

Mimesis in Plato's *Republic* and Its Interpretation by Girard and Gans

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After 2400 years the *Republic* continues to generate intense scholarly and hermeneutical debate. It is one of Plato's longest works and clearly one of the most important for an understanding of his thought. Richard Kraus explains its centrality, by reason that in the *Republic* we find:

a unified metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, political, and psychological theory that goes far beyond the doctrines of the early dialogues. The *Republic* is in one sense the centerpiece of Plato's philosophy, for no other single work of his attempts to treat all of these topics so fully. (10)

In the light of the sheer scope, depth, and range of complexity of the *Republic*, of its pivotal role in Plato's *corpus*, and of its still living interpretive reception, I will focus on a single but clearly central issue in the dialogue, that of *mimesis*, emphasizing its treatment in Book X, and referring also to a key passage in Book VI. *Mimesis* plays a crucial and highly contested role in the dialogue as a whole, figuring centrally in Books II, III, and X. Socrates picks up his earlier discussion of it in the tenth and final book in the light the intervening discussion in books IV through IX of the role of justice in an ideal city and in the well-balanced individual psyche. I will discuss some of the complexities attendant upon the role of *mimesis* in the *Republic*; this will be followed by a treatment of the responses of René Girard and Eric Gans, both of whom, because of the central role played by *mimesis* in their work, of necessity comment on Plato's founding role in relation to their respective conceptions of mimetic theory.

Like Girard and Gans, I choose to leave the term *mimesis* untranslated from the Greek, since the usual English translation as "imitation" fails to capture several of the key resonances in its aesthetic, ethical, psychological, and epistemological ranges of

significance. In his masterly analysis of the mostly aesthetic uses of mimesis, Stephen Halliwell calls the view that Plato holds anything like a “monolithic notion” of mimesis “one of the supreme myths of modern histories of aesthetics.” Rather, Halliwell argues, “Plato’s importance as the ‘founding father’ of mimeticism is much more complex and much less easily condensed into a unified point of view than is usually supposed” (25). Far from holding “an unchanging and consistently negative attitude” to mimesis, Halliwell observes, “Plato introduces mimesis terminology in a remarkably wide range of contexts, using it in connection with issues in epistemology, ethics, psychology, politics, and metaphysics, and applying it to both the musicopoetic and the visual arts, as well as to other human practices, including even aspects of philosophy itself” (24).

Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (see below, Works Cited), there is a fundamental ambiguity in Plato’s use of mimesis in the argument of the *Republic*, in particular. In Book X, Socrates banishes the poets from the ideal city, because, he says, “the argument determined us” (607b); namely, for the reason established in Book IX that poetry nourishes the pleasure-seeking and emotive and obscures the calculative and reasoning parts of the psyche—that it is imitative of the sensible world, eliciting in us conflicting and opposing perceptions, rather than of the intelligible world of a reason ruled by the law of (non-)contradiction. In relation to the law of (non-)contradiction, Allan Bloom points out in a note to his translation of the *Republic* that the “earliest known explicit statement of the principle of contradiction—the premise of philosophy and the foundation of rational discourse” (457, n. 25) occurs in Book IV of the *Republic*, where Socrates observes: “It is plain that the same thing won’t be willing at the same time to do or to suffer opposites with respect to the same part and in relation to the same thing” (436b). As Socrates argues in Book X, the tragic poets are the chief offenders when it comes to nourishing that part of the psyche that is attracted to conflictive emotions and passionate engagement. It is tragic displays of agonistic experience that constitute dramatic force and evoke intense audience response: “Now, then, irritable disposition affords much and varied imitation, while the prudent and quiet character, which is always nearly equal to itself, is neither easily imitated, nor, when imitated, easily understood especially by a festive assembly” (604e). Socrates emphasizes “the greatest accusation”: that it is dangerous not only for the general audience but also, he argues, even for those who pursue and practice philosophy. Even “the best of us,” he says, “praise as a good poet the man who most puts us in this state” (605d) of heightened tragic emotion. In sum: “[F]or all the desires, pains, and pleasures in the soul that we say follow our action, poetic imitation produces similar results in us, for it fosters and waters them when they ought to be dried up, and sets them up as rulers in us” (606d). We ought, Socrates says, to be ruled by those things described in Book VI that do not draw us into conflict and contradiction, the ideals of “the just, fair, and moderate by nature” (501b).

The just cited passage in Book VI contains the much-discussed analogy of the philosopher-ruler as a “painter using the divine pattern” (500c; for a discussion of the debate surrounding this passage, see Foshay 103-104). The philosopher as painter, the analogy

goes, “would look away frequently in both directions, toward the just, fair, and moderate by nature and everything of the sort, and, again, toward what is in human beings; and thus mixing and blending the practices as ingredients, [he or she] would produce the image of man, taking hints from exactly that phenomenon in human beings which Homer too called god-like and the image of god” (501b). Such an analogy of the philosopher-ruler arises naturally from the preceding discussion, in which Socrates describes the passionate nature of the philosophical vocation, what he calls “the true erotic passion for true philosophy” (499b):

[A] man who has his understanding truly turned toward the things that *are* has no desire to look down toward the affairs of human beings and to be filled with envy and ill will as a result of fighting with them. But, rather, because he sees and contemplates things that . . . are always in the same condition . . . *he imitates them* and, as much as possible, makes himself like them. (500b-c; my emphasis)

Thus, the philosopher is mimetic in just that matter and manner that truly makes him or her a philosopher, that is to say, in relation to those things that in being always the same are always as they are and neither in conflict with themselves nor cause conflict in those who in loving them for their own sake awaken to the philosophical life. This is the argument given by Plato to the character of Socrates in the *Republic*. Of course, because of the poetical and mimetic resources of the dialogue genre we cannot with any certainty attribute to Plato such a doctrine of forms. The notion of ideal forms is used quite inconsistently by Socrates in Books VI and X and is seriously questioned in dialogues like the *Sophist* that are almost certainly composed later in Plato’s career. In keeping with the literary structure of the philosophical dialogue as a genre, Plato always places his philosophical arguments in the mouths of characters in discussion, and in a particular context and setting which itself reflects thematically on the content of the philosophical preoccupations in the dialogue. No view expressed in the dialogues can with any certainty be attributed to Plato himself, and if the *Seventh Letter* is to be believed authentic, this is for very conscious and explicitly philosophical reasons, as the writer of the *Seventh Letter* explains: “There is no writing of mine about these [highest philosophical] matters, nor will there ever be one. For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences” (341c).

Both in being animated by philosophical eros and in achieving an explicitly mimetic relation to the ideal forms of unmixed and unchanging value, the philosopher in Socrates’ argument in Book VI of the *Republic* displays precisely those qualities for which the poets are eventually excluded from the ideal polis in Book X. The philosopher and the poet are likewise erotic and mimetic, but in regard to very different objects: the philosopher of “the just, the fair, the moderate by nature,” the poet, as Socrates specifies, of “sex, and spiritedness too, and all the desires, pains, and pleasures in the soul that we say follow all our actions,” establishing such passions “as rulers in us when they ought to be ruled”

(606d). Socrates goes on to defend the exile of the poets because “our argument determined us” (607b) and so to do otherwise in the end would be an act of impiety toward the truth of a specifically rational and critical order. The critique of mimesis in the *Republic* begins in Books II and III as a critique of religion and the canonical role the poets have played as carriers of the Greek mythological tradition. In Book X, the poets and their defenders are to be given a fair chance to argue for their rights as citizens of the ideal polis, but Socrates advises the discipline of lovers for whom “the inborn love of such poetry we owe to our rearing” would be ascetically resisted.⁽¹⁾ If poetry is not able to mount a persuasive defense, he instructs, “we’ll chant this argument we are making to ourselves, as a countercharm, taking care against falling back into this love” (607d-608a). Thus, the rhythmical poetical resources of language are invoked to defend philosophical from poetic eros, and the power of ruler over the ruled in the contention between philosophy and poetry is sustained by marshaling erotic emotion for the sake of those forms or ideas of stable and unchanging ideals that promise to bring peace and stability to the ideal city and the well-balanced psyche. What is clearly at issue for Socrates is the question of self-command of the passions and the emotions, the need to direct them away from those changing objects and pursuits that lead to instability in the psyche and conflict with others in society, from what he described in the passage we cited from Book VI as the envy and ill-will that arise from pursuit of finite desires.

It is precisely this intimate link between mimesis, desire, and social rivalry that led René Girard to the discovery of the centrality of the scapegoat mechanism in the development of social and cultural forms. Naturally enough, Plato is a key reference point for Girard in articulating the relationship of his anthropological theory of culture to the philosophical tradition. In a key passage in his first full summation of his theoretical model in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, a work staged as a prolonged interview with two students of his work, Girard is asked pointedly about his relation to philosophy, and it is assumed that this means to Plato, with whom he shares such foundational concerns with questions of mimesis, desire, violence, and justice. Girard’s response displays a quite self-aware relationship of mimetic rivalry with Plato (and one might gather with philosophy itself). For Girard, Plato is unique among philosophers for the sharpness both of his hostility toward mimesis and of his perception of its importance. Girard responds to the above question:

If Plato is unique in the history of philosophy because of his fear of mimesis, he is for the same reason closer than primitive religion. Yet Plato is also deceived by mimesis because he cannot succeed in understanding his fear, he never uncovers its empirical reason for being. Plato never relates conflict to acquisitive mimesis, that is, with the object that the two mimetic rivals attempt to wrest from one another because they designate it as desirable to one another. (15)

Now, it is clear from our earlier analysis of the complex and multivalent (not to say contradictory) role of mimesis in the argument of the *Republic* that it is not accurate to say either that Plato (or even the character of Socrates in the *Republic*) is simply afraid of mimesis, certainly not hostile to mimesis as such, though certainly he fears and respects its artistic uses because of what he argues to be their de-stabilizing effects on the psyche and on the community. Socrates in Book VI argues forcefully that philosophy, in its defining pursuit of the ideal forms and the unmixed concept of the good, is itself mimetic. Nonetheless, the category of mimesis is reserved exclusively in Book X for its artistic and poetic and indeed, its tragic expressions, with Homer described as “the most poetic and first of the tragic poets” (607a). The near scriptural status of the Homeric poems in Greek culture constitutes the greatest challenge to the philosophical aspiration to the life of virtue, moderation, and avoidance of social rivalry. For Socrates, tragic tradition fosters the pursuit of sensuous and emotional desire that leads to inevitable conflict over finite resources, entailing precisely that acquisitive use of mimesis that Girard so rightly identifies as the core dynamic of violence in society. One cannot escape the ironical observation that Plato, in having Socrates reserve the notion of mimesis for its acquisitive and conflictive forms, displays the very conflictive mimetic rivalry that he attributes to the poets. Given Plato’s subtle command of the literary resources of the dialogue form, we cannot at all be certain that this irony is not conscious and deliberate. We should recall the passage in the *Laws* where the tragic poets are anticipated to request entry into the well-ruled city, the response by the philosopher-lawgivers being this:

Most honored guests, we’re tragedians ourselves, and our tragedy is the finest and best we can create. At any rate, our entire state has been constructed so as to be a “representation” of the finest and noblest life—the very thing we maintain is most genuinely a tragedy. So we are poets like yourselves, composing in the same *genre*, and your competitors as artists and actors in the finest drama, which true law alone has the natural powers to “produce” to perfection (of that we’re confident). (817b-c)

For Plato, it is only philosophers who engage in the real mimesis of the forms that, in providing a sufficiently unqualified representation of a non-possessive good, make possible a society where the competing interests of its citizens can be peaceably mediated and modulated. Plato either refuses or else fails to explicitly theorize this notion of philosophical mimesis, but it is more than apparent that he clearly performs it in the dialogues. Indeed, Socratic dialogue is possibly more philosophically consistent as representation than it can be as linear and discursive argumentation. Both the *Seventh Letter* and the above passage from the *Laws* are frequently cited to support such an interpretation. (I am thinking here in particular of the recent so-called Third Wave of Plato interpretation, in the work of such scholars as Francisco J. Gonzales, Charles L. Griswold, and David Roochnik.)

Eric Gans, while drawing on the fundamental insight of Girard into the relation between mimetic desire and violence, emphasizes the linguistically mediated nature of human enculturation rather than the more realist approach of Girard to the founding murder, the scapegoat mechanism, and the mediation of violence through myth and ritual. Gans sees the founding moment of language as the key event of hominization, when human beings crossed over from a merely appetitive mimesis to a more complexly mediated representation of an object of desire that had to be consciously renounced in order for the conflict of acquisitive mimesis to be avoided. The founding gesture of language and representation for Gans is thus a complex renunciation of the object, a deliberate forgoing of direct conflict over the object for the purpose of social cohesion. This founding gesture of signification defers the acquisition of the object on the material level and re-presents it on the newly formed ideational level of imaginary, symbolical acquisition in and through the sign. Thus Gans's model of language is consistent with the Derridean model of the sign as a creature both of difference and deferral: language makes present what is constitutively absent, and Gans points out that this absence is a renunciation of the material referent which generates the presence of a human recognition that the social bond takes precedence over the self-seeking of merely material survival. Language in that sense is truly generative for Gans of human co-existence in a community of interest. As for Girard, mimesis plays an integral role for Gans. At the appetitive level, our direct animal imitativeness leads to the acquisitive mimetic crisis of two or more hands reaching for the same object. The originary act of representation/renunciation, one of ostensive indication or pointing, Gans argues, is likewise mimetic, leading the model to join the disciple in renunciative deferral of acquisition. As he describes this key moment:

Within the practical realm, the goal is no longer to appropriate the object in imitation of the human mediator but to imitate the object to the latter's satisfaction, that is, well enough to make him understand the new sense—which can already be called the “meaning”—of the gesture. This closure is not perceived within the practical world but on the other's imaginary scene of representation. In practical terms, this imaginary aim mediates the deferral of conflict, averting the potential wrath of the other-mediator toward his disciple-rival. (28)

The key point here, as Gans puts it, is the substitution of a sufficiently effective mimetic representation by the rival to divert the model from his act of appropriation. This is a potent mimetic significance indeed, one that Gans is subtle and evocative in presenting and defending, and on which hangs an analysis of the workings of culture that, similarly to that of Girard, generates some highly generative perspectives on cultural development and the evolution of social institutions.

Gans mounts a particularly vigorous critique of metaphysics and of the thought of Plato in

particular. "Plato does not seek, does not want to recognize the configuration of the originary scene of language in which alone such a substitution [as word and concept for thing] is conceivable" (78). Gans is sharply critical of Plato's doctrine of ideas; I am less convinced that Plato has one. In place of the ideal philosophical construct, Gans offers his own more complex and comprehensive model of the generative ostensive sign. "To eliminate the ostensive," as Gans claims Plato does by means of the doctrine of ideas and the abstraction of the concept, "is to expunge the local historicity of deferral of collective violence by means of the sign" (81). It can be argued indeed that Plato might be seen to be doing exactly the opposite. Rather than expunging the historicity of the deferral of violence, he embodies that historicity by means of the complex ostensivity of the dialogue form—a higher order ostensivity that encompasses the abstraction of the concept, but embeds it critically in the performative representation of the Socratic dialogue as a specifically literary/philosophical genre.⁽²⁾ Certainly, philosophical argumentation in its traditional monological form is declarative and conceptual rather than ostensive. But Plato's choice and persistent practice of the philosophical dialogue—as he has Socrates demonstrate inconsistently in the *Republic* but the lawgivers declare explicitly in the *Laws*—is not in overall form declarative. As already observed, none of the philosophical declarations within the Platonic dialogues can with any certainty whatever be attributed directly to Plato. He took lifelong pains to represent and to embody philosophical argumentation as an ongoing inquiry, one that does not harden itself in declarations of philosophical position taking, no matter how tirelessly 2400 years of Plato interpretation has insisted on trying to establish this. When Socrates takes a philosophical position in Book X of the *Republic*, he is in open contradiction with his own earlier application of mimesis to philosophical thought itself in Book VI. Socrates' arguments in Book X in support of the expulsion of the poets and against artistic mimesis are tendentious and inconsistent on a number of levels. It can be argued that Plato was entirely aware of these rather bald inconsistencies, that he is at once pointing to the ideal of philosophical eros in its pursuit of a transcendence of philosophical and political conflict and at the same time demonstrating dramatically and dialogically how very difficult it is to achieve in practice, even by the exemplary character of his own teacher. Precisely because Socrates and the other characters of the dialogues are historical and actual, and yet are portrayed fictionally in the dialogues, Plato can be argued to ground his representation of philosophy in history, but at the same time to lift it to the imaginative level, to indicate an imaginary scene of philosophy. It implies that philosophy by its very definition for Plato is an imaginative pursuit of an ideal, one that can only with very great difficulty and perhaps only imperfectly—and indeed not at all by Plato himself in his own failed historical attempts—be realized in actuality. Plato's dialogues are not an attempt on his part acquisitively to seize and individually to possess the philosophical object, but rather to situate his own pursuit of philosophy both historically and at the same time as a representation, a sign rather than an object. The dialogues are a highly wrought sign, not less ostensive in being more complexly performative, of the ideational difference of philosophical inquiry from the endless deferral of its attainment of what remains in its very ideational structure an imaginary scene of thought and understanding, one that must prove

itself in the actual conduct of a life in keeping with such a “true erotic pursuit of true philosophy,” a pursuit of the ideals of “the just, the fair, and the moderate by nature” (501b) such that we might live in personal and social justice, peace and the avoidance of conflict.

It is this overall probing enquiry into a non-acquisitive ideal that characterizes the thought of the dialogues, not any particular formulation or argumentation of Socrates or another of their historically referential and yet fictionalized characters. The fear and rejection of mimesis that both Girard and Gans perceive in the dialogues is a performance marked both by discursive and terminological inconsistency and by a mimetic rivalry between philosophy and the religious and poetic tradition that is arguably so overt as to strongly suggest a conscious dramatic representation on Plato’s part of the constitutively subtle nature of mimesis as a construct, of the inherent reflexivity that makes of all accusations of mimetic blindness double-edged weapons that require a highly tuned critical circumspection on the part of the wielder. The critique of metaphysics that casts Plato as the founding thinker in an originary forgetting or a forgetting of originary thinking rings with a mimetic rivalry that Plato was himself the first to represent as a founding question of the constitution of theoretical reflection itself.

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Notes

1. On this strain in Plato's thinking see Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, Part I, Ch. 2, "Romantic Puritanism: Plato and the Psychology of Mimesis," pp. 72-97. ([back](#))
2. See Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, esp. Ch. 1, "Sokratikoi Logoi: the literary and intellectual background of Plato's work," pp. 1-35. ([back](#))