
The Platonic and Aristotelian Literary Concepts of the Particular and the Universal

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Abstract

The particular and the universal played a significant role in the history of Western critical theory, thanks to the distinction drawn by Plato and Aristotle. That distinction and its subsequent ramifications had been used, for centuries, as touchstones in the light of which literary productions were assessed. This paper discusses Plato's and Aristotle's understanding of the two concepts as they relate to the nature and function of art.

ملخص

شهد تاريخ النقد الأدبي في الأدب الغربي تركيزاً كبيراً على مبدئي «الخاص» و«العام» كمفهومين على ضوئهما تحدد عظمة العمل الأدبي، حيث سيطرا على الساحة النقدية حتى نهاية القرن الثامن عشر. والفضل في التمييز بين العام والخاص يرجع الى الفلاسفة اليونان خاصة أفلاطون وأرسطو. ان هذا البحث هو تحليل لهذين المفهومين الأدبيين عند كل من أفلاطون وأرسطو من الناحيتين الفلسفية والنقدية، وعلاقتها بطبيعة ووظيفة العمل الأدبي.

The terms “universal” and “particular” are not prominent in the vocabulary of criticism today⁽¹⁾ Yet as late as the eighteenth century, the two terms were the differentia of the arts; the criteria of artistic greatness was, to a great extent, based on whether a certain work is of a universal or a particular appeal. However, the two terms were first used by Plato and Aristotle to denote specific philosophical and literary concepts. This paper discusses the literary significance of the Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of the particular and universal as they relate to the nature and function of literature.

Plato could be taken as the first philosopher - critic to trigger the issue in a detailed philosophical system. His views on art and its value and function are firmly tied to his general epistemological theory. The distinction between the universal and the particular forms the backbone of the Platonic theory of knowledge. This theory is first adumbrated in the **Symposium**. It is fully stated and eloquently argued in the **Phaedo**, and is expounded in **The Republic**. There are also brief discussions of universals and particulars in Plato’s other dialogues⁽²⁾.

The universals are presented as the only supreme reality after which the world of matter is made. Truth, reality, and essential values are not to be sought for in the particulars of the world of matter which are more reflections or copies of the universal realities. Whereas the particulars are temporary, changeable, and many, the universals are permanent, real, and one. In **Theaetetus** the existence of the universals is made as the only alternative to the theory of flux. The denial of those universals, “the things in themselves”, is a “denial of moral values”⁽³⁾. In **Timaeus** the universals constitute the pattern or model after which the whole universe is fashioned; “this pattern consists of the Forms of things in the world, as well it may since there is, strictly speaking, a Form of every universal term, every genus, species, elements or ethical value, perhaps even of all manufactured as well as natural objects”⁽⁴⁾. Our comprehension of the universals is intellectual

(1) The idea of the universal and the particular was known before Plato: “To the Greeks before Plato, devoid of a mystical sense of an invisible order of realities, the plain and obvious fact, was that the artist, did not produce the objects of real life, but their appearances only, and it was therefore inevitable that the impression produced on their minds was rather that of imitative representation than of creation, interpretation, or the like”. See J.W.H. Atkins, **Literary Criticism in Antiquity** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), I,P. 52. It was Plato, however, who developed such ideas into comprehensive epistemological system.

(2) See **Phaedrus** 248°, **Politics** 288°, **Sophist** 234° **Cratylus** 492°, **Laws** 668°.

(3) See 157^{a-d}, 175^c, 176°. References to Plato’s dialogues are from **The Dialogues of Plato**, trans. B. Jowett, 4th ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1953).

(4) G.M.A. Grube, **Plato’s Thought** (1935; rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 47.

and certainties about them are attainable by argument. On the other hand, our knowledge of and opinions about the particulars of the “world of shadows” are sensory, and thus, no ratiocinative comprehension is possible. This reasoning is made clear by the famous allegory of the cave in **The Republic**. In that allegory men are depicted as sitting on a bench in a cave with their backs to a huge fire beyond. They see only shadows and reflections of that fire inside the cave. Such is our experience, in the world of particulars of what we think to be reality and universal truths⁽⁵⁾.

All things are divided by Plato into visible and the intelligible. Reflection in mirrors, in caves, and in water is a recurring and constant device by which Plato distinguishes the universal from particular⁽⁶⁾. Our eyes would be blinded if we looked at the sun directly instead of at its copy or image in water or in something else of that sort. The universal, therefore, does not depend for its existence on the material objects; but, to understand particulars we must know the universals, and, to know reality we must dispose of the copies. If we say, destroy all the tables in this world, there will remain the idea of a table which is not a subject to decay or change. Plato’s philosophical discourse is directed towards a transcendental reality grasped by the human intelligence only. Certainly, Plato’s conception of the universals is “diametrically opposed to anything that can be called materialistic”⁽⁷⁾.

The artist draws his material from the world of particulars; the imperfect, the many, and the sensory. Since reality, according to Plato, is of a general nature; art is simply an imitation of mere shadows. Plato’s notion of the process of imitation (mimesis) is explicitly expressed in **The Republic**. In a dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, an analogy between the poet and an illusionist painter of a bed is drawn to illustrate the notion that poets are ignorant of the true universals⁽⁸⁾.

Clearly, Plato’s objections to poetry are epistemological. If the ultimate reality resides in universals, of which particulars are mere copies, then he who imitates those particulars is imitating an imitation. Plato takes the painter as a representative example. A picture of a bed is a representation of an object, the bed made by a carpenter which, as a part of the world of particulars, is not a wholly real thing. However, the carpenter’s bed is nearer to reality than the picture. The painter’s

(5) **The Republic of Plato**, Trans. F.M. Cornford (1941; rpt. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 222-223.

(6) See **The Republic**, vii, 516^{a-b}, and **Sophist** 239^d 516^{a-b}.

(7) **The Encyclopedia of Philosophy**, vol. 6, 1976ed.

(8) **The Republic**, op. cit., III, pp. 318-320.

picture of bed is, that is to say, thrice removed from reality (the essential form of a bed). Poetry is like a picture in words, a mirror-image or a representation of the objects of life. All verbal discourse is a mere representation⁽⁹⁾. Since the poet knows only appearances, he cannot be taken as a reliable teacher of whatever subject he deals with. Furthermore, the poet imitates what he sees, but he does not know how to make out what he sees (he can describe a bed but not make one). He imitates reality without necessarily understanding it. Hence poetry - as well as other kinds of artistic representations - is a production of ignorance. The whole notion of imitation in the works of Plato centers on a relation between something which is and something made like it: the likeness might be good or bad, real or apparent⁽¹⁰⁾. The process of imitation could thus be summed as: an imitation of ideas or universals as philosophers and the demiurge⁽¹¹⁾, indulge in; and the imitation of appearances such as poets do. Poets are compelled to embody in their works copies of the good and prohibited from setting forth copies of evil. The critic, in turn, must know "first, what the copy is; second, how correctly it has been presented, third, how well it has been executed in words, melodies, and rhythm"⁽¹²⁾.

The poet is also attacked in the dialogue of **Ion**. Socrates insists throughout this dialogue that poets and elocutionists are "inspired mad men", who lie entirely in the power of the Muses and speak what they put in their mouths:

For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing,
and there is no invention in him until he has been
inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is
no longer in him: when he has not attained this state,
he is powerless and unable to utter his oracles⁽¹³⁾.

There is indeed an ironic touch in the way Socrates makes Ion, the elocutionist, admit that he is out of his senses when he recites Homer. It is possible, therefore, that Plato wrote **Ion** with his tongue in his cheek. But, the way the argument conducted suggests that Plato is again emphasizing the difference between the poet and the philosopher. There is no quarrel between the two, Socrates implies,

(9) **Critias** 107^{b-c}.

(10) Richard Mckeon, "Literary Criticism and the Concept of Imitation in Antiquity," **Critics and Criticism**, ed R.S. Crane et al. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 152.

(11) Demiurge is the Platonic deity who fashions the world of matter. See **Timaeus** 28^{a-d}.

(12) Mckeon. p. 155.

(13) 534e.

as long as the poet lays no claim to the knowledge of the “universals”⁽¹⁴⁾.

Despite his insistence on the inferiority of art to philosophy, Plato is very much sensible to the beauty of artistic production⁽¹⁵⁾. He is a supreme artist himself and his dialogues attest to a profound artistic mastery. Moreover, his theory of imitation does establish a connection between the artist and life. Although Plato reduces poetry to a mere imitation of the physical phenomena, he recognizes a connection between everyday life and the artist. There are also questions that we, as readers, are likely to ask: Does not the poet, for example, suggest the universal by his treatment of the particular? Since the particular is an imperfect copy of the universal, does not the poet leave the impression of how beautiful and true the general is, simply by showing his inability to represent it? Besides, if images or representations constitute no satisfactory substitute for the absolute reality, are not they, at least, a necessary step in our approach to reality? As Grube aptly puts it, “few would admit that the artist is incapable of expressing the abstract directly... The artist must, if confusedly, represent or (to use Plato’s language) imitate, the universal forms as well as the particulars”⁽¹⁶⁾. Plato would answer that these questions are justifications of ignorance. Knowledge of the good springs from the ideal and the universal form! The poet should employ his reason, philosopher - like, to present the ideal and universal form. If the poet suggests the universal, he is most likely to distort it because his starting point, the particular, is imperfect. Further, the poet is a passive imitator, an inspired madman, thrice removed from reality, who lacks the skill of perceiving the impurity and inferiority of his world. But, we are still unconvinced of how the abstract universal can be represented without the manipulation of the concrete particular. The answer comes from an earth bound philosopher, Aristotle, who holds that the abstract truth of the universal is deduced from the treatment of the material

(14) See Craig La Driere, “The Problem of Plato’s Ion, **Journal of Aesthet and Art Criticism**, 10 (1951), 26-34.

(15) In **Phaedrus** (245^a) Plato praises inspiration. Socrates affirms that the Muses, madness is the cause of numerous blessings: The man who approaches the threshold of poetry without the Muses’ madness, convinced that by his skill he will make a good enough poet, is imperfect in himself, and the poetry of the sensible man will be set at naught by those who are mad., Socrates distinguishes four kinds of madness (**Phaedrus** 244^{a-b}, 265^b): a) prophetic madness (from Apollo); b) mystic madness (from Dionysus); c) poetic madness (from the Muses); d) madness of love (from Eros and Aphrodite). Erotic madness is considered the highest. It is none other than the love of beauty and of truth, the passion that makes philosophers and thinkers, and which leads to the contemplation of the universals.

(16) Grube, pp. 204-205.

particulars.

Any defence of poetry should, therefore, begin with refuting Plato's concept of reality and knowledge. This task is brilliantly achieved by Aristotle whose notion of the universal and the particular is only a part of a larger answer to Plato. He explicitly states in his **Metaphysics** that:

of the ways in which we (Aristotle here speaks as a Platonist) prove that the Forms exist, none is convincing; for from some no influence necessarily follows, and from some arise Forms even of things of which we think there are no Forms... And in general the arguments for the Forms destroy the things for whose existence we are more zealous than for the existence of the ideas, for it follows that not the dyad (the indefinite) but number is first, i.e. that the relative is prior to the absolute, - besides all the other points on which certain people by following out the opinions held about the ideas have come into conflict with the principles of the theory... Again, it would seem impossible that the substance should exist apart; how, therefore, could the Ideas, being the substance of things exist apart⁽¹⁷⁾.

Both, philosophers agree that the world of sense is in a state of flux. However, Aristotle, unlike Plato, does not believe that we should transcend the world of sense to the ideas. Knowledge to him resides in the investigation of the forms which exist within the natural phenomena. Further, the matter and form are unified, and all natural objects are composite of form and matter. Matter gives the substance to things; form their outline. Matter is identified by Aristotle with potentiality and form with actuality. Every object in the universe moves from potentiality to actuality which is its fulfillment, completion, and perfection. Aristotle clearly states that "matter exists in a potential state, just because it may come to its form; and when it exists actually, then it is in its form"⁽¹⁸⁾.

Everything is directed in a particular direction from within, by an internal force, towards its ultimate manifestation. Both the particular and the universal exist in the world of man. The platonic dualism - realm of becoming versus internal form - gives way to an Aristotelian monistic outlook unifying form and matter.

Nevertheless, the relation between form and matter should not be understood as static. We always observe, Aristotle maintains, how matter passes into form and form into matter. Let us take the seed of wheat as an example. The seed is the matter of which wheat is the form, when we eat the wheat, it becomes matter

(17) A. 990b-991b. The translation of **The Metaphysics** I am using is that of W.D. Ross, **The Works of Aristotle**, VIII (1908' rpt. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1960).

(18) 81050a.

for our body, which in turn becomes a form. The universal is in the particular as one of its causes. The differences between Plato and Aristotle in their view of universals is indeed derived from the fact that whereas Plato was “mathematical, transcendental, and rigorously abstract, Aristotle (whose father, Nicomachus - if a biographical note be relevant - was court physician to Amyntas II of Macedonia and who was himself a naturalist and collector specimen for King Hermias of Atarneus of Assos in Syria was biographical, natural, empirical, and concrete”⁽¹⁹⁾.

The poet thus does not represent mere appearances, but he captures the hidden reality in the objects represented. The elements of the real world are “translated” into a poem. Hence a new world and a new construction are created. The new world of art depends for its material on the real world of man, but it is quite different from its source. The particulars the poet selects undergo a process of organization and combination. The poet does not simply imitate, he rather arranges and “builds” new structures, and, thus, different elements are brought together with intensity to reveal a universal. As a result, the new world of the poet is better than the real world as we know it. The particulars that constitute the world of art are selective and, further, they undergo a process of arrangement and organization. The poet does not rest contented with the specific reality of each object. He combines those specific realities to reveal a single universal one. This probable universal reality is deduced and distilled from specific cases. Thus by assembling elements, the poet achieves harmony and creates a world unknown before to the reader; a world in which disagreeables fit and collaborate to produce one single literary effect. The reader, on the other hand, has never witnessed such a combination in his world of contradictory elements. This is what differentiates poetry from history according to Aristotle:

It is not the business of the poet to tell what has happened, but what might happen and what is possible according to probability or necessity. The historian and the poet do not differ by writing in verse or prose (for the history of Herodotus could be put in verse and yet it would be nonetheless history whether with meter or without meter), but they differ in that the historian writes of what has happened and the poet of what might happen. Hence poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history, for poetry deals with things in a universal way, but history with each thing for itself. To deal with them universally is to say that according to probability or

(19) William Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, **Literary Criticism: A Short History** (1957; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p.23.

necessity it happens that a certain sort of man does or says certain things and poetry aims at this, when it gives names to the characters. But to deal with an individual for himself is to tell what Alcibiades did or experienced. This universal quality of poetry has already been manifested in comedy, for having composed the plot according to probabilities, comic writers give the characters any names that occur to them and do not, like the iambic poets, write about specific persons. In tragedy they cling to the historical names. The reason is that the possible is credible; if a thing has happened we do not believe that it is possible, but what has happened is clearly possible, for it would not happen if it were impossible⁽²⁰⁾.

The poet creates a formal perfection and a self-sufficient world. From contemplating a coherent artistic whole our insight is sharpened and a truth, tied to *the laws of probability and necessity, is revealed. This poetic world has its own compelling kind of inevitability. The historian, who tells of what has hapened, writes of different and unrelated particulars; poetry assimilates and harmonizes the opposites. The poet transforms the particulars he selects from the real world of men into poetic structures. For Aristotle, then, the universal is contained in particulars, whether in the real world or in art. The difference between the particular and the universal in real life and in art is that in the real world each particular has its own universal, but in art different particulars are combined to reveal a single universal truth. Besides, the real world of art is an illusion of the real world. The universal truth of art is justified by the laws of the probable; it belongs to a world that might happen.*

Aristotle is implicitly refuting the arguments of Plato. He finds poetry a poor outcast, charged with inferiority. By stating the difference between poetry and history, Aristotle rehabilitates the art of poetry. Plato stresses the abstract as the only universal reality; Aristotle stresses the universality that can be deduced from the concrete particulars. To Plato, the poet imitates shadows and mere reflection. Aristotle's notion of mimesis is different. The reality the poet presents is not the Platonic ideas, but rather the action of people in real life. The poet's mimesis is not a mere copy but an improvement upon the real world. The dichotomy between the abstract and concrete; a universality separate from particulars and a universality inseparable from them; the poet as an imitator of shadows and the poet as an imitator of a real world transformed into art is the basic difference between the Platonic and Aristotelian ideas on poetry.

(20) **The Poetics**, 51a36, in **Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden**, trans. Allan Gilbert (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962), pp. 81-82.