

Plato

His Age and Works

Plato was the most celebrated disciple of Socrates. By his time the glory of Athenian art and literature, illustrated in the works of artists like Phidias and Polygnotus and writers like Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, was on the wane, and their place was taken by philosophy and oratory, of which the chief priests were Parmenides, Empedocles, and Socrates, among the philosophers, and Gorgias, Antiphon, and Lysias, among the orators.

Confronted with the decline in national character and the standards of social and public life, the philosophers in particular discussed a great variety of matters, of concern to the citizen and the state, applying the test of reason to each. Socrates heads them all by his dispassionate quest of truth, which often challenged many an established belief and convention. Among these general inquiries, the value of literature to society and its nature and functions also came in for their due share of consideration.

The theory of Forms, expounded systematically in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, can be summarized as follows. The familiar world of objects which surrounds us, and which we apprehend by our senses, is not independent and self-sufficient. Indeed, it is not the real world (even though the objects in it exist) because it is dependent upon another world, the realm of pure Forms or ideas, which can be apprehended only by reason and not by our bodily sense perceptions.

What is the connection between the two realms? Plato says that the qualities of any object in the physical world are derived from the ideal Forms of those qualities. For example, an object in the physical world is beautiful because it partakes of the ideal Form of Beauty which exists in the higher realm. And so with Tallness, Equality, or Goodness, which Plato sees as the highest of the Forms. Plato even characterizes entire objects as having their essence in the ideal Forms; hence a bed in the physical world is an imperfect copy of the ideal bed in the world of Forms.

The connection between the two realms can best be illustrated using examples from geometry: any triangle or square that we construct using physical instruments are bound to be imperfect. At most it can merely approximate the ideal triangle which is perfect and which is perceived not by the senses but by reason: the ideal triangle is not a physical object but a concept, an idea, a Form. According to Plato, the world of Forms, being changeless and eternal, alone constitutes reality. It is the world of essences, unity, and universality, whereas the physical world is characterized by perpetual change and decay, mere existence (as opposed to essence), multiplicity and particularity

His View of Art

As literature is an art, like painting, sculpture, and others, what Plato thought of art in general deserves the first consideration. It is intimately bound up with what is called his Theory of Ideas. Ideas, he says in *The Republic*, are the ultimate reality. Things are conceived as ideas before they take practical shape as things. A tree, thus, is nothing more than a concrete embodiment of its image in idea. The idea of everything therefore is its original pattern, and the thing itself its copy. As the copy ever fall short of the original, it is once removed from reality. Now art— literature, painting, sculpture — reproduces but things ‘as near pastime’, the first in words, the next in colours, and the last in stone. So it merely copies a copy: it is twice removed from reality. Things themselves being imperfect copies of the ideas from which they spring, their reproduction in art must be more imperfect still. They take me away from reality rather than towards it.

Since art serves no useful purpose in society, Plato views art as useless. Art added neither knowledge nor intellectual value. Art is essentially deceptive and potentially dangerous. The whole aim of art is to deceive. Success is achieved when the spectator mistakes an imitation of reality. Art is unconcerned with morality, sometimes even teaching immoral lessons as in the case of *The Iliad*.

His Attack of Poetry

Plato attacks poetry and poets for the following reasons:

1. Poetry is twice removed from reality and it makes men believe in the imperfection.

2. The poet writes a poem not because he thought for a long time but because he is inspired suddenly. This suddenness cannot be truthful. Poetry contains profound truth but poetry fails in the test of reason. It cannot take the place of philosophy and it cannot make a better citizen.

3. Poetry affects the emotions and not the reason. It appeals to the heart and not to the intellect. Emotions are temporary and they cannot be safe guides to men.

4. Poetry is non-moral in character. It treats both virtue and vice alike. It does not teach moral to the readers. It corrupts human beings.

Function of Poetry

Poetry is not just to offer pleasure. It should teach some morals. It should contribute to the knowledge. A poet should also be a good teacher. Plato suggests truth as the test of poetry. A poet is a good artist only in so far as he is a good teacher.

His Comments on Drama

Drama, according to Plato, is a branch of poetry. Drama is different from poetry in the following ways:

1. Drama is to be staged. Its approval and disapproval depends upon the audience. To convince the audience dramatists use some cheap techniques like quarrels, lamentations, thunder and sounds of animals. These techniques are a shame in our normal life. Such plays should be censored.

2. Audience while watching characters who are cowards, knaves and criminals tend to become one such character. They lose their individuality. Such characters must not be there in a play. A play should have good characters.

3. Plato is against the pleasure a tragedy and comedy gives. Tragedy offers pleasure to the audience. Human beings are full of feelings like anger, fear, grief, etc., when they are in excess there is pleasure. In comedy, people laugh when a coward acts like a brave man or when a criminal acts like an honest man. These characters are not to be laughed at but they should be pitied. A comic character must be lovable.

His Observations on Style

Plato lived in the age of oratory. He gives rules for the spoken language which could also be applied for the written word. A speaker must be thorough in the knowledge. He must be sure of what he has to say. It must impress the hearers. Next a speaker must be naturally gifted and he must be constantly in practice. His speech must follow a natural sequence. Finally a speaker must know the psychology of his audience.

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