

MIDTERM ASSIGNMENT

In Book X of The Republic, Plato presents three ‘charges’ against poetry arguing that poets and poetry be exiled from the state for its detrimental effects on an individual and societal level. Let us first examine each of these charges.

Plato’s first charge against poetry is based on a philosophical argument. Plato charges poetry of being mere imitation. His critique of poetry is related closely to his idea of truth and reality. According to Plato, God created the original, perfect thought and everything we have or can create is an abstraction of that perfect thought. He calls this ‘form’. The way that this form is adapted is like so, where after each copy, it loses some part of the original truth or pure form:

Form → Nature → Craft → Art

Original → Derived → Carpenter → Poet/Painter

Plato strongly believes in the concept of mimesis (imitation) and that all arts, including poetry, are imitative arts where the form or original truth is inaccessible to poets. By using many examples such as that of a bed and a craftsman, or a painting and a painter, Plato argues that poetry doesn’t abstract truth, rather, it takes an imitation of something (think of any object of discussion in any of your favorite poetic verses) and makes a copy of that, taking us even further from the truth. In fact, in this way he calls all poetry and the works of poets “third remove” from the truth or original thing, and not even an imitation of truth, but rather an imitation of appearance:

“... their works are at the third remove from that which is and are easily produced without knowledge of the truth (since there are only images, not things that are)”

Poetry is used by poets to speak on a variety of topics; morals, virtues, vices, justice, punishments, religion, nature, passion, and many more affairs related to humans and life. When we consider that their thoughts are meaningful (or in other words, convey some truth on those subjects), we may believe that the poet has some knowledge or deeper understanding of the matter they are discussing. Plato argues that giving poets this stature of authority is incorrect since poetry is inherently a work of imitation, so any thought they express comes from a place that does not understand the truth at all.

Plato argues that the only reason that any ideas that can be considered “knowledge” by the common man that poets convey, is simply due to the manner of oral/verbal decoration with which they have been expressed which, by nature, people find pleasing to hear and so pay attention to. Rather harshly, Plato says:

“... a poetic imitator uses words and phrases to paint the colored pictures of each of the crafts. He himself knows nothing about them, but he imitates them in such a way that others, as ignorant as he, who judge by words, will think he speaks extremely well about cobblery or generalship or anything else whatever, provided – so great is the natural charm of things – that he speaks with meter, rhythm, and harmony, for if you strip a poet’s works of their musical colorings, and take them by themselves, I think you know what they look like.”

In his analysis, poets speak on matters without understanding those topics in depth, their implications, their details and nuances – in short, not from a place of wisdom and with the intention of stimulating the intellect, but rather only to convey in a charming manner.

“Therefore an imitator has neither knowledge nor right opinion about whether the things he makes are fine or bad... he’ll go on imitating, even though he doesn’t know the good or bad qualities of anything, but what he’ll imitate, it seems, is what appears fine or beautiful to the majority of people who know nothing.”

Because of this ignorant behavior Plato feels poets have towards the impact and effect of their poetry on people, specifically the supposed ‘truths’ they may lead people to believe, this first charge of poetry being nothing more than a pretentious imitation, an approximation of truth and all poets being no knowledge-holders of deeper understandings of the thoughts they convey, is a significant charge in Plato’s eyes.

“... an imitator has no worthwhile knowledge of the things he imitates, that imitation is a kind of game, and not something to be taken seriously, and that all the tragic poets, whether they write in iambics or hexameters, are as imitative as they could possibly be.”

The second charge that Plato makes against poetry is based on moral grounds. He explains that the soul can be divided into two parts; the rational or law-abiding part, and the irrational or excitable part. The rational part is what compels us to act consciously, practice self-control, and respect and conform to laws and principles. However, human beings are, by nature, more susceptible to following the irrational part. The irrational part causes them to act on whim, volatility, with little to no regard for the consequences of their actions. The irrational part causes them to be a potential danger to themselves and to the society, while the rational part keeps them in check. Therefore, the rational part is called the superior part and the irrational, emotional part considered the inferior part. Keeping that in mind, anything which undermines the importance of acting upon the rational part, must therefore be an inferior thing as well.

“... And calculating, measuring, and weighing are the work of the rational part of the soul... The part of the soul that forms a belief contrary to the measurements couldn’t be the same as the part that believes in accord with them... The part that put its trust in measurement and calculation is the best part of the soul... Therefore, the part that opposes it is one of the inferior parts in us.”

Following the argument about poetry being an imitative art and therefore inferior to the truth, Plato argues that the rational part being complex and difficult to understand and imitate, does not appeal to poets. Poets are more inclined towards imitating the irrational part, enticing emotions, urge and passion. This is not alarming when poets speak of beauty, and nature, and honesty, and objectively ‘good’ subjects; but what if they use poetry to propagate a controversial sense of right and wrong, good and bad, truth and falsehood? This means that poets may depict immoral behavior, thrive on cultivating the irrational part of the soul, motivating people to act on impulse and feelings rather than reason and control; to put loosely, to act *out* of control. Provoking the irrational, enticing a group of people to be driven by emotions and desire instead of reason, for the wrong causes, can lead them to undermining moral values, creating lawlessness, unpredictability, instability and chaos. Plato claims that by appealing to the irrational, poetry does the same, harming the morals of people, and for this reason, it is dangerous for a society to uphold poetry and poets to such grand statures.

“... A rational and quiet character, which always remains pretty well the same, is neither easy to imitate nor easy to understand when imitated... Clearly, then, an imitative poet isn’t by nature related to the part of the soul that rules in such a character, and if he’s to attain a good reputation with the majority of the people, his cleverness isn’t directed to pleasing it. Instead, he’s related to the excitable and multicolored character, since it is easy to imitate... he arouses, nourishes, and this strengthens this part of the soul and so destroys the rational one... Similarly, we’ll say that an imitative poet puts a bad constitution in the soul of each individual by making images that are far removed from the truth and by gratifying the irrational part which cannot distinguish the large and the small but believes that the same things are large at one time and small at another.”

Plato charges poetry with the crime of destroying reason and rationale, and promoting immorality. In fact, he sums up this moral argument against poetry by calling it an inferior art (given its imitative nature) consorting with the inferior part of the soul (the irrational) to produce an inferior offspring i.e. an irrational person acting upon a distorted version of knowledge and truth:

“This, then, is what I wanted to get agreement about when I said painting and imitation as a whole produce work that is far from the truth, namely, that imitation really consorts with a part of us that is far from reason, and the result of their being friends and companions is neither sound nor true... Then imitation is an inferior thing that consorts with an inferior thing to produce an inferior offspring.”

Plato’s third and final charge against poetry that he calls the “most serious charge”, is based on psychological grounds. Plato says:

“... the most serious charge against imitation, namely, that with a few are exceptions it is able to corrupt even the decent people, for that’s surely an altogether terrible thing.”

Due to its evocative nature, poetry can be considered ‘manipulative’, even to a person sound of reason and morals. We have already explained how poetry appeals to the irrational in the second charge Plato made against poetry. Plato now argues that poets not only convince us to choose the irrational over the rational but distort our understanding of the irrational in a way that it seems rational to us over time ~~and compels us to unconsciously act like it when otherwise we would have acted rationally~~. Hence, poetry becomes a conduit for the corruption of reason by relying on the fundamental human desire for pleasure. By being pleased by and praising the dramatic presentations poetic imitation contains for the intense emotional effects it has on us, we praise irrational behavior over rational one; something that should be considered shameful to men of reason. When we obtain pleasure from this, we sympathize with this behavior, and in sympathizing, we later adopt the same behavior – that which he likens to women and buffoons.

“When even the best of us hear Homer or some other tragedian imitating one of the heroes sorrowing and making a long lamenting speech or singing and beating his breast, you know that we enjoy it, give ourselves up to following it, sympathize with the hero, take his sufferings seriously, and praise as a good poet the one who affects us most in this way... But when one of us suffers a private loss, you realize that the opposite happens. We pride ourselves if we are able to keep quiet and master our grief, for we think that this is the manly thing to do and that the behaviour we praised before is womanish... Then are we right to praise it? Is it right to look at someone behaving in a way that we would consider unworthy and shameful and to enjoy and praise it rather than being disgusted by it?”

A reasonable, disciplined person who praises the emotional enticement poetry has on him, slowly begins to see the cost of rational behavior for enjoying emotional displays for pleasure, as a fair bargain. In turn, this means that when the moment their ability to act out of reason is tested, they may soon become so convinced that acting irrational is of no harm, that they will begin to see it as the reasonable thing to do. The inhibitions, tendencies held back by reason, become weaker as we allow, enjoy and permit others to do things we wouldn't fancy us doing ourselves, leading us to act similarly like woman or buffoons when our own time comes.

"... It thinks there is no shame involved for it in praising and pitying another man who, in spite of his claim to goodness, grieves excessively. Indeed, it thinks that there is a definite gain involved in doing so, namely, pleasure. And it wouldn't want to be deprived of that by despising the whole poem. I suppose only a few are able to figure out that enjoyment of other people's sufferings is necessarily transferred to our own and that pitying part, if it is nourished and strengthened on the sufferings of others, won't be easily held in check when we ourselves suffer."

And so, Plato's final charge against poetry is the corruption of decent people, in polluting their minds so that instead of reason, they let emotion govern their actions and despite doing so, fail to see that they have become victim to their irrationality and desires and become of inferior character.

"And in the case of sex, anger, and all the desires, pleasures, and pains that we say accompany all our actions, poetic imitation has the very same effect on us. It nurtures and water them and establishes them as rulers in us when they ought to wither and be ruled, for that way we'll become better and happier rather than worse and more wretched.... Hymns to the gods and eulogies to good people are the only poetry we can admit into our city. If you admit the pleasure-giving Muse, whether in lyric or epic poetry, pleasure and pain will be kings in your city instead of law or the thing that everyone has always believed to be best, namely, reason."

As the 'lovers of poetry' Plato has challenged in the final lines, let us try to see if we can contradict Plato's moral and psychological arguments against not just poetry, but art in general i.e. the corruption of rationale and morals and promotion of emotional, irrational behavior. However first, since mimesis and poetry's imitative nature is central to the debate Plato makes, we must question the philosophical grounds of Plato's dismissing of poetry as cheap images of reality.

Plato's argument is that imitative arts take us away from reality since in each adaptation, truth is removed from the pure form. Central to Plato's critique of poetry is his belief that seeking of the truth is the fundamentals of the entire universe, whereas lovers of poetry such as Emerson maintained that beauty is the center of the entire universe. This idea of beauty or aesthetics over goodness or truth, will form the main difference Plato's arguments against poetry and admirers of poetry.

Perhaps Aristotle's most basic argument against imitation is that it is part of human nature, how we learn and how we grow. Aristotle maintains that all poetry is a form of imitation, and that imitation itself is pleasing to human beings. But since it is part of our nature, to ostracize poetry for its imitative nature, is incorrect.

"[T]he instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated... [T]o learn gives the

liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general; whose capacity, however, of learning is more limited. Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.' For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the coloring, or some such other cause. Imitation, then, is one instinct of our nature."

Aristotle presented an argument against Plato's first charge of poetry with the idea of aesthetics being what was captured by a poet, that was not by a philosopher on the same matter. This meant that instead of truth being the only thing that was taken away in imitative arts, there is actually the addition of something equally significant when one aims to capture experiences in poetry or art and that is these aesthetics and beauties which lead us not to the given truth, but to a deeper understanding of reality itself. And this is something that could not be attained by limiting ourselves only to the truth or totality of an experience; these thoughts added by the poet are the actual value additions that transform it into something more profound than the plain truth. Indeed, in eyes of critics like Emerson, a poet is a "complete" man solely because of his ability to look farther from the simple truth of matters.

<NOTE-TO-SELF: find Emerson quote>

When it comes to the moral and psychological arguments against poetry, it is not that poets do not agree that poetry carries a significant, intense emotional aspect with itself; it is that they see it as a form of reaching reason and rationale as well. As discussed in class, William Wordsworth describes poetry as:

"Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility".

This means that poetry is inspired by sudden powerful emotions, however, the expression of these feelings is not chaotic and impulsive; instead, it comes from a place of profound thought and understanding of that experience. The so-called imitative nature of poetry is essential to this kind of reflection on experiences/ideas that inspire it, and surely something that is given that much thought cannot be considered irrational. And therefore, as contradictory as intense emotions and deep thinking seem, poetry is a product of both.

Since we have established that poetry is meant to evoke emotions, let us now see how critics defend the charge on poetry for corrupting morals in the same way and promoting immorality. At first, many critics maintain that poetry or art on its own never claims to teach morality and that the only intention of art is to appeal to the aesthetic nature of people and provide pleasure.

"Morality teaches. Art does not attempt to teach. It merely asserts it is thus or thus that life is perceived to be. That is my bit of reality, says the artist. Take it or leave it – draw any lessons you like from it – that is my account of things as they are – if it has any value to you as evidence or teaching, use it, but that is not my business: I have given you my rendering, my account, my vision, my dream, my illusion – call it what you will. If there is any lesson in it, it is yours to draw, not mine to preach."

Indeed, Philip Sidney very strongly argues this point; "nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth." He says that a poet is the farthest thing from a liar or an immoral person, simply because he never claimed to tell the truth.

“To the second, therefore, that they should be the principal liars, I will answer paradoxically, but truly, I think truly, that of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar, and, though he would, as a poet can scarcely be a liar.”

On the other hand, the effect of art (poetry) on the morals of an individual cannot be denied. Though not directly acting as an authority on right or wrong, good or bad, poetry is a means of stimulating one's own sense of reason. Aristotle explains this in his Theory of Catharsis. Summed up, it says that poetry is a means of catharsis; building up emotions in a way that helps us better understand and implement how to control them. In this way, poets do not corrupt our morals with thoughts of their own, rather they stimulate our intellect to the point we are compelled to ponder and question our morals on our own. To put it loosely, poetry puts the ball in the reader's court.

Similarly, the effect that poetry has on an individual and the so-called “distortion of rationale” that it is claimed to make decent people suffer that Plato disapproves of so much, is to do with the same concept of not just evoking chaotic emotions, rather evoking deeper introspection and consequent rational changes in behavior arising from that. In the words of T.S. Eliot:

“Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.”

In this way, poetry and imitative arts do not compel us into thinking differently than usual, but simply offer us a chance to explore different perspectives.

In conclusion, lovers of poetry present their defense on poetry with unique and profound arguments to Plato's charges against poetry. Although, in my personal opinion, we have yet to acquire a single literary defense for poetry and art that is as sophisticatedly worded and as comprehensive in profound, detailed critique as Plato's arguments.