

**PLATO'S PHILOSOPHICAL MIMESIS:
ON THE PEDAGOGICAL AND PROTREPTIC VALUE
OF IMPERFECTION**

HÉLDER TELO

Nova Institute of Philosophy (Lisboa, Portugal)
heldertelo@fcsh.unl.pt

ABSTRACT. This article addresses two often perplexing traits in Plato's philosophical style: first, the fact that Plato's writings are mimetic, despite the strong criticisms of mimesis we find therein; second, the fact that this mimesis not only features the constitutive defects inherent to any mimesis, but Plato actually increases its imperfection by adding other manifest defects. Based on epistemological and psychological views taken from the Platonic corpus (especially the soul's tripartition), I show how Plato's philosophical mimesis uses defectiveness or imperfection to overcome the limitations of mimesis identified in the *Republic*. To explain this, I argue that Plato's philosophical mimesis should not be primarily conceived as an imitation of people or conversations in which views or arguments are conveyed, but rather as an imitation of the act or practice of philosophical inquiry, and that by rendering this act visible to the reader, the Platonic corpus can better teach how to perform it and better turn readers to a life determined by its performance. This is not without risks because, as a type of mimesis, philosophical mimesis can still lead to misunderstandings or affect the soul in a negative way. However, the quantitative, qualitative and tonal defects Plato introduces in his mimesis of philosophical inquiry cause astonishment and therefore have a provocative effect that helps to reduce those risks and enhance the corpus' pedagogic and protreptic potential. Consequently, Plato's philosophical mimesis explores the benefits of mimesis and is in strong contrast with artistic or dramatic mimesis as is understood in *Republic X*.

KEYWORDS: Philosophical inquiry, astonishment, training, philosophical life, gaps, fallacy, irony.

In a sense, mimesis seems to be the complete opposite of philosophy and wholly incompatible with it. To do what others do, think what others think and say what others say is the epitome of an unphilosophical attitude. Philosophers are supposed to be free and autonomous thinkers who live according to what they themselves think. This seems to be Plato's own view, given how his dialogues emphasize rational self-examination and criticize mimesis (especially in the form of

dramatic mimesis) as a defective presentation of reality that can have serious deleterious effects on the human soul.

In light of this conflict between philosophy and mimesis, it is astonishing that Plato's writings have a mimetic character and imitate or represent different people engaging in philosophical inquiry or examination. The astonishment increases if one considers that Plato does not simply use mimesis to present philosophical inquiry, but uses a form of mimesis that is full of gaps, involves many logical shortcomings and is unclear about what we could call its tone – i.e., whether it is meant as a more or less straightforward form of communication or serves any other purpose. Platonic mimesis is thus defective from a quantitative, qualitative, and tonal standpoint and, as such, it seriously distorts its object and lacks the correctness or accuracy (*ὁρθότης*) that would make up for a good mimesis (at least according to *Lg.* II, 667b-671a).

This could be disregarded as concerning the mere form in which philosophical views or arguments appear, but since Schleiermacher it has often been shown that the form and content of the dialogues are intertwined in many meaningful ways. It is therefore important to see how the mimetic form influences the reading and understanding of Plato's writings. To do so, I will consider these writings in light of the views on mimesis, knowledge and human psychology that they themselves introduce (especially the partition of the soul). Based on these views, I will argue that Plato's philosophical mimesis serves an important pedagogic and a protreptic function, since it teaches (despite its constitutive defects as mimesis) how one can perform philosophical inquiry and helps to recognize its importance for one's life. Moreover, I will argue that the defects added do not limit, but rather enhance this mimesis' pedagogic and protreptic effectiveness, insofar as they produce astonishment and prompt one to examine more intensely what is being examined in Plato's philosophical mimesis.

In arguing this, I do not intend to enter into the discussion of whether Plato had definite views and whether they are expressed in the dialogues. My point is compatible with sceptic or ironical, unitarian and developmentalist readings of Plato's dialogues, since I only claim that, regardless of the author's intentions and the status of the dialogues, the latter have (in virtue of their mimetic character) the pedagogic and protreptic dimensions just mentioned and that by taking this into account we can better understand the views on mimesis, pedagogy and protreptics that are expressed in the dialogues. By this, I do not mean that mimesis constitutes the main pedagogic or protreptic component of the dialogues, or that it works separately from the other components. I will only try to show that the other more studied components are accompanied and enhanced by this one,

which I will consider as far as possible in isolation, in order to better show its structure.¹

As a preparation for my argument, I will start by briefly reviewing the Platonic understanding of mimesis and determining the senses in which the dialogues are

¹ This complements the many studies of mimesis in Plato, which are mostly confined to artistic mimesis (discussing its negative appraisal and some positive aspects of it). It has some affinity to Voula Tsouna's attempt to contrast Plato's philosophical mimesis with artistic mimesis (especially insofar as she also mentions how Plato's mimesis use a defect or apparent defect – concealment – to produce a philosophical effect, though she does not go into much detail – see 2013, 24-25). My approach also expands studies of Platonic pedagogy and protreptics. Many of the works on education (including recent ones such as Scott 2000, Saracco 2017, Magrini 2018, Mintz 2018) focus on Socratic teaching, which has some points in common with what we will consider. Others consider theories of education in the *Republic*, the *Laws* or other dialogues. In some cases, the theories of education are brought into a direct relationship with other theories of Plato (cp. e.g. Scolnicov 1988). But, in general, they do not consider the role of mimesis within the dialogues or how the mimetic character of the dialogues has itself a pedagogic value. Instead, they tend to only mention that learning cannot be a simple imitation (cp. e.g. Scott, 2000, 176-177, 181-182, and Magrini, 2018, 26-27). As for the studies of protreptics, there is a tendency to focus on the kind of arguments used to convince (either directly or indirectly) others to philosophise (see Slings 1999 and Collins 2015) or the strategies used in discussion to undermine the beliefs of others (see Cain 2007 and Marshall 2021). Some consider how the texts themselves affect the readers (see Miller 1986, 4-9, and Gallagher 2004), but do not establish a clear relation with mimesis and the Platonic understanding of it. There are, however, a few notable exceptions to this general neglect of the pedagogic and protreptic value of Plato's mimesis. Harvey Yunis mentions this and offers a brief illustration of how it applies to the *Republic* (see 2007, 18-23). Ruby Blondell, in turn, discusses not only Plato's use of a form of mimetic pedagogy as a way of transforming one's character, but also how this mimetic pedagogy includes imperfections to prevent what she calls a slavish or unreflective imitation (see 2002, 80-112). Gill Gordon (1999) is another important example of this approach. She speaks of literary elements as turning us toward philosophy by engaging us and inducing us to play a role or philosophise with the characters. Although she ends up focusing more on the use of images to portray philosophical life and not so much on the practice of philosophical inquiry as such, she nevertheless considers the image of philosophical life and how it allows us to shape ourselves. Her interpretation of irony as a way of distancing us from the characters also comes close to my idea of using mimetic imperfections to further teach us and turn us to philosophical inquiry. Building on these two works, I intend to offer a more exhaustive account of the imperfections of Platonic dialogues and a more detailed explanation (mostly inspired by the tripartite psychology of the *Republic*) of how they transform one's character.

mimetic.² Based on this, I will then discuss the pedagogic and protreptic potential of Plato's philosophical mimesis – first without taking into account the above-mentioned defects, and then by considering how these defects can affect the pedagogic and protreptic potential of Plato's writings.

1. The Platonic notion of mimesis

First, it is important to bear in mind that, even though the term *μίμησις* is often translated as imitation (thereby suggesting that it corresponds to the act of consciously copying a real being), this “imitation” is not necessarily something one does consciously and, more importantly, it does not require following a real being. As Stephen Halliwell argued, rendering the term as “imitation” impoverishes the sense of the word by reducing it to a mere reflection and failing to account for its creative aspects. For this reason, Halliwell recommends translating *μίμησις* as “representation”, in the sense of letting something appear or expressing something, which does not require strict likeness or even that the thing represented be real (see 2002, 13-24).

It is likewise important to remember that Plato employs the term *μίμησις* both in a strict sense (referring to different practical components of life, such as acts, behaviours, customs, practices, handicrafts, personal traits, virtue or vice, ways of life, laws, political regimes, etc.) and in a broader sense, as a key concept in discussions about art theory, linguistics, cosmology and ontology. In general, it designates the way in which a certain being somehow hides its own autonomous identity and renders another being (the model or pattern, *παράδειγμα*) visible or lets it appear. In this sense, it comes close to the notion of image or simulacrum (*εἶδωλον*), insofar as the latter is “something that's made similar to a true thing and is another thing that's like it” (*Sph.* 240a7-8).³

² In so doing, I will focus on general aspects and avoid going into precise discussions such as those about how all passages on mimesis fit together. Many scholars stress the differences between books III and X of the *Republic*, and between the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Even within book X, some focus more on intellectual aspects, while others discuss psychological or ethical components. I will try to bring it all together in its broadest lines, to prepare the analysis to follow – and especially the analysis of the specific way in which I take the dialogues to be mimetic. Indeed, I will strive to show that they are not just a mimesis of persons and their acts and words (which would also happen to be philosophical), but they are a mimesis of a practice (philosophy) and the psychological profiles that render it possible and, as such, they are an intrinsically philosophical mimesis or a mimesis of philosophy in action.

³ Here and in what follows I use (with some changes) the translations in Cooper 1997.

The stricter sense of mimesis is, in turn, defined in *Republic* 393c as “to make oneself like someone else in voice or bearing (σχῆμα).” This is, therefore, a type of mimesis that is performed by human beings and referred (at least primarily) to other human beings or, more specifically, to what they say and do. One comes to resemble, embody or channel others, which can be done as a momentary impersonation or a regular practice, may or may not involve pretence, and may or may not permanently transform one’s way of being (cp. Woodruff 2015). The latter transformation is possible because mimesis is always more than a mere temporary conversion of oneself into another. As the Platonic dialogues point out, performing a mimesis affects one’s character or personality in a smaller or greater degree (especially in the case of children, who are more impressionable).⁴ Consequently, mimesis can be used as an educational tool, in order to transmit skills, attitudes, and even characters or ways of life. In fact, according to the Platonic dialogues, culture involves (at least at a basic level) a complex system of models to emulate and the constant practice of imitations, and for this reason the discussions of ideal regimes consider in detail how different forms of artistic mimesis can be used to improve the city (cp. *Rep.* III, 392c-403c, and *Lg.* VII, 813e-817e). In addition, there are also references to education as an imitation of divine patterns (*Phdr.* 252d and 253b), which is closely related to the idea of becoming like God (*Tht.* 176a-b).

Within this broad spectrum, Plato pays special attention to dramatic mimesis and discusses the way it affects individual and social life. Dramatic mimesis is quite complex, for it involves a chain of imitators and imitations: authors perform the original imitation or representation in their mind, actors enact it on stage, and spectators themselves experience the imitation in their souls (especially through empathy – cp. *Republic* X, 605d3-4) and can further imitate it in their lives. Moreover, dramatic mimesis does not simply imitate words or deeds, but as Socrates says in X, 603c4-7, it “imitates human beings acting voluntarily or under compulsion, who believe that, as a result of these actions, they are doing either well or badly and who experience either pleasure or pain in all this.” However, this mimesis does not only concern actions, their quality and the affections that accompany them. It also involves views on all that is relevant for these actions, including – according to Socrates – a supposed knowledge of “all crafts, all human affairs concerned with virtue and vice, and all about the gods as well” (cp. X, 598d8-e2) – i.e., specialized forms of action, the most perfect and imperfect ways of acting or being, and metaphysical questions.

⁴ As Socrates says in the *Republic* (395c-d), “from enjoying the imitation, they [children] come to enjoy the reality”, and “imitations practiced from youth become part of nature and settle into habits of gesture, voice, and thought”.

It is precisely this highly elaborate form of mimesis that Socrates discusses and criticizes in *Republic X*, both regarding its epistemological value or cognitive content and its psychological value (i.e., how it affects individual souls).

Concerning its epistemological status, Socrates stresses that dramatic mimesis does not provide true knowledge. On the ontological scale, its objective content is the third counting from the truth (X, 602c2), after the forms and the concrete beings that instantiate them. Using the example of painting, Socrates stresses that mimesis presents things as they appear (i.e., superficially and unilaterally) and not as they are (X, 598a5-b5). It “touches only a smart part of each thing” (X, 598b7-8), which makes it easy to reproduce everything, as if one were simply holding a mirror to things (cp. X, 596c-e). The same applies to good actions or virtue: mimesis presents only apparent virtue and hence it cannot impart true ethical knowledge (cp. Moss 2007). This constitutive defect does not exclude that a particular mimesis may be correct or incorrect. As the Athenian admits in the *Laws*, it may imitate an object in an accurate manner – reproducing all its parts, their disposition, their colours and shapes – or it may seriously distort it (cp. II, 668d-669b). However, what is argued in *Republic X* is that mimesis is always incorrect or inaccurate, at least to a certain extent. It always distorts its object and never shows beings as they are and much less the forms they refer to.

Besides his constitutive defect, Socrates considers an additional kind of epistemological defect. One can imitate something without having knowledge of what is being imitated and, if others are likewise ignorant, pass off bad imitations for good. Socrates explains this by referring to utensils and distinguishing between the knowledge of the user, the knowledge of the producer and the knowledge of the imitator – the user being the one that knows something best and guides the knowledge of the producer, whereas the imitator only represents something without needing to know how it is used or produced. This is particularly relevant in the case of dramatic or poetic mimesis, given its knowledge claims regarding technical, ethical and even theological matters. Poets as imitators do not have knowledge of the crafts and much less of virtue – otherwise, according to Socrates, they would use it and would engage in technical and virtuous action, and not just imitate it (cp. X, 599a-600e). They are charlatans that only present bad images of virtue (as a sort of scene-painting that creates illusions) and deceive those that are ignorant of what is being represented. Mimesis therefore tends to increase one’s ignorance by producing conceit of knowledge (the “double ignorance” mentioned in *Lg.* IX, 863c) regarding matters of virtue, crafts and anything else being imitated.

In psychological terms, the problem concerns the way mimesis affects or transforms the soul’s parts and their respective desires. The analysis in *Republic X*

seems to presuppose important aspects of the partition of the soul discussed in books IV, VIII and IX, although the partition presented here is much simplified. Socrates simply divides the soul into an irrational part, which is sensitive to (and deceived by) appearances and prone to give in to feelings, and a rational part, which uses measuring, calculation or weighing to correct appearances, and also uses reason and law to control emotions (cp. 602c-603b and 604b-d).⁵ Socrates thus stresses the way each part relates to cognition and to emotions, and according to him dramatic mimesis affects both things. On the one hand, it feeds the irrational part, together with our proneness to accept appearances, and does not stimulate rational activity (X, 605a-c). On the other hand, it nurtures one's base emotions (or, more precisely, it nurtures the desire for lamentation by causing one to pity others in tragic situations and the desire for pleasure by making us laugh of ridiculous situations in comedy). This, in turn, changes one's relation to similar situations in one's own life, making it harder to follow reason and rational law (X, 606a-d). However, the change is not limited to our views, emotions and behaviour in particular cases. Socrates' arguments also show that by rendering the irrational part stronger, dramatic mimesis promotes a bad (i.e., unjust and unphilosophical) balance or regime of the soul (605b7-8), and it has a similar effect at the level of the polis.

The epistemological and psychological appraisals thus show how defective and dangerous dramatic mimesis is. However, they also raise the question of whether these defects and their pernicious effects are characteristic of mimesis as such or whether there can be forms of mimesis that minimize or even avoid all of this. Plato's dialogues seem to consider that the latter is the case. In *Republic* III, Socrates allows for poetic imitations of good men and good actions (395b-d and 396b-e) – in contrast with *Republic* X, where he admits only of “hymns to the gods and eulogies to good people” (607a4-5), which do not seem to be mimetic or are so only in a broader sense of the word. In the *Laws*, the Athenian defines forms of musical mimesis and the criteria for appraising them (like the above-mentioned

⁵ The relation between the different formulations of the soul's partition in the *Republic* has been the subject of much discussion. The fact that in book X Socrates sees both parts as related to forms of knowledge has led some to regard the partition in book X as radically different from previous presentations. However, I agree with Rachel Barney (2016, 57-59) and others when they say that it renders explicit an important aspect of the soul's partition: namely, that the lower or irrational parts possess a particular kind of knowledge (an idea that is already present in books VIII and IX, when we see irrational parts using reason to rule – cp. 553c-d and 560b-561a). Consequently, I will assume in what follows that there is at least some partial overlap between the partition in book X and the tripartition in previous books.

correctness and moral goodness – see II, 667b-671a). In both cases, these forms of good mimesis correspond to austere forms of art that promote simple and quiet characters, who are virtuous examples and stimulate a good balance of the soul. Nevertheless, these kinds of mimesis have a limited intervention in one's life and are insufficient to perfect the individual soul and the polis. To do so, more elaborate forms of education are required. The question, then, is whether these can also be in some way mimetic.

One instance of a more elaborate mimesis is the activity of the legislator and the political thinker, which is described as a mimesis of the forms (*Republic* VI, 500b-501c) or the best life (*Laws* VII, 817b3-4). In fact, this kind of mimesis of the forms seems to apply to all philosophical communication of truth and to all implementation of truth in practical reality. However, all these things are mimetic only in a broader sense of the term and one wonders whether there is also a form of dramatic mimesis that is constitutively philosophical and can have a deep positive impact on one's life. My claim is that not just the *Republic* or the *Laws*, but the whole Platonic corpus can be revealed as being such a mimesis. But in what way are the Platonic dialogues such a mimesis, how is this philosophical mimesis to be understood and how does it relate to the above-mentioned criticisms?

2. The mimetic character of Plato's writings

Plato's writings are mimetic or involve mimesis in several different ways. For one, they use mimesis in the broadest sense of the word, insofar as they are full of images and myths (cp. e.g. Gonzalez 1998, 129). His writings are also a sort of dramatic mimesis, and they are so in a way that goes beyond the distinction between mimesis and narration in *Republic* III (392d-394c), because even the narrative parts are mimetic. Indeed, whether one particular character describes a dialogue that happened in the past or different characters speak with one another, the author never speaks in his own voice. He adopts the voices and attitudes of many different people, and produces an extremely vivid and realistic mimesis, in which readers almost see the characters moving and interacting in front of them.

The many scholars who have studied both this instance of mimesis and the characters involved in it have highlight several important aspects.⁶ For instance, the characters are a relatively diverse group. Even though they are almost all male and Greek, they have different ages, occupations, social standings and even belong to different cities. Moreover, they represent the main political agents. These characters are defined by what they say about themselves, the views they put

⁶ Most analyses tend to focus on a particular character or dialogue, but there are also more systematic ones, such as Blondell 2002, 53ff., which develops in greater detail many of the points I mention hereafter.

forward, what others say of them, how they behave, how they react to the conversation, etc. – and in all this they show different beliefs, degrees of intelligence, personalities and ways of living. Likewise important for their characterization is the fact that most of them were public figures from the Athenian recent past and some even played an important role in the Peloponnesian War. Readers knew what these figures did and how they ended up, and the dialogues show them on the way to their demise and to causing the demise of the polis.

Among the characters, the one that stands out the most is Socrates. He participates in all the dialogues except the *Laws* and often guides the discussion (either inquiring about the views of others or presenting his own). We see him in many different situations and in different periods of his life, from when he was young until the moment of his death. In addition, he sometimes reflects about his own life (as in the *Apology* or *Phaedo* 96a-100a) and some characters also try to define him (cp. *Laches* 187e-188c and *Symposium* 215a-222b). The characterizations are somewhat discordant, but to a great degree compatible, and the resulting portrait is very rich. He is generous and courteous, brave, passionate, attentive, dutiful, in some respects almost superhuman (for instance, in his endurance and the calm way in which he faces death), mysterious (especially because he seems to withhold much and often it is not clear whether he is being serious or playing the fool) and full of contradictions (the most notorious being the fact that he often presents himself as knowing nothing, but seems to know a lot, and although he confesses not being able to define the virtues, he seems to be their perfect embodiment). In general, his behaviour and way of being seem strange or outlandish (to use Alcibiades' expression in *Symposium* 215a), and as such cause much perplexity in interlocutors and readers alike.

Socrates serves as the embodiment of philosophy, but he is sometimes replaced in this role (and in the direction of the conversation) by other lead figures, such as Parmenides, Zeno, Timaeus, Critias, Diotima, the Stranger of Elea or the Athenian. These other figures have less defined traits, but they resemble Socrates in some important respects – for instance, they are also courteous, attentive and, in general, far from being fully transparent.

Besides these full-fledged philosophers, there are many other characters. Some of them are philosophers or intellectuals in a broad sense (sophists, tragic and comic poets, rhapsodes, mathematicians, etc.), while others are or will be more concerned with political and military affairs (such as Laches, Nicias, Alcibiades, Charmides, etc.). They have more or less active roles in the conversation and reveal different intellectual abilities and different concerns (including pleasure, money, victory, honour, and, to a limited extent, even knowledge). As a result, they deal with Socrates or the other lead figures, with philosophical inquiries and

even with life in general very differently. Moreover, they represent different human possibilities or different ways of life, and their combined portrait constitutes a complex typology of human life.

Plato usually imitates all these characters in a very particular kind of situation: namely, in moments of leisure, where they have intellectual conversations (asking and answering questions in turn) or make speeches (which in general also respond to each other or to what is being talked about). The conversations may be more or less intimate, more or less symmetrical, and more or less antagonistic. In many cases, there is a clash between different views and ways of being. In general, philosophy and its representatives tend to be triumphant, and this triumph may help transform the non-philosophers, but many of them are not entirely (or at all) convinced and resist the conclusions, retaining their views and way of life.

This mimesis of real people and concrete situations raises the questions of what exactly is being imitated or represented and of how correct this mimesis is. Regarding the first question, one could be tempted to think that at least some dialogues are, if not a mere transcription of Socratic conversations Plato may have witnessed or heard about, at least sufficiently faithful to such conversations to give us an impression of “what it felt like to be there with Socrates”, to use Elinor West’s formulation (2000, 107). Other dialogues seem to be more inspired by Plato’s later experiences and even the philosophical practices at the Academy. However, many components seem to be fictive and lack a corresponding reality – or at best correspond to general traits of human beings.⁷

It is important to add that the Platonic dialogues are not only a mimesis of characters in a particular situation, but they also imitate other literary styles, in the sense that they appropriate certain traits of them, as has been extensively shown by Andrea Nightingale (1995) and others. It is not difficult to see that the characters’ interactions involve many tragic elements (for instance, because they are often solemn and even ominous, as when there are references to Socrates’ trial or later episodes of Athenian history), and also comic elements (indeed, characters and situations are frequently portrayed as being more or less ridiculous and, as in comedy, they are real people and not mythological figures). As for the language, even though it is not poetic, it often imitates not only everyday language, but also the style of rhetoric, history or mythological narratives (cp. Thesleff 2009, 51-64).

Plato’s mimesis includes all these mimetic layers and they all have their own psychological and cognitive effects on the soul. However, the question at hand concerns not only mimesis in general, but rather philosophical mimesis as such.

⁷ Indeed, the dialogues seem to represent human life or, more precisely, the tragedies and comedies of life mentioned in *Phlb.* 50b.

It is therefore necessary to consider more closely in what way Plato's mimesis imitates or represents philosophy.

3. Plato's philosophical mimesis as a mimesis of philosophical inquiry

As is often pointed out, Plato's own form of philosophical writing and the philosophical mimesis he employs are anchored in a particular understanding not only of philosophical communication, but also of philosophy in general. Whether or not he has his own views, arguments or doctrines, and whether or not he changed his mind during the course of his intellectual career, he does not report it directly as when one writes a treatise. The philosophical content of his writings is conveyed by the characters in a certain context and this gives a personal character to all this philosophical content, instead of presenting it as something abstract and neutral.⁸

However, this is an insufficient characterization, because Plato does not simply represent characters reporting their views and arguing for them. There has been, to be sure, a tendency to see the dialogues in this way, as a mimesis of philosophical argument (Kosman 1992, 84), the practice of argumentation (Frede 1992, 207-208) or of people "in so far as they engage in argument" (Tsouna 2013), thereby placing the emphasis on the cognitive content or the method of rational discussion of particular views. This approach corresponds to a common way of dealing with Plato's text, which is mostly concerned with identifying and extracting views and discussing their validity, and it is based on a common conception of philosophy as having solely (or at least mainly) to do with claims, arguments and logical processes (which, in turn, leads to a conception of education and protreptics that is mostly focused on the arguments they use and the arguments they impart to us).⁹ In contrast, I argue that even though the presentation and discussion of arguments is an undeniable dimension of the Platonic corpus, this actually takes place within a broader context, and it is important not to lose sight of this. Plato's imitation is primarily an imitation of the act or practice of philosophical inquiry or examination, i.e., of the search for the truth by examining different

⁸ As Michael Frede says (1992, 216): "By their artful characterization of the dramatic context of the arguments the dialogues show in an unsurpassable way how philosophy is tied to real life, to forms of life, to character and behaviour."

⁹ Regarding education, this means that interpreters often focus on the structure of elenctic arguments or on the connection between views on education and views on psychology, ethics, politics or ontology; as for protreptics, the discussions focus mostly on protreptic arguments and argumentative strategies, as mentioned in footnote 1 above.

views and arguments.¹⁰ In this sense, the core of what is being imitated or represented is this act or practice as such, and not particular arguments or the practice of argumentation in general.¹¹

Focusing on the act or practice of searching for the truth is also important because there is no simple or uniform philosophical method one can apply to various topics. Throughout the corpus, philosophical inquiry or examination assumes many different and often complementary forms (elenchus, analogies, hypothetical methods, dichotomies, etc.), and philosophical inquiry or examination is precisely the unitary project or enterprise to which all these methods belong. This unitary project is what human life usually lacks (hence its characterization as unexamined life in *Apology*, 38a5). It is a very complex practice, which requires special commitment and ability, and although it resembles other cultural practices (both more ordinary forms of inquiry, such as cross-examinations in courts, giving account of one's activity while in office, etc., and more refined or erudite cognitive practices, like those of medicine, oratory, history, natural science, etc.), it has its own specificity and requires special learning.

The practical component of philosophy and its psychological presuppositions are thus at the centre of Plato's philosophical mimesis. This can be seen, for instance, in Plato's detailed portrayal of the kind of situations in which a philosophical inquiry begins. He represents many different beginnings of philosophical examination and shows how one can pass from everyday situations or situations of extreme tension to an inquiring attitude, how anything can prompt this transition, how some characters (especially Socrates) do it more naturally, and so on. Moreover, he represents the intricate or erratic development of philosophical inquiry – how it is full of aporias or dead ends, new beginnings and suspicions (thereby stressing the difficulty of this practice and the need to be insistent and fully engaged). Finally, he also represents different ways in which it may come to an end. Characters break off the inquiry because they cannot handle it, grow tired, are otherwise engaged, are interrupted by others, etc., and all this renders

¹⁰ This is clearly the case in the so-called Socratic dialogues (they all have something inquisitive, τὸ ζητητικόν, as Aristotle pointed out in *Politics* II, 1265a10-12), but it also applies to the Platonic corpus as a whole.

¹¹ This is relevant because (as will be shown below) by placing the emphasis on the practice (as a rational practice) rather than on the rational content, the dimension of training becomes more evident – and not just the training of a technique, but also of one's cognitive profile or intellectual character (and its relationship with one's psychological profile or character in general). This has a clear connection with character education and its epistemic consequences, but we will not be able to explore this connection here.

manifest how precarious this practice is. In all this, Plato does not simply imitate the beginning, vicissitudes and end of a rational process, but also the many emotions that accompany this inquiry, such as perplexity, insatiable curiosity, the frustration and despair of *aporia*, the satisfaction of an apparent solution, the fear one might be wrong, the surprise of being refuted, and so on.

The mimetic nature of the Platonic corpus thus shows how philosophical inquiry is not an abstract process or a general and uniform experience that everybody goes through in the same way. Philosophical inquiry is always performed by someone – either in isolation (by making a speech or simply requiring assent from others) or as a more or less cooperative effort (in which one person plays the role of the examiner and another plays the role of the examinee). This personal component of philosophical inquiry has the further implication that this inquiry is determined not only by the circumstances, but also by the character (and the corresponding way of life) of those performing it. The psychological profile of the examiners deeply influences the process or the direction of inquiry, what is accepted and rejected, the arguments or views put forward, etc. Some of the people performing the inquiry are of course more suited to do so because of their cognitive state and their character (or, according to the tripartition of the soul in the *Republic*, because of the arrangement of the soul's parts and their intrinsic desires), and the correct (or at least the best) performance of philosophical inquiry is intrinsically associated with the kind of character (or way of life) that is ruled by reason and love of knowledge or wisdom (*φιλοσοφία*).¹²

This philosophical character is mostly represented by Socrates, who is the perfect embodiment of a philosophical attitude or a life marked by philosophy inquiry or examination. He is the model inquirer and in the *Apology* he even says that he was made an example by Apollo because he understood his wisdom was worthless (23b), which entailed not only being aware of his ignorance, but also searching for wisdom, neglecting everything else, and trying to communicate this attitude to others. Similarly relevant is the already mentioned fact that Plato imitates different stages of Socrates' life (including stages in which he is still young, hesitant and stumbling, as in his conversation with Diotima in the *Symposium* or the beginning of *Parmenides*), thereby showing how this way of being is not something innate, but rather something that must be developed and, as such, can also be attained by others.

Socrates, however, is not the only relevant character for determining philosophical inquiry. The other characters have different intellectual abilities and,

¹² The personal character of philosophy in the Platonic corpus is often pointed out, but I submit that this can be taken even further and be read in light of the tripartition of the soul as presented in *Republic* IV, VIII and IX (and especially in the two latter books).

more importantly, have their own non-philosophical – or at any rate less philosophical – ways of being, which according to the *Republic* correspond to a psychological regime ruled or greatly influenced by the appetitive part and its love of gain (i.e., of pleasure and possessions) or the spirited part and its love of victory and honour. As a result, they represent other possible relations to philosophical inquiry – i.e., other ways of performing it, integrating it into one's life and reacting to the way it unfolds. Indeed, many characters become frustrated and even angry at him and philosophical inquiry (especially if they regard their being refuted as being Socrates' fault, for playing tricks on them), while others become fascinated by Socrates and imitate him, even if only superficially. It all seems to depend on one's ability to question oneself and on how strong or demanding one's love of knowledge is or becomes.

Based on all this, Plato's mimesis of philosophical inquiry shows a kind of practice that may include different methods, is intrinsically related to views or arguments (those held by the interlocutors and other ones), and is always performed by people that have a particular character or way of life (which can be marked by a greater or lesser degree of love of knowledge). Any particular view or argument and any particular instance of inquiry must be understood within this general framework, which is what Plato is primarily representing or imitating. Philosophical inquiry and the soul's relation to it is not just something the characters sometimes discuss, but it is at the centre of Plato's mimetic writings, and this is certainly one of the main differences between the Platonic dialogues and most of the attempts to imitate them throughout the centuries.

4. The didactic and protreptic value of Plato's philosophical mimesis

After considering the Platonic understanding of mimesis, the senses in which Plato's writings are mimetic and the proper sense of Plato's philosophical mimesis, we can now better appraise the value of Plato's philosophical mimesis in light of Platonic psychology, i.e., we can see how the mimesis of philosophical examination can affect readers and whether its effects are similar to those of other forms of mimesis or instead specific to this kind of mimesis.

One could think that philosophical mimesis is a mere embellishment of the texts that renders the discussion of arguments more enjoyable or at least more palatable. In this case, it would not by itself teach anything or turn anyone to a different life. At best, it would render pedagogic and protreptic arguments more appealing. However, philosophical mimesis can also be regarded as having an intrinsic pedagogic and protreptic value. On the one hand, it illustrates how philosophical inquiry is to be performed and, as such, clarifies the methods that are to be employed and is better able to impart them. On the other hand, this mimi-

sis can affect how one lives, insofar as it illustrates the commitment to philosophy of certain characters, especially Socrates, whose words, behaviour and way of life can serve as an example and influence readers. But besides these more direct and evident pedagogic and protreptic effects, I submit that the mimetic form of the texts can have a stronger effect on readers and transform them – or, to be more precise, it can transform their relation to philosophical inquiry (as well as all that depends on it) in a more profound manner.

This deeper effect can be more properly understood if we consider that Plato's writings, as a form of mimesis, give a taste of philosophical inquiry or make us enjoy it.¹³ With their help, we can not only visualize and follow it, but also momentarily experience it or experience the performance of it. This identification with what is being performed is increased by the vivid representation of different characters, with different relations to philosophical inquiry, which means that one can easily find someone one identifies with, or even identify with different characters at different times. In fact, one can experience philosophical inquiry from different angles, both as an examiner (insofar as one can identify with Socrates or any other lead figure) and as an examinee. Thus, one experiences more directly the advances and the difficulties of philosophical inquiry – as well as the corresponding curiosity, perplexity, joy, frustration, hope and despair. Whether or not one is already familiarized with this practice (and especially with the forms it assumes in the Platonic corpus), one's intense contact with it through mimesis provides a temporary (even if only apparent) exit from the unexamined life – i.e., from a passive cognitive attitude that is complacently satisfied with the usual, unphilosophical way of seeing or understanding things.

This temporary tasting of philosophical examination strongly increases the didactic potential of the Platonic corpus since, instead of simply conveying doctrines and methodological principles, it teaches in a concrete and impressive manner how to perform philosophical inquiry. It not only provides elaborate examples as footsteps we may follow, but makes us follow in these footsteps. This is similar to what happens in the dramatic world of the dialogues, where characters (usually Socrates) ask others to imitate them and do as they do, as a way of teaching a specific technique of inquiry (see e.g. *Alcibiades I*, 108b, and *Phaedo*, 105b). Other times, someone automatically imitates others, as we see in *Euthydemus* when, after witnessing the eristic technique of the eponymous character and his brother applied several times, Ctesippus is able to use it (see 298b-300d and 303e-304b). According to Socrates, the same happened to the young who saw him refuting people and then went on to do the same (cp. *Apology* 23c). Similarly, read-

¹³ For enjoyment as a feature of mimesis, see *Rep.* III, 395d1, and X, 606d6.

ers – by means of identification with characters – have a vivid experience of philosophical inquiry and this works as a form of training or exercising that in time develops their skill and produces habituation.

This kind of mimetic pedagogy applies both to relatively simple or more mechanical operations of inquiry and to more complex and refined forms. In general, it enables one to better learn the technique of philosophical inquiry or the art of dialectics (including its more advanced form: the examination of the eidetic domain). With this Plato reveals a great sensitivity to the fact that philosophy is not just something people automatically learn from hearing or reading presentations of philosophical views, arguments and methodologies. One's learning is improved by watching others and imitating them. Hence, the context in which one first encounters philosophy, the practical examples one receives and how one follows them (both in one's mind and in one's interaction with others) are decisive for developing one's philosophical skills. This in no way means that the communication of views, arguments and methodologies is not important, but such a communication should be supplemented by this mimetic and practical component in order to render people better able to perform philosophical inquiry. One learns also by practising or performing inquiry (as characters in dialogues, when they are required to imitate).¹⁴

This is one effect that the mimesis of philosophical examination can bring about. But Plato's mimetic dialogues do not just develop one's practical skills as something one can have regardless of one's character. These dialogues also have a profound psychological effect and help shape who one is and how one lives one's life. In the framework of the *Republic*, and particularly of the soul's tripartition, this means philosophical mimesis can help to change the inner regime of one's soul. More precisely, imitating philosophical inquiry in one's mind or in one's interactions with others stimulates or strengthens the rational part and its constitutive desire (love of knowledge or wisdom, φιλοσοφία), and at the same time it weakens the spirited and the desiderative parts, along with their respective desires (or, using the division from *Republic X*, it weakens the part that is sensitive to appearances). This is in clear contrast with the psychological effects of dramatic mimesis. Reading Plato's dialogues helps one visualize and follow the practice of philosophical inquiry, allows one to taste it and perform it, and this not only awakens one's reason and its love of wisdom, rendering them more able to inquire and find better views, but it also starts to change one's character, the way one sees things and acts, and ultimately one's whole way of life. In this sense, it has protreptic effects and helps one to turn away from an unphilosophical life

¹⁴ This highlights the performative character of philosophy: it is not simply a form of knowledge, but something one must do.

and towards a philosophical life. By provoking readers and prompting them to inquire or examine, it does (or at least can do) more than stimulating them to perform a single act of inquiry or to inquire for a while. It can lead to a conversion to philosophy – i.e., to a life that is fully devoted to understanding things, recognizes its cognitive limitations, strives as much as possible to overcome them and, accordingly, devotes itself to philosophical inquiry.

The dialogues promote such a life in different ways. One of the most important devices is the use of either explicit protreptic arguments (see in particular *Euthydemus* 275a-b, 278c-282e, 288d-293a) or arguments that are implicitly or indirectly protreptic (insofar as they tacitly imply that one should philosophize, as pointed out in Slings 1999, 61-62).¹⁵ The kind of discussions portrayed also affect readers in different ways, especially insofar as they identify with the characters (see Miller 1986, 4-9, or Gallagher 2004). Philosophical mimesis, in turn, adds to the arguments by letting one perform philosophical inquiry and be affected by this performance. It can, therefore, be described as a sort of performative protreptics.¹⁶

The protreptic potential of Plato's mimesis of the act or process of philosophical inquiry is further enhanced by the above noted fact that he also represents different characters and different lives performing this act and relating to it in different ways. These appear in a more negative or more positive light, and philosophical lives stand out – especially the life of Socrates, who is portrayed as being in many respects admirable and even heroic. This not only lets one visualize and somehow experience the possibility he represents, but it also leads one to emulate his words, behaviour and even his life (trying to develop oneself as he did). Furthermore, the contrast between characters and lives has its own apotreptic effects, insofar as it shows certain characters (with whom one may identify to a greater or lesser degree) that lead an unexamined life and, as a result, tend to

¹⁵ These *προτρεπτικοὶ λόγοι*, studied by Gaiser (1959), Slings (1999) and more recently Collins (2015), are developed in the text, but also apply to readers. They often involve specific strategies, as the refutation of *ἔνδοξα* (cp. Cain 2007), or refined manipulation, as studied by Marshall (2021).

¹⁶ As a performance that not only improves our technical ability, but transforms the regime of the soul, philosophical mimesis is connected with the theme of character education and introduces it as an important factor in the sphere of protreptics. Philosophical mimesis does not just invite and exhort to philosophize, but also leads one to start philosophizing and thereby start transforming oneself and becoming more philosophical (or even converting to philosophy). This partly corresponds to Yunis' notion of disguised protreptics, which he characterizes in the following terms: "disarmed by the naturalness of the conversation and intrigued by its unfolding drama, the reader is tricked into following closely the very argument that may ultimately change his values" (2007, 14).

have weak and easily refutable views, behave reprehensibly, neglect or harm others (or argue one should do so), and in some cases are on their way to contributing to the downfall of the polis and meeting their demise.¹⁷

These different sides of Plato's philosophical mimesis greatly increase its protreptic potential, and this is especially important because the practice of philosophical inquiry always takes place within a soul with a certain psychological makeup – i.e., an arrangement of its parts and their motivations that translates into a certain way of life. One's psychological makeup affects the way one learns and performs philosophical inquiry, and in order to correctly learn and perform philosophical examination, one must as far as possible have a philosophical soul and lead a philosophical life. In this sense, the pedagogical component depends on the protreptic component. However, the transformation of one's psyche also depends on the learning process and the performance of philosophical inquiry. It is by inquiring that one's character and life becomes more philosophical. Thus, the pedagogical and protreptic components of Plato's philosophical mimesis are essentially interconnected.

This is, of course, a generic description, and the didactic and protreptic effects of Plato's writings can very well vary in intensity not only from dialogue to dialogue, but also (and more importantly) from reader to reader, according both to one's psychological makeup and to how one deals with the texts. In principle, however, the dedicated study of the whole corpus greatly increases one's inquiring skills and the propensity to inquire, thereby bringing one closer to Socrates (as the model offered by Plato) and turning oneself into a model for others.

5. The constitutive imperfection of philosophical mimesis

In the previous section, the discussion was focused on the ideal effects of Plato's philosophical mimesis. This type of mimesis seems to be partly immune to the epistemological and psychological criticisms of mimesis in *Republic X*, since it leads the reader beyond appearances, constantly raises the question of what things really are, and greatly stimulates the rational part of the soul (cp. Tsouna 2013, 23-26).

However, the mimesis of philosophical examination may easily fail to do so or do so imperfectly, and it can even have negative effects. In order for this to happen, it is not necessary for such a mimesis to seriously distort philosophical inquiry. Even if the mimesis is correct, it can produce results other than the ones men-

¹⁷ This has often been discussed, but generally in more intellectualistic terms, insofar as these persons embodied certain views that are revealed as problematic in their tragic consequences. However, we can also regard it in light of the tripartition, as an illustration of bad internal regimes.

tioned, largely because of the constitutive imperfection or defectiveness of mimesis discussed above. As a form of mimesis, philosophical mimesis still produces appearances, it shows only some sides of philosophical inquiry or shows it as seen from the outside, and the same applies to the representation of philosophical lives. Hence, philosophical mimesis cannot guarantee a proper teaching of philosophical examination and the life devoted to it. On the other hand, the fact that this mimesis of philosophical practice and philosophical life involves appearance (and a pleasant or beautiful one, on account of its diversity and vividness) may nevertheless stimulate the soul's love of appearance and affections. In the framework of the tripartition, this means that philosophical mimesis can still strengthen one's love of gain or pleasure (in which case one can also try to learn it in order to have fun or to profit from it) or one's love of honour and victory (leading one to pursue the admiration of others or the joy of defeating them in intellectual contests), and if these other desires are nurtured and strengthened, the learning and transformative process will be corrupted and lead to improper results.

In light of this, there seems to be no guarantee that philosophical mimesis will affect the soul in the proper way and render it truly philosophical. As in the case of the written word (see *Phaedrus* 274c-277a and *Letter VII* 341b-344e) and oral communication (see *Symposium* 175d-e), it all seems to depend on the receptor. More precisely, philosophical mimesis depends on the way readers represent or imitate the philosophical dialogue in their mind. This second-order mimesis performed by readers can be incorrect, superficial or merely passive, like the mimesis performed by Apollodorus in the *Symposium* (173c-e) or by the young, mentioned by Socrates in the *Apology* (23c and 33b-c), who examine and refute others for fun. In these cases, one's mimesis replicates some traits of philosophical inquiry, but not the proper technique, the seriousness and especially the psychological makeup or the kind of life in which it should take place. As a result, philosophical mimesis can have several detrimental effects (as the dialogues themselves warn us), such as increased conceit of knowledge, frustration and anger (as often happens to Socrates' interlocutors), misology (cp. *Phaedo* 89b-90e), scepticism and relativism (see *Republic VII*, 538d-539c), etc. According to the dialogues, all these bad results stem from misunderstanding and incorrectly performing philosophical inquiry. It is, therefore, very important not only to have access to a correct imitation, but also to be aware that it is only a mimesis (i.e., a partial or superficial representation) and to imitate it properly (which seems to require philosophical talent, a philosophical temperament and even maturity – cp. *Republic VII*, 539c-d).

These prerequisites (the awareness of the mimetic status of the inquiry presented in the texts and the correctness of one's own imitation) are not directly

ensured by the Platonic dialogues. However, I argue that the dialogues have certain features that indirectly contribute to such an awareness and such a correctness, thereby enhancing their pedagogical and protreptic potential. Surprisingly, these features correspond to different kinds of imperfection or defectiveness that get added to mimesis' constitutive imperfection or defectiveness. The question, then, is how can imperfection help to perfect philosophical mimesis?

6. The added imperfections of Plato's philosophical mimesis

The new layer of imperfection just mentioned seems to be directly at odds with what should be expected of what is being imitated or represented. As a rational pursuit of truth, philosophical inquiry should be as complete as possible, as logically sound as possible, and as straightforward as possible about its status and what is being done or achieved in it. However, this is far from being the case. Plato's philosophical mimesis is not only defective in the way any mimesis is defective, but includes special quantitative, qualitative and tonal defects. Moreover, these defects are not inconspicuous. They stand out and, in this sense, Plato's mimesis is a sort of caricature of philosophical inquiry. However, this is not necessarily a weakness, as has often been pointed out. These defects can be construed as serving a positive function. In order to understand what this positive function might be (or what it might include), it is important to first consider the exact extent of these three kinds of defects or imperfections.

6.1. Quantitative defects of Plato's philosophical mimesis

One of the added imperfections of Plato's mimesis of philosophical inquiry (and the one that is less discussed) concerns the fact that the dialogues are full of salient gaps and present only a small part of the inquiry they allude to. More specifically, even if we assume the dialogues to be entirely fictional, they are full of references to philosophical inquiries or parts of inquiries that are not represented in the texts. These references to a vaster dramatic world include not only parts of dialogues or dialogues that are missing (such as the ending of *Critias* or the much-discussed *Philosopher*), but also allusions to inquiries that are supposed to have occurred before or after the conversations depicted in Plato's writings.

These allusions are of various types. Some dialogues start *medias in res*, with the conversation already underway, and we do not know how it got to a certain point (as in *Meno*) or have only a vague idea about it (as in *Philebus*). In addition, there are express references to (or brief summaries of) some character's past conversations (cp. e.g. *Theaetetus* 147c-148b) or past perplexities (see *Phaedo* 96a-100a and *Philebus* 36e). Sometimes, the course of the inquiry even alludes to someone's whole background (their teachers, the inquiries they performed, how

they came to certain answers, whether they have already been examined by Socrates or got acquainted with him, etc.). This is especially true in the case of the character Socrates and his philosophical development, of which we catch only a few glimpses.

On the other hand, the ending of the text is often not the end of the conversation. Many dialogues simply fade out and we do not know whether the conversation continued or not, whereas in other cases it clearly continued (for instance, in *Philebus*). There are also conversations that are abruptly interrupted because someone must (or wants to) leave, although there are still things to be discussed and Socrates is ready to start a new line of inquiry (see *Lysis* and *Euthyphro*). In other cases, the dialogue simply closes with a more or less express appeal to the need to examine the matter further (see the endings of *Charmides* and *Theaetetus*). Moreover, there are also more or less explicit references to future conversations in those cases where dialogues are being narrated at a later date (either the next day, as in *Republic*, or many years later, as in the *Symposium*, *Theaetetus* and *Parmenides*), and this literary device includes a more or less vague allusion to the conversations that took place in between the two points in time. Indeed, many more things could be said and examined, and in the *Apology* Socrates even presents the idea of spending the entire afterlife examining people (41b-c), which illustrates how much examination is still to be done.

The written dialogues are thus just interstices or intermediate stations. However, there are many more gaps, because numerous inquiries in the middle of these dialogues are also missing. In some cases, the narrator simply omits them (cp. *Protagoras* 314c and *Symposium* 180c1-3). At other times, the characters decide not to examine a particular question, postponing it for another time (cp. *Republic* 400b-c). These examinations may be resumed later (such as the question at the end of *Philebus*) or on another day, but often they seem to be simply ignored or forgotten. We can also include here inquiries that are presented in an abbreviated fashion, such as when Socrates presents only a shorter road (see *Phaedrus* 246a, *Republic* 435c-d and 506d-e) – assuming a longer one was available or possible. Furthermore, the inquiries portrayed by Plato bring up many questions that are simply left aside without mention (or whose neglect is mentioned only later – see e.g. *Republic* 449a-c). Some of these might be examined elsewhere in the Platonic corpus, but others are altogether absent. Finally, there are moments where characters examine something in silence (like Socrates in *Symposium* 175a-d).

In this respect, it is also important to bear in mind that Plato's mimesis of philosophical examination not only refers to the dramatic world itself, but also to inquiries that lie beyond this world: namely, those performed by the historical

characters themselves (whether Plato was present or not) and those performed by Plato after the death of Socrates (in his travels, in the Academy, etc.). These may have been more or less similar to the ones represented in the texts, and at any rate exerted influence over what we can read and somehow echo through it.

It may not be immediately clear how these gaps (especially those internal to the dramatic world of the dialogues) are a meaningful defect. One can argue that Plato's writings are just samples of philosophical inquiry and there is no need to think about what is missing. However, these writings often stress the importance of being exhaustive and even outline – either as the essence of philosophy or as a training regime – the project of a full and complete examination (see *Republic* 533b-534c, where Socrates adds the idea of reaching the ultimate foundation of knowledge, and *Parmenides* 135e-136c). Indeed, philosophical inquiry does not seem to be just a mechanical operation that can be applied to different topics. It is a process that must go through everything that is relevant, and each question is connected with or presupposes many others. Consequently, by leaving many questions undecided or unexamined, any solution presented becomes questionable. Some new aspect could refute everything or change the meaning of what is said. In this sense, the quantitative defect is also qualitative. Regardless of whether a full inquiry could ever be depicted or even performed, an incomplete inquiry is still defective, and Plato's dialogues could at any rate have gone much further. However, they do not do so, and they emphatically stress this fact.

6.2. Qualitative defects of Plato's philosophical mimesis

Another respect in which Plato's mimesis of philosophical inquiry is far from perfect concerns the much-discussed logical soundness of the inquiries or the arguments presented therein. Many of the arguments are accepted as valid, rejected as invalid or at least taken as clear, without being so. Indeed, inquiries in the Platonic corpus are often logically faulty. They lack in clarity, rigour, exactness and validity. In this sense, Plato's philosophical mimesis is a mimesis of an incorrect kind of inquiry, which has a defective methodology and often produces bad or questionable results.

The factors that contribute to this qualitative imperfection of Plato's philosophical mimesis are of different kinds. The use of images in the broad sense of the word (including allegories and myths) to communicate, explain and confirm views, the use of different language registers (colloquial, poetical, scientific, philosophical) and the imitation of different literary styles (tragedy, comedy, etc.) introduce a great deal of imprecision. The imprecision is enhanced by the lack of clear definitions of the terms or even a fixed terminology (the same words being

used with different meanings and words with different meanings being sometimes used as equivalent).

Another problem concerns the fact that arguments are often cryptic, unclear or unexplained. Many argumentative steps are too quick, several arguments are presented only in a shorter version, and characters tend to promptly accept or refuse arguments without sufficient examination. Moreover, these arguments often rest on questionable bases, such as analogies, inductions, common sense, the beliefs of an interlocutor, some authority (often a poet), sudden strokes of inspiration and prophecy, or even mere wordplay.

As a result of all this, there are numerous fallacious arguments in the Platonic corpus.¹⁸ This can be more or less clear to the readers, but in many cases it is pretty evident. Moreover, even when there is no glaring fallacy, the argument is not necessarily sound. One must be cautious and suspect everything, for any argument may well be fallacious or depend on a fallacy. On the other hand, it can also happen that the characters are presenting intrinsically valid arguments in a suspicious or invalid manner.¹⁹

Plato thus imitates or represents a defective philosophical inquiry, which is sometimes recognized or suspected as such by the characters, but in many cases passes off as good and satisfactory. In any case, this is a serious defect or imperfection. Philosophical inquiry requires a correct methodology, and this is clearly not what is seen in many passages of the corpus – to the point that one can wonder whether there is any proper inquiry in the Platonic corpus at all.

6.3. The tonal defect of Plato's philosophical mimesis

The third kind of defect in Plato's mimesis of philosophical inquiry concerns the tone of his mimesis. By this I mean the fact that the dialogues are unclear about their status – i.e., as we read the dialogues, it is often (if not always) difficult to determine whether each inquiry is meant as a serious and committed search for the truth (i.e., as the best that could be done by the characters and author), or if it is something else and has a different goal.

At the dramatic level, this difficulty is closely associated with the much discussed "Socratic irony". Socrates often seems to hold back, dissemble or play the fool, and this makes it difficult to know what is on his mind (which also applies, at least in part, to other lead characters, such as the Stranger of Elea, Parmenides or the Athenian). Furthermore, even when Socrates is more straightforward, his claims are problematic. He affirms views and strips them of authority (as being

¹⁸ For more exhaustive discussions of the fallacies in the Platonic corpus, see e.g. Sprague 1962 and Klosko 1983.

¹⁹ On these different possibilities, cp. Ausland 1997, 376.

provisional, something he heard, dreamt, a stroke of inspiration, etc.) and many involve apparent contradictions (for instance, he claims that he knows nothing or very little, and yet seems to have strong convictions).

Something similar notoriously applies to the texts themselves. The author not only speaks through characters, but he himself uses different kinds of disclaimers that introduce distance between him or the characters and readers. One of these devices is the use of potentially unreliable narrators (as in *Lysis*, *Charmides*, *Euthydemus*, *Protagoras*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Theaetetus* and *Parmenides*), who in some cases were not even present in the episode they are narrating (e.g. *Symposium*). These narrators may introduce involuntary distortions (due to forgetfulness or ignorance) or even intentional ones. Likewise, Plato is an unreliable author or imitator, and one naturally wonders whether (or to what degree) he is distorting real people, real conversations or even what a philosophical conversation should be.

There is also the much-discussed problem of what exactly are Plato's views. It is impossible to say what the definite results of philosophical inquiry in the corpus are, not only because many dialogues are aporetic, but also because the views of the more positive dialogues tend to differ and even contradict or refute each other (and it is not clear whether this implies a change of mind or serves some other purpose).²⁰ The contradictions may be more or less apparent, but they render most (if not all) of the arguments in the corpus problematic. Moreover, even if one can draw some conclusions from the dialogues, one still has to deal with the criticism of the written word both by Socrates (*Phaedrus*, 274c-277a) and Plato (*Letter VII*, 341b-344e, assuming it was written by him). Plato seems to denounce directly and indirectly that these are not his views or his real inquiries, because the latter cannot be communicated in writing. Writing is mere child's play (or, at best, something that can serve as a reminder of what someone already knows or provide some hints to those able to inquire by themselves). If this is the case, one must then wonder about the value of this play, but also about the value of the very criticism of the written word, since it seems to apply even to itself, thereby making Plato's dialogues an instance of the liar paradox.

²⁰ This includes different views on a particular topic – such as whether the soul can shed its non-rational parts (cp. e.g. *Phaedrus* 246a-b and *Republic* 611b-612a) or whether one needs to obey the law (see *Apology*, 29c-d, and *Crito*, 50a-54c), etc. – and also performative contradictions (e.g., the fact that the dialogues criticise mimesis or images while constantly using them).

In virtue of all this, it is impossible to determine not only Plato's views, but what the intentions behind the dialogues are.²¹ The dialogues may be trying to express a philosophical attitude, they may have a merely propaedeutic character, or they may be trying to communicate in some way doctrines and even a system. But even if they are communicating something, it is not clear whether this communication expresses a sceptic or a dogmatic stance (or both things at different stages). The texts themselves seem to admit very different interpretations and, as a result, every word in them is indeterminate. There is nothing we can appeal to in order to determine the value of the philosophical inquiry they portray, and this is a type of imperfection, because the process of philosophical inquiry should ideally be transparent about what is being done, where it is going and what is being achieved. One should understand this process, and not just be mysteriously guided by someone else without knowing what is happening.

7. The enhanced didactic and protreptic effects of Plato's defective philosophical mimesis

At first sight, these three kinds of defect or imperfection appear to threaten the pedagogical and protreptic potential of Plato's philosophical mimesis. One would be learning a kind of philosophical inquiry that is insufficient, wrong in many respects and unclear about its status. As a result, one's reason, character and life would not be properly transformed and would not become properly philosophical. Moreover, the fact that the above-mentioned defects are often salient could very well limit not only the confidence readers have in the dialogues, but also their mimetic identification with the characters and what they are doing.

However, if we take into account the ideas presented in the Platonic corpus, these defects should rather be understood as ways of enhancing the didactical and protreptic effects of philosophical mimesis. They prevent a more passive reading of the texts by causing astonishment and making readers think beyond what is explicitly discussed. In the case of the quantitative defects, they raise the question of what else could be said and whether what is missing is important or not. The qualitative defects, in turn, invite readers not only to think about how the fallacious arguments should be corrected (if they are simply wrong or if better versions of the same arguments could be provided), but also to revise everything that is being said in order to determine whether everything that is relevant is being considered and whether there are any other inaccuracies or errors. As for the tonal defect, it raises the question of the status of everything that is being affirmed – whether the characters and the author are withholding something or

²¹ One may resort to external sources, such as Aristotle's testimony, but even this is problematic and far from conclusive.

not, whether it is all meant as a game, a set of hints or an actual communication (however problematic) of views, arguments and inquiring practices.

The different defects or imperfections of the philosophical inquiry imitated by Plato thus increase the pressure on the reader, working as a sort of Socratic gadfly. Rather than telling us that examination needs to be complete, logically perfect and have a transparent status, they make us see and feel (in the form of astonishment, frustration and curiosity) how it falls short of that ideal. As a result, they contribute to bringing about a more engaged and active reading. Instead of simply memorizing, parroting or mindlessly imitating what is said in the dialogues, one is required to put in a strenuous effort of revising and rewriting the dialogues. One becomes a participant in the conversation or, as Voula Tsouna says, Plato “entices his audience to join in the action” (2013, 26).²²

Based on this, it is possible to reconsider the effects that such a provocative form of mimesis has on readers. Regarding its didactic value, this mimesis does not lead them to passively follow perfect philosophical inquiries, but it provokes them and brings about (or at least stimulates) a more active and creative kind of imitation. By calling for readers to confront the philosophical mimesis as such, to decide its value and how they should relate to it, it helps them to go beyond the texts (or at least beyond superficial imitation of these texts). This is an enhanced form of pedagogy and resembles the form of Socratic education presented in the dialogues themselves. It places a great emphasis on the performative dimension of philosophical inquiry, with the goal of making one able to inquire as completely, perfectly and transparently as possible.

As for the proreptic effect of the dialogues, Plato’s philosophical mimesis does more than stimulate the rational part of readers’ souls by making them follow philosophical inquiries. The defects of Platonic mimesis make readers feel more intensely the lack of inquiry and its importance, thereby generating more intense and conscious forms of inquiry. At the same time, these defects better prevent readers from interacting with the dialogues in a way that is simply aiming at pleasure, profit, victory or honour. One is more absorbed by philosophical inquiry and, as a result, Plato’s philosophical mimesis stimulates one’s rational part and

²² In this I agree with Susanna Saracco’s notion of a higher order pedagogy, according to which the dialogues call for collaboration from the readers (cp. 2017, 13ff.). Saracco, however, speaks of adding or criticising views, and also mentions the intellectual challenge posed by the dialogues (as others do – e.g., Cain 2007, 36). However, what I am trying to show is that the dialogues do not just stimulate us to add or criticise views, or to answer an intellectual challenge. They create in us (or are designed in a way that easily creates in us) the need to correct inquiries that are insufficient or incorrectly done, thereby avoiding a slavish kind of mimesis, as Blondell puts it (see 2002, 102-103).

one's love of wisdom more intensely, thereby producing a deeper change in the inner regime of one's soul. Consequently, one can more easily adopt a philosophical life and more easily understand what it involves, instead of simply trying to imitate Socrates and other philosophical characters without having a true understanding of what their lives involve.²³

Despite all this, one may still wonder exactly how effective the dialogues can be and what else is required for them to be truly effective. For instance, how much must one know beforehand and what kind of character or predisposition must one have? How attentive and engaged must one's reading be? How much time should it involve? How often must one read the dialogues? And can the effects be increased (or accelerated) if one has an explicit awareness of all these devices?

It is not easy to give a adequate answer to these questions, but in any case it seems clear that the effects above discussed are not automatic or guaranteed. In fact, the defects considered can still generate misunderstandings. Readers might think that all that is missing is irrelevant, might accept arguments at face value or suspect all of them (and even suspect reason's ability to settle any question), and might simply accept the texts as a more or less direct communication of Plato's own beliefs. Together with the constitutive defects of mimesis, which might lead to superficial imitation and a wrong stimulation of the soul, the added defects involve a significant risk of deviating readers from the proper way of inquiring and a properly philosophical life (either because one gets a wrong idea of what is involved, or because one grows disillusioned with the practice of philosophical inquiry). Nevertheless, these defects can also counteract the intrinsic risks of mimesis. They are not simply negative; they can produce positive effects and help one to truly philosophize. This renders Plato's philosophical mimesis better than the kind of dramatic mimesis he discusses in *Republic X* and also better than the good forms of mimesis he introduces in his ideal polis as forms of helping to raise children and citizens. Plato's philosophical mimesis is an extraordinary form of mimesis, with an extraordinary pedagogical and protreptic potential.²⁴

²³ My argument has some affinity with Mitchell Miller's notion of mimetic irony (1986, 4-9). Miller points out the provocative value of the characters' failure in examination during the dialogues (especially insofar as readers may identify with them). In my view, this is certainly an important aspect, but more than the characters' personal failure, it is the defectiveness of the philosophical inquiry represented in the texts that can deeply transform readers.

²⁴ In light of this, one could wonder whether art does not – or could not – share some of the features of Plato's philosophical mimesis, which would give it a greater philosophical value and allow it to be more positively appraised in a Platonic framework.

Conclusion

I have argued that, regardless of whether Plato had definite doctrines and tried to communicate them, it is possible to see the Platonic dialogues as a philosophical form of mimesis or, to be more precise, a mimesis of philosophical inquiry and of the kind of character or life that is better able to perform it. This approach helps us to better understand important aspects about the practice of philosophy in general and the practice of philosophical writing and reading. Philosophy in general is something that must be learned and, even if this learning does not exclude more theoretical pedagogical means, it can be improved by the use of vivid examples students can follow. Moreover, to be properly performed, philosophy requires a conversion to a certain kind of life in which the love of wisdom and reason are greatly strengthened, and this can be more easily done if one is provided with examples of how to inquire and how to live philosophically. The form of the dialogues thus shows that good didactics and good protreptics are not just about arguments and doctrines, but also about offering good models to emulate. Model philosophers render one conscious of what philosophical inquiry is or should be, and they help one change one's being, making it more rational and philosophical. There is, of course, the risk of performing only a superficial imitation and never attaining the ideal form of this practice and of the life that enables it. However, the refined form of mimesis developed by Plato, which makes a philosophical use of different kinds of imperfection (i.e., presents imperfect models that make us feel the need for a more perfect kind of examination), can counteract the tendency to focus on superficial aspects of the dialogues and better promote mimetic identification with the practice of philosophical inquiry, thereby increasing the pedagogic and protreptic effect of the dialogues. In this sense, imperfection is a major strength of Platonic mimesis.

The awareness of the imperfection of the Platonic corpus and its positive value is not without consequences for the way one should read and interpret the dialogues. Taking everything that has been said into consideration, one could invest in ways of interpreting the texts that focus not so much on what doctrines (if any) are being conveyed or on who the characters are (what they think, do and feel), but rather on how the mimesis of the practice of philosophical inquiry (as well as its more or less evident shortcomings) might itself be instructive and transform the soul of interlocutors and readers (i.e., what they can do and how they live). At the same time, one could explore how this performative dimension and its defects affect the understanding of the views or arguments put forward in the texts (and especially their express pedagogy and protreptics) and, more importantly, one could accept these limitations or imperfections and use them as starting points for new

philosophical inquiries. All this will render one's interpretation less passive and more philosophical. In this way, it will become more of a dialogue with Plato's dialogues and also more faithful to the nature of these mimetic texts.

I am, of course, not suggesting that this should be the only way or even that it is the best way to read Plato's dialogues. I only suggest that we can develop this way of looking at the dialogues to complement other readings, that it can be useful to think about education and protreptics in particular (complementing other studies), and that it can help us be more deeply transformed by the reading and the interpretation of the dialogues (assuming that this is desirable and that philosophy should be more than a purely intellectual enterprise).²⁵

REFERENCES

- Ausland, H. (1997) "On Reading Plato Mimetically," *The American Journal of Philology* 118, 3, 371-416.
- Barney, R. (2016) "What Kind of Theory is the Theory of the Tripartite Soul?" in: *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium of Ancient Philosophy*, 31, 53-83.
- Blondell, R. (2002) *The Play of Character in Plato's Dialogues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cain, R. B. (2007) *The Socratic Method: Plato's Use of Philosophical Drama*. London: Continuum.
- Collins II, J. H. (2015) *Exhortations to Philosophy: The Protreptics of Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Plato (1997) *Complete Works*. Ed. J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson. Indianapolis / Cambridge: Hackett.
- Frede, M. (1992) "Plato's Arguments and the Dialogue Form," *Methods of Interpreting Plato and His Dialogues*. Ed. J. C. Klagge and N. D. Smith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 201-220.
- Gaiser, K. (1959) *Protreptik und Paränese bei Platon: Untersuchungen zur Form des platonischen Dialogs*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Gallagher, R. L. (2004) "Protreptic Aims of Plato's *Republic*," *Ancient Philosophy* 24, 93-319.
- Gonzalez, F. (1998) *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Gordon, J. (1999) *Turning Toward Philosophy: Literary Device and Dramatic Structure in Plato's Dialogues*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

²⁵ This work was funded by national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia under the project UIDB/00183/2020. I am thankful to the participants of the Permanent Seminar on Ancient Thought "Worlds and Lives" for their helpful comments on a earlier draft of this paper and to Fábio Serranito for his meticulous feedback on a late draft.

- Halliwell, S. (2002) *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Klosko, G. (1983) "Criteria of Fallacy and Sophistry for Use in the Analysis of Platonic Dialogues," *The Classical Quarterly* 33, 363-374.
- Kosman, L. A. (1992) "Silence and Imitation in Platonic Dialogues," *Methods of Interpreting Plato and His Dialogues*. Ed. J. C. Klagge and N. D. Smith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 73-92.
- Magrini, J. M. (2018) *Plato's Socrates, Philosophy and Education*. Cham: Springer.
- Marshall, M. (2021) *Reading Plato's Dialogues to Enhance Learning and Inquiry: Exploring Socrates' Use of Protreptic for Student Engagement*. New York: Routledge.
- Miller Jr., M. (1986) *Plato's Parmenides: The Conversion of the Soul*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mintz, A. I. (2018) *Plato: Images, Aims, and Practices of Education*. Cham: Springer.
- Moss, J. (2007) "What Is Imitative Poetry and Why Is It Bad?," *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*. Ed. G. Ferrari. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 415-444.
- Saracco, S. (2017) *Plato and Intellectual Development: A New Theoretical Framework Emphasising the Higher-Order Pedagogy of the Platonic Dialogues*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scolnicov, S. (1988) *Plato's Metaphysics of Education*. London: Routledge.
- Scott, G. A. (2000) *Plato's Socrates as Educator*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Plato (1999) *Clitophon*. Ed. S. R. Slings. Cambridge: University Press.
- Sprague, R. (1962) *Plato's Use of Fallacy: A Study of the Euthydemus and Some Other Dialogues*. London: Routledge / Kegan Paul.
- Thesleff, H. (2009) "Studies in the Styles of Plato," *Platonic Patterns: A Collection of Studies by Holger Thesleff*. Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 1-142.
- Tsouana, V. (2013) "Mimêsis and the Platonic Dialogue," *Rhizomata* 1, 1-29.
- West, E. (2000) "Why Doesn't Plato Speak?," *Who Speaks for Plato? Studies in Platonic Anonymity*. Ed. G. Press. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Little Field.
- Woodruff, P. (2015) "Mimesis," *A Companion to Ancient Aesthetics*. Ed. P. Destrée and P. Murray. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 329-340.
- Yunis, H. (2007) "The Protreptic Rhetoric of the *Republic*," *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*. Ed. G. R. F. Ferrari. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-26.