
UNIT 1 THEORY OF AESTHETICS - ANCIENT

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit— is to review the growth of response of philosophers towards art and the artists tracing from the Pre-Socratic era. The approach adopted in this Block is to analyse the original works of the philosophers to derive the development of Aesthetic thought. Beginning from the Pre-Socratic development of art forms, in this unit, an attempt is made to concretise the ideas of Socrates with regard to arts, especially Poetry and his notion regarding the artists especially the Poets from the Dialogues of Plato. We shall then focus on the emphasis of the Theory of Imitation by Plato as found in Book III and X of *The Republic* followed by the break-through brought about by Aristotle in his *Poetics* through the famous Doctrine of *Katharsis*. The ancient period is marked by the end of the thought that emerged from Plotinus, post-Aristotle, in his *Enneads*.

Thus by the end of this Unit you should be able:

- to gain a general understanding of the Pre-Socratic thought
- to understand the foundation laid by Greeks beginning from Socrates
- to know the emphasis made by Plato in support of the theory of imitation
- to understand the response of Aristotle in his Doctrine of *Katharsis*
- to appreciate the contribution of Plotinus contrary to the earlier theories

1.1 PRE-SOCRATIC ARTISTS

The thought related to the philosophy of art of the West has its beginning in the Greeks. It is pertinent to imply that the aesthetic thought was highly influenced by the philosophical content of each philosopher. The study of Western Aesthetics is incomplete without knowing the metaphysical and ethical position of the respective philosophers. Here, we deal with only the aesthetic thought developed from the Greeks and its influence in different age with the presumption that the

students have a considerable knowledge of Western Philosophy. We begin with a brief note on the artists in the Pre-Socratic period which in fact formed the base later for Socrates and his followers to ponder and determine the characteristic of art and the role of artists.

The History of Greek records a high profile position of art in the form of poetry, drama, music and sculpture in what is classified as the Pre-Socratic period. Even though it is difficult to ascertain the nature of philosophy of art during this time, it is indeed amazing to see the classification of art forms in this era. Beginning from the two great epic poetry of Homer, viz., *Illiad* and *Odyssey*, many poets and dramatists have evolved during this period. Hesiod, a contemporary of Homer, wrote two major works namely *Works and Days* and *Theogony*. These are markedly in contrast to the heroic style of Homer. Greeks had classified the drama as tragedy and comedy and enacted in their well-structured theatres. Some of the Greek tragedies are written by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. The Greek comedies written by Aristophanes and Menander are well known. More than 15 works are attributed to Euripides. During this period concepts like imitation and symbolism in the field of art has emerged. Only from the dialogues of Plato we get the development of ideas on the philosophy of art.

1.2 SOCRATES ON ART AND ARTISTS

Plato’s dialogues are usually divided as early, middle and late, of which the early dialogues are considered as the record of thoughts of Socrates with his dialectic methodology. The middle dialogues are classified as beginning of Platonism. Based on the Socratic dialectics as found in ‘*Ion*’, ‘*Euthydemus*’, ‘*Greater Hippias*’ and ‘*Gorgias*’, we shall extract the idea of Socrates on art and the artist of his times.

‘*Ion*’ is a discussion on Rhapsody that takes place between Socrates and Ion, the Raphsode. Socrates through his dialectic method brings out the idea that poets compose since they are inspired and possessed and not by art. He gives the example of a magnet that attracts things, “This stone not only attracts iron rings, but also imparts to them a similar power of attracting other rings; and sometimes you may see a number of pieces of iron and rings suspended from one another so as to form quite a long chain: and all of them derive their power of suspension from the original stone. In like manner the Muse first of all inspires men herself; and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration”.

Socrates is of the view that the poet is moved by power divine and not by the rules of art. By this he derives that the poets do not bring out the work of art but work of God and that the poets are only interpreters of Gods. He places the spectator as the last of the rings who receive the power of the original divine (magnet) power that moves in suspension. The *rhapsode*, actors are seen as the intermediary links and the poet (here) as the first link. In the dialogue further he arrives that every art is appointed by God to have knowledge of a certain work thus the differences in art is brought out. From the differences in the arts it is arrived that one should have knowledge of different arts which is not possible. One without the knowledge of a particular art cannot have a right judgment of that art. In this dialogue, he arrives that the rhapsode is not an art but is a result of inspiration.

In the above two dialogues we get to know the position of Socrates with regard to the art form of poetry, rhapsody and rhetoric. Now, in the following two dialogues, viz., ‘*Euthydemus*’ and ‘*Greater Hippias*’ we find his idea on ‘Beauty’ and ‘beautiful things’. Socrates distinguishes, in the dialogue ‘*Euthydemus*’, the beautiful things perceived from the absolute beauty and observes that each of the perceived things has some beauty in it. ‘What is Beauty?’ is analysed in the dialogue ‘*Greater Hippias*’. Hippias responses to this question in three ways, that is, beauty is a maiden, beauty is gold, and beauty is to be rich and respected. Socrates response to what is beauty can be put in four ways, one that beauty is that which is appropriate, beauty is that which is useful and favourable, and finally he says, beauty is the pleasure that comes from seeing and hearing.

Socrates accepted the theory of imitation and applied it to the arts of painting and sculpture. For him, *mimesis* or imitation means ‘selective imitation’ which is a combination of beautiful points in different objects that are subject to perception. Socrates was the first to discover the symbolic element in various art works.

1.3 PLATO’S THEORY OF IMITATION

Plato, following the ideas prevalent in his times, did not add much but emphasized the theory of imitation and shaped in his work ‘*Republic*’ (classified under late dialogues), found especially in Book III and Book X. In Book III, the reasons for exclusion of the poets from the schools are elaborated. Music and Gymnastic, if rightly applied, were seen as builders of value in the young. In building an ideal state, Plato shows that young boys and girls who are show expertise in music and gymnastic are to be selected as rulers. The poets, musicians and dramatists were seen as those who bring about harmful effects on the young. In Book X, further reasons for excluding the poets from the state are detailed. The foundation for the Platonic view on art and the artists is the theory of imitation strongly proposed by Socrates.

Plato elaborates on the imitative principle in the art forms like poetry, painting etc., and thereby condemns art. The question as to what does art imitate, Plato states, art imitates the empirical objects which are copy of the Forms. Thus, art is an imitation of the imitation. The word *mimesis* or imitation is the key concept that brings out the relationship with art works. The artist is looked upon as one who imitates things and hence is a deceiver; at best an artist is concerned only to represent appearances and not reality itself. The artist is therefore said to be a collaborator in *eikasia*. The perceived things are already an imitation of their forms and art is an imitation of imitation which takes one away too far from knowledge.

Plato points out the irrationality of art at every stage. According to him, imitative art is confined to partial copying of the objects of the phenomenal world, and its products are the objects of sense-perception and arouse passion and feelings, which he categorizes as hedonistic like his predecessors. He concludes that due to the imitative and hedonistic nature, art does not strengthen the mind but on the other hand corrupts the mind. He declares the exclusion of art and artists in building an ideal republic. On analysis, we need to remember that Plato was not completely indifferent to art but in fact recommends art for satisfaction of sensuous desires which he mentions his work ‘*Laws*’. But he allows art only when it is

strictly regulated. Thus, scholars classify the Platonic theory on art as ‘rigoristic hedonism’. So far, we find that the word ‘aesthetics’ has not been specifically identified.

Let us briefly summarize the Socratic and Platonic thought on art

- art is an imitation
- artists create based on inspiration
- art forms can be classified based on its function and purpose; tragic and comedy
- art is said to be useful
- art is meant for pleasure
- art with regulations is allowed in the ideal state
- else art is to be excluded from the ideal state
- art has symbolic element
- artists identified are poets, rhetoricians, rhapsode, dramatists, sculptors, musicians, painters.

We shall now see how these elements gets transformed in the hands of Aristotle and its impact through the medieval to modern period development of Aesthetic thought in the West.

1.4 ARISTOTLE’S DOCTRINE OF KATHARSIS

Aristotle, the pupil of Plato, in his *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, reconciles his position on the function and end of art, especially poetry and drama. He therefore begins by examining the theory of imitation as propagated by his teacher. Aristotle has not dealt with the philosophy of art distinctly like other sciences. By his logical distinctions and rigid demarcation he deals with poetry and drama. We can gather some leading principles, especially in *Poetics* that forms the foundation of the development of all later theories of art. Therefore, we shall examine the work *Poetics*. He begins his *Poetics* with the proposition to enquire into the structure of the plot as a requisite to a good poem, then into the number and nature of the parts of which a poem is composed following the order of nature beginning with the fundamental principles.

Poetry, Drama and Music are conceived as modes of imitation. But they differ in three respects, viz., the medium, the object and the manner of imitation. The differences of the arts with respect to the medium of imitation are rhythm, tune and metre. The objects of imitation are men in action who are categorized with moral differences. Which follows that the representation must be either better than real life, worse or as it is. Thus the each of the modes of imitation will exhibit these differences and becomes a distinct kind in imitating objects that are thus distinct. The same distinction marks off Tragedy from Comedy. Comedy aims at representing men at worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life. A third difference is the manner in which each of these objects may be imitated. Thus, it can be concluded that the medium, the objects and the manner are the three differences which distinguish the artistic imitation.

Imitation is one instinct of our nature and second pertains to the rhythm. Based on this the definition of Tragedy is formulated first. Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, in language embellished (language into which rhythm, harmony and song enter) with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts (some parts rendered in verse and others with the aid of song) of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper *katharsis* or purgation of these emotions. Tragedy is an imitation of action that presupposes personal agents with distinctive qualities both of character and thought. The most powerful elements of emotional interest in Tragedy are – *Peripeteia* or Reversal of the Situation, and Recognition Scenes – which are parts of the plot. Thus, every Tragedy must have six parts – namely, Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Spectacle, Song. *Poetics* enjoined the Unity of Action for a successful tragic *katharsis*.

Plot – is the imitation of action. Plot here means arrangement of incidents or structure. Incidents and Plot are the end of Tragedy. Plot is the first principle, as it were the soul of a Tragedy. Character – is the virtues ascribed to the agents of action. It holds the second place in Tragedy. It reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids. Thought – is that where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated. Diction – the expression of meaning in words and its essence is the same both in verse and prose. A diction is made up of rare terms is a jargon. It is the command for metaphor. This cannot be imparted by another, it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances. Song holds the chief place among embellishments. Spectacle has emotional attraction of its own. So far, the parts of the Tragedy which must be treated as elements of the whole has been mentioned. Now, Aristotle comes to the quantitative parts – the separate parts into which Tragedy is divided – namely, Prologue, Episode, Exode, Choric song; this last being divided into Parode and Stasimon and the Commoi. The Prologue is that entire part of a tragedy which precedes the Parode of the Chorus. The Episode is that entire part of a tragedy which is between complete choric songs. The Exode is that entire part of a tragedy which has no choric song after it. Of the Choric part the Parode is the first undivided utterance of the Chorus: the Stasimon is a Choric ode, the Commos is a joint lamentation of Chorus and actors. Tragedy is then classified into two parts, Complication and Unravelling. Aristotle presents four kinds of Tragedy, the Complex, the Pathetic, the Ethical, and the Simple. Tragedy is an imitation of action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude. A whole is that which has a beginning, middle and an end. Beauty depends on magnitude and order, and hence a beautiful object must be composed of orderly arrangement parts.

Poetry is more philosophical and a higher thing than history; for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. Aristotle says, “The poet or maker should be the maker of plots rather than of verses, since he is a poet because he imitates and what he imitates are actions. A poet should speak as little as possible in his own person, for it is not this that makes him an imitator. The poet being an imitator, must of necessity imitate one of three objects – things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be. The vehicle of expression is language with modifications of language. The standard of correctness is not the same in poetry and politics, any more than poetry and any other art. With respect to requirements of art, a probable impossibility is to

be preferred to a thing improbable and yet possible. There are five sources from which critical objections are drawn. Things are censured either as impossible, or irrational, or morally hurtful, or contradictory, or contrary to artistic correctness. This censure attaches not to the poetic but to the histrionic art.”

Based on the above principles found in *Poetics* we shall now bring out the Aristotlean thought on art and art experience. ‘Art imitates nature’ is the famous phrase of Aristotle. He differentiates art as fine art and useful art. Fine art, he says, is a free and independent activity of the mind, outside the domain both of religion and of politics, having an end distinct from that of education or moral improvement. In this statement, the intention to classify art as fine art and useful art is not found. But it cannot be concluded that it bears the sense that fine art is a copy or reproduction of natural objects. The word ‘Nature’ here significantly brings out the meaning of ‘art’ as useful art. Here, Nature means not the outward world of created things, but it is the creative force, the productive principle of the universe. In nature there is union of matter with constitutive form and that the knowledge of both elements is requisite for the natural artist. Thus, the word art is restricted to useful art. In its widest sense, like nature, art has certain ends in view. In the adaptation of means to culminate in those ends, art copies nature which is already hidden in the mind of the artist. While art in general imitates the method of nature, the phrase has a special reference to useful art, which learns from nature the end which is to be aimed at precisely. The character of the useful arts is to cooperate with nature, to complete the designs which the nature could not carry out.

Useful art employs the material of nature and helps nature in its effort to realize its ideal. Fine art sets practical needs aside; it does not seek to affect the real world in the sense of bringing out any kind of modification to the actual. Fine art, then, is a completion of nature in a sense not applicable to useful art; it presents only an image, but a purified image of nature. The end of fine art, according to the doctrine of Aristotle, is a certain pleasurable impression that is produced in the mind of the spectator. Aristotle identifies poetry, drama, music and painting as fine arts. He classifies architecture under useful arts.

Nature is subject to limitations that can best make use of the available material. Nature needs more assistance in carrying out its designs in the ascending scale of being. By means of the rational faculty of art, that is endowed to human being richly by nature, the human – the highest in the scale of beings, comes to the aid of nature. When nature fails, art steps in. Aristotle says in his *Anima* that “Nature aims at producing health; in her restorative processes we observe an instinctive capacity for self-curing”.

‘Imitation’ as the common feature of the fine arts, including poetry, was first formulated by Plato. Aristotle as we mentioned earlier speaks of three-fold objects of imitation, viz., things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be. By ‘things as they are’, are meant the characteristic moral qualities, the permanent dispositions of the mind, which reveal a certain condition of the will: ‘things as they are said’ are the more transient emotions, the passing moods of feeling: ‘things as they ought to be’ are actions in their proper and inward sense. An act viewed merely as an external process or result, one of a series of outward phenomena, is not the true object of aesthetic imitation. Art mainly seeks to reproduce an inward process, a psychical energy working

outwards; deeds, incidents, events, situations, being included under it so far as these spring from an inward act of will, or elicit some activity of thought or feeling. On this principle, the entire universe is not seen as the raw material of art. Aristotle's theory in agreement with his predecessors show that the external world serves as the background of action, the emotional element inheres and heightens the interest. Thus the meaning of 'imitation' is spelt out at each stage refining the meaning in Aristotlean's scheme, by Butcher S.H. in his work titled *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 'as a work of art is a likeness or reproduction of an original, and not a symbolic representation of it'; 'a work of art as an idealized representation of human life-of character, emotion, action-under forms manifest to sense.' Thus, 'imitation' is described in the sense of creative act.

A study of the function of Tragedy according to Aristotle reveals that the word *katharsis* is just not about psychology and pathology, but a principle of art. In real life, the feeling of pity and fear contain melancholy and disturbing element. In the process of *katharsis*, the painful element of pity and fear of reality is purged away, tragedy exercises a curative influence followed by transformation of emotions. It thereby, provides a distinct aesthetic tranquility purified through the medium of art. The idea of *katharsis* reveals the expulsion of agony in mind. The expelling of pain is because of the faintness of ego.

1.5 PLOTINUS ON INTELLECTUAL BEAUTY

Aristotle instructed the dramatist in his *Poetics* and further supplemented in *Rhetoric*, the technical aspects of the dramatic production was carried out by later philosophers. Following the tradition of Aristotle came Plotinus (AD 205-270) who concentrated in taking up the discussion on the end of art that is the art experience. The theory progressed by Plotinus is known from his work, viz., *The Six Enneads*. (They are called Enneads from the Greek *ennea*, which means nine, because each of the six book contains nine sections). In the sixth tractate of the first *Ennead*, Plotinus deals with 'Beauty'. In this section, he sets on an array of questions recalling the various ideas especially of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The questions raised by Plotinus are:

In this connection, he states if the beautiful thing is essentially symmetrical, patterned then it would amount to say that only a compound can be beautiful and not a thing devoid of parts. Proceeding further, Plotinus questions as what is symmetry? Based on the Greek thought that beauty of the soul is all virtues, Plotinus wonders how symmetry enters here! He tries to extend his theory of beauty to the metaphysical intellectual being, which he claims as essentially the solitary. He arrives at a Principle that bestows beauty on material things. The process of material things becoming beautiful, he considers by communicating in the thoughts that flows from the Divine. The appreciation of beauty is spelt out by Plotinus as outcome of unification and harmony. Thus, one sees beauty in the realm of sense, images, fugitives etc. He advances in arriving at one taking delight by the sight of Soul without sensory perception. He takes the contrary to beauty as ugly and shows that a Soul which is said to be foisted upon by something descending into matter is ugly. The Soul cleared of the desires, in solitary, is freed from the ugly. The beautiful is the Soul that is heightened as the Intellectual principle.

According to Plotinus, the divine beauty emanates from the One. By ‘emanates’ he meant the overflow like light from the sun, to create the realm of Intelligence, and that in turn emanates into the world of soul. This emanation as a delightful higher creative principle or a kind of pollution of the lower is obscure. It is in the contemplation of the higher principle that the lower receives its forms. The aim is to direct the contemplation directly back to the One. In the eight tractate of the fifth *Ennead*, Plotinus discusses on the ‘Intellectual Beauty’. The question he takes up here is how the Beauty of the divine Intellect and the Intellectual Cosmos may be revealed to contemplation. By differentiating a stone from a carved stone by an artist, Plotinus shows that the form brought out by the artist is by his participation in his art. Based on this, he says, the beauty therefore exists in a far higher state in the art, which is transferred to the material object. Art is the seat and source of beauty is seen as more complete than its presence in the external. Here, Plotinus refutes the idea that art is an imitation of natural objects on the basis that the natural objects are themselves imitations. He states that art is not a reproduction of object seen but they go back to the Ideas from which Nature itself derives, they are holders of beauty and add where nature is lacking.

Plotinus now debates with regard to the beauty in nature. The sequence of his analysis can be enumerated as follows:

- 1) Idea which is primal, immaterial, firmly a unity is not Beauty
- 2) Ground of beauty cannot be Matter

Beauty is not in concrete objects but in the Soul or mind. The wisdom of the artist, says Plotinus, is in a making, where the artist goes back to wisdom in Nature which is embodied in himself. He concludes this section thus,

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Trace the thought of Socrates on art and the artist from the Dialogues.

2) Examine the theory of imitation emphasised by Plato in the Republic.

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1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have seen briefly the thought of ancient Greek with regard to art forms and artists tracing from the dialogues recorded by Plato. We find that Socrates does not give a significant position to the poets, sculptors or painters of his times. By his dialectic methodology he distances the role of art and the participation of artists in an ideal state. Plato does not differ from this and emphatically presents art as imitation and artists as imitators or rather flatterers. However, in certain lines in the *Republic* and *Laws*, we gather that Plato does consider the end of a regulated art. This is based on the metaphysical position regarding the Ideal, Form, Soul, Virtues etc., as debated by Socrates and imbibed by Plato. Aristotle follows Plato but debates on the imitative form of arts. By his classification of the Physical Sciences, Medicine, Psychology etc., he emerges with the tragic *katharsis* which he demonstrates in his *Poetics* displaying the order of Tragedy. By the time of Aristotle, an attempt is made to classify art forms, the role of artists, and the end of art. Plotinus in his *Enneads* reverts to the metaphysical approach of his predecessors and debates on the very concept of Beauty. He refutes the imitative theory developed up to the time of Aristotle and re-presents as the theory of Intellectual Beauty of the Soul. Till the thought of Plotinus we mark as the ancient period of development of Aesthetics. We should bear in mind here that in this ancient period, while dealing with art forms, artists and the end of art, the word *aesthetics* has not been identified in the sense of how it is known today. As even we move on to the medieval and modern period, we will get to know the emergence of the word *aesthetics* in relation to art and specifically to art experience.

1.7 KEY WORDS

Rhapsody	: enthusiastic, extravagant speech or composition.
Rhetoric	: art of persuasive speaking or writing.
Eikasia	: the lowest stage of knowing according to Plato’s image of the line.
Katharsis	: the cleansing (purifying, purging) of feelings such as pity and fear by feeling them in the drama of tragedy.
Emanation	: different from imitation and evolution; overflow from the One.

1.8 FURTHER READING AND REFERENCES

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