attribute to Plato an aesthetics based on a modern view of imitation. What is needed for an adequate understanding of his philosophy of the arts is a look at the role mimesis plays in the various aspects of his thought. Thus the goodness or badness of imitative arts only makes sense in the context of Plato's metaphysics, epistemology, and concept of human nature. If these are ignored there is no way to avoid the oversimplification so often attributed to him.

NOTES

¹ See R. L. Nettleship, *Lectures on Plato's Republic* (London: Macmillan, 1906), p. 279.

² *Ibid.*, p. 280.

³ See *Phaedrus* 275c sqq.

⁴ Modern philosophers of the "analytic tradition" are fond of refuting a view of meaning they mistakenly attribute to Plato. E. Nagel and R. Brandt, for example, claim that the referential theory of meaning "has a complicated history going back to Plato. It assumes that linguistic expressions are by and large proper names representing particular objects, and it equates the meaning of an expression with that which it supposedly names, and that to which it supposedly refers." *Meaning and Knowledge*, 1965, p. 4. It is ironic that the theory of meaning I am defending for Plato bears a striking resemblance to the ordinary language view held in opposition to the traditional referential theory attributed to Plato. It is also interesting that, although Plato shares the analyst's view of language, he does not make the mistake of reading the relativism and nominalism of language back into the world.

⁵ F. E. Peters in his *Greek Philosophical Terms* notes at least six major uses of the term by Plato, pp. 118-9.

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