

## Imitative and Narrative Styles & The Logical Primacy of Relation

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As I continue to work through Wrone's commentary on Plato's *Republic* not only am I gaining a greater understanding of Plato's argument but also I am seeing more connections with Jordan and Ahrens, not to mention appreciating the relevance of Plato's thought for my own life in the context of today's world. In this reflection I plan to touch on all these bases; I will focus first on the discussion of the imitative and narrative styles of life and literature and second on another aspect of his discussion of education in Book III, which provides insight into the age-old question of the individual - environment relation.

### I

As Socrates fleshes out his thoughts on the kind of educational system a just society would have early on in Book III, he addresses the question of style, of how students would learn. He begins by acknowledging that in early education the style which predominates is the **imitative**, in which children are exposed to various ideals and models which they naturally tend to emulate. In this regard, Socrates contends that educators have an obligation to expose children to characters who display such virtues as wisdom, courage, and temperance and to ban the venal and often crude and immoral stories of the Greek gods, heroes, and men. Of course, to fulfill this obligation would require that educators have an idea of what these virtues are and how they contribute to a well-ordered, just society. But as children mature into adults, and their education progresses, imitation naturally recedes into the background and a more thoughtful, reflective, critical, **narrative** style takes precedence. As Wrone characterizes this distinction: "When we repeat ideas our thinking is imitative. The narrative style comes in when you are trying to [articulate] the idea of something. What is the man saying or the people doing or Congress attempting? You express the idea....[and] when you do get the idea of anything you can state it." (p. 153)

The narrative style of thought and reflection becomes increasingly necessary as we confront complex life situations and social issues for which mere imitation will not suffice. As Wrone observes in this regard: "...in the narrative style men come to an understanding of a life situation they face and work out intelligent ways of resolving problems. This understanding in turn connects with intelligent and not imitative actions." (p. 160) So, just emulating a character who, for example, manifested the qualities of courage and integrity -- a willingness to challenge falsehood -- would not be sufficient to confront a particular instance of falsehood you may be confronted with. Martin Luther King, Jr. is certainly an admirable character who displayed the virtues of courage and integrity in his lifetime and, it goes without saying, a worthy figure to emulate, but merely imitating him will not help resolve current racial issues such as the debate over whether there continues to be a need for affirmative action. One would have to have knowledge of the nature of current affirmative action programs, as well as facts and statistics regarding the impact of such programs on breaking down barriers for minorities and promoting diversity in order to address this issue and possibly confront falsehoods being spread about such programs.

On a more personal level, I'd like to flesh out how the imitative and narrative styles have played out in my own life. I was raised in the bosom of the Catholic Church, attending parochial school from grades 1- 8 where most of my teachers were nuns and priests, as well as being an altar boy for several years. I would say, without question, my early education was almost entirely imitative, especially when it came to religion. As I recall, there was a lot of emphasis on what could be called "rote learning," including lots of memorization which is how I learned the Latin prayers I had to recite during church services. We certainly were not called upon to question what we were learning, especially when it came to religious subjects, and rarely do I recall "reflecting" on any of this except for the purpose of reinforcing our belief and faith in the teachings of the one true Catholic Church. Nonetheless, I do believe that my rather slavish imitation of Catholic ideals helped keep me on "the straight and narrow" as a child, avoiding the pitfalls of crime and vice, not to mention developing my powers of memorization which have served me well over the years.

But as I grew older, especially after transferring to public school in the 9th grade, the narrative style took hold and I began to question, and eventually reject, many aspects of my Catholic faith. I found a lot of Church dogma an insufficient guide to leading a good life and dealing with the problems confronting our troubled world. Perhaps the "final straw" in this narrative process of questioning my religious beliefs came when I had the opportunity to read and study the works of French biblical scholar, Charles Guignebert, which call into question the very foundation of Christianity -- the belief in the life, death, and resurrection of our savior, Jesus Christ. As the narrator in a novel sets the scene and comments on the action taking place, so too I began examining my religious beliefs by rising above them and taking a critical look at how they fit in my life and the world.

There is another important respect in which Plato's discussion of the imitative and narrative styles resonates with me, which has everything to do with this series of "philosophical reflections" I have been writing. These reflections are obviously all about developing the narrative style, not merely copying or reciting ideas I have encountered in studying the history of philosophy but trying to articulate the meaning and significance of these ideas for understanding and improving our world. I would certainly be the first to admit that I have done an awful lot of what could be labeled "imitative" studying. For example, most of the extensive notes I have taken on many books I have read over the years consist almost entirely of direct quotations from the text, that is, simply copying down the words and arguments of the authors of these books. Occasionally, I would include a comment of my own, usually written in red ink, in which I would try to give an example or draw out the meaning of the quoted passage in my own words. So, I did dabble a bit in the narrative style. But now as I move into the last phase of my life, I firmly believe that the narrative style needs to take precedence over the imitative, hence these philosophical reflections, which not only are an effort to clarify and extend my own thinking but also, in offering them to others, will hopefully help stimulate their own critical reflection on these important ideas.

## II

Later in Book III, Socrates discusses at length the type of "music" we would want in an ideal state, music including not just melodies and songs but poetry and literature and art. Really, he is talking about the culture in which the youth should be brought up, which would shape their

character. This leads Wrone to pose the following question: "What connection does Socrates see between the individual and his environment?" (p. 175) He, then, goes on to observe: "Here we are speaking of the environment as this world of things, of houses, roads, music, books, and similar objects that raises the question about the relationship between the individual and the environment. One band of intellectuals [which would include many sociologists] sometimes make out that the environment really determines everything about the individual. Usually they discuss the relation causally in the sense [that] they will say the environment causes many to act a certain way...." (p. 175) Wrone goes on to observe that Plato does not think in such a causal, mechanistic way about this relationship between individual and environment. For Plato, the individual **incorporates** the environment. That is, the things outer become inner." (p. 175, my emphasis) Or, to use a Jordanian term, the individual is **constituted** or made up of these relations. The problem with the typical scientific or mechanistic way of thinking about this is that we have to assume individual and environment are separate and distinct things, which is obviously not the case.

Professor Ahrens tackles this issue in a very insightful way in his unpublished manuscript, "Order and Disorder in Society," edited by Melvin Bobick. He critically dissects both the environmental determinist view and its companion "free will" view of the relation between the individual and environment which have dominated philosophical and social science debates for centuries. He convincingly shows that both views are fundamentally flawed and for the same basic reason -- that they both assume the existence of the individual and environment or society as separate and distinct entities. (See pp. 28-40, "Order and Disorder in Society") It is that abstract, simplistic, mechanistic, causal, scientific, billiard-ball view of reality that gets us into trouble. Neither view has a proper understanding of the individual as **constituted** of his/her relations to the natural and cultural world, and it is this view of the individual which really underlies Plato's discussion of education. Or, to put this another way, as Ahrens does, we might break the whole issue down into three basic terms: individual, society (or environment) and relation, of which the most fundamental term that needs to be better understood is the fact of **relation** -- the fact of relation being the real starting point for understanding both the individual and society.

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