

ART AS IMITATION IN PLATO’S PHILOSOPHY: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This study examines Plato’s theory of art. In the Republic, Plato argues that all arts and in particular epic poetry is imitation of reality and the artist (poets) imitators of reality. Being mimesis, art is at two removed from True Reality (the transcendent world of the eternal Forms), or in other words, art is just a copy of a copy, and therefore it is necessarily untrue and cannot but have a bad moral effect on the public. It is on the basis of the above that Plato dismisses art and artists as useless. For him, art adds nothing to our knowledge of the world nor to society. Art for Plato is aimed at deception, and this aim is achieved when the spectator mistook an imitation for reality. Hence, he concludes that art is potentially dangerous as it is psychologically destabilizing, leading to immorality, unconcerned with truth and therefore a threat to the common good. He therefore recommends that artists should be driven from the city. Through the method of critical analysis, this essay argues that Plato’s conversance with art is insubstantial and exclusionary. Art warrants not only subjects in virtue of utility, morality, and pleasure, but also subjects in virtue of feeling, impression, spirituality, and art itself.

Keywords: Art, Imitation, mimetic, Aesthetics, Forms/Matter.

Introduction

The concept of *mimesis* or imitation is a time-honoured concept in the history of literary and artistic and aesthetic criticism. This concept is considered to be a product of the classical era of the Greece. It is post-Homeric, and presumably, originated with the rituals and mysteries of the Dionysian cult performed by the priest- dancing, music and singing. During this period as conceived by Chen Wei and Xiong Wangmei, imitation did not indicate reproducing external reality but expressing the inner one (Wei &Wangmei 32).

From the fifth century B.C onwards the term *mimesis* moved into philosophy, meaning reproducing the external world. As conceived by the Atomist philosopher Democritus, *mimesis* was an imitation of the way nature functions.

He wrote that in art we imitate nature: in weaving, we imitate the spider, in building, the swallow, in singing the swan or nightingale (Princeton: 2002). The fact that Plato and Aristotle accepted this theory was equally important for centuries to come in history of the leading and principal theories of the arts. Each of them assigned a different meaning to the theory of *mimesis* and, therefore, variants of it originated under the same name. Hasan Baktir capped the theory of *mimesis* during this era thus:

... in the period of fourth century B.C., four different concepts of imitation were in vogue: 1; the ritualistic concept (expression) 2; the concept of Democritus (imitation of natural processes) 3; Platonic (copying of nature), and 4; Aristotelian (free creation of work of art based on elements of nature). While the original meaning of the concept was gradually fading, the idea of Democritus was recognized. The Platonic and Aristotelian notions proved to be basic enduring concepts in art; they were often fused into one (Baktir 169).

In the middle ages, Cicero contrasted imitation with truth and considered imitation as a free expression of the artist and supported the Aristotelian doctrine. Radical thinkers like Tertullian went even so far as to believe that as God does not permit things out of pure human imagination of that which do not exist, it would be advisable to leave room for imitation. Even though the theory of *mimesis* was challenged in the middle ages, it did not disappear completely and it survived among the twelfth century humanists like John of Salisbury. Moreover, Thomas Aquinas, the great Aristotelian philosopher of the middle Ages, repeated the classical definition without any reservations 'art imitates nature'. During Renaissance, the theory of imitation became again the basic theory of art and poetry, and reached its peak (Bradley 172).

The concept and the theory of imitation did not enter Renaissance poetics until the middle of the sixteenth century, -- only after Aristotle's Poetics had been fully accepted. From that time on it became the most essential element of poetics. F. Sasseti explained in an Aristotelian way that imitation is one of the four causes of poetry, namely, the 'formal', the 'efficient', the 'material' and the 'final' one. The Italian theory of imitation penetrated into Germany attracting Durer then to France where it was taken up by Poussin and many others. Even in the days of Baroque and academism, the Italian theory remained in all countries the basic theory of art (Givens 121).

In the beginning of the eighteenth century it was still regarded as an important principle of aesthetics even by such innovators as Abbe Dubos and Vico, who

declared that poetry was nothing else than imitation. An aesthete who was a typical of this century, Edmund Burke, best voiced the responses, “Aristotle has spoken so much and so solidly upon the force of imitation in his poetics, so no need of any further discourses upon this subject and it has less necessity”. However, over this period the evolution of the theory did not manifest any uniformity and different meanings were ascribed to it in the contexts of visual arts and poetics. Some understood it in the Aristotelian way and others in accordance with Plato and some retained the popular conception of faithful imitation. Hence agreement in this respect was more terminological than in relation to matters of fact (Barnashova 1997).

The theory of imitation was more pronounced and challenging in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than any other century. In the nineteenth century the term ‘imitation’, which for ages played the leading part in the theory of art disappeared suddenly when it acquired a negative meaning, and was used to indicate something unauthentic. The twentieth century theorists of art neglected not only the term ‘imitation’ but also its principle. Contemporary age does not contradict that art relies on nature but it does not maintain that art imitates nature. For some, art is construction, for others, it is for expression. The majority of contemporaries would rather agree with Girolamo Savonarola who asserted that what in fact belongs to art is only that which does not imitate nature (Barnashova 1996).

Plato is generally credited to have bequeathed to the tradition of literary criticism the concept of imitation or *mimesis* well into the eighteenth century (Wei & Wangmei 31). Plato’s theory of art is derived from his ontological/metaphysical and epistemological/ethical view of reality. In the *Republic*, Plato argues that art of any kind and epic poetry in particular is an imitation (*mimesis*), and the creator of this imitation, or the artist (*Demiurges*), is an imitator. As *mimesis* art is at two folds removed from True reality and therefore necessarily untrue and cannot but have a bad moral effect on the public. According to him, since art imitates physical things, which in turn imitate the Forms, art is always a copy of a copy, and leads us even further from truth and toward illusion. For this reason, as well as because of its power to stir the emotions, art is dangerous. This study proceeds from this background to examine Plato’s theory of art as imitation of reality. Attempts will be made to argue that Plato’s condemnation of the arts and the roles they play in the society is quite extreme.

What is Art?

The question of the meaning of art or “what art is or is not” has been a subject of much debate. Like philosophy, this issue has not reached a sustainable conclusion. Theodor Adorno claims that “It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident.” (Adorno, 1969) Artists, philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists and programmers all use the notion of art in their respective fields, and give it operational definitions that vary considerably. It is even clear that even the basic meaning of the term "art" has changed several times over the centuries, and has continued to evolve during the 20th century as well. Before we provide some famous attempts by scholars to defining the concept art, it is necessary to examine the root of the concept itself.

Etymologically, the term “art” is derived from the Greek word “*techne*” or from the Latin word “*ars*” which is translated variously as “skill” or “craft”. This broad approach leads to art being defined as: "skill in doing something." (Beardsley 32) Here we mean that skill is being used to express the artist’s creativity, or to engage the audience’s aesthetic sensibilities, or to draw the audience towards consideration of the “finer” things. Until the 17th century, art referred to any skill or mastery in doing something and was not differentiated from crafts.

Traditionally art is defined as “anything made by man as opposed to the works of nature” (this definition was challenged in the 20th century by artists who declared that *objets trouvés* -“found objects” are also works of art). It includes a diverse range of human activities in creating visual, auditory or performing artifacts (artworks), expressing the author's imaginative, conceptual ideas, or technical skill, intended to be appreciated for their beauty or emotional power. (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia) In their most general forms, these activities include the production of works of art, the criticism of art, the study of the history of art, and the aesthetic dissemination of art. The Turkish Language Society defines it as “the whole of the methods used in the expression of an emotion, design, beauty, etc., or superior creativity appearing as a result of this expression.”

In his *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art*, R. G. Collingwood conceives art in this broad sense:

The word ‘art’ has three meanings in customary use. The first is the creation of objects called work of art or actions pursued by those who are named as artists. The second is the pursuit of the total opposite of the natural and actions called artificial or the creation of these kinds of objects.... . The third is the structure of thought

which we call artistic; the structure of thought with which we are aware of the beauty (Collingwood, 2011)

As a result of the inadequacy of a comprehensive definition of the concept of art, some groups of scholars have argued that a comprehensive definition of art must capture what is essential about art. Representing these essentialist thinkers, D. H. Parker stated thus;

No definition of solving a thing as art can be wholly adequate; yet a good definition should at least seize the distinctive characteristics of art, and thus make the mind more vividly aware of art against the background of things that are not art. (47)

Following this tradition, George Dickie, for example defines a work of art is, first, an artifact, second, an artifact with a set of properties on which has been conferred the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of the art institution (Dickie 34). These, according to him, are the two conditions necessary for an object to be identified as work of art.

Consequently, Davies went on to argue that even when the necessary and sufficient condition criteria of a work of art fail us, there are certain essential formal guidelines for aesthetic judgment and analysis. According to him, art is often examined through the interaction of the *principles* and *elements* of art. These principles of art include *movement, unity, harmony, variety, balance, contrast, proportion* and *pattern*. The elements include *texture, form, space, shape, color, value* and *line*. The various interactions between the elements and principles of art help artists to organize sensorially pleasing works of art while also giving viewers a framework within which to analyze and discuss aesthetic ideas.

While trying to avoid complex relational properties as essential to art's characters in identifying and defining art, Stephen Davies identifies two ways through which art can be categorized. According to him, one convenient classification divides recent definitions into functional and procedural ones. The functionalists argue that art is designed to serve a purpose, and something is an art work only if it succeeds in achieving the objective for which we have art and the proceduralists hold that something becomes an art work only if it is made according to the appropriate process or formula, regardless of how well it serves the point of art (Davis 173). However, the inability of a satisfactory and comprehensive definition of what art is has given rise to different traditional and comprehensive theories of art. Therefore, from this observation, we can assert

that 'it is self-evident that nothing is self-evident about art. The definition varies according to use.

Art as Imitation in Plato's Philosophy

Plato's view of art begins and ends with this single tenet: art of any kind is an imitation, and the creator of this imitation, or the artist, is an imitator. Consequently, his theory of art is derived from his ontological and epistemological/ethical view of reality. According to Collingwood, Plato's theory of art can be summarized in three main points: the doctrine of the Three Degrees of Reality, the doctrine of the Three Degrees of Knowledge, the doctrine of the Emotionality of Art (Donagan 158-160). Still on the same footing, Gonzalez recalls:

Plato sets the basis for a sound theory of art distinguishing art from other types of experience. The central concept in this distinction is [*mimesis*]. A work of art is neither a percept nor an idea, but an imitation of the percept, and therefore an imitation of the imitation of the idea, a second order copy of true reality. Plato also develops a positive theory of art by defining a proper experience for the work of art. This experience is imagination and its proper quality is beauty conceived as the emotional dimension of the work of art. The emotional character of the work of art, its glamour, can only be explained by defining art as an indirect symbol of truth. This explains Plato's bipolar position about the arts in the description of the ideal state (169).

In *The Republic*, Plato locates Reality in what he calls Forms rather than the phenomenal world. He argues that, true knowledge can only be attained by the rational power exercised in dialectical search. In Book X, he illustrates his insistence of banishing the poets from his Republic through the example of three "beds" (Omogunwa 3): The Ideal of "bed"; the bed made by a carpenter and the "bed" by a painter. The bed by a carpenter is a particular derivative from the universal and abstract Ideal of "bed", but the "bed" by a painter is more inferior in that it is copied merely by "turning a mirror round and round" (Plato 30) and therefore an imitation of appearance, or an imitation of imitation, thus "thrice removed from the king and from the truth." (Plato 31) Then Plato makes an analogy to the poets: "And now we may fairly take him and place him by the side of the painter, for he is like him in two ways: first, inasmuch as his creations have an inferior degree of truth—in this, I say, he is like him; and he is also like him in being concerned with an inferior part of the soul..." (Plato35)

In the third book of the Republic, for instance, Plato provides further definitions of '*mimesis*', centering on the relation between '*mimesis*' and poetry, '*mimesis*' and education and also poetry and education. 'Since young people learn essentially through imitation, it is significant to select the models' (Richter 18-19). '*Mimesis* suggests unfavorable effect on the part of the young people' and 'poetry is one important source of the youth's experience with examples and models'; therefore, if the world of models and examples ought to be controlled in the interest of education, poetry must be likewise subject to control (Mckeon 121 - 123). Plato argues the case in the Republic as follow: "The youth cannot distinguish what is allegorical from what is not, and the beliefs they acquire at the age are hard to expunge and usually remain unchanged. That is important that the first stories they hear should be well told and dispose them to virtue" (Republic, Book X).

The contents, forms, and representational modes of poetry play an important ethical role in the education of guardians and should, because of the effects they exercise through mimetic process, be based on ethical principles. Young people should only imitate brave, sober, pious and noble men, which will increase their strength and will not infect them with weakness. In this sense, it is argued in the *Republic* that tragedy and comedy, as mimetic poetry, represent injustice among the gods in the assertion that gods are responsible for unhappiness among people. In the Platonic conception, gods cannot be evil; heroes cannot be weak. The poet's representation violates the truth and by representing the deficiencies of gods and heroes, has negative effect on the community and the education of youth.

Mimetic poetry not only misrepresents gods and heroes and leads young people to immoral behaviors but also appeals to and strengthens the lower, desiring part of the soul. According to Plato, poetry encourages short-term indulgence in our emotions when reason would forbid their gratification because it is useless or harmful for the citizen who considers life as a whole. 'Reason is a capacity that enables moral quality and authorities. Poetry is intuitive and stirs up a part of a citizen that ought to be kept quiet and fosters the lower part of the soul against the rule of higher part, reason' (Baktir 169). Poetry becomes a dangerous rival to morality, which 'is able to corrupt even good man and is a very dangerous thing encouraging all the lower desires and making them hard to cope with suffering in the theatre, and taking pleasure in laughing at comedies tends to affect our attitudes in real life and make us cynical and unserious. Sex, anger, and all

desires, pleasure and pains are fostered by poetic imitation, thus, Homer and tragic poets are not true example for a citizen' (Annas 279). Poetry, then, taking its theme as human emotion and human frailty, threatens to disturb the balance and rational disposition of the individual for the individual, by way of his mimetic abilities, is infected through poetry. Philosophy provides wisdom and truth in the education but poetry has a potential capacity to demoralize the mind and it should therefore, be censored (Annas 279).

Derived from Plato's point on the Ideals, the theory of Book IV that the human soul is constructed in three levels accounts for another reason for the exile of the poets. Human soul is according to him divided into three parts: the rational, the spirited, and the emotional or the impulses, the first being the highest part and the third being the lowest. He explains that the imitative poet "is not by nature made, nor is his art intended, to please or to affect the rational principle in the soul; but he will prefer the passionate and fitful temper, which is easily imitated." (Plato, 2006, p.35) Hence Plato's banishing the poets from his Republic is justified in an ethical sense because the poetry appeals to the lowest part of human soul and has the power of "harming even the good":

...therefore we shall be right in refusing to admit him(the poet) into a well-ordered State, because he awakens and nourished and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason. As in a city when the evil is permitted to have authority and the good are put out of the way, so in the soul of man, ..., the imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less.... (Plato 35)

Later on Plato's challenge is first accepted by his student Aristotle, who, based on his own philosophical elaboration on the Truth and the concept of *mimesis*, justifies the existence of poetry (not just "hymns to the gods and praises of famous men" as proposed by Plato and the return of the poets.

Critical Evaluation and Conclusion

Plato is arguably believed to be the first philosopher who inquired into the nature of imaginative arts and put forward theories which are both illuminating and provocative. As a poet himself, his dialogues are full of poetic beauty and dramatic qualities. Plato's aesthetics has its roots buried deep in the soil of his metaphysics and epistemology and his critique of art as imitation is based on his claims that art should serve both pedagogical and ethical purposes. Being a

moralist, he disapproves of poetry because it is immoral. As a philosopher he disapproves of it because it is based on falsehood.

Plato's mistrust of popular entertainment reflects our own commonly held beliefs that 'trashy' television can be reductive or even dangerous. This is vividly captured by Alexander Nehamas in his "Plato and the Mass Media." Nehamas argues that Plato's theory of art deserves to be re-examined as it is directly relevant to many contemporary concerns (36). He argues that Plato's 'banishment' related solely to poetry, a medium classified here as a form of vulgar art, roughly equivalent to television. He exposes modern critics of television, such as Newton Minnow and Jerry Mander, as unwitting Platonists.

Despite the influence of Plato's philosophical endeavours, his theory of art has attracted more foes than friends. One of the most devastating criticisms of Plato's theory of art is from his most devoted pupil, Aristotle. In his *Poetics*, contrary to the Platonic assumption that the world of phenomena is one that cannot lead to the Truth but only to sense-perceptions, Aristotle argues that the physical world is an ever-changing process in which Reality is located and manifested by the inward principle of order of either a natural or an artificial product. According to him, the process of imitation is not one that involves the slavish copy of appearances or images, but one that involves the inward principle of order and hence the Truth. A poetic imitation is first of all a process which involves the inward principle of order of the work itself. According to him, the poet "takes a form from nature and reshapes it in a different medium." (Adams & Searle, p.48) This can be best exemplified by what Aristotle calls "the soul of tragedy" – the action or plot: "... Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of actions and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action..." (Aristotle 55) The action is a natural process itself; by imitating the action, the tragedian takes a form from nature and reshapes it in a different medium. The arts are not imitation, rather, Poetry, along with other artistic forms such as painting or music, is thus an improvement on nature in that "the poet has brought to completion what nature, operating with its own principles, is still developing." (Adams & Searle 48). Secondly, Aristotle furthers his claim that imitation is a natural process where reality locates when he claims that poetic imitation is superior to history in reflecting truth by proposing his principle of probable or necessary:

..The one (history) describes the thing that has been, and the other (poetry) a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are

of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do – which is the aim of poetry..... And for this reason: What convinces is the possible.... (Aristotle 57)

He argues in his preference of poetry that what has happened (history) only deals with the particulars and the accidental, whereas what will probably or necessarily happen (poetry) relates to those which are of a universal nature. So through poetic imitation, the poet handles those events which comply with the principle of probable or necessary and therefore advances in truth, a notion referring to what things should be rather than what things are or have been. Thirdly, Aristotle argues in his *Poetics* contrary to Plato's condemnation of imitation that imitation is not only a part of human nature, but also brings delight to man and this we believe is true. He states:

It is clear that the general origin of poetry was due to two causes, each of them part of human nature. Imitation is natural to man from childhood, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation. And it is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation.... (Aristotle 53)

This point is proved by general human experience, for example, though the dead body is painful for the human eyes, it is a great delight to see them most vividly and authentically represented in paintings. So is the poetic imitation. Aristotle not only justifies the delight brought by tragedy, but also advances to make efforts to lay rules for this form of imitation: he, like a well-trained physician, devotes several chapters discussing what kind of plot is best for a tragedy, and, how the imitation can achieve a moralizing effect, namely, by "arousing pity and fear accomplish its catharsis of such emotions." (Aristotle 55).

Plato dismisses art on account of its lack of necessary utility and denounces the idea that it can make any claim about truth or morality. There is more to art than just the objective functions of utility, morality, and pleasure. Art has the quality of producing feelings and impressions. Nicholas James Alcock reinforces this claim with a reference to the twentieth century artistic movement known as Abstract Expressionism where art depicts form not drawn from the visible world, emphasizing free, spontaneous, and personal emotional expression. It is a practice of art that intends to elicit responses as opposed to pronouncing ideals.

It invites the viewer to observe and respond, but it does not make any claim on its own of what that view or response should be (81). Therefore, he went on to argue that Plato's theory of art excludes some spiritual arts that are foundational to religions and cultures and it in turn unreasonably denounces divine inspiration as a means of interaction between truth and art. (82). Alcock paints this situation thus:

...whether one is a theist or not, it can still be reasonably thought that, if god or some divine agent were to exist, this agent could express its truth by means of interpolation. As it is in the case of works of Hesiod and Homer, various poets have claimed that their works are inspired by the Muses, or more generally, the divine, providing a sense of an epistemic foundation for the poet's work (Alcock 83).

He argues that Whether or not the truths the poets suppose were introduced to them by the divine are actual truths themselves is not his subject of inquiry in debating this point. What is unsettling is that Plato refutes this as a possible form of art because his artist or poet is fastened exclusively to the practice of imitation (83). Alcock went on to argue that contrary to Plato's assertion, art is capable of existing in its own right as a particular thing and also capable of dialoguing plainly with Beauty for the sake of art itself. According to him, whether or not a work of art is a direct copy of a physical particular, the work is nevertheless validated by the universal of Beauty and can thus proceed to exist autonomously, apart from any utilitarian, moral, didactic, or pleasurable purposes.

Plato's theory of art does not allow for free artistic expressions. Platonism is repressive to such a degree that it cannot afford to allow for any alternative views of life. Maria Kardaun subscribes to this criticism when he argues that, Plato's ambition to eliminate any compensatory influences goes astonishingly far: not only does Plato recommend that artistic expression be strictly controlled; he even wants to regulate the dream life of the citizens in his ideal state. (158)

Akin to the above criticism, other critics of art, on the other hand, have objected to the Platonic theory on the grounds that it is too coldly intellectual. Plato, they say, confused beauty and truth and as a result neglected the emotional aspects of artistic appreciation.

To justify our claim that arts play an indispensable role in human life and the community, we must have to recline to Chen Wei and Xiong Wangmei who

argue that despite his condemnation of art, Plato himself cannot completely resist the charm of poetry; he spares a little room for the return of poetry (32). According to them, the last few paragraphs of Book X

...let us assure our sweet friend and the sister arts of imitation, that if she will only prove her title to exist in a well-ordered State we shall be delighted to receive her... Let them (lovers of poetry) show not only that she is pleasant but also useful to States and to human life, and we will listen in a kindly spirit; for if this can be proved we shall surely be the gainers – I mean, if there is a use in poetry as well as a delight? (Plato 36)

Later on Plato's challenge is first accepted by his student Aristotle, who, based on his own philosophical elaboration on the Truth and the concept of *mimesis*, justifies the existence of poetry (not just "hymns to the gods and praises of famous men" as proposed by Plato Book X, Plato, 2006, p. 35) and the return of the poets.

Conclusion

It must be borne in mind that, there are various theories of art and none of them enjoys general acceptance. The Mimetic theory of art which appears to be the oldest of the theories originates from Plato's conception of reality. In this essay, we have tried to expose the porosity of Plato's idea of imitation. Art is not imitation of imitation or copy of copy. It is neither useless nor dangerous and it does not lead to immorality because it is imitational. On the other hand, while we agree with Aristotle's view of art as imitation, we however do not accept that art is restricted to only epic poetry. Other forms of art such as music, dance, sculpture, architecture, paintings, movies or films etc are genuine arts and are all imitative of different aspects of reality or nature in relation to man's experience.

The point being made is that the term "imitation" connotes "re-presentation", "re-creation". It does not imply copying, mimicking or making a counterfeit of anything whatsoever. Hence, we employed the concept of imitation and representation interchangeably to portray the nature, features and role of art. Art is therefore essentially an imitation or representation of reality. In representing reality, the artist's presents structures and harmonies in a much broader context than mere self-expression. Art is decentralized, dispersed, and given to all in the

form of a certain focus of attention, brought to bear on the world as it is. Thus a work of art (visual, audio or literary) can modify one's view of the world by strengthening or weakening one's sense of the propriety or the value of certain very general attitudes

We therefore conclude that as imitation and representation, art partly determines one's view of nature or reality and also one's sense of self. Following this, we agree with Richard Sheursterman that:

The gap Plato maliciously posited between art and reality has become an unquestioned dogma... But, in an obvious way, the idea of this gap is quite simply false. Art is undeniably real, it exists concretely and vividly in our world and in our lives, ...of course, we can always distinguish between a real object and its artistic representation, but this does not entail that the representation is either unreal or intrinsically deceptive (52).

The grounds provided for Plato's rejection of imitative art are not sufficient. Works of art has a very good foundation in reality. It is a characteristic of a good art that it reveals truth; a truth that can hardly be grasped intellectually, however. Therefore, Plato's metaphysical argument against the poets is mere naive sophistry and that Plato probably did not want us to take it seriously.

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