IV. On Republic X, 595a—608b10

A. Argumentation: Its Structure of Argumentation

The passage in Republic, Book X, starting from 595a and ending at 608b10, can be divided into two distinct discussions. The first, at 595a–602b, provides a characterization of the imitator figure, as well as an argument about who in the city is to be considered an imitator. The second, at 602c–608b, addresses the psychology of imitation, it provides arguments for why the avoidance of imitation is to be avoided, and explains why the avoidance of imitation is necessary.

1. Definition of Imitation: Are All Tragic Poets Imitators?

Book X begins with Socrates boasting that the banishment of imitative art from their city, that was established in Book III, was a wise decision. But however, from the distinctly different uses of “imitation” in Book III, create it is confusion about what has been banned: the first, stylistic usage means that all literature containing more than a small amount of first-person narration should be excluded from the city, while the second, substantive usage would ban poets who had the content of whose work was lacking in philosophical grounding in its content (cf. Section III). Fortunately, Socrates immediately tries to clarify his usage of “imitation,” and he begins by comparing the products of different trades. The craftsman (ho demiourgos) makes an imitation of the idea of a product, producing items resembling but of actual being, but only a resemblance to it (597a5—12). In contrast, Socrates defines the imitator (hē mimētē) as one who imitates merely the appearances of a craftsman’s product. The idea itself is the product of the god (597d1—8), and the craftsman is at a second, removed level.
from the idea in by imitating its reality (596b6—11) so therefore, the imitator is at a third thrice removed from Truth in copying only the appearance of the craftsman’s product (587e1—5).

With this definition having been accomplished in place, Socrates moves on to know then questions of what type of person might be considered an imitator. It is decided that The art of painting is determined to be always directed to imitating appearance only, and never reality (598b3—7). Socrates thus easily labels categorizes all painters (hoi zōgraphoi) as imitators. At 597e6—8, Socrates states that this label of “imitator” will apply to the maker of tragedies also, if he is an imitator and is in his nature three removes from the... truth... (HC 822—3). Here, the Greek conditional eiper begins the conditional clause. Smyth (538—9) writes that this strong conditional is used “especially when the truth of a statement is implicitly denied or doubted.” This distinction may or may not be significant, given the extensive attention given paid to tragic poets later in this Book X passage, but it is worth noting.

Socrates creates a test to determine whether or not tragic poets deserve to be placed in the group of banished imitators. At 599b2—7, Socrates says that “if, in truth, he had knowledge concerning the things that he imitates, he would greatly prefer to pursue these things zealously in his works, rather than to pursue counterfeits and copies...” (my translation). Correctly understanding this requires reading it must be read with considering the ontology developed in Books V through VII in mind. Plato establishes that the real things, capable of being known, are not spatio-temporal (cf. the sun analogy in Book VI [HC 742—4]), the Cave cave analogy in Book VII [HC 749—52]), and the argument that the highest function of the soul is intellect [HC 747]). Because of this Therefore, it would be completely incoherent for...
Plato to maintain in this passage that the ultimate test of the soundness of one’s ontological beliefs must be is the tangible properties of one’s work. The discussion about the popular perceptions of philosophers in Book VI should be kept in mind considered. Here, Plato defends the philosophers against the accusation that they appear to be worthless because their work doesn’t seem to command respect. Plato retorts by maintaining that the one who has wisdom will gladly share it with others upon their request, but that it is neither the philosopher’s responsibility nor the desire of philosophers to hunt down those ignorant of their wisdom and to attempt to convince his unwilling audiences to listen to them. So Thus, in this Republic X passage, it is not unlikely that Plato has suddenly shifted position and now demands popular recognition or tangible accomplishments as proof of his wisdom: “… and [he] would endeavor to leave after him many noble deeds and works as memorials of himself, and would be more eager to be the theme of praise than the praiser.” [599b5–_7]). Yet, Socrates next applies judges the tragic poets next by using this possibly unsound method standard to tragic poets. He reports that no legislators use the writings of Homer to create their laws (599d–e), nor have any cults formed that base their beliefs upon these writings (600a8–b6). Socrates asks whether that “if Homer had really been able to educate men and make them better and had possessed not the art of imitation but real knowledge, he would not have acquired many companions and been honored and loved by them?” The discussion of concerning philosophers in Book VI is once again relevant. Here, Socrates asserts that popular opinion seems inevitably to inevitably hold lovers of wisdom in no esteem. “Teach this [lesson] to the man who is surprised that philosophers are not honored in our cities, and try to convince him that it would be far more surprising if they were honored.” (489a10–b2). As in with the previous part of this argument,
it’s completely unfounded that Plato has changed his criteria for the judgment recognition of wisdom since Book VI.

In the text of the Book X argument, however, Socrates does rail against Homer and the tragic poets for their lack of popularity and influence (599c2—600e4). His conclusion concludes is that all poets are merely imitators of images of the things they write and that they have no grasp on Truth (600e4—7; 602b8—10).

This argument for labeling all poets as imitators is a failure because, as previously noted, Plato clearly (and rightly) does not endorse the premise at 599b8—600e4, e.g., namely, that the wise man will necessarily be prosperous and honored. However, Nevertheless, the premise at 599a8—b6 should be noticed. Depending upon the translation accepted, Plato’s intention here can be consistent with ideas presented elsewhere in the Republic. According to Shorey’s and Grube’s translations, Socrates posits that if a man with real knowledge, he will spend time employing that knowledge in deeds (e.g., physical actions) instead of imitations (e.g., in writing about men’s actions, as a poet does). My translation differs: if one has the works of people who have knowledge about real things, his works must be informed by these real things, instead of by imitations. By my interpretation, these deeds or works don’t need to be physical actions. In accordance with the Socratic teaching that knowledge is commanding, I believe that Plato here agrees that, if one has knowledge of the objects of reality, he will always imitate these things rather than their appearances. Whether one chooses to express this knowledge of reality by writing literature or performing valiant deeds will simply be a matter of personal aptitude and preference.
While the second half of the argument contained in Book X, 595a—602b, generally fails overall to convince us that all poets really are imitators by Plato’s definition, the first half is valuable for it’s definition of imitation—which will be used in the second argument presented in Book X’s first half, concerning which concerns the deleterious bad effects of imitation upon the soul (602c—608b).

References: