

Criticisms of poetry in plato's republic

Profession, Poet



After much deliberation and many intense arguments, Socrates finally reaches a definition for justice and claims that leading a just life is worthwhile both for its consequences and for its own sake. Although these conclusions summarize the main dispute of the Republic, Socrates ventures on to clarify his reasoning for prohibiting poets in the ideal city. Socrates' resolution to forbid poetry may be viewed as extremely harsh at first, especially considering the current concerns people have with censorship. With a close analysis and better understanding of the dialogues, Socrates' rationale for his judgment becomes much clearer and assists in demonstrating the negative effects poetry would have on the ideal city. In Plato's Republic, Socrates' ability to maintain control of the ideal city is upheld by the banishment of poetry and is essential to the protection and survival of the city. One of the key motives for Socrates' outlawing of poetry can be observed in his notion that the soul is depraved and distorted by poets. Socrates reveals that the best element of the soul is "the one that puts its trust in measurement and calculation" (Republic 603a). This statement refers to the discussion between Socrates and Glaucon about how things appear versus how they truly are based on measurements and calculations. For example, an object can appear big because it is in close range, but when seen from a distance it can appear very small (Republic 602c). The only way to tell the true size of the object is to measure it and make calculations; it is not possible to accurately determine size through imitation. Therefore, when Socrates claims "the one that opposes it would be one of the inferior parts in us" (Republic 603a) he is referring to the people who oppose the idea of using calculations to draw conclusions and

dubs them “ inferior.” By accepting imitations as actualities, people are moved further and further away from the truth and are consequently altered from rational souls to irrational souls. The impressionable, appetitive, irrational soul is easily swayed by the arts; this is imperative to understand for the complete comprehension of Socrates’ ideas. Poetry and the arts in general were not created for sheer entertainment purposes, although that is the popular belief. According to Socrates, the arts appeal to our deepest feelings and innermost passions, even though most of the time we do not even realize we are being influenced by them. Poetry deceives most people because we do not believe we are affected by it, and are not compelled to feel what the fictional characters are feeling. In actuality, poetry allows us to live vicariously through these characters and behave in ways that are considered shameful. We are too joyous and extremely envious; we mourn excessively and we rage with anger, yet we would not want to behave in such shameful ways in real life. Although we do not want to display these embellished behaviors, we live with them everyday whether we know it or not. Socrates states that “ We suffer along with the hero and take his sufferings seriously. And we praise the one who affects us most in this way as a good poet” (Republic 605d). Here, Socrates admits that at times we give in to the arts because of our appreciation for them, although we do not think it is acceptable to behave in such ways in our daily lives. He asserts that everything we see and read in the arts will eventually become subconsciously embedded in our minds and will cause us to act in a certain way, almost as if we have switched places with the fictional characters and have become the performers ourselves. Socrates recognizes the strong

negative influence poetry has on the irrational soul and human behavior; he prohibits the arts in order to maintain control of his city. Socrates demonstrates how the poet corrupts this “good” part of the soul by averting people from reality and moving their thoughts and actions towards idealism. Socrates compares a poet who destroys the rational soul by increasing the strength of the irrational soul to someone who can take over and ruin a city by making evil people strong (Republic 605b). He goes on to say that each individual has a tainted soul because imitative poets create images that are not realistic and are secluded from the truth (Republic, 605b). In summary, Socrates equates the soul and the city, stating that the destruction of the soul will be followed by the demise of the ideal city due to the arts. If the poets are successful in persuading people to embrace and observe their irrational, emotional, and impulsive side, the ideal city will surely collapse. The abovementioned irrational feelings that all of humanity will intrinsically feel at some point in time are brought to the surface by the arts, and jeopardize the survival of the ideal city. Socrates explains these desires as the “appetitive soul,” which prioritizes instant gratification. When Socrates addresses the appetite of the human race, he says, “It nurtures and waters them when they should be dried up, and establishes them as rulers in us when– if we are to become better and happier rather than worse and more wretched– they should be ruled” (Republic 606d). Here, Socrates is conveying the idea that the arts manipulate people into having sexual desire, anger, pain, and pleasure. Socrates claims that we are all ruled internally by these feelings due to the extreme influential power of poetic imitation. He suggests that instead of tending to these deep, internal

desires, we should conquer them in order to live better lives. This passage is of paramount importance because it clearly expresses how deeply influential the arts are. Socrates must ban poetry from his ideal city because the human appetite is too weak to overcome the temptations of personal desires. If the arts are in control of the individual, bringing to the forefront the irrational soul that separates us from reason, Socrates' city will indisputably fail. Socrates' theory on educating the guardians is quite interesting considering the fact that he acknowledges the need for the study of the arts as well as physical training to compliment his city. Although earlier in Book III Socrates underscores the significance of music during the education of the guardians, he also conveys his deep concern for the powerful influence music will have. Socrates' acknowledgement of the need for music can be observed when he says " it is in musical training that the guardhouse of our guardians must surely be built" (Republic 424d). Here, Socrates recognizes how necessary the arts are for the ideal city and seems to be going against his own proposal that poetry is dangerous. In contrast to his own declaration, Socrates claims, " there must be no innovation in musical or physical training that goes against the established order" (Republic 424b). In this assertion, Socrates attempts to describe the importance of forbidding musical training from exceeding the laws that he so skillfully enacted to create the ideal city. Adeimantus then discusses the concept of the infiltration of music into society through people's routines and daily practices, which could eventually work its way up to the law, resulting in the total destruction of the city (Republic 424d). The severe censorship of the arts that Socrates suggests is necessary to defend the ideal city from a

potential overthrow. Socrates' banishment of poetry from the ideal city at the beginning of Book X may come as a shock to some readers. In 21st-century America, we live in a world where freedom is of the greatest value and censorship is frowned upon. However, a careful analysis of Socrates' reasoning reveals that he wishes to ban poetry from the city because it is created and driven by images as opposed to rational ideas. Images are three times removed from the truth, leaving poetry at the lowest level of the self; the imitative part, which Socrates' believes will corrupt the soul and the ideal city as well. Interestingly enough, Socrates does not ban all forms of poetry from the city; he allows eulogies to good people and hymns to the Gods to remain. In fact, Socrates claims to be well versed in and appreciative of the arts and invites any lover of poetry to argue on its behalf (Republic 607e). Despite Socrates' apparent leniency in this regard, he stands firm in his belief that poetry must be prohibited. In order to understand Socrates' criticisms of poetry it helps to consider today's media: television and ads shape our lives, determining what we wear, how we feel about ourselves, what we eat, where we shop, and essentially our outlook on life. Whether we know it or not, for many people what they see on television are the most "real" things in their lives, which is exactly what Socrates was afraid of: people straying from the truth by trusting in images as opposed to rational ideas. Socrates' decision to ban poetry may seem like a harsh and tyrannical act, but it is the only way to maintain control and support the survival of the ideal city.