PLATO'S AESTHETICS

"Aesthetics" can be defined as the branch of philosophy which focuses on questions about art and beauty, and like the other branches of philosophy, it was first developed in ancient Greece. The first major aesthetic theory is found in the 4th-century BCE writings of Plato, but the Greeks were theorizing about aesthetic issues for at least 200 years before that, and what made this history possible was the Greek creation of a new concept—the concept of "art."

The Emergence of "Art". Here it should be noted that the words "art" and "artist" didn't exist in the first human languages, and thus there could be no theorizing about aesthetic issues such as about the nature of art, what inspires artistic creation, and the value of art for human beings. In other words, although the first human beings sang and danced and painted and told stories, they didn't think of this as we do today, that is, as creating artworks which belong to the separate category of aesthetic objects and which should be judged simply as members of this category. The ancient Egyptians, for example, lacked words for "art" and "artist," and thus they at first praised the pyramids for their size and durability, not for their beauty as aesthetic objects. Good architects were also praised, but as good craftsmen, like carpenters, and not because they gave the world beautiful objects; in other words, they were not praised because they were what we would call good artists. Here it should also be noted that Egyptian paintings were seen primarily as religious objects (e.g., scenes of harvesting guaranteed a good crop and scenes of a deceased hunter in pursuit of game enabled him to continue hunting after death), and they were not seen simply as aesthetic objects. Because of this lack of concern with the aesthetic appeal of art—in other words, a lack of concern with art as such—most Egyptian paintings were kept out of sight in the tombs, where they could be appreciated by no one.

"Art" in Greece. Eventually, however, human beings began to develop the concept of art, and thus in 7th-century Greece we find Homer judging a picture as a picture, such as when he tells us that a picture on Achilles' shield is "a marvelous piece." This doesn't mean that the Homeric Greeks had arrived at our modern way of thinking about art, which separates the "fine arts" (think especially of music, sculpture, painting, literature, and the movies) from crafts like shoemaking, but it does mean that they were beginning to think of artworks as art. And because of this new way of thinking, by the 4th century Plato developed the first major aesthetic theories about the nature of art, the source of artistic creation, and the value and influence of art.

But before discussing Plato's ideas, we should glance at the traditional Greek ideas about poetry and the poet which Plato was responding to. First, there was the popular idea that the poet is divinely inspired, like a seer or a prophet. Both Homer and Hesiod, the two most important Greek poets, claimed that they were inspired "by the Muses," and their elevated, magical and hypnotic language seemed to support this idea. As a human being inspired by the gods, the poet was also believed to possess important knowledge, again like the seer. Thus, not only did Homer's poetry entertain, it also provided a source of knowledge about all sorts of things, including education, warfare, and proper moral behavior. Indeed, for many centuries down to the time of Plato oral recitals of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* provided the major source of Greek education. (Here it should be emphasized that the Greeks didn't invent the alphabet until approximately 725 BCE, and a culture based on writing and books developed only gradually after that; in the absence of such a culture, oral poetic recitals of Homer were essential to the passing on of valued cultural traditions. It should also be emphasized that educational recitals were highly emotional affairs, filled with music, chanting, and the passionate play-acting of the rhapsode.) In the 5th century BCE, Heraclitus and Zenophanes, two Greek philosophers, criticized the idea that the poet possesses knowledge, and they especially criticized Homer's poetry on the ground that it showed the gods behaving in immoral ways. But such criticisms were not the norm, and mainstream Greeks continued to believe that there was a divine knowledge in Homer's poems, and thus they continued to function as "tribal encyclopedias" at the center of Greek education.

Plato on Art and Poetry. For Plato, who wanted education based on philosophy, mathematics and science, this emphasis on poetry was a major mistake, and at this point we will turn to Plato's aesthetic theory—in particular to his ideas about painting and, above all, poetry. These ideas are most forcefully developed in the *Ion* and the *Republic*, and they provide the basis for the following discussion.

In the *Republic* Plato's starting point is a famous definition of art as an "imitation of reality." The Greek word for imitation is "mimesis" (which is also translated as "representation"), and the artist is thus one who composes a *mimesis*, in other words a person who makes representations or copies things. As Plato says, the painter simply "takes up a mirror" and shows us the appearances of things in his mirror. This basic idea, that a painting, literary work and even a piece of music, is an imitation of reality, was to dominate western thinking about art until the 19th century, and thus Leonardo told painters that "the mirror should be taken as your master," and Shakespeare told playwrights that they should above all "hold a mirror up to nature."

But while Leonardo and Shakespeare placed a high value on the artist's mirror, Plato did not, and in the *Republic* he even tells us that the poet's mirror would be banished in an ideal society. Here Plato is especially concerned with the mirrored images found in epic and dramatic poetry, and in explaining why

they should be banished Plato first asks us to think about the various kinds of things that exist. In particular he asks us to think about three kinds of beds that exist. The first, at the deepest level of reality is the Form or mental design of a bed. It is perfect, exists in the non-material world, and can only be discovered by Reason. Perhaps it was made by god. At the next level of reality there are the beds that exist in the sensed or material world; these beds are made by carpenters, after they have mentally glimpsed the Form of a bed, and they are imperfect. They are the beds that we sleep on. Then there is the bed that the artist makes, and this bed is an imitation or copy of the beds made by carpenters. More specifically, it is a copy based on a particular appearance of the carpenter's bed when seen from a particular angle. Since this bed is a copy of the carpenter's copy, it should be seen as an imitation of an imitation, far removed from the ultimate reality of bedness. As Plato says, since the artist makes his "representation by reference to its superficial appearance" and "not by reference to the object as it actually is," "the art of representation is a long way removed from the truth."

In developing this point Plato emphasizes that neither the artist nor the poet have knowledge of the things they represent. Not only are their imitations of things created without focusing on their Forms; they are not even informed by actual experience with the copies that exist at the second level of reality. In this respect the artist and poet differ from the craftsman. For example, before he makes a flute, the flute-maker talks to the flute-player about what separates a good from a bad flute, and thus what he makes is informed by information based on its use. But the poet who copies an appearance is not concerned with such information, and thus he "will be beautifully ill-informed about the subjects of his poetry." To make matters worse, in making his representations he will be concerned with what "appeals to the taste of the ignorant multitude." In other words, what the artist makes is controlled by a desire to give his audience pleasure, and not by a desire to gain knowledge and present the truth.

Plato also claims that if an artist had knowledge of the various things he imitates, he would have made them rather than give us imitations of them. If, for example, Homer had knowledge about how to educate or make war, he would have opened up a school or become a general, instead of just showing us some pictures of education and war. For Plato it is obvious that human beings prefer making the real thing over an imitation, and thus we can be sure that the artist doesn't know how to make the real thing.

In the *Ion* Plato focuses on the origins of poetry—which both Homer and Hesiod claimed is a "gift from the gods"—and here too the concern is the poet's (and rhapsode's) lack of knowledge. What Plato argues is that in both composing and reciting, the poet and rhapsode are "out of their minds." In other words, rather than being based on reason, poetic descriptions of the world come to the poet and rhapsode while they are in an emotional state, spontaneously. Because of their poetic talent their descriptions have great appeal, but neither the poet nor the rhapsode knows how he came up with them, and thus we should give up on the idea

that poetic descriptions are based on knowledge. It is calm and deliberate reasoning that leads to knowledge, not mindless poetic inspiration.

In this same dialogue Plato compares the power of poetry to that of a magnet. The magnet pulls various iron rings toward it, and it also gives them the power to pull other iron rings toward them, so we sometimes see a chain of objects clinging together, all connected by the same power. In this same way the poet attracts the rhapsode, and the rhapsode attracts the audience, each clinging to the other. But everyone involved is out of his mind, and thus in no position to talk about knowledge.

The problem—and this is what makes poetry dangerous—is that because of his seductive way with words the poet often seems to have knowledge of what he is talking about, and thus it is easy for many to believe that his imitations of reality give us truth. As Plato says,

> In the same way the poet can use words and phrases as a medium to paint a picture of any craftsman, though he knows nothing except how to represent him; and the meter and rhythm and music will persuade people who are as ignorant as he is, and who judge merely from his words, that he really has something to say about shoemaking or generalship or whatever it may be. So great is the natural magic of poetry. Strip it of its poetic coloring, reduce it to plain prose, and I think you will know how little it amounts to.

Here it should again be emphasized that in Plato's day the oral recitals of Homer's poetry were highly emotional affairs—affairs which invited close audience identification with Achilles and Odysseus, rather than detached, analytical thought—and thus it was especially easy to be taken in by poetic descriptions of things. As Plato says, it was particularly easy for students, "as ignorant as the poet," to believe that Homer really did have something to say about shoemaking and generalship. And since this prevents the acquisition of true knowledge of these subjects, it prevents wise decisions about them—and thus, again, the poet's imitations would not be allowed in an ideal society.

Aside from the tendency of poetry to mislead with imitations of reality which are far removed from the truth, Plato emphasizes that poetry should be eliminated for another reason: it appeals to and brings out lawless emotions rather than reason. We have already emphasized that this is the case with the rhapsodes' recitals, and Plato is even more concerned with dramatic poetry. In both cases what the audience encounters is highly emotional human beings, human beings who readily give in to their passions, rather than try to control them with reason. In some plays, for example, actors weep hysterically over a friend's death rather than face it stoically. Since it is hard to hold the audience's attention with calm and rational behavior, rhapsodes and actors will inevitably give emotional performances, encouraging audiences to weep along with them. And while you might think that there's nothing wrong with encouraging you to have a good cry, Plato thinks that it should never be allowed because it discourages calm, rational deliberation, which alone can help human beings solve their problems. Thus when the poet and actor "water" the passions, they are

working against a good life, that is, against a life dominated by reason. As Plato concludes: "We are therefore quite right to refuse to admit the poet to a properly run state, because he wakens and encourages the lower elements in the mind to the detriment of reason, which is like giving power and political control to the worst elements in a state and ruining the better elements."

Here Plato isn't just concerned with the momentary emotional appeal of poetry; he is also concerned with its lasting effects on the audience, and his main point is that poetry has "a terrible power to corrupt even the best characters, with very few exceptions." It has this power because the audience tends to identify with the emotional heroes of epic and dramatic poetry. Like contemporary critics of violent entertainment, Plato argues that we cannot ignore the psychological principle of identification—i.e., cannot ignore the fact that human beings tend to model themselves on the exciting heroes of popular entertainment. Thus Plato argues that children should not be exposed to Homer's immoral gods. But his main point is more general: it is that epic and dramatic poetry, like all popular entertainment, will inevitably encourage the audience to develop an emotional approach to life. As Plato says, when people are exposed to "womanish" actors, who go all to pieces over the death or loss of a loved one, they will think that such behavior is appropriate. In other words, Homeric recitals, plays, movies and soap operas should be banned because they foster an irrational approach to life. And even though you might think that a good cry helps, Plato insists that only rational thought can solve your problems.

Is Plato Right? In evaluating Plato's aesthetic theory several questions should be kept in mind. First, should art, in particular painting and poetry, be defined as an imitation of reality, and should we judge it as such? Second, should we accept Plato's extremely negative conclusions about the artist's imitations—that they are far removed from the truth and even dangerous? Thirdly, is Plato right about the creation of poetry—that it is fundamentally an irrational process, based on mysterious "inspiration" rather than reason and knowledge? And finally, does it make sense to say that the main appeal of popular literature is inevitably its highly emotional quality, and that, because of identification, it corrupts character and makes us irrational? Today, under the influence of feel-good romanticism, Plato's approach to the arts has been heavily criticized, but if you think about the feelers who appear on American talk shows—who have been raised on the kind of art that Plato talks about—you might think twice about these criticisms.