

Poetry, Justice, Philosophy, and the State

In Books II, III, and X of *The Republic*, Plato addresses several controversial concepts and issues in the arts:

1. the role of the arts (*mousikē*) in the education of the young;
2. *mimēsis* (a complex concept that corresponds roughly to representation, imitation, or emulation); and
3. censorship and the role of poetry (and beauty) in a just state.

As we've seen, Plato seems to say different things at different times about art and inspiration, some very negative and others less so. At 533e in the *Ion*, Socrates claims the best poets are not masters of the craft. And at 534c he says they have the gift of the gods in them, not knowledge. That leaves open the possibility that there may still be truth in the poet's words. But ultimately, you might ask, regardless of the question of knowledge versus inspiration, isn't Plato advocating a tyrannical policy by banishing poetry from the state?



Raphael, *School of Athens* (detail), 1509

To properly address that question, we need to understand Plato's work on a larger scale. We can see more clearly in the *Republic* that his primary objective is to formulate a radical critique of "the state of Athens" in the 4th century BC. The **means** he employs for his critique is a transitional form — **philosophical poetics** — his attack coming from within a dramatic poetic practice. Having lost all hope in the existing rulers, Plato argues that only philosophers can lead the state.

"[I]t became clear to me, with regard to all existing communities, that they were one and all misgoverned. For their laws have got into a state that is almost incurable, except by some extraordinary reform with good luck to support it. And I was forced to say, when praising true philosophy that it is by this that men are enabled to see what justice in public and private life really is. Therefore, I said, there will be no cessation of evils for the sons of men, till either those who are

pursuing a right and true philosophy receive sovereign power in the States, or those in power in the States by some dispensation of providence become true philosophers."¹

¹ Plato, "The Seventh Letter" (360 BC), J. Harward translation.

That said, the *Republic* should **not** be read as a program for the **educational foundation** and **structure** of the state. Rather Plato is trying to show what is needed to bring the **just individual** into harmony with a **just community**. The question is what it will take to bring the individual's **inner state** and the **public state** together in **justice**.

On Plato's view, poetry must be understood in the context of a just state. That gives us a way to read and assess the *Republic*.²

We should also keep in mind the sophists' attempts to reinforce a new ethos in which justice was simply a pragmatic response to mistrust, fear, and self-interest. This is expressed in the Sophist's claim: "No one does what is right voluntarily." Plato follows Socrates in arguing that justice is more "a condition of the soul" than a relation to others. It exists not when each person watches over others, but when each watches over their own soul and behavior. It was in that spirit that politics and pedagogy would be pursued by Plato and his followers.

Thus, the model for real education is **not** the ideal state of the *Republic*, but the **process exemplified** in Plato's text and **practiced** in his Academy, where education thrives on **questioning** and **research**, not the administration of principles, prohibitions, and sanctions.

Thus, Plato's proposal is not sophistic or Hobbesian — not a social contract for mutual self-protection. Rather it's intended to be a condition that allows humans to **rise above self-interest** in taming and harmonizing the **tyrannical** and the **philosophical** aspects of the soul. The real danger for Plato is not so much art and artists. Rather, it is ethical education and sophists.

The poets, for their part, **can** play a role by looking to **reality** and the needs of the **community** rather than mere **imitations** appealing to **popular opinion**. (*Republic* 602a-b; 604d-605a)

Timothy Quigley, revised 14 Aug 13

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Plato and the Poets", in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.