

Plato's Theory of Mimesis

The word **Mimesis**, is Greek which means “imitation”. Plato and Aristotle spoke of mimesis as the re-presentation of nature. According to Plato, all artistic creation is a form of imitation: that which really exists (in the “world of ideas”) is a type created by God; the concrete things man perceives in his existence are shadowy representations of this **ideal type**. Therefore, the painter, the tragedian, and the musician are imitators of an **imitation**, twice removed from the truth. Aristotle, speaking of **tragedy**, stressed the point that it was an “imitation of an action”—that of a man falling from a higher to a lower estate. Shakespeare, in Hamlet's speech to the actors, referred to the purpose of playing as being “...to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature.” Thus, an artist, by skillfully selecting and presenting his material, may purposefully seek to “imitate” the action of life.

In his theory of *Mimesis*, Plato says that all art is mimetic by nature; art is an imitation of life. He believed that ‘idea’ is the ultimate reality. Art imitates idea and so it is imitation of reality. He gives an example of a carpenter and a chair. The idea of ‘chair’ first came in the mind of carpenter. He gave physical shape to his idea out of wood and created a chair. The painter imitated the chair of the carpenter in his picture of chair. Thus, painter's chair is twice removed from reality. Hence, he believed that art is twice removed from reality. He gives first importance to philosophy as philosophy deals with the ideas whereas poetry deals with illusion – things which are twice removed from reality. So to Plato, philosophy is superior to poetry. Plato rejected poetry as it is mimetic in nature on the moral and philosophical grounds. On the contrary, Aristotle advocated poetry as it is mimetic in nature. According to him, poetry is an imitation of an action and his tool of enquiry is neither philosophical nor moral. He examines poetry as a piece of art and not as a book of preaching or teaching.

Aristotle replied to the charges made by his Guru Plato against poetry in particular and art in general. He replied to them one by one in his defence of poetry.

1. Plato says that art being the imitation of the actual is removed from the Truth. It only gives the likeness of a thing in concrete, and the likeness is always less than real. But Plato fails to explain that art also gives something more which is absent in the actual. The artist does not simply reflect the real in the manner of a mirror. Art cannot be slavish imitation of reality. Literature is not the exact reproduction of life in all its totality. It is the representation of selected events and characters necessary in a coherent action for the realization of the artist's purpose. He even exalts, idealizes and imaginatively recreates a world which has its own meaning and beauty. These elements, present in art, are absent in the raw and rough real. While a poet creates something less than reality he at the same times creates something more as well. He puts an idea of the reality which he perceives in an object. This ‘more’, this intuition and perception, is the aim of the artist. Artistic creation cannot be fairly criticized on the ground that it is not the creation in concrete terms of things and beings. Thus considered, it does not take us away from the Truth but leads us to the essential reality of life.² Plato again says that art is bad because it does not inspire virtue, does not teach morality. But is teaching the function of art? Is it the aim of the artist? The function of art is to provide aesthetic delight, communicate experience, express

emotions and represent life. It should never be confused with the function of ethics which is simply to teach morality. If an artist succeeds in pleasing us in the aesthetic sense, he is a good artist. If he fails in doing so, he is a bad artist. There is no other criterion to judge his worth. R.A.Scott -James observes: "Morality teaches. Art does not attempt to teach. It merely asserts it is thus or thus that life is perceived to be. That is my bit of reality, says the artist. Take it or leave it – draw any lessons you like from it – that is my account of things as they are – if it has any value to you as evidence of teaching, use it, but that is not my business: I have given you my rendering, my account, my vision, my dream, my illusion – call it what you will. If there is any lesson in it, it is yours to draw, not mine to preach." Similarly, Plato's charges on needless lamentations and ecstasies at the imaginary events of sorrow and happiness encourage the weaker part of the soul and numb the faculty of reason. These charges are defended by Aristotle in his Theory of *Catharsis*. David Daiches summarizes Aristotle's views in reply to Plato's charges in brief: "Tragedy (Art) gives new knowledge, yields aesthetic satisfaction and produces a better state of mind."

3. Plato judges poetry now from the educational standpoint, now from the philosophical one and then from the ethical one. But he does not care to consider it from its own unique standpoint. He does not define its aims. He forgets that everything should be judged in terms of its own aims and objectives, its own criteria of merit and demerit. We cannot fairly maintain that music is bad because it does not paint, or that painting is bad because it does not sing. Similarly, we cannot say that poetry is bad because it does not teach philosophy or ethics. If poetry, philosophy and ethics had identical function, how could they be different subjects? To denounce poetry because it is not philosophy or ideal is clearly absurd.