PLATO'S OBJECTIONS TO MIMETIC ART

Admirers of Plato are usually lovers of literary art, for Plato wrote dramatic dialogues rather than didactic volumes and did so with rare literary skill. You would expect such a philosopher to place a high value on literary art, but Plato actually attacked it, along with other forms of what he called *mimesis*, and argued that most of it should be banned from the ideal society that he described in the *Republic*. What objections did Plato have with *mimesis*? Do those objections apply to the sort of art we value today? Are they well-founded? These are the questions that I shall be discussing in my talk today.

It has been said that Plato's objections were to poetry, not to all sorts of mimetic art.[1] I think this is wrong. The Greek word for poetry, poiÆsiw, applies to other kinds of making as well, and the sort of making--the sort of mimetic production--Plato objected to included not just poetry, but painting, sculpture, and even representational music. To understand why Plato objected to all making of this kind (or almost all of it) we must pay careful attention to the context in which his objections arose. It is only by doing this that we can gain an accurate grasp of what the fuss is all about.

Plato's attack on mimesis takes place in two different parts of the *Republic*. The first and most revealing discussion takes place in books two and three. Book one is an introduction to the dialogue, and in book two Plato's argument begins in earnest. His basic subject is "the good life"--the best way for a human being to live. Contrary to the view of Thrasymachus, one of the characters in book one, Plato thinks that the good life is not an egoistic, amoral enjoyment of power and sensual satisfactions but a moderate life of reason and justice. To support his view--to show that justice is essential to the good life--he must say what justice is, but Socrates, his spokesman in the dialogue, always disavows having knowledge of such things. What Socrates can do is seek the relevant knowledge by a dialectical investigation in which his companions play a vital role: If he puts questions to them in the right way, they will eventually be able to tell *him* what justice is. He undertakes this investigation in book two, and before long he introduces the subject of art.

The transition from justice to art proceeds as follows. Justice can exist, Socrates says, in a community as well as in an individual person, but it is easier to discern its nature in a community, for a community is larger and open to view. Socrates therefore begins with the notion of social justice; when this is understood, the notion of personal justice (justice in a person) can be worked out readily, he believes. Social justice is not a mere matter of convention, in his opinion; it is rooted in the nature of things. An important clue to its nature is the basic purpose for which a city (a pÒliw) exists. People form cities, he says, because no single person is self-sufficient. To live (at least with any success) a person must have food, clothing, shelter, and protection from animals and other humans. These needs cannot be reliably satisfied without the help of others. Different people have different talents; and when these talents are pooled, the needs of all can be satisfied. If each person makes the contribution he or she is best fitted to making and receives in turn an appropriate benefit, the society will fulfill the function for which it was created. Such a society will be just. Social justice consists in an arrangement by which benefits and burdens are appropriately distributed: each person makes an appropriate contribution and receives appropriate benefits.

What benefits and burdens are appropriate in a just society? Socrates views the benefits very narrowly: the aim is to satisfy basic needs, and needs, for him, are necessities, not luxuries. He doesn't himself approve of wealth and luxury; he thinks they are bad for individual people and bad for societies. In fact, in summing up his vision of a healthy and just society he enthusiastically describes a community of back-to-nature vegetarians who will produce grain and wine and clothes and shoes. They will build their own houses, and, for food, they will make flour from wheat and meal from barley, baking the former and kneading the latter. They will then put their "excellent cakes and loaves upon reeds or clean leaves" after which, "reclining on a bed of strewn briony and myrtle leaves, they will feast together with their children, drinking of their wine" (372b). But eating off leaves and sleeping on a thatch of vines and bushes is not everyone's idea of a fortunate life. One of his interlocutors objects, saying "If the people you are talking about are not to be miserable, they should recline on proper couches and dine at a table, with the cooked food and delicacies that people are accustomed to having" (372d,e). Socrates does not insist upon his aus-

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[1] See Alexander Nehamas, "Plato on Imitation and Poetry in *Republic* 10," in *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the Arts*, ed. Julius Moravcsik and Philip Temko (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982), pp. 47-78.

tere ideal but emphasizes that if a city is allowed to become luxurious, it will need protection within and without: it will need guardians.

Although ancient Athens had a participatory democracy and a citizen army, Plato was very critical of democracy and doubtful about the effectiveness of a citizen army. Ideally, at least, both were defective in his opinion. If each person in an ideally just society would make the contribution he or she is best fitted to making, the society would be governed and protected by people with a natural fitness for the job. Such a scheme of government and protection would be inherently risky; Plato had no doubt about this. To make such a scheme work, the natural tendency of the stronger and more aggressive (which the guardians would be) to dominate the weaker and less aggressive (the others) would have to be neutralized. In principle, at least, this could be done. There is, in fact, a model for it: highly bred guard dogs. These animals are *naturally* protective of their owners and naturally aggressive toward others. If human guardians could be trusted to have the temperament of well-bred guard dogs, the fear that they would take control of the city and run it for their exclusive benefit could be disregarded.

But how could this guard-dog temperament be assured in a human guardian? Humans are more complicated than dogs, and a guard-dog temperament is not a *natural* trait of an appropriate class of humans. Plato's response to the question was that the appropriate temperament could be induced or created in a human being by the right kind of training begun at a sufficiently early age. He calls this training "primary education"; it is the earliest formal education that a natural guardian would receive in Plato's ideal pÒliw. This primary education is directed to the minds as well as the bodies of the future guardian; it would involve both physical training (gumnastikÆ) and training in such things as music and poetry (mousikÆ).

Everything Plato says in the *Republic* is interesting, and his remarks about how gumnastikÆ and mousikÆ can be used to create the desired temperament in future guardians are especially fascinating. But my subject is his attack on *mimesis*, not his beliefs about the positive value of exposure to what we would call the "arts." When he discussed the effects of these things on a young person, he emphasized that such effects may be destructive as well as constructive, depending on what the art is like. He began his discussion by describing the bad effects of the wrong kind of art and arguing that the arts curriculum for the future guardians should be carefully censured.

Careless readers of the *Republic* often object to Plato's advocacy of censorship here, but it is certainly reasonable if the aim of the education is to produce a person with the "guard-dog" temperament I have described. In addition to being helpful and protective to the people of the city, guardians must be fearlessly aggressive in pursuing enemies; and this combination of kindness and ferocity can be disrupted by frequent exposure to tales in which even gods are depicted as hating, fighting, and betraying one another, and famous heroes are portrayed as overcome by sorrow at the death of friends or lamenting their existence in Hades or engaging in dreadful and impious deeds. The content of the stories future guardians learn must therefore be restricted to subjects compatible with the successful performance of a guardian's task. This restriction will obviously require censorship by discerning teachers.

It is not just the content of stories and songs that may be out of line with the aims of a guardian's primary education; the form of this art may also be objectionable--and it is a particular kind of form that Plato finds especially worrisome and wants to prohibit--not just in the primary education of certain children but in his entire ideal city. As I indicated at the beginning of my talk, he calls this special form "mimesis." The Greek word "m mhsiw" is translated by our "imitation," but neither word is sufficient to convey what Plato has in mind. Plato himself realizes that his meaning is difficult to convey in general terms, so he begins with an illustrative example of the worrisome form.

Plato's example (given by his mouthpiece, Socrates) comes from the *Iliad*. Near the beginning of the poem, Socrates says, Homer tells us that the priest Chryses begs Agamemnon to release his daughter. Agamemnon gets angry and Chryses, having failed in his object, prays to Apollo to take his side against the Achaeans. Until Homer reaches the lines,

and he begged all the Achaeans,
But especially the two sons of Atreus, commanders of the host,

he speaks in his own voice and does not, as Socrates puts it, attempt to turn his hearer's attention elsewhere as if he were someone other than himself. Yet after this he speaks as if he were Chryses and tries as far as possible to make us think that he is not Homer but the priest, an old man (392e, 393a). What Homer does here is impersonate Chryses; *he acts as if he were the old priest*.

Impersonation of this sort is not peculiar to Homer's epic poetry; it is also characteristic of tragedy and comedy, and it is present in most imaginative literature--in novels, short poems, even many biographies--and such things as movies and soap operas. In all these instances strings of words, heard as in movies or read as in novels, are understood as utterances of people who do not actually utter them. An actor may utter "Oh, that this too too sullied flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!" but we understand the words not as his utterance but as that of Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark; similarly, we read the line "I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me," but we understand it not as a sentence expressing the wish of the writer Laurence Sterne but that of the man Tristram Shandy, who happens to be imaginary. Plato's calls such strings of words, be they uttered by someone or only read or recalled by us, "imitations" (mimÆmata) because they are, as we understand them, not real utterances of real people but imitations or semblances of such utterances.

Why does Plato object to such imitations? Some of his reasons mainly apply to future guardians; others apply, he thinks, even to us. As for the future guardians, Plato's concern is that they do not become imitative themselves. Children are naturally imitative, but future guardians must learn to play a distinctive role of their own, and they should not, Plato thinks, be imitative of others when they are adults. Initially, they can imitate what (as Socrates puts it) is "suitable to them, namely brave, self-controlled, pious, and free men"; but they should not imitate other men or their actions, for this sort of imitation, freely practiced, will become part of their nature and settle into habits of gesture, voice, and thought that are unsuitable to guardians (395d). Imitative adults will naturally engage in what psychologists call "role-playing"; in different circumstances they will act as if they are different people: they may act like Captain Bligh on Monday, like laid-back uncle Neil on Tuesday, and like someone else on Friday. (I had an actor friend named "Harry" who played so many roles that I hardly knew what to expect when I would meet him on the street. Even his accent used to change.) Plato thought that guardians should always act in character; one should never have to worry about how they will behave today. They should have what he calls "simplicity of character." They will not wear masks; they will always be the same--the same solid, reliable people.

If these guardians are always to stay in character and be wholly reliable, they will have to be emotionally unflappable--in full control of their fears and irrational desires. Mimetic art tends to undermine such self-control, Plato thinks; he says it "bewitches" the mind. And this is his *basic* objection to it. Anything that bewitches the mind--that undermines our mental self-control--can hardly be good for us. If Plato is right, therefore, many of us in the humanities who are devoted to dramatic art of various kinds may be studying the wrong things. Plato's reasons for this view of mimetic art deserve our closest attention.

Although Plato introduces the idea that fears and desires are apt to bewitch us in book 3, it is not until book 10 that he explicitly declares that mimetic poetry does the same thing. It undermines our judgment, he says, because it induces us to enjoy and praise the spectacle of people doing things that we know to be ignoble and that we would ordinarily find disgusting. The tendency of *mimesis* to make us lose our hold on reality is familiar to all of us. When I was young and newly married, I came home one afternoon and found my new wife sitting on the couch weeping. "What is it, " I said? "Are you all right?" "Oh, I'm fine," she replied; "it's just that George Osborne died, and I didn't expect it." George Osborne, if you recall, is a character in a novel, *Vanity Fair*, which my new wife was reading. She knew George Osborne wasn't a real person; she knew he was a fictional character. And yet she cried. The power of drama is sometimes so great that you cannot resist it even when you are reminded that you are observing a mere fiction. Some years ago when my daughters were girls, I walked into our family room when they were watching a TV program in which a dog was about to be harmed by a bad man. My oldest daughter stood up, put her hands over her eyes, and began to leave the room. "I can't watch this," she cried. I stopped her and said, in a fatherly professorial voice, "Oh Alison, that dog is an actor; he's not really going to be hurt. You know that." But she left the room anyway.

When Aristotle discussed tragedy, he argued that its immediate effect on us is to generate feelings of pity and terror; but he did not emphasize that the spectacle producing these feelings was a nearly bare stage on which exclusively male actors in wooden masks declaimed their lines in solemn, high-toned, unnatural language. To feel such strong emotions for such unrealistic characters, one's reason (or at least part of it) must be off duty, out to lunch, or seriously bewitched.

Even if we agree that dramatic art bewitches us in this way, we need not thereby accept Plato's condemnation of it. Suppose *we* are bewitched by mimetic art. Why is this bad? If we return to our senses at the end of the performance, aren't we as good and reasonable as before? If we have been entertained--if we have enjoyed responding to a fictional situation--isn't that all right? Might it not be a positive good, if our real life is dull or dreary?

A reasonable person would never condemn innocent pleasure; Plato was certainly reasonable; therefore, the pleasure of *mimesis* is not, at least in his eyes, entirely innocent. He had two principal reasons for thinking this, one of which applies most directly, or more forcefully, to the future guardians of his utopian society. I'll begin with this latter reason.

Unlike the real-life Socrates, who is described as arguing that people cannot knowingly do what they believe to be wrong or bad,[2] Plato thought that even the best people, with the best knowledge of what is right and good, often act contrary to what their reason dictates: they "know the better but do the worse." This ill-advised behavior is possible only because their reason is not fully in control of their conduct. Although the guardians of an ideal *polis* might have the right "doglike" temperament and also, by a process of higher education that Plato describes later in the dialogue, know how to behave toward citizens and outsiders, they may yet be susceptible to mental bewitchment and thereby irrationally abuse the people they are supposed to protect or desert them in time of peril, throwing down their arms and fleeing from the enemies invading the polis. To forestall such possibilities, Plato insists that future guardians must be trained to resist bewitchment--to maintain rational control in the face of all things that can disrupt it, these being fear, desire, *and* mimetic art. Only those young guardians who can resist bewitchment best can be promoted to the highest class of guardians, those who will eventually serve as rulers.

Plato believed that frequent exposure to mimetic art, particularly when we are young, increases our natural susceptibility to bewitchment. This susceptibility would be substantially extinguished in a successfully trained guardian; so if such a person were exposed even to the most terrifying tragedy or the most hilarious comedy, he or she would remain unmoved: the dramatic illusion would not be created. Oedipus the king would be an actor stumbling around in a painted mask; the threatened dog would be an actor ready to fall down and roll over when the signal is given. For these people, with their special training, *mimesis* is not a threat. But it may yet be a threat to others.

Almost every day we hear that children who are exposed to violence on television have an increased tendency to become violent themselves and that teenagers who are exposed to erotica have an increased tendency to respond to their own erotic impulses with relevantly similar behavior. These claims may well be true: children are imitative. But do normal, properly socialized adults in our society become unglued by *mimetic* art? Would you or I become unglued? Probably not. If Plato has a convincing case against *mimetic* art--a case strong enough to dissuade us from enjoying it--he must have an argument of a more compelling kind.

He does have another argument, and it is more compelling. This other argument is, in fact, his major argument against *mimesis*; it occurs, appropriately, in book 10, the last book of the *Republic*. The symbolic target of his attack is Homer, the author (or supposed author) of the epics that have been called "the bible of the Greeks." Although, according to Plato, many of his contemporaries thought that Homer knew all technical skills, all human affairs concerned with good and bad and all about the gods as well (598d,e), Plato argued that Homer was a mere imitator of human behavior and did not possess, at least as far as one can tell from his poetry, *any* expert knowledge. Unsophisticated people, hearing Homer's poetry recited, think that he is imparting knowledge "because they believe anything said with meter, rhyme, and tune, be it

[2] See Plato's *Protagoras, 452c5, b7.*

on cobbling or generalship or anything else whatever, is right--so great is the natural charm of poetry...." (601a,b). This natural charm of poetic language deludes us into thinking that we are being instructed rather than merely entertained.

Plato supports his view of mimetic art by considering another form of it, representative painting. Although the artisans who make tables and chairs deserve admiration for their successful creations, one might think that a single person who makes many more things would be even more admirable--a person who not only makes all the things that other artisans make but also makes all plants that grow from the earth and all animals including himself, and makes the earth itself as well as the heavens and the gods, and makes all things in heaven and all things below the earth, in Hades. But it is not really difficult to make all these latter things if every kind of "making" counts. The quickest and easiest way of making these things, Socrates says, is to carry a mirror with you wherever you go: without any real work involving any real knowledge, you will be able to reproduce the sun, the earth, yourself and other living creatures, as well as manufactured articles, plants, and all sorts of other things. Of course, this kind of "making" produces mere appearances; it does not create things as they really are. The same is true of the making of the representational artist: they too are appearances, and making them does not require the knowledge of furniture or animals that would be required to make real examples of these things.

When carpenters make furniture, they look to certain "Forms," as Plato called them; the carpenters don't creature the Forms, he said: they exist in nature or are created by a god. Carpenters create instances of Forms, and the instances they create, like any human product, are never perfect. The beds painters "create" are semblances of carpenter's beds, and they too are imperfect in their own way. The carpenter imitates in wood the ideal bed, the Form; the painter imitates on canvas or some other surface a carpenter's bed; so the painter's bed is the imitation of an imitation, and it is, Socrates says, "far removed from the truth" and does not embody the knowledge of reality that the philosopher seeks. To obtain such knowledge, it is a mistake to consult the mimetic poet, the maker of imitations.

Okay. Mimetic artists, *qua* artists, do not supply knowledge; as mimetic makers, they create imitations--semblances of real people speaking (in plays, movies, novels, what we call dramatic poetry), real people struggling, feeling (music),and real people standing, moving, doing this or that (painting). But why should such artists be expelled from an ideal community? Plato's answer, which applies to our world too, is that mimetic artists do not recognize their limitations, their lack of real knowledge, and they try to instruct us as Homer did. They feel compelled to speak out on matters important to us, and they seduce us with the charm of their words. Their influence on our thinking is therefore far greater than it deserves to be. Gaining real knowledge is a difficult process, one that requires serious labor and much midnight oil. It is much easier to listen to the poets and absorb their convictions--much easier than learning mathematics and struggling through dusty, difficult books, and spending years in the process.

I should make a qualification before I enrage too many of you. Plato did not say or imply that mimetic artists are necessarily ignorant. If he did, he would obviously have been wrong. What he said was that mimetic artists *qua* mimetic artists--artists insofar as they are playing this role--are mere imitators. They may, in addition to playing the mimetic role, also play another role; they may *incidentally* be purveyors of knowledge and instructors of humankind. But if they play this other role, they will have to provide genuine evidence for what they claim to know; they cannot secure our assent by mere poetic charm. Although Plato was very critical of mimetic poets, he was actually one himself; and the *Republic*, the dialogue in which he attacked the mimetic poets, was itself a mimetic work: it was a philosophical drama. But Plato didn't attempt to convince his readers by mimetic means; he constructed a difficult argument, part of which I have attempted to reconstruct for you here. There is no danger that his readers will be convinced by his *mimesis* and not his argument, for his mimesis can be grasped only by grasping that argument. His *mimesis* is mere icing on the cake.

The qualification I have just made has the effect of allowing *mimesis* as an acceptable decoration to an instructive work--a decoration that, though pleasing, is not to be regarded as instructive itself. This view of *mimesis* is pretty deflationary, for it implies that *mimetic* art--drama, fiction, representational painting--does not itself have an important role to play in increasing our *understanding* of human beings and the human world. This implication would not be rejected by every lover--or indeed every creator--of imaginative

literature. In fact, one of the most exemplary novelists and poets of our century, Vladimir Nabokov, at the end of a course of lectures on European literature, made a special point of emphasizing the nondidactic character of dramatic literature. The novels he had discussed in the course will not teach you anything, he said, "that you can apply to any obvious problems of life. They will not help in the business office or the army camp or in the kitchen or in the nursery."[3] The knowledge about the novels that he had been trying to share with his students is, he said, "pure luxury": style and structure--glorious style and structure--are the essence of a literary work of art; great ideas, he said, are [esthetic] hogwash.

Substantially the same view of literature has recently been expressed by Professor Harold Bloom in his book *The Western Canon* .[4] Although he defends what used to be called "the great writers" of the Western literary tradition against their current critics, he rejects the position of neo-conservative defenders of those writers who emphasize the moral value of imaginative literature. In his view (and I quote) "Reading the very best writers--let us say Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy--is not going to make us better citizens. Art is perfectly useless according to the sublime Oscar Wilde, who was right about everything."[5] In expressing his agreement with Wilde on this matter Bloom did not mean to imply that art is a frivolous endeavor that has no serious value. It does have such value, in his view; but the value is esthetic, not practical. Art enriches our lives, but it does not instruct us or improve our understanding. It is not, *qua* art, science or philosophy; and it does not compete with them. If we want instruction in morals, political theory, or social matters, we should not look for it in imaginative literature. We should look elsewhere.

I doubt that most people concerned with the arts would agree with Nabakov and Bloom. Strident critics of the traditional curriculum in liberal arts colleges--I am thinking of Marxist, feminist, neoconservative, deconstructionist, new-historicist, and multiculturalist critics--evidently believe that we and, though us, our society should be improved by literary study. But if the literature they have in mind is dramatic literature--the sort Plato considered mimetic--they can support their belief in its didactic value only by *showing* how such literature, by virtue of its dramatic, fictional character, can serve a genuinely instructive role--how it can increase our *understanding* of anything. We know it can bewitch us and thereby delight us. We also know that, unlike Plato's future guardians, we are not necessarily weakened or harmed by esthetic bewitchment. What we should know, if the critics are right, is how mimetic art *as mimetic* can increase our knowledge and do something that is not done better by prosaic science and analytical philosophy. I am not saying that Plato's criticism of mimetic art is wholly successful and that we must accept his verdict about the cognitive value of such art. What I am saying is that, if we do not accept his verdict, his criticism poses a challenge that we have to meet. *How* can a work of mimetic art possibly instruct us or increase our understanding? *How* can it increase our knowledge? These are questions we will have to answer.

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[3] Vladimir Nabakov, *Lectures on Litrerature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York, 1980), p. 381. His remark about hogwash is cited by John Updike in his introduction to Nabokov's lectures.
[4] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York, 1994).
[5] Bloom, p. 16.