On Mimetic Style in Plato’s Republic

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ABSTRACT

In this article the author offers a reading of mimetic style (lexis) as it is presented in book 3 of Plato’s Republic with the aim of disclosing the importance of style in the acquisition and employment of knowledge—whether scientific or ethical. In fact, the author argues that a careful reading of Socrates’ words in the text occasions the idea that reflection on the way that we imitate our inherited content—the ethos, the comportment, in which we exhibit that content—makes visible a potential to appropriate received content and imitated knowledge in original and wakeful ways. In consequence, the author argues that it might be style, not content, that harbors the capacity for us to take a genuine, critical responsibility for our inherited concepts.

In book 3 of his Republic, Plato has Socrates undertake an assessment of the educational curriculum that the city (which is being constructed by him in speech) will implement for its youth. Consequently we see that Socrates assigns to poetry a crucial importance; by their imitation of it, poetry shapes the citizens with an initial formation, casts them within a certain orientation, and places them on a path leading in an already conceived direction, toward some unarticulated good. Thus, in forming this city and the souls of its citizens, Socrates first conducts a censorship of the content of the formative myths of the city in an attempt to orchestrate a certain fail-safe against ambiguity and against falling off the path toward the fulfillment of the good of human nature. I want to draw our attention to a passage (392c) just after Socrates effects this censorship; for there, Socrates follows his critique of the content of the poetic utterances that animate our identities with a meditation on style. “So then,” says Socrates, “let that be the end of what has to do with [the content of] speeches. After this, I suppose, style [lexis]
must be considered, and then we’ll have made a complete consideration of what must be said and how it must be said” (1991, 71, emphasis added).

In response to this announcement about the need to think not only about what is said, but also how it is said, Adeimantus replies that he does not understand. Perhaps his perplexity should not be surprising. After all, how something is said, style, is rarely considered when we speak in our everyday engagements. But perhaps the reader asks, what about more sophisticated, non-everyday discourse? What about the speech of the trained public speaker, for instance, or even the sophist and the philosopher? Do not these elevated, self-conscious speakers reflect on and manipulate their styles? Even if it is true that training in rhetoric had made public speakers and sophists more aware of stylistic manipulation in discourse, I want to argue that Adeimantus’s bafflement implies an ignorance about a certain modality of speech that perhaps remains untouched by mere rhetorical training, a lexis that remains crucially connected to all speech and yet is not reducible to content: mimēsis.1 Often, in our everyday engagement in discourse, we present our observations and arguments with only an awareness of the content we wish to convey. Even in rhetorically sophisticated and stylistically trained modes of discourse we present arguments in, say, journal articles with an awareness of the content about which we are speaking, and, with respect to style, we might very well couch our claims using certain rhetorical devices and in a stylistically acceptable form. Yet the form of imitation that we employ in our speech is perhaps more elusive. Socrates here indicates that style qua mimēsis, is crucially important, too—perhaps even more important than content in securing the stability of our disposition.

In this article, I offer a reading of mimetic style (lexis) as it is presented in book 3 of the Republic—in the portion of the text concerned with the censorship of inherited poetic utterance. I read this section not so much as a prescription for political governance of citizens within a city but rather as an occasion for a mediation on human nature and that nature’s dependency on a complex and curious skein of logoi, a meditation that should disclose the importance of mimetic style in the acquisition and employment of knowledge—whether ethical or epistemological. In fact, we might find that a consideration of style remains even more urgent than that of content. After all, even if we authentically desire it, we might find ourselves hard pressed to offer a convincing argument that the content of our soul formation can genuinely be edited once we are already shaped; we might even doubt that the censorship of content can genuinely serve as political security by which we can preserve the unwavering dispositions of a citizenry.
However, I argue that reflection on the way that we imitate our inherited content—the ethos, the comportment, in which we exhibit that content—does make visible a potential to appropriate received content and imitated knowledge in original ways. In consequence, it might be style, not content, that harbors the capacity for a genuine responsibility toward our inherited concepts.

In section 1 I perform a textual analysis of the brief conversation surrounding style in book 3. I conclude that on Socrates’ account in these passages, philosophy is in no way opposed to poetry but rather it is concerned with securing the most wakeful and responsible ethos toward inherited logoi. The philosophical disposition, I observe, is one of the three dispositions of imitation articulated in book 3 (imitated speech, nonimitated, or simple, speech, and a mixture of both). Surprisingly, Socrates does not suggest that the ethos of simple, nonimitated speech be the one that they allow in the kallipolis. Rather, he chooses the mixed form, which, I argue, is the most philosophical lexis, the one that follows Homer’s style. I end this section with a few considerations of why the comportment of the mixed style is the one in which we may most take responsibility for the conceptual structures that we have inherited.

In section 2 I offer an interpretation of style in its relation to knowledge. Here I invoke Aristotle’s claim in the Nicomachean Ethics that children can recite passages of Empedocles and perform geometrical demonstrations, but these acts do not indicate that children know what they are saying; that is, children have the knowledge—they have the content—but that is not a sign that they are actively, wakefully knowing these things. I argue that the difference between the child and the geometer cannot be intuited through the content (indeed, they both exhibit the very same content) but rather only through their style of imitation. I then situate this argument within the context of the presentation of the new sciences in book 7 of the Republic in order to offer a reading (through the image of lexis) of that most controversial of Platonic concepts: dialectic.

STYLE AND MIMÉSIS: ON STYLE AS THE COMPORTEMENT OF LOGOS

Before offering remarks on the passage at the beginning of Socrates’ consideration of style, I think it is important to indicate that I read the scope of this passage differently than most scholars. For the most part, the passage is read as a consideration exclusively of poetry. Thus, not only is the
reach of the passage often narrowed in such a way that it is taken to be an articulation of how poetry as a specific art form will be allowed in the city (instead of being seen as a thesis about the meditation on human nature, which is the interpretation that is governing my work here) but also the three modes of style (imitation, simple speech, and a combination of both [392d]) in which Socrates says poetry is embodied are seen as confined to poetry. I want to argue, however, that these three modes of style characterize all speech, broadly conceived. My reading is further buttressed in a passage a few pages after the initial consideration of style (397c). Socrates asks: “Do all the poets and the men who say anything fall into one of these patterns of style or the other, or make some mixture of them both?” “Necessarily,” [Adeimantus] said (1991, 76, emphasis added).

We see from these words that Socrates’ reflections on style are not limited to poems or the specific form of speech that we see in poetry. Rather, style is something that shows itself in every utterance, in every speech activity, in the speech of humans that, as Socrates says, “say anything.” Of course, speech—or logos—is certainly not one activity among others for human beings—for these ancient Greeks, it is most primary. Indeed, human nature itself is displayed through and as logos for them. Thus, we might say that any consideration of human nature would have to concern itself most primarily with logos. Moreover, as I have suggested, mimetic style might be even more urgently a concern than content; for, by its very nature, this form of lexis is something that often slips into the soul unnoticed. Rather like our grammar, the style of imitation in speech remains most often unreflected on, unnoticed, unquestioned, surreptitiously under our radar. Yet at the same time that our style remains hidden from us, it is formative to our comportment in our speech, since we are prepositioned toward the world, toward ourselves, and toward others in our style. Lexis of imitation discloses our bearing toward the world; it is a fundamental hexis, which is to say, we hold ourselves toward the world and toward ourselves in our style and, consequently, style harbors a certain meaning that remains, for the most part, undisclosed to us. To be sure, style is that in which content is embodied; we might even say that it is the body of meaning. As such, the style of imitation is not merely a minor consideration in the censorship of poetry; indeed, it is not merely a concern for poets and poetry. Rather style is a concern for anyone who says anything—that is to say, style shows itself as a central concern for any human being.

Let us consider, then, how style is presented in the Republic so that we may retrieve from this formative text an idea of how the lexis of mimēsis
might be shaping our thinking and how it might determine meaning in its unique and surreptitious way. At the beginning of his consideration of style (392d), Socrates says that everything that is spoken by poets or tellers of tales (and this would include presumably all kinds of speaking and speakers) is “a narrative of what has come to pass, what is, or what is going to be” (1991, 71). Indeed, everything that comes to be in logos is a certain articulation of the being of things, either in the present, the past or in the future. Further, Socrates suggests that this narrative of the being of things takes three different styles: “simple, or produced by imitation, or both together” (1991, 71). Having been pressed for a clearer description, Socrates offers examples of these three different modes of style. Appealing to his interlocutor’s knowledge of poetic utterance, Socrates explains that Homer’s *Iliad* fits the third, the combination of simple and imitative style:

You know up to these lines, “And he entreated all the Achaeans, But especially Atreus’ two sons, the marshallers of the host,” the poet himself speaks and does not attempt to turn our thought elsewhere, as though someone other than he were speaking. But, in what follows, he speaks as though he himself were Chryses and tries as hard as he can to make it seem to us that it’s not Homer speaking, but the priest, an old man. (1991, 71).

Thus, Socrates employs Homer as an example of a poet that *both* imitates and *repeats* the figures, sentiments, and conceptual motivations of the characters that animate Greek culture and life and speaks for himself, originally commenting on the events as an individual. On the one hand, therefore, Homer’s articulation, his thought that is preserved through oral and written tradition for us, is itself a repetition, an imitation of some other individual’s or culture’s thought or reflection, some other individual’s actions and commitments. Yet, on the other hand, Homer’s articulation also shows itself as original. He speaks for himself, as himself and does not hide himself (393c) behind the presentation of the image of another.

From these observations about the style of speech that is a combination of the imitative and the simple, we can intuit what purely imitative speech and purely simple speech mean for Socrates. On the one hand, imitative speech would show itself when we effect the comportment of one who is imitating someone else. Socrates describes it in this way: “When he gives a speech as though he were someone else, won’t we say that he then likens his own style as much as possible to that of the man he has announced as the
on mimetic style in Plato's *Republic*

speaker?” To which Adeimantus responds, “We’ll say that, surely” (1991, 71). Imitative speech betray a certain displacement of the speaker; he hides or occludes himself behind the presentation of the imitation. Like a rhapsode, the imitative speaker in a way channels the sentiment, the concept, or the action of another, serving as a conduit for the concepts and sentiments of other people. Perhaps we can even say that he re-presents the other as himself without disclosing himself within the representation. The fact that he loses himself in the presentation of another is not unimportant here. To be sure, the rhapsode determines and shapes the utterance he articulates insofar as it is in his voice, his timbre, his tempo—indeed, his embodied constitution—that the speech of the other finds its expression, but, nevertheless, the way that Socrates describes this speech comportment here indicates that he thinks that one lacks in a crucial way any power over what one says. One repeats in an imitative, unreflective way the concepts and sentiments of another.

As for simple speech, we might say that Socrates’ description makes it out to be radically original, speech that brings something into being from nothing. “If the poet nowhere hid himself,” Socrates says, “his poetic work and narrative as a whole would have taken place without imitation. So that you won’t say you don’t understand again, I’ll tell you how this would be. . . . It would be something like this”—Socrates then speaks in simple style—“I’ll speak without meter; I’m not poetic” (1991, 72). In this speech comportment, the speaker speaks, and perhaps also thinks, for herself. Without the structure of imitation or poetic meter, this comportment is the exact opposite of the rhapsode. There is an immediacy to this kind of utterance, an immediate character to the representation that discloses nothing but the unmediated thought of the speaker herself. One might even say that there is no re-presentation in the disposition of the simple speaker, insofar as she speaks without repetition, without imitation. Such a disposition in speech would, as such, convey a certain originality to reflection, insofar as these words would be conceived as mine alone—immediate presentations of my individual soul.

These three modes of *lexis* indicate for us the character of what Socrates means by “style”; for him, style is the comportment that our speech and our thought adopts in relation to the common language economy. Perhaps, for the most part, we merely imitate the common concepts of our cultural horizon without much reflection. We dispose ourselves to our inherited cultural economy in the way of the rhapsode, allowing the governing conceptual structure to shape and determine the ends of our thoughts and actions.
RUSSELL WINSLOW

without ever really engaging them in a critical way. Thus, Socrates thinks that the style of pure imitation runs a great risk for the city. If we just imitate and fail to self-critically reflect on those concepts we receive from our cultural horizon, it might never occur to us that the sentiments and concepts that we imitate may not lead to the good for us or for our city. We may very well, as Socrates says,

narrate everything [without reflection] and think nothing unworthy [to imitate]. . . . Hence he’ll undertake seriously to imitate in the presence of everything we were just mentioning—thunder, the noises of winds, hailstorms, axles and pulleys, the voices of trumpets, flutes, and all the instruments, and even the sound of dogs, sheep, and birds. And this man’s whole style will be based on imitation of voice and looks, or else include only a bit of [simple style]. (1991, 75).

For Socrates, the style of pure imitation harbors the danger of fully “losing ourselves” in our imitation. Not only do our identities—qua this historical human individual—unravel in the imitation of axels, pulleys, and wind, but, perhaps even more important, we give ourselves over to the mere repetition of already governing commitments, expectations, and cultural norms. Pure imitations allow cultural norms to be repeated without reflection for the sake of some unperceived “good” and, thus, without responsibility.

Socrates’ critique of imitation is often considered to be a critique of poetry without qualification. However, I think that the consideration of style here allows us to say that the problem of imitation does not lie in poetry or poets; rather, the problem of imitation lies in the complacent and passive reception of poetry, one’s comportment or style in approaching inherited speech. On my reading, if we maintain (as I do here) that poetry is the mode of education and the formation of souls in the polis, then there really is no other way to receive poetry except by passivity and imitation. After all, we are habituated as children into our cultural paradigms. However, on the other hand, Socrates thinks that this disposition toward poetry, while unavoidable, desirable, and certainly human, is not the most exquisite manifestation of human nature. Rather, thinks Socrates, our capacity to raise questions about our poetic formation, to reflect on the “good” that that formation harbors, might be the most authentic appropriation of poetry; indeed, perhaps we could even say that a wakeful appropriation of our poetic formation would be most radically poetic.
Thus, philosophy on the Platonic model would not be opposed in any way to poetry, even as it confronts poetry. Rather philosophy would be the most radically poetic of all.

Given the concern expressed surrounding imitation, we might assume that Socrates would privilege “simple” lexis, or the style of speech that contains no imitation. However, that is not what Socrates says he believes. “In my opinion,” he says,

when the sensible man comes in his narrative to some speech or deed of a good man, he will be willing to report it as though he himself were that man and won’t be ashamed of such an imitation. . . . Won’t he use a narration like the one we described a little while ago concerning Homer’s verses, and won’t his style participate in both imitation and [simple narrative]? (1991, 75).

But is not the human being that speaks in a radically original way most philosophical? Do we not value the so-called original genius precisely insofar as she speaks in a nonrepetitive fashion and thereby discloses what had previously remained invisible to us? Socrates seems to say “no.” Why would the radically original simple style not be the one that Socrates suggests that we should adopt, like philosophers? Why does he choose the “mixed” style of speech that is both imitative and original? Moreover, what can we possibly mean by describing a style as “both imitative and original”? Is this not fundamentally contradictory, oxymoronic?

I want to argue that when we offer a considered view of style in the context of human nature, then we see that the question of imitation and originality is much more complex than it at first seems. When do we see examples of radically simple speech? In the Republic, we see it in the speech of the sophist Thrasymachus. In his articulation of justice, we see the sophist offer an account that is precisely opposite the common conception, the conception articulated by the poets. So, in some way, Thrasymachus is offering—or thinks that he is offering—a radically original conception of justice. He opposes the conception of justice derived from the poets with a notion that would otherwise be seen as antijustice. Justice is in the interest of the stronger, who seek to acquire whatever they can at whatever cost to the public good.

This conception of justice is indeed original, insofar as it is radically opposed to the primary understanding of justice. Moreover, he claims to be speaking with originality insofar as he does not rely on education or the
poets: he is speaking for himself as himself. Without regard for the consequences of his definition of justice on the community or the individuals who adopt it, he speaks as an individual, a radical individual. Yet is this true without qualification? In Thrasymachus’s speech, he employs language, language and concepts that clearly do not belong to him but belong to everyone. Language and concepts, by their very nature, are never private or individual but betray a political status. As a consequence, we can say that there is no radically original articulation, no radically original speech, insofar as every original speech always emerges out of a wellspring of already governing and preexisting speech. Speech always exhibits itself as repetition. There is not a single meaningful word that I can utter that is not always already an imitation. Thus, there is no simple style in speech. Simple style betrays itself as merely an affection of one who does not fully understand the debt he holds to the language and conceptual economy already at work around him. The lack of concern on Thrasymachus’s part for the consequences his articulation will have on the community at large is to me an indication that he remains unaware of the debt he holds toward the community and its governing logos.

Philosophy by contrast, as I have indicated, takes up the concepts of the poets, imitates them with a commitment to engaging them in a reflective way. As such, it is always already both imitative—insofar as the philosopher recognizes that there would not be a conception of justice, wisdom, truth, or beauty to consider at all without the poets—and original, insofar as the wakeful, critical appropriation of the meaning of justice represents an original articulation that is irreducible to the pure imitation of a rhapsode. Philosophy is thus an original imitation that seeks to disclose and justify the “good” toward which we are blindly moving and that governs our actions in precisely the same way as radical poetry, poetry as we perhaps think of it often today.

**STYLE AND KNOWLEDGE: ON THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “HAVING KNOWLEDGE” AND “KNOWING”**

Now I would like to pursue a possible description of what I am calling the phenomenon of mimetic style as it shows itself both in the Republic and in a general way when we talk about modes of philosophical discourse and activity. With the aim of contributing to the recent arguments that seek to broaden what is understood as philosophical discourse in Plato, I discuss mimetic style’s relationship to Platonic dialectic in book 7. First, however,
on mimetic style in plato’s republic

I preface my reading of dialectic with a brief meditation on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. With this digression, I can more clearly elucidate a principal assertion of this article: it is only through a consideration of mimetic style, I argue, that one will be able to intuit the difference between “having the facts of knowledge” and “knowing.” That is to say, it is possible for two accounts differing in their mode of imitation to possess the same content, the same facts. Yet unless one perceives this difference of ethos, of comportment, one fails to perceive something fundamental about the articulation. Ontological considerations, therefore, can never be indifferent to the ethos of mimetic style without losing something central.

In the Nicomachean Ethics (1147a19–24), Aristotle distinguishes between, on the one hand, a child that can perform demonstrations and recite verses of Empedocles and, on the other hand, an adult that “knows what he is saying” in regard to the very same content.11 Having the content of the logos is not enough; there is something additional that one must possess that does not become displayed in the exhibition of content in speech. The child acquires the logos and can repeat it effectively and accurately. The child knows. The adult mathematician knows the content, too, but there is something else that becomes manifest in the display of knowledge, something that does not become evident until style is considered—style, that is, as the potential form of mimēsis an utterance might display. Both individuals possess the facts, possess the correct data; they each have the knowledge and the content. Indeed, without a consideration of lexis, there is no way to tell the accounts apart. While the terms “child” and “adult” need to be understood somewhat loosely here, nevertheless, the example is revealing. The “child,” Aristotle implies, imitates the content of a demonstration and recites verses of Empedocles, but he does not make it his own; he does not exhibit an encounter with the content that manifests a history of the occurrence of critical engagement and appropriation; he does not display an original repetition of Empedocles or Euclid. One must be disposed toward the content in a manner that does result in one merely displaying the content, in merely imitating in a nonreflective fashion. By contrast, the “adult”—in the fullest sense of this term—actively appropriates what he imitates. There obtains a wakeful and original orientation within his comportment toward what he knows, toward what he imitates.

In the context of book 7 of the Republic, we see a similar sentiment in the conversation concerning the cultivation of the reflective disposition toward beings that Socrates suggests human nature harbors as a potency, a disposition that might be considered to be a philosophical ethos of speech.
In this section of the dialogue, Socrates argues that the education of the youth described in book 2 was not yet complete. There, the educational system was organized around music and gymnastics; gymnastics shaped and cultivated the bodily strength and stamina of the population (as well as fortitude in the soul), while the study of music—actually conceived much more broadly as music, poetry, mathematics, and the study that nurtures the part of the soul concerned with all *logoi*—engendered knowledge in the soul (376e–377b). As such, we might say that the early study of music (which includes poetry) places all of the most central conceptual structures (the facts, the content) within the soul. It shapes and organizes the soul. In this way, the early education serves a most crucial function: namely, instilling the potential for each human to actualize his or her humanity—it bestows the *logos* on the citizens. Consequently, each citizen is given a knowledge-grid through which to perceive and interpret the world.

Yet, in book 7, Socrates argues that this education is inadequate for fully actualizing a citizen’s potential to become a human being (952 e–522 a)—that is to say, to effect an intellectual relation to knowledge and to beings in the way of Aristotle’s “adult.” In an effort to provide completeness to the educational structure, Socrates announces a series of new studies—each established to establish and foster what at 518c he names the “art of turning,” an activity that clearly bespeaks “style” in the way I have been describing it throughout this article; that is to say, the “art of turning” describes the study (or studies, in this case) by which we are able to “turn” from one comportment of *mimēsis* (pure imitation) to another comportment of *mimēsis* (philosophical imitation). If a child is a human being only in potency, what then is needed beyond mere bodily maturity to actualize that potency? Socrates thinks that the possession of bare facts, the possession of knowledge or content, is not the answer to this question, since the “knowledge” is already in the soul of the child, insofar as the child has already been appropriated by the common language economy—that is to say, the child has already undergone the education of book 2 and, therefore, already possesses the content, possesses the logos (or perhaps we should say that the child is already possessed by the logos). The characteristic of “having the knowledge” is not the definitive distinction by which we are able to discern the difference between the human being in potency (the child) and the actualized human being (the adult). “Having knowledge,” therefore, must even be distinguished from “knowing.”

The difference between the child and the adult, between “having knowledge” and “knowing,” would be intuited through the display of a
capacity to perform what Socrates calls "the turn"—that is to say, through a certain comportment in which we hold ourselves toward the knowledge and contents that we already harbor in the soul. For, on my reading, to speak of how we are "turned" toward the knowledge we harbor in the soul is the same as to speak of the ethos we hold toward the facts. I want to argue that it is the cultivation of a certain style that Socrates seeks to develop by way of the new studies, through a curriculum that establishes an imitative comportment toward preexistent knowledge on the model of that I have proposed. If, in their early studies, human beings are appropriated by the surrounding conceptual economy, then, when they take up the new curriculum, they imitate those very same concepts in a way that is original; that is to say, they perform an "original imitation" of the facts, of the content—they effect a disposition toward the logos in the form of an original imitation.

In the interest of conserving space, I here briefly discuss only two of the new studies (arithmetic and dialectic) in an effort to describe how each one cultivates the specific comportment in speech suggested by Socrates in book 3—that is, through this abbreviated description of the new studies, I show how they engender the possibility for (though not the assurance of) an originally imitative style in speech. Ultimately, I want to suggest that the initial mathematical and scientific studies prepare one for the practice of dialectic (but do not subtend it—indeed, cannot subtend it). Moreover, I argue that dialectic is in fact the practice of "turning"; that is to say, I argue that dialectic as described in book 7 is the uniquely human practice of original imitation, the activity by which we turn away from the ethos in which we imitate the facts of our education in a nonreflective manner toward the ethos of the philosophical, wakeful lexis. With this reading, I dive headfirst into the deep and troubled waters of the recent literature on Platonic dialectic. In agreement with David Roochnik, I recognize the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of drawing a consistent cross-corpus and systematic articulation of the "technical meaning" of dialectic in the dialogues. Yet, in what follows, I hope to contribute meaningfully to the debate by arguing that there is a consistent conception of technical dialectic operative in the description of book 7 if we read it through the lens of the lexis of imitation that I have developed in this article.

The first study that Socrates describes is arithmetic. However, this is not the same sort of mathematics that the youth have learned in the educational program of music and gymnastics. In fact, each of the new studies cultivates a certain wakeful disposition toward what is already present in the
soul. One might say that the new studies are concerned not with acquiring new knowledge but with intellectually engaging what the old study had already placed in the soul. In this study of number, the student considers “the one” itself. As Jacob Klein has remarked, the problem of “the one” in Greek mathematics was quite perplexing. If we are beings that operate in accordance with logos—which is a universalizing conceptual structure—how then do we become aware of only one thing? In order for there to be one recognizable concept, there must be at least two of something. For instance, on any given evening at seminar, there are numerous beverage bottles on a table. All of the bottles on the table possess meaning not because of any one bottle, but because each one belongs to the multitude encompassed by a concept. For this reason, Aristotle argues that the first number is two; for, there must be at least two of something in order to form a conceptual economy in which things are counted and subsequently numbered. Thus, attempting to think through “the one” leads the human into what Socrates calls an “aporia”—it leads the inquirer into a state of perplexity regarding the “fact” or “content” that he has always taken for granted as understood. When an inquirer reaches an aporia, Socrates says that nous (or the intellect) is called before itself. The inquirer is newly disposed toward “the one” and called before herself in contemplation. Contemplation of “the one,” or the newly wakeful imitation of “the one,” occasions “a turn” toward a consideration of what this “one” actually is that has always already animated my conception of number, though I now understand that I remain in ignorance of it, despite having the awareness of it.

While arithmetic (and other mathematical study) contributes to our capacity to render ourselves at a loss and effect a wakeful comportment toward the knowledge that has shaped us, it is clear that Socrates privileges dialectic, the final study. The first three studies lead one into serious difficulties that emerge in Greek science and mathematics. Arithmetic leads one to reflect upon the paradox of singularity and unity; the study of geometry calls forth the problem of the incommensurability of the diagonal of the square; and astronomy renders one starstruck regarding the possibility of circular motion. However, it is dialectic alone that seems to pervade human life.

With this observation, I voice my disagreement with the claim that dialectikē in the Republic is mathematical or “technical” in the sense often attributed to it. For the prior mathematical studies are a mere “prelude to the song itself” (1991, 211): dialectic. I would argue that the distinction articulated between dialectic and the mathematikē in book 6 (510b)
continues to hold here in Book 7. That is, mathematics and the sciences presume their archei and proceed with hypotheses grounded on those presumed archei. Dialectic, by contrast, takes up the question of the presumed archei and asks what they are. For instance, physics holds a presumed understanding of physis, of nature, an understanding that remains unquestioned but that serves as a foundation for the work of physics. Biology operates with a presumed conception of bios, or life, as its first principle and builds its science on the foundation of this conception. However, dialectic inquires into the first principles; it asks, “What is physis?” “What is life?” Again, in the new study of dialectic, there is a turn away from the unreflective orientation toward the first principles (the scientific/mathematical) and an interrogative turn toward the first principles themselves—this turn, as should be phenomenologically evident, is crucially a matter of imitative style, not content.

In book 7, what the mathematical new sciences share with dialectic, as is evident from my analysis, is the capacity to invoke aporia and nous in the inquirer; but dialectic itself need not be mathematical in order to actualize this potency. In fact, dialectic is that activity that when practiced carefully engenders the “turn” and forces one into an originally repetitive style in all of the basic concepts that hold together and preserve a human being: wisdom, beauty, moderation, courage, justice, and certainly the good itself.

A dramatic example of this activity in the dialogue already appears in book 1 during Polymarchus’s engagement with Socrates. In answer to the question “What is justice?” Polymarchus answers with an unreflective imitation of the poet Simonides: “it is just to give to each what is owed” (1991, 11). As a consequence of the ensuing interrogation of Polymarchus’s off-the-cuff interpretation of this poetic utterance, Polymarchus comes to understand that he neither knew what Simonides meant nor what he himself meant in his interpretation: “I no longer know what I did mean” (1991, 11). That is to say, Polymarchus reaches an aporia with respect to his unreflected conception of justice and is now in a position, an ethos, for the very first time to pursue this fundamental concept that had always already animated him. Polymarchus always already possessed the content and would often imitate it, but he had never imitated it originally, that is, with responsibility.

We can now see that the content of any one of these fundamental concepts driving human activity can be recited in blind imitation without a genuine ethos of “knowing” and, consequently, without genuine human animation. It is only through the distinction made visible by reflection on lexis (qua mimēsis) concomitant with a consideration of the content behind “the good,” “justice,” and “wisdom,” and so forth, that we are able to intuit
the difference between genuinely being animated by “justice” and simply “having the facts” of its content. Moreover, through our interpretation of style, we have taken a preliminary step toward fleshing out a reading of human nature in the dialogue; for, it might not be “the facts” that humans acquire that exhibit human nature in its most exquisite sense, nor perhaps even the capacity to acquire knowledge that does. On this account, it is the comportment, the ethos, we hold toward what is given in the world, in others, and in ourselves that discloses human nature most of all.20

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NOTES

1. With this claim, I distinguish my focus from that of others on the question of style, for instance, Ruby Blondell’s (2002). I am not here concerned with rhetorical style as such. I am rather pursuing an interpretation of the three different mimetic styles in the Republic—that is to say, the styles in which we imitate inherited discourse and concepts. My reading suggests that education in book 3 is not merely about how to speak but also about how to say, to imitate, what has already been said.

2. Here, I appropriate Claudia Baracchi’s terminology in her Of Myth, Life, and War in Plato’s “Republic”: “It must be made clear that, properly speaking, the problem was never the lie of mimēsis, but the comportment toward it—the ethos” (2002, 124). I argue that the question of right lexis in book 3 is not a matter of whether to imitate or not but rather a matter of the ethos in which one inevitably and unavoidably imitates.

3. I develop the notion of mimetic style here as part of the project of many in recent years of expanding the concept of philosophy in Plato beyond the merely argument-focused interpretations found in, for example, Vlastos 1983. By suggesting that style must be considered as a serious and unavoidable source for responsibility, I seek to further Jill Gordon’s claim that “the elements that are considered nonphilosophical by contemporary approaches—or at the very least, extraphilosophical or extralogical—are the very elements of Plato’s dialogues that can turn a soul toward the philosophical life” (1999, 5).


5. Here I assume my reader agrees that there is a commonality between Socrates’ words on the formation of human beings through education in books 2 and 3 of the Republic and Aristotle’s on human nature in book 1 of the Nicomachean Ethics. As is well known, in the Ethics Aristotle articulates a vision of the nature of human beings in a way that distinguishes it from other animal natures as the kind of life having logos.
6. As has been pointed out by Ruby Blondell (2002, 37), it should not escape our notice that since Socrates is himself narrating everything that happened yesterday (in the form of Homer), his initial narration of the various myths that are recounted throughout the Republic must have been a matter of pure imitation. Thus, Socrates is both a pure imitator and a mixed one. Further, Claudia Baracchi wonders “what to say about that other narrator behind Socrates, that other one who makes Socrates remember and narrate, even write? What to say of this one, who writes dialogues but never speaks?” (2002, 101). Given the structure of the dialogue, Plato’s style of speech would have the characteristics of the most imitative—even further behind the scenes, further hidden than the purely imitative narrator Socrates.

7. I do not wish to overly simplify the distinction between the sophist and the philosopher. The difficulty of making this distinction by appealing to rhetoric has been shown by Marina McCoy. However, I do want to suggest that perhaps one way of making such a distinction is through the figure of imitative style. McCoy distinguishes between the philosopher and the sophist by way of what she calls “moral virtues” (2008, 5). With reservations, I agree. However, I show in this article that the ethos of imitation determines the designation “virtue.”

8. Even though Glaucon claims at 358c that the thrasymachal account of justice and human nature in book 2 is an imitation of the stories by which he has been “talked deaf by Thrasymachus and countless others” (1991, 36), with Drew Hyland, we might say that Glaucon’s presentation of human nature is in fact “atomistic.” As such, the simple style may correspond to the mistaken “atomistic” conception of human nature in which a human being is conceived as an “autonomous, independent, radically self-interested ‘monad’ or ‘atom,’ who, to be sure, may enter into relations with others” but to whom “such relations will never be essential” (Hyland 1995, 40–41).

9. Given the broad scope of its potential development, I do not address here how my reading accounts for a fundamental problem in the text with respect to mimesis: the relation of book 3 to book 10. In the latter book, Socrates bans all imitation from the city.

10. An anonymous reader asked how I can say that philosophy is the activity that discloses the original, and therefore, the new, when we see examples of this disclosure in other disciplines (e.g., contemporary poetry and contemporary physics). I must refrain from entering into the storm of criticism surrounding what poetry is and does in the modern world. However, one way of describing “poetry today” might be as what I am calling “original repetition”: as the imitation of beings and events in a way that makes them original. I would say that a poet expresses a singular and original being or event through the means of an imitated language. If I am allowed this interpretation, then Socrates’ understanding of philosophy might be said to be poetic for us, though, to be sure, he does not use the term “poetry” in this way. As I suggest in my interpretation of book 6, I think that, for Socrates, insofar as a physicist performs the activity of physics, he is not disclosing the archē and thus not discovering the new. However, insofar as he performs the work of physics with
the aim of uncovering archai in the way suggested by book 6, he is performing philosophy as Socrates understands that term. Consequently, part of the task of this article is to argue that philosophy in the Republic must be understood as more than logical argumentation.

11. “Speaking the words that come from knowledge signifies nothing, since people who are in these states of passion recite demonstrations, or verses of Empedocles; those who are first learning something also string words together, but do not yet know anything. For one must grow into knowing, and this requires time; and so one ought to assume that people who behave without restraint speak in the same way as actors playing a part” (2002, 124, emphasis added).

12. With this qualification, I distinguish my interpretation from the readings of “technical dialectic” developed by, for instance, Gilbert Ryle (1966).

13. In the appendix of his book on the Republic, David Roochnik first observes a distinction between the everyday meaning of dialegesthai (“to converse,” “to discuss,” “to argue”) and the “technical” meaning of dialectikē, noting that the latter is derived from the former. Citing John Lyons (1967), he shows that the addition of the suffix ikē to the adjective turns the activity of dialegesthai into a technē. The technical form means “skilled in language or argument” (2003, 133). According to Roochnik, commentators in the tradition have often attempted to argue that the dialogues present the development of Plato’s thinking on the cultivation of the higher, philosophical mode of technical dialectic, grounding it on the mathematical and scientific. However, he finds this reading problematic for a number of reasons: not only because there is scant evidence and description of the practice of technical dialectic across the dialogues but also because there is much in the dialogues that undermines the idea that only the “technical philosopher,” the one that practices technical dialectic, “is the serious one” (2003, 140). For instance, in his interpretation of the Phaedrus, a dialogue that does offer a brief description of dialectic, Charles Griswold suggests (and Roochnik agrees) that it does not encourage the project of dialectic as much as it “point[s] out the limitations of technē” (1986, 144). Both Roochnik and Griswold ultimately conclude that “there is not a comprehensive view of the meaning of dialegesthai in the dialogues” (Roochnik 2003, 144).

14. I use the terminology of “technical” dialectic with hesitation here. My understanding of dialectic, as suggested by my analysis of the relevant passages of book 7, is animated by a commitment to the notion that there is an inseparable relation between dialegesthai and dialectikē—indeed, one might even say that there is a “dialectical” relation between them, insofar as dialectikē is a lexis in which one wakefully imitates what is already given in dialegesthai. Even if, given the rarity in the dialogues of the actual term dialectikē (see Kahn 1996, 327) and the meager technical descriptions across the corpus, we wish to give up on a clear definition of the technical form, nevertheless, my reading still holds. For we can textually show two different comportments within the same dialegesthai: an ethos of pure imitation and an ethos of original repetition.
on mimetic style in plato’s republic

Additionally, insofar as it will be mimetic style that enables us to take responsibility for the concepts that we have inherited, dialectic, on my reading, will exceed its characterization as mere argumentation or logic. As Jill Gordon argues, “dialectic or questioning is a way to protect the soul not from beliefs repugnant to logic, but beliefs repugnant to good human living” (1999, 28).

16. See especially 524e: “A soul would be compelled to be at a loss [aporein] and to make an investigation, setting in motion the intelligence [ennoian] within it, and to ask what the one itself is” (1991, 204).
17. According to Roochnik, for example, dialectikē is “somehow dependent on mathematics” (2003, 150), though, to be sure, Roochnik here refers to this common attribution as a problem for the description.
18. I would like to thank one of my reviewers for pointing me to the following passage that comes just after the discussion of the new mathematical studies that helps to distinguish between them and dialectic: “The power of dialectic alone could reveal it to a man experienced in the things that we just went through, while it is in no other way possible” (1991, 212).
19. Though, with this observation, I do not necessarily claim that Polymarchus has the character to perform the dialectic successfully. Blondell’s claim that Polymarchus is too pliable and capable of manipulation is convincing. For “pliability is dangerous in so far as it encourages passivity rather than analysis” (2002, 178).
20. I would like to thank my two reviewers for their considered and constructive criticisms of this article.

WORKS CITED
