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Eric Brook

California Baptist University, ebrook@calbaptist.edu

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Art Imitating Art

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Abstract

Using as a contextual reference my experience of seeing the original and copy of Michelangelo's *David* in Florence, I briefly introduce how the Platonic legacy has affected that discourse. The Western preference in art and aesthetics is typically in favor of the original over the copy, despite whatever indiscernibility may exist between them. Since Arthur Danto has treated this phenomenon in his text *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, his relevant comments are considered and adapted for the purpose of working through how one understands the relationship between the original and copy in terms of a criterion for defining art.

Key Words

Danto, Plato, original, copy, indiscernibles, Michelangelo, *David*

In the center of Florence, the Piazza della Signoria stands as an august remnant of the city's Renaissance past. Just before the entry to the Palazzo Vecchio that overlooks the city plaza, a copy of Michelangelo's *David* occupies the space formerly held by its original counterpart, which now resides in the gallery of the Accademia in Florence. The sheer throng of people that I first witnessed around the statue in the plaza would make one speculate about whether or not this *David* was the original. However, judging by the extensive line outside the Accademia, it was obvious that enough people knew where to find the original *David*.

I endured that line with one of my students in the blistering heat of summer. Once inside, we walked through the halls of the Accademia, past the "unfinished" sculptures of Michelangelo, to stand beneath the power of his masterpiece. I spent roughly 45 minutes walking around *David* and then made my way back with the student to meet the others from our university.

Upon returning, a colleague of mine asked the student whether or not he had seen the original *David* and whether or not he had seen the copy. When the student affirmed that he saw both, my colleague asked him if he could tell the difference between the original and the copy. Immediately, the student exclaimed: "Of course, the original glows!" My thoughts were actually preoccupied with the idea that a good copy is typically one that cannot be easily distinguished from the original; but after hearing my student's response, I began to ponder what he said. Was I not chosen? Why did I not see the glow?



Michelangelo's *David*. [1]



David, Piazza della Signoria (Photo: Markus Bernet). [2]

Upon reflection, I do not think that the student was simply describing the clean surface of the marble or the lighting of the Accademia. Rather, I think it was closer to what Arthur Danto describes in his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Much of what Danto says there applies directly to this experience of the original and copy of Michelangelo's *David*, since he remarks that he is "obsessed with paired cases where only one member of the couple is an artwork." [3] More explanatively: "We are bound to find two (at least) representations, indiscernible in any merely visual sense, only one of which will be an artwork" (139). My focus on Danto's discussion of indiscernibles will not concentrate on his desire to define the nature of art but will consider how to extend Danto's criteria for art in comparison to this experience of seeing the copy and the original of Michelangelo's *David* in Florence.

The response of the student in describing the original *David* would appear to betray a Platonic default in Western aesthetics. Anyone familiar with Plato's philosophy knows that he places the original forms in the timeless brightness above the heavens while understanding everything in the shifting shadows of this world as copies of these original forms. The Allegory of the Cave and the Divided Line in Plato's *Republic* both signify as much. Plato offers an epistemology and ontology of the original and copy where reality itself is best understood in terms of the original. This original is what can be truly known and seen as the original, the *eidos* or Form in itself. That which one sees in the Form is the light of knowledge and truth. To know the Form is to have true illumination. Any formal resemblance between all other things and this original is something of a deception, or *eikos*, as it may simply appear to be like the original. The copy can never be less than an imitation of the original. Plato's value theory follows from this preference for the original such that a copy always has less value than the original. Thus in our language today the

word "imitation" carries the intension of diminished value and can be used synonymously with what is fraudulent. To take the copy for an original is to be deceived and defrauded.

It is not Plato's theory of art *per se* that has impacted the West but the application of his philosophy of the original and copy to aesthetic judgments. We are all not ravenous iconoclasts, and art, including discourse about art, to some extent still retains value in our society. But instead of seeking for the "real" in the heavens, we simply prefer the original as "real" while the copy cannot be designated by this category. In this regard, a copy of an art piece can never be art in the true sense of the word. Hence, in the Platonic view of things, the copy of Michelangelo's *David* is not art, but stands in place of the absent art. Here we may have the beginning of an explanation for my student's epiphany. Using the idea of transfiguration, Danto comments: "It is possible that the work of art was the one that glowed, but incandescence could not be the sort of differentia a definition of art would look for" (vii). It is precisely this illuminationist approach that has defined the preference for the original ever since Plato, and Danto has been intent on challenging it. In Platonic terms, the original *must* glow, but according to Danto this is not a sufficient basis for distinguishing indiscernibles.[\[4\]](#)

It could be argued that a Platonic ontology is not the only basis for distinguishing the original from the copy or even for preferring the original to the copy. We can take one step forward in the history of philosophy and consider how someone like Aristotle could account for the reality of Michelangelo's *David* in terms of its copy. For example, if we use Aristotle's four causes, we can see where a clarification can be made between the original and copy. When comparing the four causes of the original and copy, the material and formal causes correlate: both being marble; both being the form of *David*. However, in the third cause, the efficient cause, there is a difference. In the original, Michelangelo worked on the marble to bring into actuality his idea of *David*. Thus, the idea could be said to have originated with Michelangelo, and he was the one who originally executed its form in the marble. There would, of course, be an extended consideration of the final cause, or purpose, for the statue, but it would probably be safe to say that Michelangelo had some kind of artistic purpose in mind when creating it.

This being said, any number of philosophies pertaining to the original/copy dichotomy could be advanced beyond what is offered in Plato, but my suspicion is that these other notions are not what typically come to mind when people in Western culture evaluate art. Furthermore, using an Aristotelian perspective, as Danto himself does to some extent, we could distinguish between the original and copy in its formal and efficient causation (and possibly in the historical accidents related to the material of quarried marble and Michelangelo's Renaissance purpose), but could we also explain why a preference would be made for the original over the copy? Possibly, but our explanation would probably hover around the historical value placed upon Michelangelo in his Florentine context.[\[5\]](#) At this juncture, we can return to Danto's treatment of indiscernibles.

In Danto's treatment of mimesis, he speaks of "bracketing" as the context indicating how one is to understand the relationship of the copy to the original. His main concern in this discussion is in the way art imitates life ("real things," as he puts it), specifically with an example taken from theater. Seeing the play within the theater cues the audience to interpret it as mimesis through "conventions of dislocation" that make the aesthetic experience of the theater possible. Thus, "it is precisely the confidence that the conventions are understood which enables the mimetic artist to carry mimesis to its extreme point, to make whatever is to appear within the relevant brackets as much like what would be encountered in reality as he can manage" (23). Following Aristotelian concepts of mimesis, Danto argues that

these brackets allow for the experience of pleasure since through them we are aware that the experience is mimesis. In any other context, we would be puzzled or unsure as to how to interpret the experience.

Danto is not content to leave the aesthetic experience, or more directly the definition of art, at the mercy of these conventional brackets; but he does appreciate that the brackets provide a meaningful way for talking about art more generally. It seems that his concern with bracketing is found in how it functionally resembles quotation marks to indicate a quote. Once quotation marks are added, one now has a different interpretive stance toward the words. These words are not original for the one quoting them. Danto's fuller reflection upon indiscernibility goes beyond the mimesis of one work placed within the conventional brackets of another context. His example is from Borges's text *Pierre Menard, Symbolist Poet*, where "he describes two fragments of works, one of which is part of *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, and the other, like it in every graphic respect – like it, indeed, as much as two copies of the fragment by Cervantes could be – which happens to be by Pierre Menard and not by Cervantes" (33). He argues that the one is not a copy or quotation of the other because they derive their aesthetic appeal from two different historical contexts. And this is part of the overall thrust of Danto's philosophy of art: "To see something as art at all demands nothing less than this, an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art" (135).

At this point, Danto's comments may apply and not apply in two different ways to the copy and original of Michelangelo's *David*. With the case of Pierre Menard's work, the historical context of the actual words was different from the original. Thus there was no bracketing, no quoting of the text. Yet with the copy of Michelangelo's *David* in the Piazza della Signoria, we do have an actual copy set forth as a copy. It is not to be interpreted as the original in the Accademia. But where is the bracketing that will conventionally indicate to me that this is a copy? Had I not been told that this was a copy, I may have easily taken it to be the original, because the copy is bracketed within its original Florentine context. It stands precisely where the original *David* stood for a few hundred years. By looking at the copy I can get a sense of what it meant for Michelangelo's *David* to stand as a symbol of Florentine civic pride before the city hall.

In contrast, the original *David* is now confined within the conventions of dislocation. There is nothing about the Accademia that would indicate to me the kind of historical significance that Michelangelo's *David* had when standing in the central square of the city. The form that the original has now, with the arm broken in city riots restored, carries within it the marks of Florentine civic struggle. In the Accademia Michelangelo's *David* is bracketed out of context, within the pristine glow of a modern museum.

If we are to apply and extend Danto's criteria for the definition of art, the indiscernibility of the original and copy cannot be resolved with immediate reference to the history of art. I can say that the original *David* once stood in the Piazza della Signoria as a symbol of Florentine civic humanism and embodied the defiance of the city against foreign aggression; but it does not stand there now. As with so many pieces of art that now stand in places like the Louvre or the British Museum, the original *David* is not in its original historical context. Of course, considerations of artistic conservation and accessibility may come into play with our current context, but here I am looking at the discussion from the standpoint of indiscernibility of the original and copy. Given the dislocation of the original and the contextualization of the copy, would it still be appropriate to favor the original over the copy? Maybe in the grander scheme of things we would. I do not think that anyone would be satisfied with the neglect of the original for the copy. But it does seem that having the copy, as a *copy*, standing in the *original* place of the original

serves a significant function for how art is interpreted, which is a key factor in Danto's assessment of what makes art what it is. Danto is correct in maintaining that a piece of art is not ascertained as such merely on formal grounds. This is probably the one area where Danto's discussion of indiscernibility is most relevant, since it provides the terms upon which the discourse about indiscernibles can move forward. Thus, what I am advocating here is not so much a thorough critique of Danto's approach but rather an application and exploration of it based upon a particular historical example.

To increase our perspective it may also be of use to consider the third copy of Michelangelo's *David*, in the Piazza Michelangelo atop the adjacent hill overlooking the city of Florence. Again, we have here an obvious copy, but none of the ambiguity associated with bracketing. The original statue never stood on this hill, nor is my historical appreciation for the original enhanced in any significant way by seeing it looking over the city. This copy would be a good example of the art work in quotation. As one views the cityscape of Florence, it could be suitable to associate what one sees with a symbol of the city's historic identity, much as a mayor in the United States might quote the *Declaration of Independence* in a speech before the city on the 4th of July. I know how to interpret the copy on the hill since the conventions of dislocation, and the copy as well, serve to give me some context.

Given the historical context of the copy standing in the Piazza della Signoria, am I not justified using Danto's criteria in asserting that this copy is in fact art? It may not be the original art of Michelangelo's *David*, but its substitution for it in the plaza does serve an important artistic function, which according to Danto is a key aspect to defining art. Any consideration given to mimesis would not necessarily involve a simple rejection of the copy in the city square. It has an artistic presence there, with all the other "original" sculptures around it. If this copy is to be understood in terms of imitation, it would not be a mere object imitating art. It would probably be better to speak of the copy as art imitating art, carrying the connotations appropriate for something deemed to be art. Granted, with Michelangelo's *David* we have a unique history involved with the location of the original work of art that may not apply to the same extent to other works, even if this involved another case of indiscernibles. Danto himself has used various examples to illustrate his philosophy of art in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Michelangelo's *David* is a vivid, notable, and possibly unmatched example of how Danto's views can be applied to what would appear as an obvious work of art for which there would be no controversy concerning its status as art.

My colleague who asked my student the question related to the original and copy was content enough to leave Florence without viewing the original because he saw the copy. And he felt justified in doing so because anyone who went to see the original could not tell the difference. I am definitely not willing to go that far with how I will evaluate the original and copy, but whenever I think back to my experience of Michelangelo's *David*, the one in the Piazza della Signoria first comes to mind – for obvious historical reasons.

Endnotes

[1] Photograph published [GNU Free Documentation License](#).

[2] Photograph published under [Creative Commons](#).

[3] Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981) p. 90. References to this text will be made parenthetically in the body throughout.

[4] No direct association is being made between this discussion of glowing and any other illuminationist approach to art (such as Benjamin's "aura" concept). My concern is only with an analysis of Danto's explanation of the

phenomenon of glowing related to Plato and the application of Platonic metaphysics in the history of Western aesthetics. The phenomenon is only under discussion here inasmuch as it reflects the actual description of the experience of the work of art in terms of the language of original and copy and the aesthetic criterion used to distinguish original and copy when defining art.

[5] The basis for couching an aesthetic discussion with reference to Plato and Aristotle, besides the use that Danto makes of them, has been argued well by Stephen Halliwell in "The Importance of Plato and Aristotle for Aesthetics," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, 5 (1991), 321-348.

Eric Brook

World History

California Baptist University

ebrook@calbaptist.edu

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