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Art and Education in Plato: The Praise Beneath the Criticisms in the Republic

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Abstract: Plato's arguments in the Republic against the value of art for education are directed only against the popular practices of his day; they also indicate art's potential value. The Republic's sequel, the Timaeus, recognizes the value of art for education as long as it is employed "not for irrational pleasures as now", but to produce harmony within us. There are several indications that this is the lesson of the Republic's criticisms: a) The view that art is imitation is expressed not by Socrates but Glaucon, and Socrates urges him to reconsider it. Socrates himself earlier suggested that a painter might imitate something like a form, b) Each of Socrates' arguments suggests a positive contribution of art at the same time that it criticizes its popular employment, c) Art theory and art works of Plato's day point to a different view of art: not as imitation but as aiming at the ideal, and the mythic paradigms on which the tragedies were based lead to a similar conclusion, d) The concluding myth of Er shows how art can achieve its educational function without succumbing to the dangers that Plato saw as undermining the value of art in his day. It is an edifying poetic creation free from all six dangers pointed to by Socrates.

Keywords: Art and Education, Ancient Greek Art and Theory, Plato, Edifying Myth

PLATO'S CRITIQUE OF art as an educational tool in the final book of the *Republic* is perplexing for the opposite reason that other passages are perplexing: not for its ambiguity but for its apparently unambiguous attack on the arts. How can Plato, whose every line of writing testifies to his artistic sensitivity, write of art with such a lack of sympathy? How can the author who concludes Book 10 with one of his greatest artistic achievements, the myth of Er, begin that book by denouncing art as a whole? And how can Plato condemn art for being imitative, in a dialogue that is nothing more than Socrates' imitation of eight different speakers?

Some explanations of the extreme nature of Socrates' criticisms take them to be guided by ulterior motives, such as that their real target is not poetry but sophistry,¹ or by a desire to provoke the audience to come to poetry's defense,² or else the arguments are taken to be in some sense merely ironic, satirical or *ad hominem*,³ or even that they display the hysteria of someone who cannot find good arguments for an indefensible thesis.⁴ I believe that the arguments are

serious and not to be dismissed as irony or *ad hominem*; that Plato understood what they did and did not prove; that they are not the product of hysteria; and that they are not guided by a hidden agenda like an attack on sophistry. They display an awareness of the educational value of art as well as its dangers, but we will have to discover why the emphasis is so skewed toward the negative.

The *Republic* presents an evolving point of view as it takes us through the stages of the Divided Line,⁵ so it is not surprising that after six intervening books the value of the arts is assessed differently in Book 10 than it was in Books 2 and 3 where the arts were an important component of the educational curriculum. The criticisms in Book 10 turn out to be considerably more far reaching than in the earlier books.⁶ Previously only imitators of unhealthy states of mind were banned, while a poet who imitated the speech of a good person in the right way would be encouraged (395d-398b). Since then, however, Socrates argued that the soul or self has three tendencies that work in opposition to one another in such a way

¹ H-G. Gadamer, "Plato and the Poets" [1934] in Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic*, translated by P.C. Smith, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980, 47.

² Stephen Halliwell, *Plato: Republic 10*, trans. and ed., Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1988, 6.

³ Charles Griswold, "The Ideas and the Criticism of Poetry in Plato's *Republic*, Book 10", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981) 135-50.

⁴ Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, 344.

⁵ See my book-length study, *The Transformation of Plato's Republic* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006). Material from that book is included here with the permission of Lexington Books.

⁶ Despite the love and admiration that Socrates has always felt for Homer, he says, one of the many reasons he is convinced that the criticisms of Book 3 were correct is the tripartite division of the soul in Book 4 (595a-b), and we shall see that the opposition between rationality and appetite that was introduced there becomes an important factor in Socrates' criticisms. Socrates not only reaffirms their previous conclusions, however, but makes them even more radical.



that the pleasures of appetite are in competition with rationality even if the pleasure is not an unhealthy one, and the Divided Line regarded all sensuous appearances as potential distractions from intelligible reality. Consequently *any* work of art that aims at emotional pleasures can be detrimental to rationality even when what is imitated is not objectionable in itself, and even artistic imitation that does not appeal to the emotions is problematic because of its appeal to our senses. Thus where Books 2 and 3 acknowledged the positive value of the arts together with their dangers, and the arts became a primary educational tool, here the emphasis is almost entirely on their dangers, and their redeeming features are referred to only obliquely. Socrates does not make explicit that the objection to poetry has now become more far-reaching, but the arguments that follow defend the broader condemnation.⁷

First Argument. Creation and Imitation: Painting (595a-598d)

The concern about imitative art leads Socrates to ask about the nature of imitation generally, and when Glaucon declines to attempt an account of it, Socrates begins by formulating what is both the most concise and broadest description of the theory of forms anywhere in the dialogues: “we posit one form (*eidōs*) for every plurality to which we give the same name” (596a). Thus there are many couches and tables but only one form (*ideai*) of each of them, for if there were two forms there would have to be a third form for what they have in common (597b-c). The individual artifacts come into being when an artisan makes them in accordance with the corresponding form. If I want to build a couch I must first under-

stand what a couch is, and then make something that accords with that understanding. When Socrates goes on to say, “Surely no maker makes the form itself, for how could he?” (596b), the implication is that the form is something beyond what even an inventor can create. Whoever invented the first couch or table was only formulating one version of a possibility that existed all along: “a surface for reclining on” or “a raised surface on which objects can be placed”. All inventions are instantiations of a possibility inherent in the nature of things, and only the latter, strictly speaking, are forms: thus Socrates calls the form of a couch “the couch in nature” (597b6, c2).⁸ By choosing examples of artificial things, Socrates is able to locate the imitator in relation not only to the form but also in relation to the artisan. His subsequent argument will depend in part on comparisons between the artisan and the artist with respect to the form, which requires him to refer to forms of artifacts. The two examples that he chooses here, the couch and the table, were the first two items whose absence Glaucon complained about in the original healthy city of Book 2 (372d7-8) and the first two that Socrates subsequently introduced into the feverish city that followed (373e6-a2). They were the original examples of unnecessary appetites, which paved the way for the more destructive varieties, and Socrates’ reference to them here foreshadows the connection that he will establish by the end of the arguments, between imitation and irrational appetite.

The argument proper begins when Socrates asks what Glaucon would call an artisan who can make absolutely anything, including living things, and Glaucon replies that this artisan is “A most wondrous sophist” (596d1). But anyone can do this by means of a mirror, Socrates says (596d-e), and Glaucon

⁷ Also see Dennis Rohatyn, “Struktur und Funktion in Buch X von Platons Staat: Ein Überblick” (*Gymnasium* 82 [1975] 314-30) 319-21. Views on the compatibility of the two accounts vary. J. Tate argues that the banishment of imitative poets here refers only to the kind of imitation that was already banned in Book 3 (“Imitation in Plato’s Republic”, *Classical Quarterly* 22 [1928] 16-23, and “Plato and Imitation,” *Classical Quarterly* 26 [1932] 161-69), but the evidence does not support that solution; see Alexander Nehamas (“Plato on Imitation and Poetry in Republic 10,” in Moravcsik and Temko, eds., *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the Arts*, Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982, 47-78) 49-50. Gerald Else believes that the accounts are so incompatible as to argue for a much later date for Book 10 than Book 3 (*The Structure and Date of Book 10 of Plato’s Republic*, Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1972, 55-56). Julia Annas too believes it is impossible to reconcile the differences between the two accounts (*An Introduction to Plato’s Republic*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, 336), but Christopher Reeve disagrees: “when Plato tells us at the beginning of Book 10 that all T[echnically]-imitative poetry has been excluded from the Kallipolis, he is referring to the effect that the philosopher’s truth-guided, censoring hand has had on all the poetry that has been allowed to remain there” (*Philosopher Kings: The Argument of Plato’s Republic*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, 228).

⁸ In the case of a couch or table there are at least physical precedents in nature, flat surfaces that we can lie on or raised surfaces that we can place things on; but how can we deny that an inventor makes the form of something that had no pre-existing counterpart in the physical world, such as a wheel? Or a shuttle, to cite the example at *Cratylus* 389b? The following discussion applies especially to wheels on vehicles—other kinds of wheels, like potter’s wheels, would have to be discussed somewhat differently. Insofar as we call many things wheels there must be a form of wheel, and if the form of the wheel is the “wheel in nature” how can there be something in nature of which there can be no natural instantiations? A spinning top, which Socrates himself used as an example in an earlier context (436d), has concrete natural counterparts like a spinning rock, but the axle of a wheel sets it apart from anything in corporeal nature, including logs used as rollers. Nevertheless what he says about the top can be extrapolated to the wheel. He showed that there is nothing contradictory about the fact that a top is both spinning and standing still, because it is the circumference that is spinning and the axis that is standing still. We could say then that whereas in the case of a top the circumference is parallel to the ground and the axis perpendicular to it, the form of a wheel is “a spinning circumference that is perpendicular to the ground, with an axis that is parallel to the ground and provides a basis for supporting and carrying something in the direction of the spin”. The invention of the wheel is in fact a discovery of this principle which was always “there”. All inventions no matter how complicated could be shown in this way to be discoveries of the forms or possibilities inherent in the nature of things, made not by the inventor but by a god, as Socrates puts it a page later (597b), a metaphor for the form of the good, the principle according to which the world is the way it is rather than some other way (509b).

agrees that what painters do is similar—they only copy outward appearances. In that case painters are inferior to artisans who make the thing itself rather than copying its appearance. In the example of the couch, then, there are three levels of reality: the form itself, which if it is made at all could only be made by a god,⁹ an individual couch which is made by a carpenter and is “dimmer” than the form because it is only one of the infinite possible configurations that the form can take (597a); and the imitation of a couch in a painting which is in turn dimmer than the individual couch since it only captures one aspect of the individual (597e-598a). The painting is therefore far from the truth, and the painter, like the man with a mirror, can produce everything only because it is produced at the most superficial level (598b-d).

When Socrates asked about the relationship between the painter and the couch, it was Glaucon who said, “He is an imitator of what those others make” (597e2). But now Socrates raises another possibility:¹⁰ he asks whether the painter tries to imitate the form itself or only the works of the artisans (598a1-3). Since Glaucon had already said that the painter imitates the artifact, the only thing accomplished by repeating the question is to point out that there was another possible answer that they have not considered: the painter may imitate not the physical instance but the form. Glaucon reaffirms his earlier answer, but without giving a reason, and the possibility that has just been raised is never mentioned

again. In an earlier passage, however, Socrates himself seemed to suggest that a painter might in principle imitate something like a form, when he conceived of a painter who paints “a pattern (*paradeigma*) of what the most beautiful human being would be like” (472d).¹¹ “*Paradeigma*” is one of Plato’s words for the forms, and it is hard to see a difference between being able in principle to imitate the paradigm of “most beautiful human being” in a painting, and to imitate the paradigm of couch or table.

In fact the art historian J. J. Pollitt argues that “Greek artists tended to look for the typical and essential forms which expressed the essential nature of classes of phenomena in the same way that Platonic ‘forms’ or ‘ideas’ expressed essential realities underlying the multiplicity of sense perception.”¹² Pollitt’s description of an 8th century BCE statuette of a bronze horse, for example (fig. 1), as “an attempt to get at the ‘horseness’ which lies behind all particular horses” (*ibid*) is more convincing than a Glauconian claim that the sculptor was trying to imitate the outward appearance of a particular horse. Plato speaks about painting rather than sculpture here, but since almost nothing has survived of Greek painting, except for vase painting which was intended primarily to decorate household objects (*ibid* 61), we have to generalize from what sculpture shows us about Greek artistic practices.



Fig. 1: Bronze Horse, c. 750 BCE. Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz. Drawing by Jane Thornton from Photo by Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY

⁹ For a discussion of this passage and the history of its interpretation see Harold Cherniss, “On Plato’s *Republic* X 597 B”, *American Journal of Philology* 53 (1932) 233-42. For more recent discussions see Giovanni Reale, *Toward a New Interpretation of Plato* (trans. & edited by J. Catan & R. Davies, Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997) 314-20, and Charles Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 363.

¹⁰ Cf. David Gallop, “Image and Reality in Plato’s *Republic*” (*Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 47 [1965] 113-31) 120.

¹¹ Cf. Morriss Partee, “Plato’s Banishment of Poetry” (*Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29 [1970] 209-222) 217; and Nehamas 1982: 58-64.

¹² J. J. Pollitt, *Art and Experience in Classical Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972) 6.



Fig. 2: Aphrodite Sosandra, c. 460 BCE. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy. Drawing by Jane Thornton from Photo by Scala / Art Resource, NY

Closer to Plato's own day is the "severe" style represented by the 5th century Aphrodite Sosandra (fig. 2), in which naturalistic imitation is sacrificed to a geometricizing abstraction of the human form. "The effect produced is that of a geometric shape, a polyhedron ... with only the toes projecting from beneath to give a human dimension. The somber, hooded face ... also has a geometric exactitude" (*ibid* 39). The aim is clearly to capture an ideal rather than to imitate the appearance of a particular person.

Not only art works themselves, but even the art theory that Plato would have known contradicts Glaucon's assurance that art is imitation of the outward appearance of individual things. According to Diogenes Laertius, in the 6th century the sculptor Pythagoras of Rhegium was "the first to aim at rhythm and symmetry" (8.47), which is quite a different matter than slavish imitation. Polykleitos of Argos, who flourished in the second half of the 5th century and was evidently influenced by Pythagoreanism—Pythagoras of Samos this time—wrote a treatise called the Canon, according to which the aim of art is to express 'the perfect' (*to eu*), and the ultimate goal was to represent the ideal nature in human beings.¹³ Socrates may have been alluding to Polykleitos' theory in Book 3 when he said that like music and the other arts, painting is full of qualities like

harmony, grace, and rhythm that follow a character that is perfect (*eu*) (400d11-401a1).

If Plato knew that there is more to painting than the imitation of outward appearances, why does he have Glaucon answer so simplistically? In the *Timaeus* we're told:

However much of music in sound is useful for hearing is given for the sake of harmony. And harmony, which has motions akin to the revolutions within us of our soul, was given by the Muses to him who makes use of it with intelligence, not for irrational pleasures, such as now appears to be its use, but as a co-fighter against the disharmoniousness of the revolution of the soul which has come about in us, to bring it into order and concordance with itself. [47c-d]

The reason for Glaucon's answer may lie in the words "irrational pleasures, such as now appears to be its use". In Plato's own day the idealization characteristic of the works shown above was replaced by a new emphasis on emotion and sensuousness.¹⁴ Given the artistic practices of the day, if Socrates had asked Glaucon not about what "the painter" does but about how "painters now" appear to use their art, Glaucon's answer would seem to be justified—much

¹³ Pollitt 1972: 106, 108. In a later and more detailed survey of this aspect of Greek art Pollitt writes with regard to Greek artists who aimed at "making forms", that their basic approach "was to pare away details which seemed inessential in a form in order to bring out its underlying geometric structures, and then to reassemble these structures into a new proportional harmony". "Early Classical Greek Art in a Platonic Universe" in C. Boulter (ed.), *Greek Art: Archaic into Classical*, Leiden: Brill, 1985, 96-111 and plates 79-96. Plato must have been as well acquainted with art theory as the *Republic* shows him to be about music theory (and the *Phaedrus* about theories of rhetoric).

¹⁴ Pollitt 1972, 143-64.

in the way that Schopenhauer complained of composers of his day who wrote “program music” that illustrated events in the world of phenomena, imitating outward appearances instead of exploiting music’s ability to express the in-itself of the will. Socrates’ strategy throughout the founding of the city has been to minimize the risk of corrupting influences (e.g. 490e-493a), so art is here judged by the damage it can do rather than the good it can accomplish. Accordingly the emphasis is not on art’s ability to convey the intelligible by means of the sensuous (an ability that was indicated in Book 3 and will be again), but on the danger that it will make the sensuous an end in itself and focus our thoughts on material things. All art, as we shall see, functions as a bridge between sensuousness and intelligibility, but the bridge can be crossed in both directions. Artistic idealization leads us from our senses to something intelligible, but sensuous or emotional art uses beauty to enhance the pleasures of sensation and tie us more closely to the material world, as in the *Timaeus* passage.

Second Argument. Imitation and Implementation: Poetry (598d-601b)

During the first argument’s critique of painting Socrates anticipated that the criticism would apply to poetry as well. After Glaucon agreed that a painter creates an imitation three times removed from the form and truth, Socrates added, “This then will also be the case with a tragedian if indeed he is an imitator” (597e). Given the mythic paradigms on which the tragedies were based, Plato could hardly have believed that they were nothing more than slavish imitations of particular individuals. The person who says, “Whoever arrives at the gates of poetry without the madness of the Muses, expecting to be an adequate poet by means of craft, is unsuccessful” (*Phaedrus* 245a),¹⁵ would not be likely to disagree with Aristotle’s claim that poetry is more philosophical than history because it is concerned with universals rather than particulars (*Poetics* 9) — that poets are interested in the individuals they imitate not ultimately for the sake of biographical accuracy but as vehicles by which to express something universal. But even if poetry is more philosophical than history, it is not as philosophical as philosophy, and that is where Socrates’ emphasis lies here (607b).¹⁶

The first argument that is specifically directed against poetry takes as its target “tragedy and its

leader Homer” (598d). The reference to Homer shows what we’ve already seen in the case of painting, that the present critique applies to a broader conception of imitation than did that of Book 3. There only the directly imitative poetry of drama came under attack, but now it includes even the indirect imitation of narrative epitomized by Homer.¹⁷

The critique of poetry takes a different form from the previous critique of painting, because the products of poetry are composed of words rather than visual images, and can thus be taken as providing explicit guidance to life — thus poetry is the only art form that is a direct rival to philosophy (607b). There were intimations of this earlier. In Book 1 Cephalus presented his views in the words of Sophocles (329b-d) and Pindar (331a), and Polemarchus did so in the words of Simonides (331d-e); while at the beginning of Book 2 Adeimantus shows how the words of the poets encourage people to believe that justice is profitable only for its reputation while injustice is profitable inherently (363a-368a).¹⁸ Socrates’ argument attacks the common belief that if poets create beautiful poetry they must have knowledge of their subject, and since they take all things as their subjects, including crafts, virtue and vice, and even the gods, they must know all things and cannot be mere imitators three times removed from truth (598d-599a). The argument is not presented sequentially but it implies the following steps:

1. Someone who truly understands actions could perform them as well as imitate them.
2. Actions have more value and benefit than images of them do.
3. Therefore if poets understood the actions they imitate they would prefer to be remembered for doing noble deeds rather than for imitating them — to be praised rather than to praise.
4. There is no record of such accomplishments by the great poets.
5. Therefore they do not have genuine knowledge of the things they imitate.

The third premise is obviously contentious since poets would not accept the description of their work as mere imitation. But Socrates is taking this point to have been established by the previous argument and in need of no further discussion — even though in that argument he applied the conclusion to poetry only in tentative terms: “if indeed (*eiper*) he is an

¹⁵ Cf. Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977): “Surely art transforms, is creation, as Plato’s own praise of the ‘divine frenzy’ must imply” (7).

¹⁶ Cf. N.R. Murphy, *The Interpretation of Plato’s Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1951) 229.

¹⁷ Gallop points out that the charge of “mere word painting, if it disqualifies the poet, [need not] disqualify the philosopher. Since the latter depicts Forms and not phenomena, the fact that he merely paints need not debar him from pronouncing upon morals and statecraft. For his words, unlike the poet’s, lay more hold upon truth than action” (1965: 127).

¹⁸ Cf. Stephen Halliwell, “The Republic’s Two Critiques of Poetry” (In Höffe 1997, 313-32) 314-15.

imitator" (597e). The third premise stands or falls with the validity of the first argument, and our conclusion about the first argument was that its claims are true selectively but not universally.

Let us concentrate instead on what is distinctive about the new argument. The premise for which Socrates provides the most detailed argument is step 4, a type of argument familiar from earlier dialogues.¹⁹ He says he will not ask about crafts like medicine and whether poets have cured people (although to raise the question is to answer it), but only about the most important crafts like those of war, government, and education. None of the great poets have benefited their cities as lawgivers, like Lycurgus, Charondas, and Solon, or devised useful inventions like Thales and Anacharsis, or had followings as educators like Pythagoras, Protagoras, and Prodicus. Since Protagoras and Prodicus were sophists, this is a strange argument from the mouth of Socrates, who denounced the sophists three books earlier (492a-495a). Are we really to suppose that the poets' lack of wisdom can be proven by the fact that they are not as politically successful as sophists?

Equally puzzling is the goal of "being praised" that Socrates appeals to in step 3. The corrupt nature of public praise and blame was graphically exposed in Books 6, 7, and 8,²⁰ and will be identified in the fifth argument as a corrupting influence on playwrights (605a). Given Socrates' own fate in the court of public opinion it is a strange court for Plato to have him appeal to now; it inspires as little confidence as a sign of wisdom as does the success of the sophists. If this argument were offered as a free-standing demonstration it would be hard not to regard it as in bad faith since it uses premises that Socrates cannot have believed to be true. However it is not offered as a free-standing demonstration but as a refutation of an objection to the previous argument. It began with the words, "we hear from some people that [Homer and the tragedians] know all the crafts, all human affairs concerning virtue and vice, and the affairs of the gods as well" (598d). The argument refutes this claim on its own terms, appealing in passing to the concepts of popularity and praise that the objectors presumably accept, even if Socrates does not. It loosely takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*: assuming that the poets have the kind of knowledge you attribute to them they would have used it to benefit public institutions, but they did not do so, so your assumption must be false.

Socrates reaffirms their previous conclusion that the poet, like the sculptor, does not need to know his

subjects but only to imitate their outward appearance, so as to impress those who form opinions by seeing things only through words. What impresses them, however, is not only the skillfulness of the imitation, but also the fact that the poet "speaks in meter, rhythm, and harmony... So great is the enchantment that these very things have by nature" (601a-b). In the first argument Socrates simplified the indictment against painting by making no mention of the important positive qualities of harmony, grace, and rhythm that gave the arts importance in the education of the guardians (400d11-401a1). Now he shows that he has not forgotten the power of these attributes, but they do not testify to wisdom on the part of artists if wisdom means understanding the world of action. An understanding of meter, rhythm, harmony, and beauty generally is no small thing in the context of the *Republic*. But it is not the same as the practical wisdom that is also attributed to the poets as an extension of it by audiences who fail to make the distinction.²¹

Third Argument. Acquaintance and Imitation: Painting (601b-602c)

The first argument put visual artists as makers of imitations in third place with respect to truth, behind the maker of the form and the maker of the thing that is imitated by the painting. The new argument puts visual artists in third place again, but this time not ontologically with respect to the truth of the work of art, but epistemologically with respect to the knowledge of the artists. The third argument thus combines the first two: as the first argument put visual artists in third place with respect to the truth of their creation, this does so with respect to their knowledge; and as the second argument denigrated the factual knowledge of poets, this makes a similar point about painters. Socrates begins with the example of a horse's reins and bit. The painter imitates them, and the cobbler and smith make them, but the rider best understands their use. In all cases there are these three kinds of technique—imitating, making, and using—and the user knows the thing best because the excellence (*aretē*), beauty, and rightness of a thing refer to its use. Thus the user tells the maker what is good or bad about the way the object performs (601b-d).

Socrates now changes his example. A flute player tells the flute maker what is good and bad about his flutes and instructs him what kind to make, and the maker follows his instructions. The one who *knows*

¹⁹ *Ion* 537a-540e, *Gorgias* 453d, *Protagoras* 311b, 318c.

²⁰ 492b-c, 449c-550a, 516c-d.

²¹ J.O. Urmson shows how this issue is as relevant today as it was then ("Plato and the Poets", in Kraut 1997, 223-34).

the goodness and badness of flutes, then, is the user,²² while the maker has only a *correct belief* about them. Imitators neither know from their own experience whether or not what they imitate is good, nor do they have correct belief from others. What they imitate is what appears beautiful to the multitude who also lack knowledge. Imitation, then, is a kind of playing rather than a serious matter. Once again the conclusions about painting are extended to poetry (601d-602b).

The charge of a lack of seriousness is also raised in the *Phaedrus* but in that case against the writing of *philosophy* (276b-277a). Does that mean philosophy suffers from the same limitations as the arts? From the standpoint of the *Republic* where the highest knowing cannot be put into words (533a), the *Phaedrus*' attitude toward written philosophy would not be out of place, especially since written philosophy too is an *imitation* in words. But the philosopher, when writing about the experience of thinking or virtue, is a user as well as an imitator, and so written philosophy is at least serious in the sense required by this third argument. The characterization of artists as imitating not the being of a thing but only the way it appears to their audience, recalls other passages of the *Phaedrus*, where rhetoricians are condemned for caring not about the way things really are but only the way their audience thinks that they are (260b-d, 272d-273c). Since what painters do is comparable to what manipulative rhetoricians or even sophists do (cf. *Sophist* 235b-236b), the initial comparison of artists with sophists at 596d1 should not be taken lightly.

There is another side to this argument. Why did Socrates change his example from rein and bits to flute? All of the points that are made in terms of flutes could have been made in terms of reins and bits. The most obvious difference is that in the new example the *technē* associated with the most complete knowledge is that of a musician. In an argument devoted to denying to artists any true knowledge, it is intriguing to find knowledge attributed to the musician at the same time that it is denied to the painter. The first argument described the artists' work only

in terms of the imitation of outward appearances, and without any reference to the important contribution that they were earlier acknowledged to make in terms of harmony, grace, rhythm, and beauty generally (400d-402a). The second argument, in turn, reminded us explicitly of the power of the poet's knowledge of meter, rhythm, and harmony (601a-b). If we now ask what kind of knowledge flute players have that enables them to tell the maker what is good about flutes, most obviously they must have some understanding of goodness (601d9), which involves in this case an understanding of beauty (601e8). They must also have knowledge of *harmonia* or tuning, in order to judge whether the instrument is in tune. As for the poets, Socrates reminds us again of their knowledge of rhythm when he goes on to say that they are imitators whether they write in iambs or epic hexameters (602b). There is a tacit acknowledgment once again that although artists may have no knowledge of the kinds of things they imitate, they have another kind of knowledge whose importance cannot be overestimated, although it is not of a conceptual nature.²³

Fourth Argument. Art and the Divided Line: Painting (602c-603b)

Representational painting is an art of illusion, and its power to produce illusions is what makes it enthralling. But this power is of questionable benefit if, as Socrates says, it stems from an inability of the sense of sight to guard against being deceived. The corrective of visual deception is reason, which tests appearances by means of measuring, counting, and weighing (602c-d). When our eyes tell us that a stick that is partly immersed in water is bent, and reason tells us that it is straight, we trust reason because we regard it as the superior guide to truth. Thus not only are the products of painting and imitative art far from the truth, but the part of us that they consort with is also inferior; and the offspring of these two inferior parents—the effect of painting on an inferior part of our nature—is inferior as well.²⁴

²² *Chrōmenos* — in fact the terms “good” (*agathos*) and “useful” (*chrēstos*) are used interchangeably here (601d-e) as elsewhere in Plato. *Chrēstos* is used throughout the *Republic* (and elsewhere) as a synonym for *agathos* (“good”): 334c-e, 396d, 401b, 403d, 409d, 424a, 438a, 475b, 478e, 531b, 573a, 602b, 608b, 618b. Cf. Guthrie: it is an “old Socratic dictum” that “the excellence and beauty of everything ... consists in its fitness to perform its proper function” (1975: 546).

²³ There has been an ascent through the stages of the tripartite soul in the examples that Socrates chose: the couch and table were allusions to the unnecessary appetites (372d-373a), horses are first mentioned in the *Republic* in the spirited context of competition, a horse race (328a), and later serve as an explicit example of spiritedness (375a), while the flute example implies rationality (*harmonia*: 530d). Cf. Seth Benardete, *Socrates' Second Sailing: On Plato's Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1989) 215, although he is mistaken in thinking that 375a is the first mention of horses (cf. 335b and 352e2).

²⁴ Paul Shorey points out the resemblance of this line to 496a (*Plato's Republic*, Vol. 2. London: Heinemann.1935: 450). Once again (597e, 602a) Socrates extrapolates the conclusion from painting to poetry (603b), but we shall see that the way poetry consorts with an inferior part of us is not the same as the way painting does. This discussion of the effect of painting on us recalls Socrates' description in Book 7 of how perceptual contradictions could be used to turn the soul from the realm of *doxa* to that of reason (523e-524c), from the shadows to the realities. But here it seems that these same contradictions contribute to the power of art to appeal to *doxa* rather than reason. This fundamental difference is reflected in the fact that here Socrates appeals to the examples of shadow painting (painting that uses shading to

The fourth argument, then, accuses painting, and the arts in general, of using elements of our experience, such as optical illusions, to make our perceptual experience more exciting and thus tie us even more closely to it, instead of using them to expose the insubstantiality of the world of the senses and turn us toward what is in truth substantial.²⁵

Fifth Argument. Art and the Tripartite Soul: Poetry (603b-605c)

Until now the arguments have been based on the Divided Line's distinction between originals and imitations or images, and have criticized art for being satisfied with imitations.²⁶ The common theme of all the criticisms was that art devotes itself to appearance and the senses rather than to reality and reason. Art was not charged with being inimical to rationality as such, but only with emphasizing rationality's lowest levels. The fifth argument, on the contrary, will conclude that poetry destroys rationality in us (*apollusi to logistikon*: 605b), and so for the first time the critique moves from the epistemological considerations of the Divided Line to the motivational, implicitly moral distinctions of the tripartite soul.²⁷

In Book 3 when they discussed education in poetry, and scrutinized the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* for unwholesome passages, Socrates mentioned that if a

good man suffers the loss of a son or something else dear to him he will bear it more easily than other people (387e). Socrates now adds that such a man will be torn between his emotion which pushes him to give vent to his pain, and rationality and convention (*logos kai nomos*) which push him toward restraint, with the result that he will be more likely to give way to his grief in private because he would be ashamed to do so in public. The convention that Socrates refers to says that it is best to accept misfortunes as quietly as possible, if only because excessive grieving impedes our ability to respond to them effectively (603e-604c). The part of us that wants to indulge in self-pity is irrational, lazy, and cowardly, but it is more interesting and comprehensible to theater-goers than is rational restraint, and is easier for poets to portray. Since the poets depend on the approval of the spectators, they naturally focus on the excitable and irrational character rather than the controlled and rational one.²⁸ Like the painter, then, the poet's creations are not only inferior with respect to truth but they also appeal to an inferior part of us.

Sixth Argument. Art and the Corruption of Virtue (605c-606d)

This brings us to what Socrates calls the most serious of the charges against imitation—that the poet under-

give the illusion of three-dimensionality) and the way distance fools us about the size of an object (602c-d), whereas in the earlier passage when Glaucon suggested those very examples Socrates said that he was missing the point (523b). The tension between these passages, which refer to the same phenomenon of inconsistent sense impressions but which derive opposite results from it, is analogous to a tension we have witnessed before. The second argument reminded us that rhythm and harmony have so powerful an effect on us that they can make mediocre products seem exciting and profound (601a-b); but these same qualities formed the basis of the children's first education to goodness (400d-401a). Both of these tensions show how the appearance of the rational within the perceptual realm (whether symbolically in rhythm, harmony, and beauty, or directly in calculation) sets up a pressure that can push us toward either pole. It can make us dissatisfied with the perceptual realm because of its lack of self-sufficiency and thus point to something beyond sense perception. Or we can find the unresolved tension exciting in itself and thus have our pleasure in the perceptual realm enhanced, like the intensity of the false pleasures that results from the juxtaposition of pleasure and pain (586b-c), or Socrates' example in the *Philebus* of inexpressible pleasures produced by the juxtaposition of the pain of an unquenchable itch and the pleasure of the relief brought by scratching it (46e). The alternatives are reminiscent of the alternative uses of music mentioned in the *Timaeus* passage cited above: it can be used either for irrational pleasures, "such as now appears to be its use", or to bring us into harmony with the rational basis of reality (47c-d).

²⁵ Cf. Murdoch on Plato: "Art makes us content with appearances, and by playing magically with particular images it steals the educational wonder of the world away from philosophy and confuses our sense of direction toward reality and our motives for discerning it" (1977: 66). For Murdoch's defense of art see *op. cit.* 82-89.

²⁶ The four levels of the Divided Line (*eikasia*, *pistis*, *dianoia*, *noesis*) are divisions of the rational part of the tripartite soul — they are ways by which we hold something for true rather than pleasant or honorable. When the previous argument extrapolated the criticism of painting to poetry, Glaucon expressed his agreement by saying, "It is likely" (*eikos*, 603b8). Socrates now replies, in words that recall the stages of the Divided Line but without observing the distinctions among them, that they should not have *pistis* (trust) in *eikasia* (what is likely) on the basis of painting, but should go to that part of *dianoia* (the mind) with which poetic imitations consort and see whether it is inferior or something to be taken seriously (603b9-c2).

²⁷ In what follows, however, Socrates speaks of only two parts of the soul, the rational and irrational. This has led some readers to see a tension between this discussion and that of Book 4, either resolvable or not. Cf. Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1981) 339-40; Elizabeth Belfiore, "Plato's Greatest Accusation against Poetry" (*Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 9 [1983] 39-62), 152-56; Halliwell 1988: 134-35; Ramona Naddaff, *Exiling the Poets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 162n6. Since the remaining two arguments criticize art for undermining the rule of rationality within us, what is at stake here is the relationship between what is rational in us and what is not, so there is no reason to keep in view the further distinction between two irrational parts of our nature. Whatever nourishes either one of them at the expense of reason is equally blameworthy. When Socrates speaks of pleasure (603c7, 606d1-2), laziness (604d10), or appetite (606a5-6, d2) the appetitive part of the soul is implied, while when he speaks about fighting against pain (604a2), or about cowardice (604d10), or anger (606d1) the spirited part is implied; but to distinguish the two explicitly in this context would be irrelevant.

²⁸ Apart from the competition to win a prize, the pressure on dramatic poets to please the theater-going crowd was evident in Book 6 when Socrates remarked that in theatres and other public gatherings people object so aggressively to what they dislike and approve so loudly what they like, that it is hard not to be swept away by their views (492b-c).

mines the rational part of us by strengthening the irrational part (605c). Part of being virtuous is the ability to control our emotions, to bear our suffering with dignity and strength rather than giving vent to self-pitying exhibitions of grief. But although we may be ashamed to indulge our emotions in this way, we enjoy seeing this kind of behavior in tragic heroes. Not only does the part of us that by nature desires to give vent to grief take vicarious pleasure in watching others behave in this way, but even our better judgement may regard this as a harmless pleasure and allow it to be indulged, not realizing that to enjoy watching other people behave a certain way necessarily has an effect on us. Once the emotion of pity is nourished in us in relation to others, it is more difficult to restrain in relation to ourselves (605c-606b).²⁹

Concluding Remarks

The first three arguments showed that the arts are not based on the kind of factual conceptual knowledge that naïve audiences attribute to great artists, but at the same time showed that another kind of knowledge and truth is present in great art, although audiences neglect to distinguish it from the first. The final three arguments took a different direction, showing that the arts reach us at the level of sense perception and emotion, and can undermine what is best in us if they treat such phenomena as ends in themselves to be made as pleasant as possible to the appetites, rather than as vehicles by which to awaken us to the intelligible reality that is obscured by our senses and appetites.

The three criticisms of painting were all extrapolated against poetry (597e, 602a, 603b), but the criticisms of poetry were not extended to painting, most significantly in the case of the “greatest accusation” against poetry, its ability to seduce even the best of us into unhealthy emotions like self-pity. Accordingly it is only the poets who are banned from the city, not the painters and musicians (398a, 595a, 607a-b).³⁰ In the *Laws* the Athenian says that it is difficult to understand the meaning of music without words (669e). With painting it is almost as difficult. Because the language of paintings, like that of music,

is not as explicit as that of poetry, it cannot influence our attitudes the way the literary arts can.

The philosophical condemnation of poetry is nothing new.³¹ There is a long standing quarrel between philosophy and poetry, says Socrates, and the poets speak equally harshly of philosophers (607b). Socrates’ strategy is to put the onus of proof on poetry: now that he has advanced his arguments he says it is up to the poets or the lovers of poetry (*philopoiētai*) to refute them.³² If no convincing rebuttals are brought forward, they must regard the love (*erōta*) of imitative poetry that was instilled in them by their upbringing, the way lovers (*erasthentes*) do who realize that their love (*erōta*) is not a healthy one, and force themselves to refrain from it (607b-608a). The emphasis on eros throughout this passage helps underscore the importance of what is at stake from Socrates’ point of view: what distinguishes the best and the worst people from each other is not their fundamental nature (one and the same nature can be fulfilled or corrupted) but the direction in which their eros is turned, whether toward rationality or appetite.³³ Accordingly, if the love of poetry carries within it a love of the objects of appetite and sensuousness it is a dangerous love.

By limiting the field of battle to arguments, Socrates is open to a charge of begging the question in favor of rationality, since argument is the domain of philosophy, not art. In the *Philebus* when the life of reason and that of pleasure compete for supremacy, and Socrates proposes that they decide between the two rationally, Philebus replies that as far as he is concerned pleasure will be the winner regardless of what happens in the argument (12a-b), and refuses to take any further part in the proceedings. Why should the competing claims of hedonism and rationalism be adjudicated by the criteria of reason? If Philebus finds the pursuit of pleasure more pleasant than the pursuit of truth, then for him that is the only criterion that counts. In the same way, if poets find poetic thinking more rewarding than philosophical thinking, they may dismiss Socrates’ arguments as irrelevant. If someone denies that rational inquiry is better than any other basis for making choices, there is no common ground on which Socrates can meet them, and in the *Philebus* Plato shows that he understands this. For those of us who believe in the value

²⁹ Comedy is as dangerous in this respect as tragedy, for just as in tragedies we allow ourselves to indulge in the pleasure of pity toward tragic figures, vicariously sharing their self-pity, in comedies we permit ourselves to enjoy and vicariously share in the clownishness of the characters even though we would be ashamed to behave that way ourselves. In both cases we nourish what is irrational in us and strengthen it against the control of the rational. The principle that operates in the case of pity and clownishness operates also with respect to our other appetites as well—sex and anger and all the others.

³⁰ Cf. Alexander Nehamas, “Plato on Imitation and Poetry in *Republic* 10” (in Julius Moravcsik and Philip Temko, eds., *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the Arts*, Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield 1982) 47.

³¹ 607b. Cf. Xenophanes fr. 11. For a survey of where Plato’s and Homer’s world-views coincide and where they differ, see Charles Segal, “‘The Myth was Saved’: Reflections on Homer and the Mythology of Plato’s *Republic*” (*Hermes* 106 (1978) 315-36).

³² Socrates adds that he and his allies will willingly listen to the refutations because they would be glad to believe that these works which give so much pleasure might also be beneficial.

³³ Compare 491d-492a with 485d-e and 572e-573e.

of rational inquiry, however, there is nothing arbitrary about Socrates' challenge.

Socrates concludes that only by excluding all imitative poetry from the city, and limiting poetry to hymns to the gods and encomia to good men, can pleasure and pain be prevented from gaining an excessive level of influence over us (606c-607a). Hymns and encomia consort with the highest part of our nature, rationality—the former directing our thoughts to the gods, and the latter directing them to manifestations of the good.³⁴ The end of Book 10, the story of what Er experienced in Hades, suggests that another form of poetry is permissible as well. Socrates concludes the myth of Er with the words, “And thus myth was saved and not destroyed” (621b8). His words are grammatically ambiguous. The primary meaning is that “Er’s story (*mythos*) was preserved because he didn’t drink a full measure of forgetfulness,” but it admits of a secondary meaning: “And thus literature (*mythos*) is *salvaged*”—in other words, “In this way literature can be permitted to exist in our city.”³⁵ The myth of Er is in fact free from all six of the elements that were targeted by Socrates’ criticisms of art: 1) It does not primarily imitate the visible world (it does talk about meadows, doors, lights, writings, water, and so on, but its primary subjects are invisible: disembodied souls, divinities, heaven, and Hades); 2) It provides us with moral guidance in life; 3) It is the testimony of someone with direct personal experience of the subject; 4) It appeals to us at the level of thought rather than sensuality; 5) It nourishes rationality rather than emotion; 6) It tends to strengthen our self-control rather than undermining it. To put the contrast between this kind of poetry and the conventional kind in general terms, whereas most poetry makes use of the extraordinary to enhance our enjoyment of the ordinary, the myth of Er uses images of the ordinary (meadows, doors, lights, writings, water) to enable us to conceive of the extraordinary. As with Plato’s other myths, it functions at the level of what the Divided Line calls *dianoia*, which uses visible images to convey the intelligible (510d-e), rather than *noesis* which is limited to pure concepts without images (510b), so its function is pedagogical rather than strictly philosophical—there would be no reason for philosophers at the level of *noesis* to speak to each other in myths. Even the most noetic parts of Plato’s writing, however, are never purely noetic: artistic poetic elements play such an important part that his criticisms of poetry are often thought to be either not serious or self-refuting. But once again we can see that they are free from all the elements that call down Socrates’ criticisms on traditional poetry.

Socrates’ arguments point to real dangers in the arts. Works of art can and often are created 1) without looking to true reality, 2) without displaying wisdom regarding the subject matter, 3) without having personal acquaintance with it, 4) without rising above the pleasures of illusion, 5) without rising above self-indulgent emotionality, and 6) without governing our irrational emotions. However, nothing valuable is without danger, including philosophy—a view of philosophy voiced not only by Socrates’ jurors but by the narrator of the *Republic* himself. He warned earlier that if people are given a taste of argumentation when they are young, they are likely to develop an excessive distrust of traditional beliefs, and discredit both themselves and philosophy generally (537e-539d). The arts are no more invalidated by their possible misuse than is philosophy, and together with his criticisms we saw that Socrates also alluded to art’s positive potential. In the first argument he raised the possibility of the painter imitating the forms rather than particular things (598a), echoing the possibility he raised earlier of a painter painting “a pattern of what the most beautiful human being would be like” (472d), a potential that accrues to poetry as well when Socrates extrapolates the argument from painters to poets (597e). The second and third arguments, in turn, showed how poets and musicians have their own kind of access to truth through their relationship with harmony, rhythm, and beauty.

Socrates does not fail to appreciate the value of the arts, and shows more respect for them than do those who treat them more tolerantly because they consider them harmless. His criticisms are aimed not primarily at the arts but at their practitioners. Earlier Adeimantus criticized philosophy in the same way: most of those who pursue philosophy become completely strange, or even vicious, and at best useless (487c-d). Socrates had replied that this was not the fault of philosophy but of those who practice it in a manner that degrades it (494a-496a). In the same way his criticisms are not an indictment of art, so much as of those who abuse its potential. The passage quoted above from the *Timaeus* is Plato’s clearest description of this abuse: music is being wrongly employed for irrational pleasures instead of to make us internally harmonious and open to truth (47c-d). The power of the arts lies in the relation between the universal and the individual—between intelligibility and sensibility or between rationality and emotion. When the arts use what is universal and transcendent to enhance our enjoyment of material things, their works are open to Socrates’ criticisms; but when they use material things to awaken

³⁴ Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Plato and the Poets” (in Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) 65-66.

³⁵ Cf. Segal 1978: 330.

us to a harmony and beauty that are no longer material, they become the powerful instruments of educa-

tion and enlightenment that Socrates welcomed in Book 3.

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