

The Relationship Between Art and Mimesis in Plato’s “*The Republic*” Dialogue

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Abstract

According to the ideology of the ancient philosopher Plato, the universe in which we exist is comprised of two distinct areas: the area of the senses and the area of ideas. True and constant knowledge is the knowledge of the ideas. The realm of the senses is considered a reflection of the ideas. Plato is the first philosopher in the history of thought to define art as an activity of mimesis (representation).

In *The Republic* dialogue, within the framework of rules that define the boundaries of the ideal state, a conception of art is also discussed. In the ideal state, art is regarded as a mimesis activity. However, it is also emphasized that as long as art does not deviate from the ideas, it can make significant contributions to the development of society. Although there are thoughts that Plato was opposed to art, literature reviews reveal that these views are inaccurate. The study aims to examine the relationship between art and mimesis, based on the idea that, according to Plato, art remains significant in human education and the ideal state as long as it adheres to the realm of ideas.

Thus, by addressing the connection between Plato’s theory of ideas and his conception of art, the study analyzes his philosophical approach to art in light of the discussions on art and mimesis in *The Republic* dialogue.

Keywords: Plato, The Republic, Art, Mimesis, Ideas.

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Introduction

Art has been considered as one of the earliest and most impactful forms of expression throughout human history, from prehistory to the present day. According to Plato's understanding, the place and value of this mean of expression in human life has become one of the fundamental problems in philosophical thought. Plato, one of the first philosophers to systematically discuss this issue in the history of thought, examined the nature of art and its social effects within the framework of the theory of ideas. Plato's conception of art is not merely an aesthetic phenomenon but is deeply interconnected with epistemology, ethics, and politics. In his philosophy, art is regarded less as a part of the search for knowledge and more as a difficult area due to its distance from the realm of ideas.

According to Plato, the universe in which we live consists of two distinct dimensions: the realm of the senses and the realm of ideas. The realm of the senses contains transient beings that are in a constant state of change and becoming, while the realm of ideas is the basis of unalterable and universal knowledge. This distinction is the essential element that determines Plato's approach to the concepts of art and mimesis (representation). Artworks, as imitations of objects in the realm of the senses, present a reality that is doubly distant from the realm of ideas. This situation forms the basis of Plato's critiques of art.

In *The Republic dialogue*, Plato examines the limits of the ideal state while thoroughly considering the impact of art on society. According to him, the primary goal of art should be to contribute to the development of individuals and society. However, art is often seen as a factor that appeals to emotions and hinders access to the knowledge of truth. In this context, Plato's philosophy defines art as a tool that shapes both individual and societal moral and intellectual development.

The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between art and mimesis in Plato's philosophy and to reveal the role and importance of this relationship in his concept of the ideal state. The study addresses the connection between Plato's theory of ideas and his conception of art, explaining his philosophical approach to art in the context of the discussions of art and mimesis in *The Republic dialogue*. This approach remains relevant not only for ancient philosophy but also for contemporary theories of art and aesthetics. The research is structured under three main headings: "Plato's Philosophy and Art", "Mimesis in Plato's Philosophy", and "Art in Plato's Ideal State", with analyses conducted in accordance with these topical frameworks.

Literature Review

Plato's Philosophy and Art

Throughout the history of thought, Plato, who recognized, studied, and addressed problems that would later shape the foundations of modern philosophy, was born in 427 in Athens to an aristocratic family. His early years and youth were spent with individuals interested in literature and philosophy. His birth name was Aristocles, after his grandfather, but he was subsequently given the nickname 'Plato'. In his teenage years, Plato wrote theatrical and poetic works, but after encountering Socrates, he wrote all of his works. The events surrounding Socrates considerably impacted Plato's intellectual development and philosophical orientation (Plato, 2010). The execution of Socrates by poisoning deeply affected Plato, especially as it revealed the contradiction between societal concepts and the world of ideas. This led Plato to begin articulating his thoughts, starting with writing Socrates' defense (Gaarder, 2019).

The injustices in Athens' political governance and the disruptions caused by the disordered way of life led Plato to create his vision of the ideal state. According to Plato, the order within a state can be achieved through ethics and cause. Although such a state did not exist at the time, Plato viewed it as an 'idea' and referred to it as the 'ideal state' in his philosophy. In Plato's vision of the ideal state, the concept of a 'state governed by laws' is emphasized. In this ideal state, justice is prioritized, and no

power outside of morality and reason will dominate. Citizens of the society within the state should possess ethical and intellectual qualities that they acquire through education (Tunalı, 2008).

Plato's theory of knowledge forms the foundation of his philosophy of art. Plato believed that the soul has its own essence and that the soul is immortal. According to him, the body consists of the four basic elements -water, fire, earth, and air- while the soul consists of three parts: perception, opinion, and nous (the immortal intellect) (Demiralp, 2015).

In Plato's philosophical system, the concepts of forms and ideas hold great significance. The concept of ideas pertains to essence. The essence of things, which can be perceived through the senses, is an idea, perfect, and eternal form. Unlike other thinkers, Plato advocated for the existence of an independent, unchanging reality, which is separate from human existence. In addition to the sensory-perceived universe, Plato argued for the existence of an unchanging world of forms, which can be understood through intellectual contemplation. For Plato, the true essence of reality is found in the realm of forms. Things perceived through the senses (such as people, trees, stars etc.) are mere reflections and imitations of their original forms. True knowledge, for Plato, is the knowledge of the unchanging ideas. The concept of ideas shows humans the truth. This is why artists such as poets and painters, by reflecting mere images of things, cause people to stray further from the truth. In fact, sometimes works produced by artists without any original source are representation of imitations, pushing individuals even farther away from reality. According to Plato, humanity's goal should be to reach the truths behind the shadows. In *The Republic* dialogue, Plato's stance on artists and art is due to the fact that arts such as poetry and painting do not reflect reality in their essence. For example, literary works, by appealing to people's emotions, lead them further away from the realm of ideas (Çil, n.d.).

Plato takes reality as the concept of ideas, asserting that reality exists in the world of ideas and that all things in the universe are merely shadows or reflections of these ideas. Consequently, according to Plato, artworks are copies of the ideas (Demiralp, 2015). All entities and objects in the world are formed from images (eidola) of ideas. According to Plato, the universe perceived through the senses is not truly real, and mimesis works reflect a secondary imitation of reality. Plato illustrates this with the example of a table and a chair (Ünlü, 2018). In this example, a chair is an idea. The person who paints the chair has made a copy of the image, thus creating a secondary copy (Demiralp, 2015). In fact, if the carpenter had not made the chair idea, the painter could not have imitated it. Here, the carpenter has realized the chair idea in his mind, and the painter has imitated this idea, thus creating 'the representation of the imitation' or mimesis (Plato, 2019).

Plato's critical approach to the concept of art offers solutions to relational issues between reality and art in his philosophical theory. In Plato's philosophy, art is expressed as mimesis, or representation. Art has the ability to reflect reality from the external world in different dimensions. It has the power to detach people from their real experiences and make them perceive things in another dimension. Therefore, art is the shadow of a shadow, diverting people from true life. According to the theory of illusion, art is a mimesis of the natural beings in nature (Yurderi, 2015). Plato, in considering art as mimesis, maintains that works of art are the shadow of the shadow, or secondary representation. Therefore, art should imitate things that guide people toward the good rather than the bad (Ünlü, 2018).

According to the theory of ideas, everything that exists in the universe is made up of mimesis. In addition to things grasped through sensory perception, there is also the realm of ideas that can be grasped through the mind. Everything perceived through the senses is a reflection of forms grasped through reason, and fundamentally, only the world of ideas is real. For this reason, the works produced by artists are only imitations (Turan, 2015). Plato strives to attain true knowledge and ideas in his philosophical theory. According to him, the sensory world is always changing and can only be grasped through the senses. Therefore, he rejects the sensory world and accepts the existence of the realm of

ideas, which can be grasped through reason. Since the world perceived through the senses is only mimesis and does not contain any real truth, Plato argues that only the world of ideas holds real knowledge, which is immutable (Moran, 2018).

Plato analyzes artistic poiesis (creation) in three parts: craft, poiesis, and mimesis. Artistic poiesis is the mimesis of appearance. In this case, a third-degree representation of the real is made. Plato notes that people who achieve the third-degree distance from something are not true imitators, and he argues that this type of mimesis is not properly aligned with ethics or art. This is because third-degree mimesis distances the imitator from the world of ideas (Ülger, 2013).

Mimesis in Plato's Philosophy

The concept of mimesis has many forms of expression, but it is commonly understood as 'representation' (Mutlu, 2017). The origin of the concept of mimesis dates back to ancient times, and it is observed that during this period, philosophers tried to reach the knowledge of truth as they encountered problems in defining the external world. This process has played a significant role in the emergence of the philosophical views that have lasted from that period to the present day (Demir, 2018).

The first usage of the word 'mimesis' is related to dance and is known as 'mimos.' The term 'mimeisthai' expressed that dancers communicated their emotions through bodily movements, and later, this term began to be used within the context of general culture. According to Hofmann, there is a connection between the word 'mimos' and the Sanskrit word 'maia,' and the concept of mimesis emerged after this derivation. The roots of the words such as 'mai, mi' in Sanskrit mean 'delusion, illusion, deceit.' The literal meaning of the word Maia is defined as 'deceptive vision.' Mimesis is generally defined as reflection or imitation. The meaning of 'delusion' in mimesis is found in Plato's *The Republic* dialogue (Ülger, 2013).

Plato approaches the concept of mimesis in two separate realms: the real world and the world of sensory perception. According to Plato, the sensory world consists solely of imitations of images. The sensory world leads humans away from the ideas, bringing confusion, disorder, and evil into human life. In order for human life to be good and progress in an orderly manner, it must remain connected to the world of truths (Mutlu, 2017). Part of the sensory world is created by humans, while another part is created by God. In God's universe, there are not only natural things, but also their reflections. For example, the shadow of a tree on the water's surface is also mimesis. Although the reality of these things is somewhat diminished, Plato refers to them as *eidola* (images). The sensory world is the mimesis of ideas, and *eidola* is the representation of the imitation of the ideas (Moran, 2018).

Plato explains the concept of mimesis through the reflection theory, using the example of a mirror. The concept defined as mimesis reflects everything, just like the images falling into a mirror. The key point here is that the reflections should be recognized as distant from the concept of reality. This example suggests that the image world, reflected in mirrors, imitates and lacks real substance. Therefore, it is argued that it is impossible for artists to create truly original works (Ülger, 2013). The artist reflects nature, human beings, and life in their art, which is compared to a mirror held up to the universe. The metaphors made by painters and poets are explained in the same way.

Plato viewed tragedies and theatrical works as dangerous because these types of works often imitate not exemplary figures, but those who should not be role models (slaves, drunks, cowards, and madmen). According to Plato, people who imitate such characters and make it a habit of doing so move further away from the ideas. Literature in the arts appeals to the sensory side of society. It influences the senses of people and may mislead their emotions, thus disturbing their balance. In Plato's philosophy, literature negatively influences society, leading it to become disorderly and uneasy. Poets and writers often create works far from the knowledge of truth, distancing society from the ideas, which are the true knowledge. On the other hand, these artworks imitate people who are

not role models, undermine gods and heroes, and stimulate the sensory world, thus poisoning society. In *The Republic* dialogue, Plato investigates the role of art and artists in the ideal state and education. Artworks that praise gods, heroes, and the good are welcomed in the ideal state, while those that do the opposite are excluded. Plato allows art in his ideal state only as long as it does not distract people from the ideas. In Plato's ideal state, artists are constantly monitored to ensure that their work does not move people away from the ideas (Moran, 2018).

Art in Plato's Ideal State

The concept of art is frequently discussed in Plato's dialogues. In fact, nearly all of his dialogues contain thoughts and interpretations regarding art (Demiralp, 2015). Plato is the first philosopher to address the concept of art in the history of thought. His dialogue *The Republic*, in which he places art within a broader scope, continues his philosophical thought, which has remained significant in the periods following his life. Plato's understanding of art has influenced many areas, including Roman, Greek, Medieval, Islamic, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and even Marxist aesthetics (Ülger, 2013). According to Plato's view of art, the beauty of art is expressed as a reflection of forms. The beauty seen in the universe and in works of art consists entirely of reflections of the idea of beauty (Çil, n.d.).

In Plato's ideal state, art is considered a mimetic activity because it is related to illusion. Since the ideal state is linked to reason, there will be no room for illusion in this state (Tunalı, 2008). According to Plato, works of art are mimetic and do not closely relate to the concept of reality. An artwork may resemble the thing it depicts, but it has no relationship with the truth of that thing. Therefore, works produced as art are mimetic representations of things. In Plato's ideal state, art, which is done unconsciously and is a copy of a copy, is not seen as valuable. It is considered to lead society away from ideas because it does not carry true knowledge. According to Plato, artworks should not have a place in society unless they are studied and pass certain criteria. Artists influence the weak and worthless emotions of society through their works, negatively affecting and harming people (Karaca, 2009).

People who engage in art are considered imitators in Plato's state because they use the method of mimesis. The things in the world of images are copies of ideas, and what the artist creates is a copy of a copy. This is why the person involved in art is defined as an imitator. Through this behavior, the artist is essentially reworking things that are unknown (Atahan ve Aşkın, 2017). According to Plato's philosophy of art, the artist is merely someone who is knowledgeable about the image and is not familiar with the true knowledge or the doxa of the things they imitate. All forms of art are mimetic, with tragedy being the art form that primarily uses mimesis (Karaca, 2009). According to Plato, literature also takes society further from the ideas because poets produce works based on mimetic knowledge, and this knowledge is not a reflection of reality. Plato holds philosophy to be superior to literature. While philosophers use the methods of reason to find true knowledge, artists approach reality through the senses. Therefore, literature is not helpful because it affects the sensory aspects of society and triggers their delicate points. On the other hand, philosophers can suppress their sensory aspects because they use reason. Thus, Plato includes philosophers in the ideal state, but he does not accept people engaged in art, as they may disturb the order of the ideal state (Turan, 2015).

According to Plato's understanding of art, the works of painters and poets are far from reality. Without understanding the knowledge of reality, they create works beyond reality, engaging in third-degree imitation. Therefore, in Plato's realm of ideas, there is no place for mimesis (Mutlu, 2017).

Plato critiques mimetic art actions based on inconsistencies between the relationship of real-world art and truth. In this context, it is argued that artists should not only grasp the fundamental principles of the creative process but also possess mastery over all knowledge that can be obtained through imitation or copying. However, this knowledge, although necessary for artistic creation, is not sufficient. For instance, the knowledge required to produce a table or a sofa is not the same as the

knowledge needed to depict these objects. According to Plato, if artists had all the knowledge needed to create something, they would have reached a position similar to that of God. The ability to create true entities belongs only to God. In Plato's thought, truth represents a higher level and cannot be attained through an individual's knowledge and ability. Therefore, artistic activity is seen as a misleading act that does not reflect the essence of truth (Atahan ve Aşkın, 2017).

Plato addresses the concept of mimesis across various art forms (painting, poetry, sculpture, tragedy etc.) and considers all forms of art as instances of mimesis. These art forms are criticized by Plato because they fail to represent the world of ideas. In the world of Plato's ideas, art is a copy of truth and provides reflections of things. Therefore, art does not present the real, but an image of the real. Since the things in the external world are imitations of the ideas, the work produced by the artist is a third-degree mimesis. In short, the artwork is a copy of a copy. Rather than bringing people closer to the ideas, works of art move them further away from the truth (Yurderi, 2015). For example, rivers, trees, and other entities in the sensory world are imitations of the real. However, the reflection of the tree in the water is a second-degree mimesis. The tree's reflection in the water is a copy of a copy. The artist's actions are likened to this. The artwork, like the reflection of the tree in the water, performs a second-degree mimesis of nature, which already exists as a reflection. According to Plato's philosophy of art, the artist imitates the sensory world, which is already a mimesis, with the artwork. Therefore, the artwork is considered a second-degree imitation, a mimesis of a representation, and is not seen as something of great importance (Çil, n.d.). Plato does not place mimesis within his understanding of art (Turan, 2015). The concept of mimesis is negatively expressed in Plato's ideal state because it is a copy of a copy (Karaca, 2009).

As long as art remains in the world of ideas, Plato supports its place in the state. In his state, the artists he does not include are those who, despite not reaching the essence of things, reflect them to society as knowledge of ideas, thereby corrupting society. In Plato's ideal state, art that focuses on true knowledge, beauty, and ethics, and analyzes right and wrong, is welcomed. Art that reaches the knowledge of the ideas plays an important role in the education of the youth in society (Turan, 2015). Therefore, Plato includes arts that can be beneficial to the state in his ideal society. For example, poetry that praises gods and conveys true knowledge about them, and portrays virtuous individuals who serve as role models for society, is considered useful (Karaca, 2009). Art is seen as a concept that affects the sensory world of humans and, when it does not include true knowledge, poisons society (Özçınar, 1999).

Plato is not against art, but he does not accept harmful art forms in the ideal state. If art involves reality and aligns with the ideas, it has an important place in the education of people (Tunalı, 2008).

Art and Mimesis in The Republic Dialogue

In *The Republic* dialogue, Plato addresses the issues of how social order should be organized and what kinds of behaviors individuals should exhibit. According to this thought, it is argued that human communities should live together in a collective way, constantly interacting with each other. People are naturally successful in different tasks, and as long as everyone is focused on their own work, everything will be more orderly and better. Those who excel in different jobs should therefore live together and maintain the continuation of social order. The idea that individuals should focus on their own tasks and not interfere in others' processes gave rise to the concept of justice (Çıvgın, 2018).

The Republic dialogue explains Plato's ideal state structure and consists of ten books. In these books, dialogues are held between Socrates, Polemarchus, Thrasymachus, Adeimantus, and Glaucon. In the first book, the dialogue on art is presented between Thrasymachus and Socrates (Demiralp, 2015).

In the second book, dialogues on art between Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus are discussed. The topic of whether an artist should focus on one form of art or engage in multiple forms of artistic

creation is debated. The conclusion is reached that focusing on a single art form leads to better results (Demiralp, 2015).

In the third book of the work, the concept of mimesis is addressed technically and defined as a form of representation. In this context, when a poet relays the words of others, where and how they were spoken, this is merely a quotation. However, when the poet adopts the persona of someone else, attempting to imitate their words and actions, this becomes a process of imitation. Plato notes that in this case, the poet's goal is to closely align with the personality and expression of the other. Someone trying to adjust their voice and actions to match another person is engaging in direct imitation. This interpretation illustrates how the concept of mimesis is situated as a form of representation and mimesis in Plato's philosophy (Tunalı, 2008).

In the third book, Plato presents the dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon. Within this dialogue, the characteristics of the education that the youth should receive in the ideal state are explained, alongside discussions of art and artistic education (Demiralp, 2015). The dialogue on myths and words continues with the topics of music, its pitch, and melody. The importance of music education, the types of prohibitions to impose on music for the development of youth, and how music should be structured are discussed. While the lyrics must conform to rules, melody is expressed in terms of pitch, mode, and rhythm. The appropriate mode for the state should be one that matches the courageous attitude of a man, capable of defying any adversity he encounters in life or battle. According to Plato, literary art, by affecting people's sensory world, negatively influences the education of the youth. Plato here speaks of the functional problems of art. Artworks that address the sensory world are dangerous and harmful to societies because they touch upon people's weak and worthless sides, poisoning them. Literary art distances people from the ideas, thus disrupting the ongoing order in society. In Plato's ideal state, people must reach the ideas using the methods brought by reason (Kavuran ve Dede, 2013).

In the seventh book of his work, the allegory of the cave fully reflects the perspective and thought Plato has on imitation in art (Ünlü, 2018). Plato's allegory of the cave in the dialogue of *The Republic* is one of the best examples to explain the theory of ideas. Inside a cave, people are bound by chains, unable to move, facing away from the entrance. A large fire burns near the entrance, and the shadows of people passing by with objects in hand are cast onto the wall in front of the prisoners. Since they cannot move, they can only see the shadows on the wall and believe them to be real. When they are freed from their chains, they will be able to move and, after seeing the fire at the cave's entrance, realize that the shadows were mere reflections and not the truth. Once outside the cave, they will see the true source of light, the sun, and the real physical objects. The cave represents the sensory world in Plato's philosophy, while the world outside the cave symbolizes Plato's theory of ideas (Turan, 2015). Through this allegory, Plato indicates that the true ideas exist beyond appearances (Gaarder, 2019).

In the tenth book, Plato explains art as a copy of a copy and addresses whether or not it should have a place in the realm of ideas. The creations of poets are not the real thing but merely shadows of reality. Humans do not have the power to create the essence of anything. A good poet must understand both the good and bad sides of humanity and know everything about the gods. To create a likeness, one must know the original very well. Mimetic poets can be likened to painters, as both create things that are far removed from reality and have no intrinsic value. They appeal to people's lower sides and thus do not have a place in the state. By nourishing the bad sides of humans and corrupting reason, they are not appropriate in the ideal state. Mimetic poets expose the negative aspects of humanity and disrupt order. According to Plato, poetry is a reckless art. To act in accordance with reason, it is best to remove poetry from the state. On the other hand, if a poet proves that they have a place in a well-ordered state, they will be accepted. Poets are listened to carefully and speak pleasant words that

appeal to people's emotions. Poetry, if aligned with goodness and truth, will have a place in the state; otherwise, it will not.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to examine how the concepts of art and mimesis are addressed in Plato's *The Republic* dialogue and to explore the role of art in the ideal state. The fundamental element shaping Plato's approach to art is his theory of ideas. In his context, the research addresses the question of how art is positioned within Plato's epistemology and ontology and analyzes the function of the concept of mimesis within his philosophical system.

The methodology of the research is shaped around the question of whether Plato's criticisms of art are merely aesthetic judgments or whether these criticisms are based on a philosophical necessity rooted in his understanding of knowledge and reality. Plato's view of works of art as reflections of ideas, his consideration of the artist as an imitator without knowledge of the truth, and his treatment of art as a potential threat to societal order are examined in detail within the scope of this study.

As a result, Plato's conception of art offers not only an aesthetic evaluation but also a philosophical framework that facilitates individuals' pursuit of truth through reason and virtue. The role of art in the ideal state is understood to contribute to individuals' approach to true knowledge, provided it is aligned with the theory of ideas, shaping both social morality and individual development. In this regard, the relationship between art and mimesis in Plato's *The Republic* dialogue is considered an important means for leading a virtuous life, not only on an individual level but also in the societal discourse.

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