

Creativity and Justice: The Arts in Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*

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I: Introduction

Plato and his writings are a major point of fixation in the fields of philosophy and political science. In 2001, a poll conducted by *The Philosophers' Magazine* placed Plato's *Republic* as the greatest philosophical work of all time.¹ Clearly, Plato's thought is viewed as extremely influential and resonates with readers today; though his conclusions and arguments are not necessarily aligned with those of modern philosophers, there are certain contents of his writing which present highly intriguing questions that are still relevant to this day.

Particularly interesting, and frequently puzzling, is the way that Plato discusses the arts, especially poetry. Throughout his dialogues, Plato makes use of beautifully expressive language to convey his ideas concerning philosophy and politics, yet he is heavily critical of poetry and other forms of artistic expression. This seems contradictory, especially taking into account his use of the poetic Myth of Er to conclude the *Republic*. However, by separating his rhetorical treatment of justice and the soul from where he is making earnest proposals for an ideal (or practical) state, this apparent contradiction can be reconciled. In both the *Republic* and *Laws*, Plato makes extensive use of poetic language while also laying out strict guidelines as to what forms of artistic expression should be permitted by a just state. The *Laws* and *Republic* treat the arts in ways that are both similar and distinctly different, which presents a paradox of sorts between the ideas present in the earlier and later dialogues.

¹ Fiachra Gibbons, "The Thinking Person's Favourite Thinkers," *The Guardian*, September 7, 2001. <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/sep/07/books.humanities>.

I will argue that this ultimately suggests a view of poetry and other forms of art as beneficial to a society if regulated and used in certain ways, but dangerous if given free reign, a view that was developed and refined over the course of Plato's career between the *Republic* and *Laws*. This paper will begin with a review of previous scholarly literature on the subject, followed by my analysis of the *Republic*, and then the *Laws*, before returning to the *Republic* to address the Myth of Er. Finally, I will draw a connection between this argument on Plato's views on art and ways in which it is treated in modern society by comparing Plato's ideas to the mission statements of groups like the Motion Picture Association of America and Recording Industry Association of America, which provide content rating systems for film and music respectively.

II: Literature Review

The question of the arts in Plato's dialogues has of course been discussed before, and many compelling arguments have been a part of this conversation. Firstly, Morris Henry Partee offered his interpretation in his 1970 article "Plato's Banishment of Poetry."² Partee's central argument is similar to mine, in that he argues in favor of interpreting Plato's censorship of poetry at face value. He thoroughly examines the idea that Plato himself could be considered a poet, and that he himself used very poetic language, an idea sometimes used to argue that Plato did not honestly intend his criticism of poetry. Partee admits that Plato was fond and appreciative of poetry as a

² Morris Henry Partee, "Plato's Banishment of Poetry," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29, 2 (Winter 1970): 209-222. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/428602>

form of expression, and used it quite effectively, but argues that ultimately he found it inferior to philosophy and rational discourse in terms of helping to create a just society.

Partee's biggest strength is his focus on Plato's emphatic support for rationality and philosophy as the means to virtue, and how poetry does not fit into this framework. His argument here is quite coherent and appears difficult to refute. This argument ties quite strongly into mine, in that we are essentially arguing the same position, though I intend to focus primarily on different aspects of Plato's dialogues. Partee focuses largely on Plato's ideals of rationality and philosophy, which I find quite compelling. However, he does not make much distinction between the ideas dealing with poetry in the *Republic* and in the *Laws*. While they are similar in many ways, it is important to consider the different contexts and possible intentions of the two dialogues. In addition, Partee does not comprehensively respond to counterarguments presented by the ironic interpretation of the *Republic's* Kallipolis as a teaching tool not meant to propose an actual practical society. I intend to clearly distinguish between the ways that the creative arts are treated in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, and properly address the possible refutation of Plato's criticism of poetry as literal based on interpreting the *Republic* ironically.

The ironic interpretation of the *Republic* as it pertains to the question of poetry is represented by Darnell Rucker in his article "Plato and the Poets."³ Rucker's central argument is that the city depicted in the *Republic* is an ideal state constructed for the purpose of exploring virtue among individuals, and not an actual one, and therefore the

³ Darnell Rucker, "Plato and the Poets," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 25, 2 (Winter 1966): 167-170. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/429388>.

ensorship of poetry should not be considered to be applicable to a real state.⁴ This interpretation is not without basis or merit, as I will discuss later on. However, it does not appear to be easily applicable to the *Laws*, which contains similar, and in some ways more clearly defined guidelines concerning creative expression.

Rucker also argues that art serves “at least in part” in real societies as relief and distraction from the difficulties of the real world, which is unnecessary in the ideal society of the *Republic*.⁵ However, this interpretation of the function of the arts does not seem to fit with that of Plato’s as expressed in either dialogue; both the *Laws* and *Republic* ultimately make a case for art and poetry that is used to develop human good, and therefore serves as more than a source of aesthetic pleasure. Furthermore, Rucker claims that the *Republic* provides a goal for actual societies to measure themselves by and strive towards.⁶ This presents an apparent contradiction, as if real-world states base themselves on the *Republic*, the ideas therein would have real-world effects, rather than just serving as part of a dialectic exercise concerning virtue of the soul.

A third interesting interpretation of Plato’s treatment of the subject is offered by Mary Whitlock Blundell in her article “Self-Censorship in Plato’s Republic.”⁷ Blundell points out that Plato includes in his own dialogue some characters and scenes that seemingly contradict the guidelines for censorship later laid out by Socrates.⁸ She then

⁴ Rucker, 167.

⁵ Ibid, 169.

⁶ Ibid, 170.

⁷ Mary Whitlock Blundell, “Self-Censorship in Plato’s Republic,” *Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 26, 3/4 (1993): 17–36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40913724>.

⁸ Ibid, 23-24.

argues that the content and form of the dialogue shifts through its course to more closely match said guidelines - Plato in effect applies the very censorship he espouses to his own writing.⁹ Eventually she concludes that Socrates' views in the dialogue can not be held to directly mirror Plato's own, and that the dialogue serves more as an exploration and examination of these views rather than an espousal of them, and that Plato's own views on the subject are irrelevant to discussion of the dialogue.¹⁰ I disagree with these two final points - it seems contradictory that Plato should choose to enforce the censorship guidelines he outlines on himself if he does not find value in them, at least in pursuit of understanding virtue. Plato's intent and personal beliefs are of course impossible to know, but it seems likewise impossible to entirely separate them from his work. In addition, his return to this subject in the *Laws* indicates an interest in the question of artistic expression beyond using self-censorship as a literary exercise or experiment.

III: The *Republic*

Taking these interpretations into account, let us examine the treatment of poetry in the *Republic*. When laying out the educational plan for the guardian class of Kallipolis, who serve as the city's elite protectors of justice and order, Socrates places stringent restrictions on poetry, citing some of Homer's works as creating a fear of death: "We'll beg Homer and the other poets not to be harsh if we strike out these and all similar things. It's not that they are not poetic and sweet for the many to hear, but the

⁹ Blundell, 35.

¹⁰ Ibid, 35-36.

more poetic they are, the less they should be heard by boys and men who must be free and accustomed to fearing slavery more than death”.¹¹ In order for the guardians to properly ensure that justice is maintained in Kallipolis, it is decided that poetic expression must be restricted to that which instills reverence and awe of the gods, and does not portray death and the underworld as frightening. In this portion of the dialogue Socrates places strict limitations on how the gods can be portrayed, going so far as to list certain lines from Homer to be “expunged.”¹²

Here, poetry left uncensored weakens and corrupts the souls of those who protect the city, and thus is detrimental to the sanctity of the city in its entirety. The fact that Socrates says that they’ll “beg” Homer and the other great poets not to be offended by omissions of portions of their work shows clearly that Plato had great respect for them, but ultimately thought poetry unrestricted presented a danger. Also interesting is that rather than removing poetry from the city entirely (at least at this point), Socrates wants to cut out only certain lines and passages that he thinks weaken the souls of the guardians. If these passages are so dangerous, why not remove the poems entirely? The fact that he views certain parts of the poetry as quite harmful but still wants most of it to be left as it is reveals Plato’s admiration for the poetic masters of the time. Following this decision to “expunge” certain lines from classic poetry, the matter is not addressed again for much of the dialogue.

¹¹ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1991), http://rocket.csusb.edu/~tmoody/PlatosRepublictrans.Bloom_text.pdf, 64, 387b.

¹² Ibid, 63, 386c.

The discussion of poetry does finally resume in Book X of the *Republic*, a large portion of which is devoted to criticizing it as an imitative art. Socrates/Plato eventually comes to the conclusion that the participants of the dialogue are “justified in not admitting [the poet] into a city that is going to be under good laws, because he awakens this part of the soul and nourishes it, and, by making it strong, destroys the calculating part, just as in a city when someone, by making wicked men mighty, turns the city over to them and corrupts the superior ones”.¹³ He seems almost reluctant to banish poetry from Kallipolis and again shows his admiration for it, saying “if poetry directed to pleasure and imitation have any argument to give showing that they should be in a city with good laws, we should be delighted to receive them back from exile, since we are aware that we ourselves are charmed by them.”¹⁴ However, no such argument was apparent to Plato/Socrates, and so poetry had to be removed from the city.

This supports Partee’s argument that for Plato, “the spirited and the appetitive elements [of the soul] must always be subordinate to the rational.”¹⁵ Poetry connects with emotions rather than with rationality, and Plato’s Kallipolis could only truly exist under complete rule of the rational. Plato saw poetry as ultimately corrupting the souls of the citizenry and decaying the city as a whole, as evidenced by his strong language equating destroying the rational element with turning the city over to wicked men. His argument here portrays poetry as a powerful force, able to influence people’s ways of

¹³ Plato, *Republic*, 289, 605b.

¹⁴ Ibid, 291, 607b.

¹⁵ Partee, 221.

thinking and acting. However, it is a dangerous force, and one that is overall a danger to the city. Thus, he would not allow it in his ideal state.

As contrary evidence, one could point to the fact that the city of Kallipolis was not necessarily intended as an actual ideal state. Rather, the city described in the *Republic* is used first and foremost as a teaching tool to ultimately examine justice within the individual: “Perhaps there would be more justice in the bigger and it would be easier to observe closely. If you want, first we’ll investigate what justice is like in the cities. Then we’ll go on to consider it in individuals”.¹⁶ One could interpret this to mean that Kallipolis is not intended as an actual political proposal (the “ironic” interpretation), and thus that the comments on poetry are not intended as actual practice, as did Darnell Rucker. However, while this argument is rather compelling, it cannot be readily extended to the restrictions on poetry in the *Laws*, which are similar in nature yet distinctly different.

IV: The *Laws*

The beginning of the *Laws* establishes the dialogue not as a metaphorical tool for examining justice in the soul, like the *Republic*, but rather a discussion of the nature of law and government in and of itself, with the Athenian Stranger requesting that Cleinias and Megillus “give an account of their government and laws.”¹⁷ That is to say that even if one interprets the *Republic* ironically, the city of Magnesia in the *Laws* can reasonably

¹⁶ Plato, *Republic* 45, 368e-369a.

¹⁷ Plato, *Laws*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, http://rocket.csusb.edu/~tmoody/PlatosRepublictrans.Bloom_text.pdf, 4.

be supposed to be an earnest proposal for a practical state. Magnesia is constructed in speech for the purpose of examining how legislation and political systems come to be, how they function, and what their purposes are. These are practical concerns, as opposed to the *Republic's* Kallipolis, which is created in order to discover the source of virtue and justice. The latter, while still an integral part of the origins of political systems, are more metaphysical, while the *Laws* presents its contents much more in terms of the real-world application of legislation and governance. Thus, by examining the *Laws*, Plato's later restrictions on poetry can be interpreted literally. The restrictions found in the *Laws* represent Plato's more developed and practical conception of the relationship between government and art and how to properly integrate the two.

This conception is outlined in Book VII of the *Laws*, which while not banning imitative poetry or other art forms outright, does place strict restrictions and censorship on them. The Athenian Stranger says, "Shall we make a law that the poet shall compose nothing contrary to the ideas of the lawful, or just, or beautiful, or good, which are allowed in the state? Nor shall he be permitted to communicate his compositions to any private individuals, until he shall have shown them to the appointed judges and the guardians of the law, and they are satisfied with them."¹⁸ His companions agree with this proposal. In Magnesia, poetry would be allowed, but would have to meet strict standards outlined by the authorities. Similar restrictions are placed on dance, music, and all other forms of artistic expression.¹⁹ Here we see again that Plato finds value in

¹⁸ Plato, *Laws*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, <http://pinkmonkey.com/dl/library1/laws.pdf>, 159.

¹⁹ Ibid, 159-162.

poetry and other forms of art, but in his ideal state they would be heavily censored to fit the ideals of virtue and proper worship of the gods.

The Stranger further proposes that foreigners in Magnesia who wish to create art or poetry must also submit their works to the authorities: “first of all show your songs to the magistrates, and let them compare them with our own, and if they are the same or better we will give you a chorus; but if not, then, my friends, we cannot”.²⁰ Rather than allow a free flow of different ideas into the city, the authorities would have to approve foreign poetry as fitting the same standards as their own before it could be exposed to the public. To preserve the integrity of the city of Magnesia, poetry must be restricted to only that which the authorities find acceptable; there is no room for free expression, as it would create a threat to virtue among citizens. In the *Laws*, Plato took his ideas about creative expression and how it should be limited from the *Republic* and refined them to better suit a practical proposal for a just city.

Notable also is Plato’s focus on the education of children in Magnesia. The discussion of poetry in the *Laws* arises out of one on education, in which the Athenian Stranger says at one point:

When I consider the words which we have spoken from early dawn until now, and which, as I believe, have been inspired by Heaven, they appear to me to be quite like a poem...for of all the discourses which I have ever learnt or heard, either in poetry or prose, this seemed to me to be the justest, and most suitable for young men to hear...[the educator] shall make use of and shall commit to them the instruction and education of youth²¹

²⁰ Plato, *Laws*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, <http://pinkmonkey.com/dl/library1/laws.pdf>, 174.

²¹ Ibid, 168-169

It is of particular importance to the Athenian that poetry and prose be a major component of the education of children in Magnesia, provided that it is poetry or prose that meets certain criteria. For Plato, the persuasive or worldview-shaping power of poetry is useful, and should be harnessed in order to guide children on the proper path toward virtue.

V: The Myth of Er

A final contradiction I have yet to address is presented by the Myth of Er, which concludes the *Republic*. In this section of the dialogue Plato tells Glaucon the tale of a man named Er, who died in battle but came back to life twelve days later, while on top of his funeral pyre. Er tells those around him what he witnessed of the afterlife; the judges of the dead send those who were virtuous in life to a peaceful and idyllic heaven, while those who led unjust lives are sent beneath the earth to be punished for a thousand years.²² Towards the end of the tale, Er gives an account of dead souls who have spent their allotted time in the underworld going through the process of choosing new lives from a variety of options, including “lives of all animals, and, in particular, all the varieties of human lives.”²³ According to the myth presented by Socrates, the dead are given rewards or punishments according to their choices during life, but ultimately all (besides some souls which are permanently condemned to the underground realm) at some point choose a new life and return to the world of the living.

²² Plato, *Republic*, 297-299, 614b-616a.

²³ Ibid, 301, 618a.

So why, given his emphasis on the superiority of rational dialectic, would Plato choose to end his dialogue with a rather poetic myth, which appeals to the irrational part of the soul? Partee argues that “this flight of fancy does not make Plato a poet, for myths in Plato never stop with their literal statement ... Praises of the gods and of noble men are allowed in the state because they are not poetry, poetry being language beautiful in itself.”²⁴ While I don’t entirely agree that Plato can in no way be considered a poet, Partee brings up an important point that I will elaborate on.

The Myth of Er fits into the *Republic’s* narrative of Socrates’ persuading Glaucon to lead a just life, using the myth as a final piece to bolster his argument: Socrates introduces the myth by telling Glaucon that the rewards and punishments given to just and unjust men during their lives “are nothing in multitude or magnitude compared to those that await each when they are dead.”²⁵ The Myth of Er is being used as a poetic tool to convince Glaucon of the benefits to leading a life ruled by justice. In the myth, it is only a truly virtuous soul who is ultimately rewarded. The first soul that Er witnesses choosing a new life quickly and without consideration chooses the life of a tyrant, failing to notice that this life includes many terrible things including eating his own children. It is then revealed that this soul came from heaven, “having lived in an orderly regime in his former life, participating in virtue by habit, without philosophy.”²⁶ In fact many of the souls who came from heaven made similar rushed, careless choices.²⁷ Thus,

²⁴ Partee, 221.

²⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 297, 614a.

²⁶ Ibid, 302, 619c.

²⁷ Ibid, 302, 619d.

according to the myth, only those who are versed in philosophy and practice virtue with full intent and understanding of it are ultimately rewarded, because they are the only ones adequately prepared to choose a good life to live when they return to the living realm. At one point Socrates even halts his recounting of the myth to address Glaucon directly and make clear to him how important this section of the myth is:

“Each of us must, to the neglect of other studies, above all see to it that he is a seeker and student of that study by which he might be able to learn and find out who will give him the capacity and the knowledge to distinguish the good and the bad life, and so everywhere and always to choose the better from among those that are possible.”²⁸

Philosophy and the understanding, intentional practice of a life of virtue is integral because it allows one to be cognizant of their choices and the consequences of their actions. Here, Socrates is convincing Glaucon that virtue is ultimately its own reward, because it makes for a life in which one can choose how to live while having full understanding of the benefits or effects of their choices.

In this way, the Myth of Er is an example of the self-censorship that Mary Whitlock Blundell argues Plato is participating in. While this still appears to conflict with the *Republic's* complete elimination of poetry in Kallipolis, it fits in perfectly with the restrictions laid out for poets in the *Laws*: Plato finds poetry allowable and even useful, when it espouses virtue and leads citizens toward a just path. The Myth of Er seems out of place in the *Republic*, as it is the final section and seems to have little to do with the laws of the city previously laid out. This appears to be because Plato had not yet come to the conclusion that poetry such as he used here, which encourages virtue, can be

²⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 301, 618c.

allowed in a just state. Clearly that had changed by the time the *Laws* was written, given the allowance of poetry in Magnesia. The special attention paid to its use in educating the youth is also echoed here, as Socrates uses the Myth of Er to educate Glaucon and persuade him to lead a virtuous life. It is apparent that when the *Laws* is accounted for, the Myth of Er seems much less a contradiction than it might have otherwise.

VI: Conclusions/Implications

Thus, we see how between the *Republic* and the *Laws* Plato appears to have reconciled his belief that creative expression was too dangerous to be allowed in a truly just society with his appreciation for poetry as an art form. In his later more developed city-state (Magnesia), while heavily censored, there is a place for poetry as long as it is properly used and conforms to certain ideals. This is significant in that it now becomes clear how the contradictions surrounding poetry's treatment in the *Republic* are reconciled in the *Laws*. This provides a possible narrative as to how Plato's ideas about poetry changed over the course of his life and body of work, an important component of interpreting his philosophy.

Furthermore, Plato's thoughts on art and its place in society are in some ways much more similar to how modern society treats art than it might seem at first. Modern developed states allow for much more freedom of expression than Plato would like, but there are nonetheless restrictions which certain mediums of art must follow; In the United States, organizations like the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), Electronic Software Ratings Board (ESRB), and Recording Industry Association of

America (RIAA) have created systems for rating the content of films, video games, and music respectively in order to determine the suitable audience for a particular work. This stems from a view similar to Plato's that the arts are powerful in the way they can impact one's perception and way of thinking, and that certain artistic depictions are unsuitable for certain audiences. This audience that must be protected is most commonly associated with youth, an idea also found in Plato, particularly the *Laws*.

Though modern society has in many ways very different ideas about what art is acceptable and what isn't for a mass audience, there still exists the notion that certain artistic portrayals are more acceptable than others, and systems need to exist to ensure a level of suitability for children in particular. On a section of their website regarding the rating system used for films in the United States, the MPAA says "Movies can open our children's eyes to new places, cultures and ideas, and parents have an important role in ensuring that experience is positive and enriching. They need the tools to decide what movies are suitable for their children to watch."²⁹ The RIAA, which applies a Parental Advisory Label to certain recordings deemed possibly inappropriate for children, says similarly "Children now have access to the media in ways their parents never imagined, and we provide parents with the tools they need to make the right decisions for their children while nurturing their passion for music."³⁰ Both organizations state or imply that the medium they rate can serve as a positive influence or educational tool for youth, as evidenced by the use of "positive and enriching" by the MPAA and "lifelong passion"

²⁹ Motion Picture Association of America, "Understanding the Film Ratings," accessed April 8, 2016, <http://www.mpa.org/film-ratings/>.

³⁰ Recording Industry Association of America, "Parental Advisory Label," accessed April 8, 2016, <https://www.riaa.com/resources-learning/parental-advisory-label/>.

by the RIAA. This conception of the arts is quite similar to Plato's, in that it finds art to be incredibly influential and powerful, and useful in educating and enriching the lives of children if placed under guidelines. Granted, a movie being given an R rating or a record receiving a Parental Advisory Label is not so severe as Plato's measures for poetry he found unworthy of approval, but the core idea is the same.

Thus we see the direct connection between Plato's ideas on poetry and other forms of art, and those held by the relevant authorities in contemporary American society. This connection is important, and in the future could further provide a basis to work from when comparing Platonic conceptions of art and poetry and their relationship to governance with more modern ideas about artistic expression.

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