Socrates

Although Socrates never wrote a word, we have inherited his ideas through his pupil, Plato. Socrates believed that the written word was inferior to memory, and so we are left with only a few accounts of this great philosopher's life. Xenophon, another contemporary, has also left his own account of Socrates, in which the philosopher is depicted as an activist and more contentious than the Socrates of Plato.

Socrates was ultimately condemned to death as a result of a trial in which three charges were leveled against him:

- Corrupting the youth,

- Believing in false gods, and

- Making the worse argument the stronger (Apology, 24b-c).

The Socratic Dialectic

Plato's writings take the form of **dialogues** composed of conversations between Socrates and a specific interlocutor. An **interlocutor** is a person who serves the role of "student" for the purpose of conducting a conversation. Most of Plato's dialogues are named for the interlocutor who plays the central role in the conversation. Thus, we have dialogues titled, *Crito, Phaedo, Meno,* and *Phaedrus*, among others.

In the method of Socrates, the process of philosophical discovery is called the elenchus. The **elenchus** is conducted as a question and answer session between Socrates and his interlocutor.

The dialogues follow a similar format, including the following key elements:

- Each dialogue has a central question that guides the discussion.

- The question takes the form of, "What is X?" The variable "X" can represent justice, beauty, art, piety, knowledge, love, et cetera.

- The interlocutors attempt to answer this central question using all of the most common answers.

- Socrates examines each answer and finds difficulties with the definition given.

Multiple possibilities are examined throughout the dialogue, and some general guidelines for creating a good definition are offer This reading from your text is an excerpt from Books III and IV of Plato's *Republic*. You can access the full text of the *Republic* at: http://www.literatureproject.com/republic/

The key question that arises in the *Republic* is, "What is justice?" which can further be divided into two related questions:

1. What is justice at an individual level?

2. What would a perfectly just city-state look like?

Plato's purpose in Book III is to create a "city in speech;" a perfectly just city that would benefit all citizens. Socrates divides the city into three social classes:

- Gold: Philosopher-kings who will educate the young and rule the city.

- Silver: Warriors/Guardians who will protect the city.

- Bronze: Craftsmen and artisans who will create the things necessary for the city to function.

And what of the arts? This is where our reading for this week begins. For Plato, the arts in his ideal city-state are intended solely for the entertainment of the citizens. The arts lose their autonomous status, perform a merely subsidiary function, and are to be controlled by the city-state.

Censorship of the arts is advocated for two reasons:

1. The arts, especially music and poetry, may sow the seeds of lawlessness. Homer's poetry chronicles many immoral acts by gods and mortals. Plato proposes that children who hear these tales of immorality at a young age will be influenced to engage in the same sorts of behavior.

2. "All poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers."

This reading invokes a theory of knowledge commonly referred to as the **divided line.**

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- Each dialogue resists the urge to provide a final definition of the concept in question, thus making it difficult to codify Plato's doctrines.

The divided line is a hierarchy that describes our relation to the truth. On the left of the diagram below are various real-world objects and ideas; on the right are various mental processes associated with the various levels of experience (in descending order). It is clear from the diagram that Plato gives a low priority to images and the use of the imagination.

	Objects	Forms of Cognition
Intelligible	Forms (eidē)	Intellection (noēsis)
Intelligible	Mathematical Objects (ta mathēmatica) Abstraction	Thought (dianoia)
Visible	Things	Trust (pistis) (Belief in description of the world)
Visible	Images (eikones)	Imagination (eikasia)
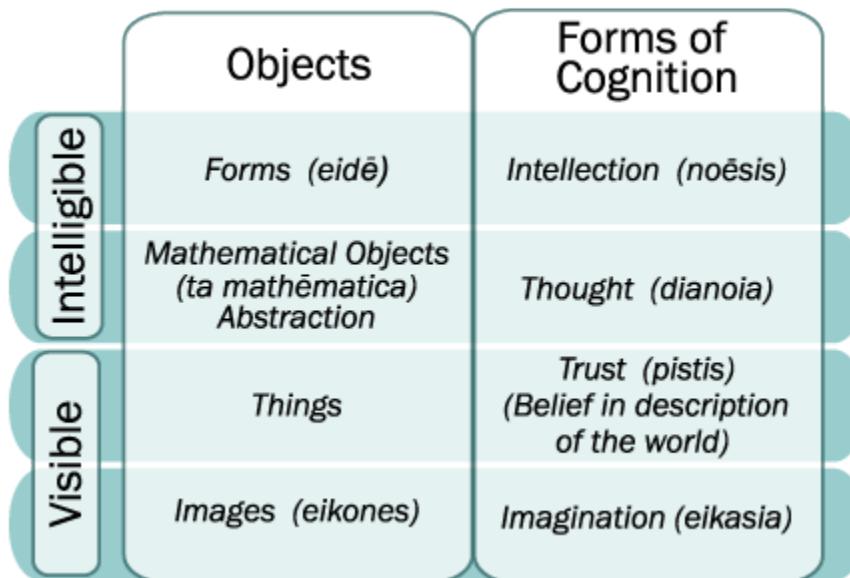
Paul Cézanne was a rebel who rejected the formal art circles of Paris, claiming that art critics or "philosophers" of art are not the arbiters of taste. He believed that art was a matter of perception, and did not share the view that there were formal standards for art.

Cézanne on Imitation

Cézanne believed that the observance of nature is the best method for beginning to understand the ideas of form and perspective. Imitation is a useful educational exercise that can increase our awareness of the forms inherent in nature. He also felt that the artist's relationship with his or her teacher should be respectful, though not purely imitative; the student should endeavor to create his/her own voice and style only after learning the basic techniques for the medium in question. Although useful, imitation is not an end in itself.

Cézanne's view of imitation counters Plato's, in that art is not a matter of imitating reality. Rather, it is a matter of expressing one's own perception of reality.

The Great Bathers, Peirre-Auguste Renoir, 1884-87   The Large Bathers, Paul Cézanne, 1906
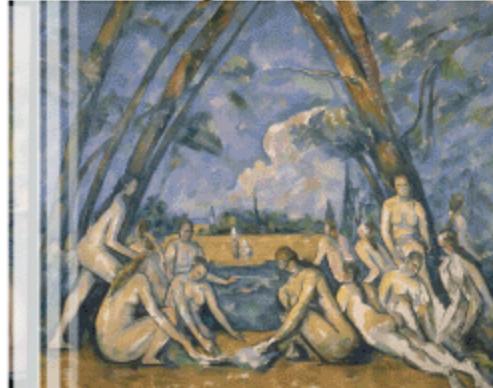
Imitation   1   Interpretation

Still Life, Antoine Vollon, 1880

Still Life, Paul Cézanne, 1900-1906

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Imitation — 3 — Interpretation

difference between Plato's vision and Cézanne's cuts right to the issue of truth. In Plato's view, all human pursuits ought to be aimed at broadening our quest for truth and wisdom. Thus, art should contribute to the quest by revealing the truth; in this role, art becomes mimetic (imitative) because it is designed to mirror reality rather than reflect one possible interpretation. In Cézanne's view, the painter reflects *one* interpretation of reality. For him, the possibility of teaching art is therefore limited. While we may be successful in communicating basic techniques for each medium, creativity remains beyond the scope of instruction. Creativity is an ability that a student does or does not possess, regardless of training.

Landscape, Albert Bierstadt, 19th Century

Interior of a Forest, Paul Cézanne, Date Unknown

Imitation — 2 — Interpretation