

Kabren f Levinson
Philosophy and the Arts
Garry Hagberg
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What do you see?

Plato and Arthur Danto are more similar than one might think. Plato, a philosopher who praises rule and control in his *Republic*, advocates for the banishment of art from all of civilized society. He says art exists in a world furthest from the truth and believes a painting of a bed to be more fabricated than a bed itself. Plato constructed a civilization where the philosophers and thinkers of society decide what is good and bad. Danto, on the other hand, writes and thinks in a world where art is accepted and celebrated. In addition to living in an art-welcoming society, Danto's philosophy addresses and recognizes a radical and fundamental shift in the world of art. Danto, like Plato, viewed art as apart from appearance and reality, but instead of wholly excluding it, as Plato did, Danto offers art it's own existence - the art world. Danto is engaged in an almost Platonic and Socratic task, too, for he is asking questions and making classifications about the world. Again, Danto is explicating a shift in art. Instead of epic poems and tragic plays, Danto encounters urinals and Brillo boxes that are viewed as art and displayed in museums. Danto, too, is involved in the epistemological practice of defining art through structure and challenging the limits of appearance and reality.

Three main ideas offer both connections and contentions between the philosophies of Plato and Danto. On the one hand, Plato banishes art from his constructed civilization and creates rigid definitions of what is and should be considered "art," while on the other hand, Danto offers art an active role in society and claims that

art has moved beyond definition and become post-historical. Even though the implications and consequences of Plato's philosophies are often in opposition to those of Danto, both philosophers do, however, address the idea of a "third world" of art, apart from the worlds of appearance and reality, and discuss similar types of objects that may or may not be seen as art. Finally, Plato and Danto both examine art within similar contexts and constructs. The philosophies of Plato and Danto are both harmonious and in conflict at the same time.

The Republic is, at its core, a text of political philosophy. In Book X, however, Plato has Socrates engage in a discussion of the value of art in relationship to the good and to a greater society. Plato begins his discussion by plainly banishing art that claims to be real. "...it seems to me clearer than ever that such poetry must be firmly excluded" (21). Plato says that art is ultimately a bad part of society and therefore, it is to be eliminated. "...poetry of that sort seems to be injurious to minds which do not possess the antidote in a knowledge of its real nature" (22). He goes even one step further to say that art is actually harmful to the minds of the people - remember that Plato is not referring to the class of philosopher elites.

After his blatant attack on the arts, Plato now begins his conversation of the worlds of appearance and reality by discussing actual objects. Plato claims that there are three levels of truth; the ultimate and true form, controlled by God, the manufacture of a form, produced by a carpenter, for example, and representations of manufactured forms, created by artists. To Plato, the artist's creation is furthest from the truth. "...he, and all other artists are, as it were, third in succession from the throne of truth" (24). Plato's artist is not representing the real and true form of an object, but is instead

representing the product of a form. The artist makes appearances of appearances. “The art of representation, then, is a long way from reality...it grasps only a small part of any object, and that only an image” (24). To Plato, the artist does not actually understand what he is recreating, but instead only takes snapshots of someone else’s work. To Plato, the artist is a joke, and “not to be taken seriously” (27).

In this discussion of truth and appearance, Plato examines a bed and a table - both objects encountered in every day life. Plato unifies all beds and tables by claiming that there are only two forms - one of bed and one of table. Plato distinguishes between a real big-B Bed and a particular small-b bed, or between a form and a production of a form, or between reality and appearance. Plato says that the craftsman is not an artist. These objects the craftsman creates are not works of art. Art is something special for Plato. It is a perversion of a production. Plato makes clear his division between object and art. In the examples he provides, the object has a clear purpose, while art could only deceive the people.

Finally, Plato investigates the arts through civilization. He banishes the arts out of a concern for the greater public. “...our commonwealth has many features which make me think it was based on very sound principles...” (21). He trusts only the philosopher rulers and his judgement of art comes in a text containing a greater judgement of society.

Arthur Danto is a philosopher of the arts. His role in the world of philosophy is not nearly as diverse and well known as Plato’s, however, he still is an influential thinker in his field. Danto’s text is not about politics, the good, or constructing a civilization. “Theories, on this account, are somewhat like mirror images on Socrates’ account,

showing forth what we already know, wordy reflections of the actual linguistic practice we are masters in" (172). As an institutionalist, he is committed to describing the art world, not inventing or constructing it.

In Danto's essay, the line between what is and what is not art becomes less clear. "Or has the whole distinction between art and reality been broken down?", Danto asks amidst a discussion of art made from "real" things (179). Even though the separation between the two worlds breaks down in some works, Danto still believes there is a fundamental difference between reality and art. He strongly emphasizes the difference between art and reality later in his text. "...but there remains...a fundamental contrast between artworks and real objects" (180). Even though art *may* appear to be a "real" object, or a constructed object in Plato's view, art works are still outside of reality. "The artworld stands to the real world in something like the relationship in which the City of God stands to the Earthly City" (180). Danto elevates art. In his mind, art can be classified and separated from our world. "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry - an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld" (177). Danto offers art its own existence within itself, apart from reality and appearance.

Danto's discourse on appearance and reality is furthered by his discussion of objects. He addresses postmodern art that purposefully imitates reality. "It rather occupies a freshly opened area between real objects and real facsimiles of real objects: it is non-facsimile..." (173). Danto investigates found art and art that is created in the form of a real object. Presented are Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes and Rauschenberg's bed, both of which can be mistaken for real objects. "To mistake an artwork for a real

object is no great feat when an artwork is the real object one mistakes it for” (174).

Danto explicates a dilemma in the classification of art. In Danto’s world of art, one could now ask, What *is* art? Danto sees the function of art in relationship to an institution, a society, or a culture. Danto also removes art from the rest of society, while at the same time welcoming it. He gives art a place to exist, while Plato condemned art to death.

Connecting Plato and Danto makes as much sense as it does not. The answers Plato provides are on the opposite end of the artistic-philosophical spectrum Danto is investigating. Danto is not engaged in politics, while Plato’s primary objective is to create a city in the name of justice. More plainly, Plato excludes art while Danto’s philosophies are made possible by a healthy artistic ecosystem. While reading their texts, however, points of connection do arise, both on the surface and on fundamental levels. Plato and Danto both advocate for the separation of art from other realities. This may be a superficial parallel, but it is a philosophically fascinating relationship. Both philosophers believe in some sort of appearance and reality and both remove art from those relatively static worlds. Be that as it may, Plato ultimately decides to remove art while Danto provides it with its own world.

Plato and Danto both add the idea of objects to this discussion. Plato primarily discusses a bed, while Danto addresses the bed on a more abstract level, by discussing objects that have been turned into art. Again, Plato and Danto agree that the object is an integral part of discussing art, for Plato it is the imitation of an object that is art, while for Danto it may *be* the object that is art. Finally, on a fundamental level, Plato and Danto both engage with art within the structure of an organization, for Plato only discusses art in his construction of a civilization and Danto’s theory depends on an

institution to realize art. In addition, this institution or society makes the ultimate decisions about what is allowed within that structure - Plato's city has rules determined by the philosophers and Danto's institution says what can and can not be considered art.

The institutionalist philosophy has been more recently furthered by George Dickie, who was the ultimate institutionalist. His theory almost makes a full circle back to the philosophy of Plato. Compared to Danto, Dickie holds a stronger belief in the institution and a qualified individual to make decisions of what is and is not art. Dickie's philosophy depends on a framework of relationships, similar to the greater structure of Plato's civilization and the meticulously planned social order. Dickie's ideas also introduce the idea of an essence of art, however, the ultimate decision is still up to a specific individual. Plato's society is more controlled. Art can still bend the limits of reality and appearance in Dickie's notions.

It is remarkable to see how much the ancient world still influences the modern world. Even though found objects are put in museums and artists recreate reality on purpose, the artworld of today still depends on the foundations that Plato lay. It is not necessarily what he said that matters, for he did ultimately banish art, but he still questioned what was accepted and asserted what should be accepted. Plato had civilization, but we have the world of art - the "third" world, more different and strange than appearance and reality themselves.

Works Cited

Aesthetics a critical anthology. New York: St. Martin's P, 1989.