

THE DIFFERENT QUALITY OF ART IN PLATO'S AESTHETICS

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Abstract

This paper is to examine how Plato's theory of forms significantly influences aesthetics, offering a distinct perspective on beauty, art, and the nature of reality. The research problem is what the implication of Plato's view on art in society is. The research finding is that Plato was wary of art's ability to evoke emotions, arguing that it can distract individuals from reason and lead them away from virtuous living. He believed that engaging with art should ultimately promote knowledge and virtue rather than mere emotional pleasure.

Keywords: Art, Aesthetics, Beauty, Mimesis, Society

Introduction

In ancient Greece, things we now call art existed, and people experienced them. However, this experience was not linked to concepts like "beauty" or "aesthetic value". The creation of these objects was considered a technical skill, and different skills like painting, building, and music were not grouped together under a single concept of art. There was no unified idea of art as a way to create various works like paintings or poems. The person making these objects was seen as a craftsman or artisan, skilled in producing useful things. Therefore, Plato and other Greek philosophers didn't have a formal "philosophy of art" like we do today; trying to define beauty, perception, or truth specifically in relation to art is a modern pursuit. Essentially, art was about skillful craftsmanship, not about abstract concepts of beauty or aesthetics.

Western philosophical inquiry into art originated with Plato, who explored almost all key aesthetic questions. The views of early church fathers on beauty and art were largely disregarded during the middle Ages, after which the Renaissance saw a resurgence of influence from Aristotle and Horace on poetics.

The study of art raises many important questions: What is art? What is the purpose of art and its role in human life? What defines good and bad art? Art, which is valuable in axiology, enriches life by providing enjoyment, entertainment, intellectual stimulation, emotional experiences, and communication of ideas. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, German philosophy dialectically explored aesthetics, with Romantics emphasizing emotional expression and Realists focusing on factual representation or social commentary. These represent key Western aesthetic perspectives.

Plato's theory of art is the first, oldest, simplest, and most systematic aesthetic theory. He addressed nearly all fundamental aesthetic issues, while Aristotle's aesthetic theory primarily stems from his lecture notes, 'Poetics'. Both philosophers defined art as "imitation," suggesting that this definition captures a key quality of art. However, their theories fail to provide a comprehensive foundation for all forms of art; many works do not replicate ordinary experiences or ideal forms. For Plato, art is mimesis, meaning imitation, with verisimilitude as a crucial aesthetic component for evaluating artistic quality. This study analyzes Plato's theory of art, specifically his argument in *The Republic* that art, particularly epic poetry, is mere imitation (mimesis). Plato posits that art is twice removed from True Reality (the Forms), making it an inherently untrue copy of a copy with negative moral consequences. Consequently, he deems art and artists useless, contributing nothing to knowledge and aiming

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at deception by convincing viewers that imitations are real. Through critical analysis, this paper contends that Plato's understanding of art is limited and exclusionary, failing to recognize art's value beyond utility, morality, pleasure, and encompassing feeling, impression, spirituality, and its own intrinsic worth.

This paper will emphasize the influence of Plato's aesthetics in society. The first section will present Plato's main ideas about art, the second section will discuss the meaning of mimesis, the third section will examine Plato's views on art and its purpose, the fourth section will discuss the significance of beauty in Plato's philosophy and finally will examine the three approaches of aesthetics in philosophy.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research paper is to present that Plato's theory of forms significantly influences aesthetics, offering a distinct perspective on beauty, art, and the nature of reality. The main objectives are to understand Plato's main ideas about art, to know the meaning of mimesis, and to investigate the influence of Plato's aesthetics on society, which is still felt today.

Research Methods

Both descriptive and evaluative methods are used to achieve the research's objective.

Plato's Main Ideas about Art

Plato was the first philosopher to seriously examine the nature of art and offer thought-provoking theories about it. Plato's view of art can be seen in his dialogues. In Plato's time, we have only crafts. According to the Webster's Third New International Dictionary, craft is defined as,

Skillfulness in planning, making or executing: artistic dexterity to make or construct esp. by or as it by hand.¹

Plato's theory of art can be found in his dialogue, especially, in the Republic, the Ion, the symposium, the Laws and the Sophist. In the sophist, where Plato presents,

By way of example, an elaborate definition by dichotomy of the craft of fishing, he divides crafts in general into acquisitive" (such as money-making) and "productive", or creative, which bring into existence what has not existed before. The productive crafts include a wide range of skills for example, carpentry; flute-playing, painting, embroidery, architecture, the making of furniture.²

Plato suggests several ways in which all these craft might be subdivided, for example, a division into human and divine. According to Plato, art and craft are synonymous and Plato does not distinguish between art and craft. So, Art is closer to craft that Plato divides craft into two kinds. They are Productive craft and Acquisitive craft. Productive craft means creative craft. Productive craft is sub-divided into human craft and Divine craft. According to Plato, art is the production of Divine god. Plato treated and deeply considered some of the fundamental aesthetic problems. The principal dialogues of Plato are "Ion, symposium, and Republic". Plato's aesthetics mean his philosophical views about those fine arts such as visual arts (painting, sculpture, and architecture), literary arts (Epic, Lyric, and Dramatic poetry) and mixed musical arts (dance and song). Plato does not assign them a special name. For him, they belong to the more general class of craft. Crafts are divided into acquisitive crafts and

¹ Beardsley, Monroe C., (1996). *Aesthetics form Classical Greece to the Present*. New York: The Macmillan Company. P. 106

² Ibid.,

productive crafts. Productive are subdivided into production of actual objects and production of image. Both may be either human or divine.

He argued that art is a mere imitation of the physical world, which itself is an imperfect copy of the Forms, the ultimate reality. This places art that removes from truth, making it a lower form of knowledge. Consequently, for Plato, and is inherently suspect because it appeals to emotions rather than reason, potentially corrupting the soul. He favored art that could lead to virtuous conduct but was wary of art's potential to mislead. Thus, in his view, art's quality is judged by its truthfulness and its capacity to promote moral and intellectual development.

The Meaning of Mimesis

In Plato's philosophy, mimesis (imitation) plays a crucial role in his assessment of art. He argues that all art is an imitation of the physical world, which itself is an imperfect reflection of the true reality, the world of the Forms. Plato's theory of mimesis suggests that all art is mimetic, meaning it is an imitation of life. He believed that the idea is the ultimate reality, and art imitates this reality. Mimesis is a Greek term that means "imitation" or "representation." In Plato's philosophy, mimesis is considered inferior to the realm of forms (ideas). He argued that art is a copy of a copy, art represents physical objects that are themselves imitations of ideal forms. Thus, art is twice removed from the truth and can mislead people.

Aristotle, on the other hand, saw mimesis as a natural human instinct. He believed that art, through imitation, could provide insight into reality, evoke emotions, and even facilitate learning. For Aristotle, Drama and poetry were critical for understanding human experiences. Mimesis has broader implications in aesthetics, literature, and performance art, influencing how we understand representation and creativity across various media.

Plato's view on art is primarily discussed in his works, particularly in "The Republic." Plato believed that art is an imitation of reality (mimesis). He argued that there are three degrees of reality: the Forms (ideal, unchanging concepts), the physical world (which imitates the Forms), and art, which imitates the physical world. He considered art to be deceptive because it represents only shadows or copies of the true Forms. Plato was concerned about the moral impact of art. He believed that art could lead to emotional disturbances and mislead individuals, as it often presents idealized versions of life that contradict the pursuit of virtue and wisdom.

Plato believes that artists do not create but rather imitate. For instance, a painter replicates a physical object, which is already an imitation of the ideal Form of that object. This means art is at least two steps removed from the truth. Because art is merely imitative and not grounded in knowledge of the Forms, artists lack true understanding. Plato asserts that they can only produce illusions rather than genuine representations of reality. This undermines the value of their work as a source of truth.

Plato was concerned that art appeals to the emotional and irrational aspects of human nature. He believed that mimesis can lead individuals away from rational thought and virtue, promoting false images and ideas rather than encouraging critical engagement with the truth. In his ideal state, it is described in the *Republic*, Plato proposed censoring art that he deemed harmful. He believed that since art could mislead and elicit negative emotions, it should be regulated to ensure it serves the higher purpose of moral and social betterment. In Plato's aesthetics, mimesis illustrates his skepticism toward art and its potential impact on society, emphasizing a preference for products of reason and truth over mere representations.

Plato's Views on Art and Its Purpose

According to Plato, the artist is irrational for he does not know what he is saying or why he might be right or wrong. The artist works in a mad state. So it is very important to study carefully the effect of good and bad that art may have upon the citizen. For the final evaluation of any work of art, the Statesman in his role of legislator and educator must inquire into the work of art. The legislator must supervise the works of art. The poet must submit his works of art to censor and obtain their approval. Art is too serious to be left to the artist. Therefore, the artist must be censored and restricted. So, Plato placed the art at the lowest level.

Plato holds that the work of art has its power to do good to contribute to the health of society. Music, Poetry and Dancing of the right sort are indispensable means of education. Music can make us better man. So art also has its social education. Art also has its social responsibilities and its rational place in the whole sense of the citizen's life.

Plato holds up,

The ideal of a whole way of life which will possess aesthetic quality. The citizens of the Republic will dwell in an environment which is suffused with grace and harmony. These aesthetic properties are not to be confined to what we call the fine art.¹

From Plato's theory of art, we can infer his views on life and art. Plato identified art with craft. Art includes in the kinds of production of images. This production is made by human or divine. In fact, art is a godly gift by God. So, it may be criticized that Plato connected art with life through the artist's imagination or inspiration. According to Plato, art is not knowledge. The artists have no knowledge, and they have only inspiration. The artist works in a mad state. So, the legislators or the philosophers must apply censorship to the artists. So Plato tried to control art in some ways. In this case, it may be said that Plato took serious for the art and life. Although Plato placed art and artists of the lowest level, he accepted that music shape the youth into better individuals. So, Plato also recognized the importance of art for the society. In other words, Plato has not ignore the relationship between art and life. Therefore, art is important to the human life to some extent.

Because of his worries about the influence of art, Plato advocated for censorship in his ideal society. He suggested that only art that promotes virtue and justice should be allowed. For Plato, philosophy is the highest pursuit because it leads to the understanding of the true Forms. Art, being an imitation, is inferior and can be a distraction from philosophical inquiry. Plato viewed art as a lesser form of understanding that could mislead people and detract from the pursuit of truth and virtue. His critiques of art emphasize the need for careful consideration of its role in society and its potential effects on the moral character of individuals.

The Significance of Beauty in Plato's Philosophy

Plato has also accepted the Divine power of Art. With the help of imagination the artists creates the work of art. Plato inspiration is necessary for the creation of art. The nature of inspiration is concerned with emotion. It is irrational. So Plato had considered the artists in his creative power from the new point of view. The nature of inspiration had discussed in the Ion. Art embodies in various degree of the quality of beauty. The value of art is beauty.

¹ Eisner, Elliot W., (1972). *Educating Artistic Vision*. London. Collier Macmillan Publishers. P.65.

However it is not important values of aesthetics. There are also other values such as expressiveness, sublimity, prettiness, cuteness, picturesque, humor, confines and neatness.

The theory of Beauty is something abstract. It deals with the values as a whole. It is a concept like the concept of justice. It must explain how that value can be recognized.¹

Beauty is an abstract noun; it is opposed to the objective beauty. For the layperson, beauty is a property or quality, and being beautiful which corresponds to an individual possession of property. But according to Plato, the form of Beauty is an independent real, abstract entity which exists apart from concrete things. The property passed man works of art is Beauty. Beauty is also shared by other objects, including objects of nature. Individual things- statues, people, horses-exhibit this quality in variable ways. Some are more beautiful than others, some lose their Beauty after a time, some appear beautiful to one person but not to another. Besides the changing Beauties of the many concrete things in the world, there must be one Beauty that appears in them all.

Plato is the first philosopher who developed a theory of beauty. Plato discussed the theory of beauty though not in a systematic way. According to Plato, there are various degrees of embodiment of Beauty. Some of them are to a high degree. Some of them to a low degree, so different kinds of art reveal different degrees of beauty. The artists must try to gain the knowledge of true beauty. The artists, in fact, are the greatest creators of beautiful things. According to Plato,

Beauty also means the quality of measure and proportion. So, measure and symmetry are closely associated with Beauty and essential for Beauty. The Beauty of concrete things may change or disappear, may appear to some but not to others.²

Behind these temporal embodiments, there is an eternal and absolute form of beauty, not seen with the eyes but grasped conceptually by the mind alone. This is that a single transcendental artist is the imitator of the beautiful things. So the artist must try to get the knowledge of Beauty.

According to Plato, art is potentially dangerous for several reasons. Art is mainly concerned with sensual pleasure. Art can lead to immorality. Art is descriptive; moreover art is psychologically the destabilizing. So, according to Plato, art cannot give reliable truth, and therefore cannot be used as a guide for the moral action. Plato's aesthetics, as reflected in his dialogues, critiques art based on its perceived distance from the Forms, the ultimate reality.

¹ Harrison, Charles & Wood, Paul. (1992). *Art in Theory*. USA: Black Well, Oxford University. P.34.

² Ibid.,

He views art, particularly mimetic art like painting and poetry, as an imitation of an imitation. The craftsman creates an object (e.g., a bed), which is an imitation of the Form of Bed. The artist then creates a representation of this object, making the art twice removed from reality. According to Plato, this leads to a lower quality of art, as it lacks true knowledge and can mislead viewers. He values art that reflects the Forms, but is skeptical of art that merely imitates the physical world. Plato also considers the moral impact of art, believing that it can influence emotions and behaviors. Consequently, the quality of art is judged not only by its accuracy of representation, but also by its potential to harm or benefit society.

The Three Approaches of Aesthetics in Philosophy

Aesthetics has three different theories which are (1) objective theory, (2) subjective theory and (3) instrumental theory. In objective theory of aesthetics, an object's beauty lies within it. The object's beauty is recognized universally and is not restricted to a group of people. For instance, the color red denotes danger everywhere while the color blue stands for love. In subjective theory of aesthetics, everyone has their own perception of what is beautiful. An object's beauty is determined by the person who sees it. What is therefore beautiful to Mr. A might not be to Ms. B. This is so because beauty is determined by the beholder. Thus, it is a personal view of a thing. It entails viewing something from multiple perspectives. In instrumentalist theory of aesthetics, an object's beauty might be so attractive that it draws the observer to it for appreciation.

The abstract portrayal of ideas is an example of this. Typically, abstracts are metaphorical and laden with meaning. It is an object's power to arouse admiration in others. Philosophical study of the qualities that make something an object of aesthetics interest and of the nature of aesthetic value and judgment. Three approaches to the subject have been taken, each distinguished by the types of questions it treats as foremost: (1) the study of aesthetic concepts, often specially through the examination of uses of aesthetic language; (2) the study of states of mind-responses, attitudes, emotions held to be involved in aesthetic experience; and (3) the study of objects seemed aesthetically interesting, with a view to determine what about them makes them so.

Aesthetic concepts are the concepts associated with the terms that aesthetic properties referred to descriptions and evaluations of experiences involving artistic and aesthetic objects and events. The questions (epistemological, psychological, logical and metaphysically) that have been raised about these properties are analogous to those raised about the concepts. In the eighteenth century, philosophers such as Edmund Burke and David Hume attempted to explain aesthetic concepts such as beauty empirically, by connecting them with physical and psychological responses that typify individuals' experiences of different kinds of objects and events. In the twentieth century, philosophers have sometimes returned to analysis of aesthetic concepts via the human faculty of taste and have extended this psychological account to try to establish an epistemological uniqueness for aesthetic concepts. Many have argued that although there are no aesthetic laws. Others have argued that aesthetic concepts are not essentially distinguishable from other types of concepts.

Recently theorists have been interested in ways that aesthetic concepts are constructed out of social moral and practices. Their theories often deny that aesthetic concepts can be universal. For example, not only is there no guarantee that the term harmony will have the same meaning in different cultures; it may not be used at all.

There is an all-important question upon the answer to which the course of aesthetics depends the question of the recipient. Only beings of a certain kind have aesthetic interests and aesthetic experience, produce and appreciate art and employ such concepts as those of beauty, expression, and form. There is an all-important question upon the answer to which the course of aesthetics depends: the question of the recipient.

Only beings of a certain kind have aesthetic interests and aesthetic experience, produce and appreciate art, and employ such concepts as those of beauty, expression, and form. What is it that gives these beings access to this realm? The question is at least as old as Plato but received its most important modern exposition in the philosophy of Kant, who argued, first, that it is only rational beings who can exercise judgment-the faculty of aesthetic interest and, second, that until exercised in aesthetic judgment rationality is incomplete. It is worth pausing to examine these two claims. Rational beings are thoughts and conduct that are guided by reason, who deliberate about what to believe and what to do and who affect each other's beliefs and actions through argument and persuasion. The guiding law of rational conduct is that of morality, enshrined in the categorical imperative.

Rational beings must be treated always as ends in themselves, as having intrinsic value. The capacity to see things as intrinsically valuable, irreplaceable is one of the important gifts of reason. But it is not exercised only practically in dealings with other reasoning beings. It may also be exercised contemplatively toward nature as a whole. Such an attitude is not only peculiar to rational beings but also necessary to them. Without it, they have only an impoverished grasp of their significance and of their relation to the world in which they are situated through their thoughts and actions. They therefore provide the guarantee, both of practical reasoning and of understanding. The term aesthetic object is ambiguous and depending on its interpretation may suggest two separate programs of philosophical aesthetics. The expression may denote either the "intentional" or the "material" object of aesthetic experience.

It may be briefly characterized as follows: when people respond to object, their response depends upon a conception that may, in fact, be erroneous. The term intentional comes from the Latin *intender*, "to aim". To cite an example: a person is frightened by a white cloth flapping in a darkened hall, taking it for a ghost. Here, the material object of the fear is the cloth, while the intentional object is a ghost. A philosophical discussion of fear may be presented as a discussion of things feared but the phrase denotes the class of intentional objects of fear and not the class of material objects. In an important sense, the intentional object is part of a state of mind, whereas the material object always has independent existence. If the expression aesthetic object is taken in its intentional construction, the study of the aesthetic object becomes the study not of an independently existing class of things but of the aesthetic experience itself.

Research Findings

The research finding is that Plato thought well-crafted poetry and stories could promote virtue and ethical understanding, influencing people positively. Plato was concerned that art appeals to the emotional and irrational aspects of human nature.

Research Contribution and Discussion

It is expected that this research will help to properly comprehend art which represents beauty which should ultimately lead the observer toward a greater understanding of goodness and virtue. It is expected that this research will help to properly comprehend art that represents beauty should ultimately lead the observer toward a greater understanding of goodness and virtue. Plato established mimesis as a core concept in western aesthetics.

Conclusion

Plato was the first philosopher to really think about imaginative art. His theories about art are interesting but also debatable. Although critical of some aspects of art, he was a skilled writer, using poetic language and dramatic elements in his philosophical dialogues. Plato's criticism of art as "imitation" stems from his belief that art should be used to teach people and promote moral behavior. Plato was the first philosopher to explore art, even though he was an artist himself. His opinions are interesting, and his belief that art should be educational and moral shaped his ideas. It challenges Plato's perspective, arguing that his understanding of art is limited and narrow. It argues that art's value extends beyond just utility, morality, and pleasure; it also encompasses feelings, impressions, spirituality, and its inherent artistic worth.

Plato is arguably regarded as be the first philosopher who inquired into the nature of imaginative arts and put forward theories which are both illuminating and provocative. As a poet himself, his dialogues are full of poetic beauty and dramatic qualities. Plato's aesthetics has its roots buried deep in the soil of his metaphysics and epistemology and his critique of art as imitation is based on his claims that art should serve both pedagogical and ethical purposes. As a moralist, he disapproves of poetry because it is immoral. As a philosopher he disapproves of it because it is based on falsehood.

Plato dismisses art on account of its lack of necessary utility and denounces the idea that it can make any claim about truth or morality. There is more to art than just the objective functions of utility, morality, and pleasure. Art has the quality of producing feelings and impressions. Plato believed that art should serve a specific purpose: to promote moral and rational understanding. His theory of art does not permit artists to freely express themselves in any way they choose. Instead, art must conform to Plato's rigid philosophical ideas. The statement argues that Plato's philosophy is so strict and controlling that it doesn't tolerate any art that presents different perspectives or alternative ways of viewing the world because they might challenge his "ideal" form of society. Essentially, freedom of artistic expression is sacrificed for the sake of maintaining Plato's perceived "truth" and social order.

The grounds provided for Plato's rejection of imitative art are not sufficient. Works of art has a very good foundation in reality. It is a characteristic of a good art that it reveals truth; a truth that can hardly be grasped intellectually, however. Therefore, Plato's metaphysical argument against the poets is mere naive sophistry and that Plato probably did not want men to take it seriously. Plato believed that art could be a tool for moral education. He thought that well-crafted poetry and stories could promote virtue and ethical understanding, influencing people positively. In works like the "Republic," he suggested that art aligned with the truth and the Forms such as philosophical ideas, could contribute to a deeper understanding of reality. Plato valued the experience of beauty, seeing it as a pathway to the divine

and a trigger for philosophical contemplation. Art that captures beauty could inspire individuals to strive for higher truths.

Art that supports societal values and the common good, such as honoring heroes or conveying communal ideals, could be beneficial. Although he was wary of tragedy, Plato acknowledged its capacity to evoke profound emotional experiences and lead to catharsis, potentially providing insights into human nature. It may be said that while Plato was critical of most art for its misleading nature, he did see value in art that aligns with truth, beauty, and moral education.

This paper highlights the note of art in Plato's aesthetics. Firstly, in logical analysis, Plato's views on art impact how art is perceived and valued in society, particularly in the Western tradition. Secondly, concerning research findings, Plato thought that well-crafted poetry and stories could promote virtue and ethical understanding, influencing people positively. Moreover, regarding evaluation, value is a key principle because Plato was critical of most art for its misleading nature, he saw value in art that aligns with truth and beauty. Finally, as a contribution, this research will help to properly comprehend how art that represents beauty should ultimately lead the observer toward a greater understanding of goodness and virtue.

Plato acknowledged some positive aspects of art, though with significant qualifications. While he was critical of most forms of mimetic art for their potential to mislead and stir irrational emotions, he recognized that art could serve positive purposes. Plato valued the experience of beauty, seeing it as a pathway to the divine and a trigger for philosophical contemplation. Art that supports societal values and the common good, such as honoring heroes or conveying communal ideals, could be beneficial.

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