

Against Imitation Plato Of the many excellences which I perceive in the order of our State, there is none which upon reflection pleases me better than the rule about poetry. To what do you refer? To the rejection of imitative poetry, which certainly ought not to be received; as I see far more clearly now that the parts of the soul have been distinguished. What do you mean? Speaking in confidence, for I should not like to have my words repeated to the tragedians and the rest of the imitative tribe—but I do not mind saying to you, that all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, and that the knowledge of their true nature is the only antidote to them. Explain the purport of your remark. Well, I will tell you, although I have always from my earliest youth had an awe and love of Homer, which even now makes the words falter on my lips, for he is the great captain and teacher of the whole of that charming tragic company; but a man is not to be revered more than the truth, and therefore I will speak out. Very good, he said. Listen to me then, or rather, answer me. Put your question. Can you tell me what imitation is? for I really do not know. A likely thing, then, that I should know. Why not? for the duller eye may often see a thing sooner than the keener. Very true, he said; but in your presence, even if I had any faint notion, I could not muster courage to utter it. Will you enquire yourself? Well then, shall we begin the enquiry in our usual manner: Whenever a number of individuals have a common name, we assume them to have also a corresponding idea or form—do you understand me? I do. Let us take any common instance; there are beds and tables in the world—plenty of them, are there not? Yes. But there are only two ideas or forms of them—one the idea of a bed, the other of a table. True. An excerpt And the maker of either of them makes a bed or he makes a table for our use, in accordance with the idea—that is our way of speaking in this and similar instances—but no artificer makes the ideas themselves: how could he? Impossible. And there is another artist—I should like to know what you would say of him. Who is he? One who is the maker of all the works of all other workmen. What an extraordinary man! Wait a little, and there will be more reason for your saying so. For this is he who is able to make not only vessels of every kind, but plants and animals, himself and all other things—the earth and heaven, and the things which are in heaven or under the earth; he makes the gods also. He must be a wizard and no mistake. Oh! you are incredulous, are you? Do you mean that there is no such maker or creator, or that in one sense there might be a maker of all these things but in another not? Do you see that there is a way in which you could make them all yourself? What way? An easy way enough; or rather, there are many ways in which the feat might be quickly and easily accomplished, none quicker than that of turning a mirror round and round—you would soon enough make the sun and the heavens, and the earth and yourself, and other animals and plants, and all the other things of which we were just now speaking, in the mirror. Yes, he said; but they would be appearances only. Very good, I said, you are coming to the point now. And the painter too is, as I conceive, just such another—a creator of appearances, is he not? Of course. But then I suppose you will say that what he creates is untrue. And yet there is a sense in which the painter also creates a bed? Yes, he said, but not a real bed. And what of the maker of the bed? were you not saying that he too makes, not the idea which, according to our view, is the

essence of the bed, but only a particular bed? Yes, I did. Then if he does not make that which exists he cannot make true existence, but only some semblance of existence; and if any one were to say that the work of the maker of the bed, or of any other workman, has real existence, he could hardly be supposed to be speaking the truth. At any rate, he replied, philosophers would say that he was not speaking the truth. No wonder, then, that his work too is an indistinct expression of truth. No wonder. Suppose now that by the light of the examples just offered we enquire who this imitator is? If you please. Well then, here are three beds: one existing in nature, which is made by God, as I think that we may say—for no one else can be the maker? No. There is another which is the work of the carpenter? Yes. And the work of the painter is a third? Yes. Beds, then, are of three kinds, and there are three artists who superintend them: God, the maker of the bed, and the painter? Yes, there are three of them. God, whether from choice or from necessity, made one bed in nature and one only; two or more such ideal beds neither ever have been nor ever will be made by God. Why is that? Because even if He had made but two, a third would still appear behind them which both of them would have for their idea, and that would be the ideal bed and not the two others. Very true, he said. God knew this, and He desired to be the real maker of a real bed, not a particular maker of a particular bed, and therefore He created a bed which is essentially and by nature one only. So we believe. Shall we, then, speak of Him as the natural author or maker of the bed? Yes, he replied; inasmuch as by the natural process of creation He is the author of this and of all other things. And what shall we say of the carpenter—is not he also the maker of the bed? Yes. But would you call the painter a creator and maker? Certainly not. Yet if he is not the maker, what is he in relation to the bed? I think, he said, that we may fairly designate him as the imitator of that which the others make. Good, I said; then you call him who is third in the descent from nature an imitator? Certainly, he said. And the tragic poet is an imitator, and therefore, like all other imitators, he is thrice removed from the king and from the truth? That appears to be so. Then about the imitator we are agreed. And what about the painter?—I would like to know whether he may be thought to imitate that which originally exists in nature, or only the creations of artists? The latter. As they are or as they appear? you have still to determine this. What do you mean? I mean, that you may look at a bed from different points of view, obliquely or directly or from any other point of view, and the bed will appear different, but there is no difference in reality. And the same of all things.

Yes, he said, the difference is only apparent.

Now let me ask you another question: Which is the art of painting designed to be—an imitation of things as they are, or as they appear—of appearance or of reality?

Of appearance.

Then the imitator, I said, is a long way off the truth, and can do all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them, and that part an image. For example: A painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter, or any other artist, though he knows nothing of their arts;

and, if he is a good artist, he may deceive children or simple persons, when he shows them his picture of a carpenter from a distance, and they will fancy that they are looking at a real carpenter.

Certainly.

And whenever any one informs us that he has found a man who knows all the arts, and all things else that anybody knows, and every single thing with a higher degree of accuracy than any other man—whoever tells us this, I think that we can only imagine him to be a simple creature who is likely to have been deceived by some wizard or actor whom he met, and whom he thought all-knowing, because he himself was unable to analyse the nature of knowledge and ignorance and imitation.

Most true.

And so, when we hear persons saying that the tragedians, and Homer, who is at their head, know all the arts and all things human, virtue as well as vice, and divine things too, for that the good poet cannot compose well unless he knows his subject, and that he who has not this knowledge can never be a poet, we ought to consider whether here also there may not be a similar illusion. Perhaps they may have come across imitators and been deceived by them; they may not have remembered when they saw their works that these were but imitations thrice removed from the truth, and could easily be made without any knowledge of the truth, because they are appearances only and not realities? Or, after all, they may be in the right, and poets do really know the things about which they seem to the many to speak so well?

The question, he said, should by all means be considered.

Now do you suppose that if a person were able to make the original as well as the image, he would seriously devote himself to the image-making branch? Would he allow imitation to be the ruling principle of his life, as if he had nothing higher in him?

I should say not.

The real artist, who knew what he was imitating, would be interested in realities and not in imitations; and would desire to leave as memorials of himself works many and fair; and, instead of being the author of encomiums, he would prefer to be the theme of them.

Yes, he said, that would be to him a source of much greater honour and profit.

Then, I said, we must put a question to Homer; not about medicine, or any of the arts to which his poems only incidentally refer: we are not going to ask him, or any other poet, whether he has cured patients like Asclepius, or left behind him a school of medicine such as the Asclepiads were, or whether he only talks about medicine and other arts at second-hand; but we have a right to know respecting military tactics, politics, education,

which are the chiefest and noblest subjects of his poems, and we may fairly ask him about them. 'Friend Homer,' then we say to him, 'if you are only in the second remove from truth in what you say of virtue, and not in the third—not an image maker or imitator—and if you are able to discern what pursuits make men better or worse in private or public life, tell us what State was ever better governed by your help? The good order of Lacedaemon is due to Lycurgus, and many other cities great and small have been similarly benefited by others; but who says that you have been a good legislator to them and have done them any good? Italy and Sicily boast of Charondas, and there is Solon who is renowned among us; but what city has anything to say about you?' Is there any city which he might name?

I think not, said Glaucon; not even the Homerids themselves pretend that he was a legislator.

Well, but is there any war on record which was carried on successfully by him, or aided by his counsels, when he was alive?

There is not.

Or is there any invention of his, applicable to the arts or to human life, such as Thales the Milesian or Anacharsis the Scythian, and other ingenious men have conceived, which is attributed to him?

There is absolutely nothing of the kind. . . .