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## Antique Ideas about Imitation and Perfection

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*The author argues that in different cultural and historical periods, relation to practices of imitation was different, and the negative perception of the simulation, which was established during the Enlightenment and which is the most common, is not something taken for granted. There is a lot of evidence that in antiquity the phenomenon of imitation was perceived not only as natural but also as bringing undoubted social benefit. Analyzing the works of Homer, Plato, Isocrates, Plutarch and others, the article shows that for antiquity own propensity to imitate others is one of the ways to evaluate our success in moral development.*

*Keywords: imitation practices, perfection, antique philosophy, Homer, Plato, Titus Livius, Isocrates, Plutarch. .*

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Let's start with the necessary terminological clarifications, since while dealing with the themes of imitation and perfection, the distinction between semantically close notions «imitation», «modeling» (emulation) «mimicry» (simulation) played the crucial role. In the technical sense «imitation» means a reproduction of a model of action in a way that implies the achievement of the same goal. That is the real imitation is an action which reproduces an activity itself as well as the aim of the model's action. On the contrary, «modeling» (copying, emulation) as it is known, occurs when the observer is trying to achieve the same goals as the model, but by other means. «Mimicry» (simulation) is performed when the

imitator reproduces the means of action, not sharing the model's purpose. However, what is the aim from one point of view, can also be a means to something else, and the differentiation of the purposes and means of activity is quite a serious theoretical issue. Therefore, we will use the term «imitation» to denote steps which reproduce the behavior, attitude, way of life of another person, that is, actions provoked by the representation or perception of behavior, position or lifestyle of the person (and not provoked by the presence of a rule requiring that everyone would act by the same way). Thus, we will use the term «imitation» rather in its wide than in a technical sense.

In the historical tradition of the European philosophy of education, reasoning about human perfection can be classified into two main conceptual categories. First, there is a long tradition of understanding of samples of perfection as models of imitation. Samples of perfection operate in education, revealing the model that can be replicated in the subsequent steps. Secondly, there is a tradition that emphasizes a non-imitative role of specimens of human perfection in human development. This second way of understanding the perfection of the samples often opposes the first one. Although this position has fewer supporters, it is often proved with equal fervor and conviction. Studying both sides of the tradition shows a variety of productive ways of thinking about samples of human perfection.

With Homer, an ethereal figure standing behind any reasoning of education, the discussion about the history of human perfection should be opened. An educational value of human lives in the Homeric epos focuses on their use as samples, which one should imitate. Homer is important for his concepts of perfection, because he presents some of the most influential models in history. Indeed, the heroes of Homer became a focus of imitation throughout the ancient world. His values were retained long after the Greeks and Romans, when human society had left far behind any open approval of the Homeric epos. Actually, even when the actions of Homer's heroes was reinterpreted allegorically in order to avoid controversial moral assumptions of their behavior, their role as models of imitation were kept in the abstract form. These heroes always followed the spirit of antiquity.

Homer's epos provides not only the content of pedagogy, focusing on samples of human perfection, but also the form of this pedagogy. In some verses of Homer we can see a young man who joins the heroic life and the ethos accompanying it. Initiation usually supposes an

experienced teacher or mentor who imparts to the young warrior the character of a hero and makes the imitation emergent<sup>1</sup>. In "Iliad", the old mentor Phoenix gives to Achilles the example of the hero Meleager in order to avert the boy from his violent anger against Agamemnon and return him to the heroic obligations given to his Achaean brothers-in-arms (Iliad 9: 646-729). In "Odyssey" the pedagogy, based on the examples, is even more evident. Goddess Athena gives the example of the hero Orestes to the son of Odysseus, Telemachus, and convinces him to revenge for his missing dishonoured father. Athena tells Telemachus:

“... it beseems thee not to practise childish ways, since thou art no longer of such an age. Or hast thou not heard what fame the goodly Orestes won?” among all mankind when he slew his father's murderer, the guileful Aegisthus, for that he slew his glorious father? Thou too, my friend, for I see that thou art comely and tall, be thou valiant, that many an one of men yet to be born may praise thee.

(Odyssey 1: 298-303)

In this instruction of Athena reveals the pattern of training and education on the example of human lives. The scheme of education offers an exemplary action to the pupil (the punishment of «insidious Aegisth»), the description of the rewards ensued from the notion of perfection (in this case, it is the glory won by Orestes, when having avenged for his father) and the requirement to reproduce the action ( «you're not weaker than he»). This process, first, depicts actions of an individual, secondly, informs about the benefits that follow from actions, and third, uses these benefits to motivate the learner to be like a model. It was one of the most popular ways of thinking about role models in education. It can be found everywhere, from the moral biographies after

Plutarch to the theories of the 20th century about «replacing reinforcement» (where some reward or punishment, being a destiny of a model, motivate an observer). It occurs so often that we would call it ‘the standard model’ of comprehension of human perfection and imitation.

Due to the influence of the heritage of Homer, the poet's role was defined in terms of education, as education was understood in terms of imitation of behaviour of the characters. The poet becomes a teacher that educates when glorifying the heroes of antiquity. Plato says in ‘Phaedrus’ that the poet «embraces a delicate and immaculate soul, awakens it, induces to express Bacchic delight in hymns and other kinds of creativity and, adorning countless deeds of ancestors, brings up descendants»<sup>2</sup>. Plato himself adapts the pedagogy of Homer, providing his own kind of a hero. The poetic dialogues of Plato exalt a new type of perfection, of the philosopher Socrates, who possessed the true love of wisdom, in contrast to passionate Achilles or wily Odysseus. The main point of the dialogues of Plato – not to establish a philosophical doctrine, but to present a new way of life. Plato's dialogues imply that we should imitate Socrates, leading an austere life of the philosopher. In the character of Socrates Plato poetically states that later Aristotle will express theoretically: samples of human perfection giving us the only access to the understanding of virtue. Philosophers in this sense retain the Homeric way of thinking about education.

Education based on examples was the main task of the ancient poets as well as philosophers and historians. The Roman historian Livy was able to create a History of Rome, asserting that the goal of history is the creation of truthful messages about «samples of each possible type». «The main use and the best fruit of the acquaintance with the events of the past are to see all kinds of instructive examples in the majestic frame of the whole; and here for yourself and for the state

you'll find what to emulate and what to avoid; inglorious beginnings, inglorious ends»<sup>3</sup>. History is a study of the possible samples of the human perfection. One who studies the past, thinking about its events and these reflections give the best positive result (relating to oneself and to society) because then one chooses a model to follow, based on these results. Standard model of education was spread from poets to philosophers and historians.

One of the most famous ancient teachers of rhetoric Isocrates adapts the use of the examples of human perfection to rhetoric and often applies the standard model of imitation in his writings. Aspiring to unite the separate Greek city-states, Isocrates wrote a letter to the Macedonian king Philip, persuading him to copy the life of his father, who had attained political power on the noble path of friendship, and not through incitement to hatred and bloodshed. After he described the positive effects of such a strategy («a long and happy life»), he ends with the following conclusion: «I told you that, intending you to realize that with this speech I appeal you to deals, toward which your parents clearly expressed their preference, recognizing them the best of their activities. Any sensible person should take for a model the finest of ancestors and try to become like to him, and this particularly refers to you. In fact, if you do not need to ask for examples of other people's ancestors, but you have such example in your own kin, it is only natural for you to be encouraged by it to aspire to come up to him, isn't it?»<sup>4</sup>. In the passage, Isocrates offers a perfect example of the standard model of teaching by means of examples of human perfection, and he also points out that living process of imitation is not the life of those who lack the courage or intelligence to choose his own path. It is not a derived, secondary type of education. On the contrary, he says that those who possess the «intelligence» seek to imitate the patterns of perfection. Isocrates exalts the

status of simulation training to the extent that it will trigger a large wave of criticism. According to Isocrate, imitation of samples of perfection is not opposed to the wise life: on the contrary, to emulate noble examples means to live in wisdom. Ancient writers not only believed that simulation is compatible with wise discretion, but was convinced that the simulation is not inconsistent with human freedom. In the famous satirical works of Lucian there is a description of his ideal philosopher, a man named Demonax. Even as a boy, Demonax was known to have despised all that «people believe is good», He also professed unlimited freedom and speech. That philosophy was mainly understood by Lucian and other thinkers of the Hellenistic era in terms of freedom of thought and action. Lucian emphasizes how Athenians admired Demonax and looked at him as a superior being. It encourages young philosophers to copy Demonax and build their lives on his example. Modern readers can see here some kind of irony – in hopes of young people to learn «freedom and free speech» by copying someone else. Lukian describes the freedom of Demonax as the most important basis of his philosophy of life and states that this freedom can be and should be imitated. As in the case of Isocrates, later critics have objected to this conclusion and argued that if someone is truly free, it cannot be achieved by simple copying. But Lucian does not find that the freedom and simulation are conceptually incompatible.

Medieval writers shared the ancient understanding of the simulation, increasing it by appropriate biblical teachings. In the XI and XII centuries, the main driving force behind education was the charismatic presence of a teacher who provoked imitative practices among students. S.Yeager argued that in early medieval pedagogical schemes personal attractiveness of a teacher was valued very highly: «The physical presence of the educated man possesses great

pedagogical value; his countenance and bearing, his behavior themselves constitute a form of discourse, intelligible and available for learning»<sup>5</sup>. Educated people don't write books in this era, but demonstrate their learning in a certain way of life. External bodily signs manifest internal harmony, and virtue may be represented by the way a person walks, speaks, holds himself. Imitation of these external bodily actions is seen as a way to find inner virtue (and, what is equally important, to gain a higher political and ecclesiastical position).

The value of imitation in philosophy of education of the Middle Ages is demonstrated by the authors emphasizing the importance of selecting good models. The author of 'Moralium dogma philosophorum' proves that we have to «choose a good man and to keep his image before our mental eyes»<sup>6</sup> to construct our behavior in accordance with this sample. In medieval writings we find many elements of the standard model: studying the quality of life of a model, Model selection based on such reasoning, and proposal to imitate him who was thus selected.

Imitation is a special case of repetition, which usually involves a person repeating (even if abstractly) the actions or positions presented by someone else. Simulating repetition provides many different meanings. Sometimes imitation is seen as a sign of respect for the man copied, and even as a sign of piety, as in the notion of imitating God, *imitatio dei*. Sometimes imitation is regarded as an act of plagiarism, sometimes as an act of mockery, sometimes as an act of obedience. Sometimes the value of simulation could be even more profound. It can be a way to invoke the memory of an abstract object or a person to make the past presented through pantomime: when, for example, any expression awakens reminding about the event and about the emotions with this event. Indeed, imitation is never meaningless. When I repeat what somebody else makes, it

is an act of communication in the social world. Imitation serving to a communicative function sometimes refer to mimesis (from the Greek word 'mimeisthai', which meant imitation). «Ancient Greek poietes in its original meaning, in fact, refer to any creator and «doer» (from poieo – «do») and this concept is close to representations of a demiurge, which are etymologically connected with the idea of a craft, creating something new. Many nuances of the theoretical concept of «mimesis» absorb the Greek meaning of the word «poiesis» (actually «art»), and in Latin «imitatio» the idea not about simulation in the modern sense of the word, but about reconstruction in the Aristotelian sense will remain for a long time»<sup>7</sup>.

This provision is confirmed by the examples of historical tradition. Let's consider the following educational advice which Isocrates gives to his young student Demoniku: «Imitate the manners of kings, and follow their deeds: so you will create a reputation as a supporter and an adherent of the Imperial authority. As a result you will gain much respect of the people, and more enduring favor of the kings. Obey the Imperial laws, however, consider the Royal will as the most severe law. Just as a citizen of a democratic state should respect the masses, living under a monarchy should honor the king»<sup>8</sup>. Note that Isocrates advise to imitate the kings partly due to the communicative qualities of their actions, that is, the value that a simulating action represents. His advice is to follow the example of the kings is not just intended to provide useful information about successful kings' actions. Isocrates takes the example of imitation in order to compose a special message from the simulator, in this case, the message that the simulator endorses Royal examples («you will create a reputation as a supporter and an adherent of the Imperial authority»). Simulation indicates an acceptance of a wider range of actions by the imitator, extending even to those imitations, which have not been observed. Thus,

the repetition of Demonica would imply that he approves the current political regime and that he accepts this lifestyle as his own. Isocrates believed that imitation creates the circumstances in which people may be accustomed to the desired action.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of this passage is that Isocrates considers imitation as a tool of social influence. The result of simulation will be “much respect of people and more lasting favor of kings.” People who view the imitation of Demonica will have more respect for it. The most important thing is that the king's power, seeing the imitation, will probably give favor to Dominica. Isocrates thus realizes that imitation has certain values, which can induce favorable responses from the man who is imitated, as well as from an external observer. For Isocrates, social values, associated with imitation (communicative aspects of imitation), were inseparable from the understanding of its educational value. Royal examples could show Dominique how to act, imitating the kings, but an imitation of these examples will also contribute to the movement of Demonica along upward social trajectory. It could be an open door to new practices.

Sometimes deeper meanings of imitation are indicated. For the model, simulation sometimes has the value of «mirror», which gives a reason to a model to examine her (his) own actions, looking at them through the eyes of an outsider. In the ancient world Plutarch believed that this reflexive function of imitation could form an important educational opportunity. For Plutarch, the mirror reflects both ways. Parents must be examples to children, and should therefore provide children with the image of what they will be in the future. But in addition, parents can also see themselves in a new way, when the child begins to imitate them: «Fathers should, above all, avoid evil deeds and do what they need to do, in order to be a clear example to their children, so that children, looking at the lives of their fathers

as in the mirror, could restraint from shameful deeds and words. For those who are committing the same mistakes, in which they reproach their sons, under the name of their sons unwittingly accuse themselves. If the life they lead is quite bad, they are not free to warn even his servants, not to mention of their sons. Besides, it is highly likely that in the misconduct of their sons they will become their advocates and mentors» (“About parenting”, 14 A). An imitating child is treated as the reflection of the model. If the child acts incorrectly, parents should correct themselves, as if they saw their own reflection in the mirror badly, understanding a need to change their own behavior. Thus, imitative meaning becomes the mechanism of self-knowledge.

Basing on the ancient ideas, F. Nietzsche in *‘The Birth of Tragedy’* uses an emulation of human being as a kind of life-affirming theodicy – justification of human pain and suffering. He argues, that Greeks knew and felt «the fears and horrors of existence: to actually have the opportunity to live, they were forced to shield themselves from them with the brilliant product of dreams – Olympians. To be able to live, Greeks had to create these gods by sheer necessity; we would imagine the event like this: from primitive Titanic order of the gods of horror through instinct of beauty specified by Apollo, by slow transitions, the Olympic order of gods of joy developed; so roses make their way out of the thorny thicket of bushes. How otherwise could such painfully sensitive, so vehement in its desires, so extraordinarily tending to suffers people endure existence, if it had not been represented in his gods lit up in so dazzling aura. The same instinct that brings to life the art, as a supplement and completion of being, tempting for the future life, – created the Olympic world, as a transfiguring mirror that Hellenic will look into. So the gods justify human life, living this life, – the only

satisfactory theodicy! acutely aware of the terrors and horrors of existence; in order to be able to live at all, they had to place before them a vivid fantasy of the Olympians”<sup>9</sup>. Greeks invented gods that imitate mankind to justify human existence in the world of suffering and pain. Imitation of gods is a protection of Greek life in general, not of any private actions.

It is Plutarch who gives to the imitation the highest rating. Plutarch argues that our own propensity to imitate others is one of the ways to evaluate our success in moral development. In his essay ‘Moralia’, “On the progress to virtue”, he writes that people should not only approve and admire what is worthy of praise, but to imitate the action. The degree of the desire to imitate the laudable action is a way to check advancement in virtue. «We must therefore suppose that we shall not achieve great success, until the admiration that we feel towards successful people doesn’t remains inert inside our mind and encourages us to imitate. Actually, love to man is not active, unless there’s some jealousy in it, if the approval of virtue is passionate and effective, if this love leads us not only to envy, but also to the imitation of noble things». (On succeeding in virtue. 84 B–E). For Plutarch the desire to imitate has value as a measure of personal virtue. The admiration of a virtuous man, without the need to copy the virtue of this man, leads to flaws in the development of morality. This is the second way, by which Plutarch explains the idea of imitation as a mirror and as a moment of self-reflection. Interaction with a model of human perfection through the imitation is considered as an opportunity to increase self-knowledge.

All premises allows us to conclude that in different cultural and historical periods, relation to practices of imitation was different, and the negative perception of the simulation, which was established during the Enlightenment and which is the most common, is not something taken for

granted. There is a lot of other evidence that perceived not only as natural but also as bringing in antiquity the phenomenon of imitation was undoubted social benefit.

<sup>1</sup> After, initiation rituals were submitted by imitational practices. "Transition rites were gradually changed to mythological imitations and transformed to more and more conditional testing, the meaning of which was transmitted by word of mouth, rationalized and symbolized. Thus the ritual of symbology became, laden with social value, devoid of its origin. – Koliev A. Political mythology. Remythologization of social experience. Moscow, 2003 P.188

<sup>2</sup> Plato. Phedrus. 245 a.

<sup>3</sup> Titus Livius. The History of Rome from its Foundation. V.1 Moscow, 1989 P.10

<sup>4</sup> Isocrates. Speeches. Letters. Antique oratores. Moscow, 2013 P.102

<sup>5</sup> Jaeger, C. S. The envy of angels: Cathedral schools and social ideals in Medieval Europe, 950–1200. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994 P. 80

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, P. 79

<sup>7</sup> Dubova O.V. Mimesis and Poiesis. Antique conception of imitation. Moscow, 2001 P.6

<sup>8</sup> Isocrates. Speeches. Letters. P.17-19

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche F. The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Muzic // Nietzsche F. Collected Works in 5 Vol. V. 1 Moscow, 2011 P.40-41

## **Античные представления о подражании и совершенствовании**

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*В статье утверждается, что в различные культурно-исторические периоды отношение к практикам подражания различилось, и негативное восприятие имитации, которое зародилось во времена Просвещения и является наиболее распространённым, не является самим собой разумеющимся. Имеется много доказательств того, что во времена античности феномен подражания воспринимался не только как естественный, но и как социально выгодный. Анализ работ Гомера, Платона, Сократа, Плутарха и других философов показывает, что для античности склонность подражать другим являлась одним из способов оценить наш успех в моральном развитии.*

*Ключевые слова: практики подражания, совершенствование, античная философия, Гомер, Платон, Тит Ливий, Сократ, Плутарх.*

*Научная специальность: 22.00.00 – социологические науки, 24.00.00 – культурология, 09.00.00 – философские науки.*

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