Notes and Fragments

PLATO ON MIMESIS AND MIRRORS

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The mirror analogy in Book X of Plato’s Republic (596c–e) helps Socrates formulate the conception of mimesis used to make the initial argument that the painter is an imitator and his works are inferior, being three times removed from truth and reality. The metaphysical argument, as I will call it, includes what seems to be a simple analogy between painting and holding a mirror to the world (596a–598d). But the analogy is not a simple one. It provides a visualizing mechanism that helps Glaucon to conceptualize the hierarchical schema of form, artifact, and image upon which the metaphysical argument is built, preparing the way for the key distinction that Glaucon makes between appearance and reality. It conjures up the idea that the mirror holder is a sophistic know-it-all who can “make” all things, and places painters in the same class as sophistic mirror holders.

In my reading of the mirror passage, three imaging devices are constructed. I call both analogy and metaphor “imaging devices,” since they have similar rhetorical and educational functions in helping Glaucon arrive at conclusions that Socrates wishes him to accept. First is the analogy that focuses on the resemblance between images created in mirrors and in paintings. Socrates leads Glaucon to understand what it is that the painter “makes,” and to deduce its inferior ontological status. The second imaging device is also an analogy, related to the first, that compares a painter, without qualification, to a mirror holder who turns the mirror round and round, pretending to “make” all things. This shows that Socrates’s mirror holder is not an innocent, anonymous someone.
The third imaging device is a metaphor. The idea that a mirror makes images is transferred to the art of painting: painting is holding a mirror to the world. The idea that mirror holders claim to know more than anyone could possibly know is transferred to painters, who belong to the same class of imitators as mirror holders. Painters are sophistic mirror holders.

In my view, the mirror analogy and its imaging devices give Socrates a dialectical advantage that he would not otherwise have. The metaphysical argument is a dialectical one, and it depends heavily on Glaucon’s receptivity to the model of the mirror. The painter is classified as an impostor in what is ultimately an attempt to impugn the poet. The classification is achieved by an unfair assimilation of the painter with the sophistic mirror holder. If Socrates succeeds with Glaucon in his attempt to show that painters and poets are imitators, his success is primarily due to the mirror analogy and its metaphorical imagery. By constructing such images, Plato appears to violate his own precept: he (seemingly) has Socrates do the very thing he rails against. Socrates takes only a small piece of the whole of something, focuses attention simply on how it appears, and presents it in a misleading way (598b; see also 392e). If one understands the mirror passage as I suggest, the dialectical backbone of the metaphysical argument will be revealed as satisfying Socrates’s desire to provide Glaucon with an antidote: an argument and a set of images necessary to back it up.

I

Book X begins with Socrates’s comment that mimetic poetry as discussed in Book III (396b–398b) has been rightly restricted and, in light of what he and Glaucon had discovered about the nature of the soul (595a–b), should perhaps be banned altogether. Socrates expresses a special concern for the “minds of the audience” and the harm that may come to those who do not have within them the kind of knowledge that provides an “antidote” (pharmakon) to ward off the negative effects of tragic poetry (595b6–7). The remark suggests that by the end of the discussion Glaucon will have a sort of immunity to the seductions of artistic mimesis; in particular, tragic poetry. Socrates then says he will explain further and, with apologies and all due respect to Homer, he begins a series of arguments. The potential harm to the soul isn’t addressed fully until 603c, when they turn their attention to poetry and painting is set aside. I will not include this in my discussion. It is important to
note, however, that all the arguments against mimesis are intended to be therapeutic, like "incantations" (608a2). The mirror analogy is the first strategic tool in Socrates’s medical black bag to neutralize the psychologically ill effects of artistic mimesis.

From the dialectical point of view, the concept of mimesis and its range of meanings are central to Socrates’s argument. An ongoing concern among scholars is specifying the meaning, or meanings, of “mimesis” in Book X. Two of the term’s possible interpretations are generally considered relevant in this context. The first is “dramatic impersonation,” which is included in the discussion of education and poetic style in Book III. Here, the term is applied to poets who use a type of narrative in which they impersonate their fictional characters in direct speech. It is narrowly taken to mean “make oneself like somebody else in voice or in form” (393c5). Initially, the definition seems to refer to mere mimicry, but as the discussion continues, the meaning of “mimesis” expands to include the processes of learning by emulation and internalization (394d–398b). What one imitates may “become part of one’s nature and settle into habits of gesture, voice, and thought” (395d1–2). The term thus acquires an ethical significance. In Book X, mimesis assumes another meaning, one that is less overt, since Socrates’s explicit goal is to provide a general definition of the term. It may be argued that, throughout the discussion, he tacitly relies on a working understanding of “mimesis” as the relation of copy to model. To simplify, in the part of Book X under discussion “mimesis” refers to either the “making of images” or the “copying of appearances.”

According to Gerald Else, three discrete interpretations of “mimesis” are to be considered here. The earliest and most basic sense of the word—its root meaning—corresponds to a direct miming of a person’s voice and gestures. A secondary meaning developed as its usage in Greek literature expanded, referring very broadly and indirectly to imitation of a person’s character, mainly in the ethical sense. A third meaning refers to the making of images, copies, or replicas (mimemata). In Book III, its usage at 393c5 points to the first sense, yet the context and continuation of the discussion also includes an ethical dimension, as noted above. In the metaphysical argument of Book X, the first two meanings are dropped and the third sense emerges. What it is to imitate (mimeisthai) something is examined mostly in terms of what it is to make (poiein) something. The mirror analogy does the real conceptual work. The painter’s activity cannot legitimately be called by the same name as the activities of the craftsman, nature, or the god.
The inquiry into mimesis begins when Socrates asks Glaucon to explain “the general nature of imitation, for I do not myself quite understand what meaning that word is trying to express” (595c). In his wry manner, Socrates personifies mimesis, as if the word wanted to be defined or wanted to be something it was not. Glaucon staunchly declines to answer. Socrates leads the way with the methodological principle that one must posit a single form whenever a common name applies to many things (596a–b).

Socrates takes as his example the many types of tables and couches. The first step is to sort out two types of “makers”: the craftsman-maker and the maker of the original Form, either nature or the god. In a surprise maneuver, Socrates asks Glaucon to tell him what he would call the kind of maker who has the ability to make “all the things which any and every artisan makes” (596c2). The example Socrates uses is a man holding up a mirror to the world and, by so doing, instantly creates all things at will, simply by turning it around. He can outdo both the craftsman and the god by “making” things appear (e.g., sun, moon, stars, plants, animals, human beings, and gods), and do so without effort. In response, Glaucon equates this wonder worker to a sophist (596d; also see 398a). The wonder worker may be able to “make” whatever he pleases—but only in a manner of speaking.

Clearly, this striking image enables Glaucon to follow Socrates’s meaning. When Socrates tells him that even he could make things in this way, Glaucon sees the need for a conceptual distinction. This distinction helps them to clarify what “making” means in this context: the wonder worker “makes” only the appearance of reality, not reality itself (phainomena, ou mentoi onta ge pou tē alētheia, 596e4). Socrates takes it for all it is worth when he asks, “The painter too belongs to this class of makers, does he not?” (596e6–7). Glaucon agrees. Socrates confirms that the sense in which the painter is said to “make” a couch is that he “makes the appearance” of a couch. The newfound distinction that classifies the painter as a maker of appearances marks the end of the mirror passage. The thrust of the mirror analogy has yet to emerge; its strength will be tapped once it is shown that the only thing a painter can do when he paints is copy the visual appearances of an artifact. The imaging devices of the mirror and the mirror holder serve as a reminder for what is to come.

The next point establishes that the artifact couch made by the craftsman is less real, but is like the real. When Socrates asks whether
Glaucon wishes to inquire further into the “nature of the imitator in these same examples,” he bounces the conceptual ball back to Socrates by responding, “If you wish” (597b4). The hierarchical framework is falling into place. The god is described as a “natural maker.” He has “made the true nature of this and everything else” (597d4–5). While they agree that the carpenter is a maker, the burning question is, what will they call the painter? Glaucon says that he would call such a man “an imitator of that which the others made” (597e2). Socrates rephrases the answer as a question: “You call an imitator one whose product is at three removes from nature?” And a split second later: “This will be true also of the tragedian, as he is an imitator”? Glaucon has no problem with this, answering, “Probably so” (597e5–6).

Socrates has ontologically stratified Glaucon’s meaning with the “three removes” metaphor. The stratification is linked directly to the tragedian insofar as he too is called an “imitator.” The problem is, what definition of imitation or imitator has allowed Socrates to create this link? Given that the only precise meaning of mimesis associated with the tragic poet is dramatic impersonation, it is difficult to see what makes the tragic poet an imitator in the relevant sense of the term. To describe the painter and the poet as imitators, Socrates uses the language of breeding (gennēmatos, 597e4). He says that they are “by nature, third from the King and the truth, as are all other imitators” (597e7).

The metaphysical framework is reinforced. Socrates presents the hierarchy of the three couches and their respective makers: the first is the work of nature or the god, the second is built by the carpenter, and the third is what the painter “makes” (597b–e). This framework, which seemingly derives from the Forms and the methodological principle, does little to establish that painters are imitators or in what sense tragic poets are imitators. There is no inquiry into what the practice of mimesis is as a painterly activity; no general definition of mimesis is forthcoming. Instead, Socrates takes away the painter’s status as a craftsman-maker and, using the mirror analogy, groups the painter with the sophistic mirror holder. He then generalizes from what he and Glaucon agreed upon in calling the painter an imitator and, without further argument, swiftly applies the term to the tragic poet.

III

Now that they have agreed on who and what imitators are, Socrates and Glaucon start a new phase (598a–d). This section is decisive, for it
establishes, from an epistemological standpoint, the antithesis between appearance and reality. When Socrates asks Glaucon whether the painter, when he paints a couch, attempts to imitate the thing itself or the craftsman’s artifact, Glaucon understands and chooses the artifact. Socrates now poses the leading question: in painting from the artifact, does the painter paint it as it is or as it appears to be? Glaucon asks for clarification. Socrates explains that in order to imitate the artifact’s appearance the painter need only take into account the angle, shape, and shading of the object from a single viewpoint. This means that the painter cannot capture the essence or reality of an object that exists as a physical entirety. With the hierarchical framework in place, the painter can only imitate the object by copying its surface features—that is, the appearance of the thing. Glaucon accepts this explanation. Socrates asks again whether the painting imitates “the reality of the model as it is or its appearance as it appears.” Before Glaucon can answer, Socrates follows up with: “Is it an imitation of the truth or of an image?” Glaucon responds, “Of an image” (phantasmatos, 598b3–4).

To make this argument, Plato works with an extremely narrowed idea of the visible in an image, as if what the viewer perceives at the most superficial levels of color and shape would be enough to make sense out of what he sees. In his reliance on the mirror as his model, Plato omits too much of the actual artistic process of re-creating the object’s appearance. There is no recognition of the tangible basis or physical medium that would hold the image in place. While the painter does copy a thing’s visual appearance as he sees it, he cannot simply paint the appearance without taking into account the object’s position, spatial relations, and other properties that make it a perceptual whole. The painter can only work out what the object’s appearance is or what it must look like from one perspective, if he has a clear conceptual idea of the thing’s structural basis or form. Plato’s notion of an object’s visual appearance requires that it be cut off completely from any context, as if painting the appearance were a matter of fabricating a picture from thin air. Perhaps Plato expects the reader to adopt the viewpoint of the naïve perceiver and accept the caricature of the painter suggested by the mirror analogy. I see no reason to go along with this, since the painter has been given a stupendously superficial treatment by Socrates.

What the metaphysical argument shows is that Plato cannot take the painter’s image-making seriously or allow it to mean something more substantial in terms of its representational capacities. The unfairness lies in Plato’s unwillingness to accept that the mimetic artist as such is
not a fraud; that is the case only when the artist claims to be more and know more than he can. In summary, Socrates gives an explanation for the mistaken belief that a putative wise person—a sophist, painter, or poet—can make or know all things. While some might think that such a person is capable of imitating any thing, this view is limited to presenting an image of an object as it appears, one small bit at a time (598b–c). Socrates’s advice to Glaucon, then, is to disbelieve anyone who says he has met someone claiming to be capable of “making” all things, but rather to believe that the speaker has met an impostor or imitator, and is unable to “distinguish between knowledge, ignorance, and imitation” (598d7–8).

IV

The metaphysical argument clearly relies upon both the mirror analogy and metaphor to separate the painter from the other two types of makers and thus set up the hierarchy. These imaging devices provide a visual reminder that sharpens the appearance/reality distinction and confines the painter to the realm of insubstantial images. This sharp distinction overlooks the possible difference between a painter who paints an object’s surface appearance, whimsically and without care for the thing’s essential nature, and a painter who paints an object with a careful eye toward what it really is, by nature. While both products are images occupying the third tier, the latter is a true image or likeness (eidōla/eikon); and the former, a false simulacrum (eidōla/phantasia).

The mirror analogy does much more than compare painting with the act of holding a mirror. It turns the image of the mirror into a powerful metaphor that stands for deception and exaggerates both the artistic skills of a painter and the literary skills of a poet. In a strict sense, a mirror can only show what is in front of it. By itself, it cannot “make” anything. Only the mirror holder can do this. Since the mirror is limited to reflecting things in one’s immediate environment, the comparison of the mirror holder to the painter or poet must be embellished. In Greek art, the painters, sculptors, and poets who created the myths and images of gods could not use the visible world as their model; rather, their images took from what they and their culture believed about their gods and heroes—in other words, they had to imagine a world entire. The mirror passage contains both the visual imagery and the metaphysical implications that Socrates needs. It also allows Socrates to vilify the
painter or poet, to turn him into the wizard-sophist—a pretentious, ignorant fraud unworthy of trust.

The mirror is a reflecting surface that reproduces exactly what is before it. The painting is not a reflecting surface in this way. The painting may be treated as if it were only a reflective surface upon which the painter works his magic, making an exact image of what is before him. But this is not what a painter does when he re-creates visual appearances. Indeed, the painter may claim to know more than he actually does, but this a human failing, not an artistic one. A painter may strive to make his finished product look as if creating it were as easy as holding up a mirror to nature. He may wish to hide his laborious processes and keep his techniques a secret. Yet a painter is not identical to Socrates’s mirror holder, unless he has the mirror holder’s same intentions to fool the public. The mirror holder is none other than the grand impostor who receives undeserved praise from the ignorant for what he appears to know. As such, he may stand in for anyone who misuses his talents for ignoble ends: sophist, painter, poet, politician, or philosopher.\(^\text{12}\)

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4. In my view, Socrates does not attain the goal. A number of scholars hold that a general definition is given; see 597e2–4, 598b4–5, 603a7–10. With regard to Homer and tragic poetry, see 599d4–5, 602b6–7, 603c3–7. On the contrary, Philip in “Mimesis in the Sophistes of Plato” notes that we get, not a definition of mimesis, “but a determination of the ontological status of its manifestation or product” (p. 457).

5. Goodrich, in “Plato on Poetry and Painting,” notes that “there is no attempt to give a general definition of representation despite invitations to do so (595c & 597b).” As Goodrich interprets it, “representation functions more as a tool of analysis than as an object of analysis” (p. 127).

6. It is debatable whether Socrates is genuinely trying to give a definitional account of “mimesis” in his usual way, by looking for a common element that it shares with things of the same name. Some scholars point out that Plato may be signaling a change when he has Socrates seek this type of definition. Some claim that the meaning of “mimesis” remains indeterminate; others, that the whole concept is being reinterpreted, which is why it is being examined dialectically. Most agree that the context of Book X broadens the meaning of the term.


8. Hyman (OE, pp. 61–62) offers a critical discussion of Plato’s mirror analogy and its influence in misleading philosophers about the nature of pictures and the resemblance theory of art. See also ML, pp. 33–34.


10. Elsewhere in the Republic, Socrates recognizes the difference between good and bad painters, and speaks metaphorically of philosophers as painters who look to models or paradigms for guidance (472d–e, 484c–d, 478e–488b, 500c–501d). See also Cratylus (431c–d).


12. With regard to George Inness’s painting The Lackawanna Valley (1855), Gombrich explains that Inness agreed to include in his picture railroad tracks that were not yet built. He notes, “The lie was not in the painting. It was in the advertisement” (AI, p. 67).