

Plato's republic essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *The Republic*, Plato makes a systematic case for censoring all arts. The task of the Platonic philosopher is to take up the “ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” [607b] and to assert the State-enforced dominance of philosophy. To that end, *The Republic* as a whole is a powerful integration of philosophy, religion, education, and politics, and its argument for the political suppression of most art follows from that integrated system.

Rhetorically, Plato uses Socrates' discussion with Glaucon and Adeimantus to list a series of grievances against poetry, music, and painting:

- * A good portrait of the gods and heroes will show them as worthy and exalted beings — but poets such as Homer and Hesiod often tell tales of the gods and heroes fighting and bickering and acting immorally [e. g., 390b-391e].
- * A moral citizen's soul will be composed and dignified — but many musical modes stir us up inside and make us jangled and unsettled [398e-400d.].
- * Good people and gods do not deceive — but painters constantly deceive us by trying to make their fake imitations look real [598c, 602d]. (Meanwhile, Plato allows that politicians (and only politicians) ought to be allowed to lie to their citizens [389b-c].)
- * A strong and moral man will not grieve the death of a friend by moaning and wailing like a woman — but poets regularly have their characters issue long, pathetic lamentations [387d-388d].
- * Courageous men are willing to die in battle — but the poets tell scary stories about the afterlife and make us fear death [386b-d].

* A proper moral of the story will teach that good people meet good ends and bad men meet bad ends [613d-614a] — but tragic poets have will often have bad men profit and protagonists fail and suffer despite their virtues [392b].

* Decent people respect and strive for worthiness — but comic poets appeal to our basest desires and mock and deride everything [e. g., 395d-e, 606c].

And so on.

The Republic's overall argument for censorship thus combines a particular conception of morality with religion and authoritarian politics. Formalizing the argument:

1. To have a good society, we must have good citizens.
2. To have good citizens, children must be well educated.
3. To be well educated, children must be exposed to good material and shielded from bad material [386a].
4. So, to have a good society, children must be exposed to good material and shielded from bad material.
5. It is the obligation of the State to educate its citizens.
6. So the State should allow only good material and suppress bad material.
7. The State's censorship applies also to art.
8. So the State should allow only good art and suppress bad art [401b, 595a].

Evaluating Plato's argument for censoring the arts.

Plato's philosophy of art seems to be that it has a vital purpose, to illuminate, instruct, and foster virtues. And that its misuse can destroy a culture. Without granting art total control, I would agree that art serves a purpose, and might say, to illuminate values, including by warning of their destruction, by concretizing for contemplation and education. Plato's primary value of art may be to have the individual serve the state, but he sees it working by serving the individual to make him of value to himself and the state. My primary value of art would be art's service to the individual, but recognizing that this subsequently serves the community. We both recognize that art may have destructive effects on the individual and, thus, the state. But evidently I would grant individuals more powers of resistance. My additional thought would be that the "state" is an abstraction, not the entity or collective Plato imagined. So, Plato's epistemology led him astray in evaluating art and justifying censorship. He saw the operation of the state as necessary for the life of the citizens.

Its protections and the productivity from the division of labor were necessary for life. (Quite true. Who could live today without the wider community of productivity?) Plato saw the state as more important than the individual because the individual required the state for life. He failed to note that the state was only a cooperative collection of individuals. They do not require the state, per se, not central control, but only cooperative trade and planning for defense. Such cooperation does require shared, rational values and virtues. How can this be obtained without central control over their lives? Is it not the duty of parents to "expose their children to good material and shield

them from bad material?" Is it not the duty of the state to do the same for citizens?

An obviously duty for parents tailoring activity for varieties of child personalities and ages, within limits. However, Plato continues the error of considering the community a collective, rather than an abstraction, with natural leader, worker, and defender personalities. So, he fails to appreciate that people reason for themselves, evaluating good and bad ideas. They are not controlled by the art they encounter. It is not only the influence of artists or teachers which determines people's character and beliefs, but their whole experience and intellectual integrations. Plato's philosophy of art seems properly tailored to his unfortunately confused understanding of human nature. A far better approach than that of modern-abstract art philosophies which ignore human nature.

PLATO ON MIMESIS

- Plato is convinced that " the arts" form a natural grouping and that they all share a common Form
- i. e. : " That which all and only Arts have in common by virtue of which we recognize each to be an art and by virtue of which each is an art."
- Not so much an assumption, as the consequence of his Metaphysical Theory of Forms.
- We rightly gather them together linguistically because of a metaphysical reality.

– As 20th Century Formalist Clive Bell put is:

“ Either all works of visual art have some common quality, or when we speak of ‘ works of art’ we gibber.”

1. Art was useless:

- It serves no useful purpose in society.
- As a “ Imitation of Nature” it added no knowledge. –No intellectual value-

(The same value could be added by simply by holding up a mirror to the world which would be far less costly.)

- According his metaphysics, art is an imitation of an imitation, thus barely real at all.

Art was potentially dangerous for several reasons:

A) Art was essentially deceptive.

– The whole aim of art was to deceive. Success was achieved when the spectator mistook an imitation for reality.

– Furthermore, artists were unconcerned with facts/truth. It made no difference to artists nor to the success of their works whether the images or stories they depict were real or their messages true or good.

B) Art was mainly concerned with sensual pleasure.

– Art seems directed entirely towards pleasing the senses and ignoring the mind, intellect, or concepts.

- Remember that, according to Platonic Mind/Body Dualism, our bodies are the least valuable, least permanent, least “ real” aspects of our personalities.
- Further, according to Plato's Rationalism, our senses are incapable of providing us with genuine knowledge since they only gather impressions from an ever-changing physical world but not immaterial/invisible forces which guide, direct and sustain the physical world.
- Thus our senses and, consequently, art are “ metaphysically” misguided since it is directed towards illusion and not “ reality.”
- Further, Art serves to perpetuate and sustain this misdirection, keeping us ignorant of truth, justice, goodness and “ real” beauty.

C) Art was mainly concerned with sensual pleasure.

NB: Note this has not only a Metaphysical and Epistemological Dimension; this has an Ethical Dimension as well.

- This has “ Ethical” overtones, not so much in the Later Christian Condemnation of Sensualism, but rather the more “ Greek” notion, that this was a pathetic way to waste a human life. (Too much T. V.- Cartoons)
- Ethical in the sense that this is simply not “ what one (human) ought to do.”

Think of the uncanny similarity between the imprisoned slaves in Plato's “ Allegory of the Cave” who mistakenly take the shadows to be all there is to reality, and those who in a darkened cinema sob uncontrollably when Leonardo DiCaprio goes down for the last time.

D) Art was mainly concerned with sensual pleasure.

- Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato's cave, still reveling, its age old habit, in mere images of truth. (Susan Sontag)

- It must be admitted that if imitation is the sole purpose of the graphic arts, it is surprising that the works of such arts are ever looked upon as more than curiosities, or ingenious toys, are ever taken seriously by grown-up people.

(Roger Fry)

E) Art is psychologically de-stabilizing.

- Human existence is, in great part, a struggle to master the emotions and sensual urges by using reason and intellect according to Plato. (His tri-partite theory of the Psyche)

- Therefore art was dangerous and counterproductive to this end (i. e. rational self-mastery) since it appeals not to reason and intellect, but to the psychological forces which constantly try to over-throw reason, namely passion and emotion.

“ Poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue.”

F) Art leads to immorality.

- Art was unconcerned with morality, sometimes even teaching immoral lessons. (The Iliad) Morality, it would seem, has nothing to do with a work's success as art.

– Plato worries that such art would encourage immorality in the citizens of this state. People might uncritically accept and admire immoral, vicious traits when they are attractively packaged by skilled artists (distinction between truth and illusion/ physicians and cooks/ health and cosmetics/ beauty and glamour.)

Like a skilled chef, artists are only interested in pleasing the palate, even if it poisons the diner. Since (mimetic) art is institutionally divorced from truth, goodness or any concern with ‘real’ beauty, it creates an environment of superficial “flavors” where all sorts of atrocities can be made to seem a tempting confection.

G) Art was politically dangerous, a threat to the common good.

– Similar to the point made earlier (c), Plato worried that strong art which appeals to emotions stirs up negative emotions which we are trying to control.

– But this is more than just a problem for the individual. For a people with a history of “mania,” strong, emotion-stirring art is rightly seen as a threat to the good of state/community.

– It was, therefore correctly the concern of government.

NB: This is similar to the criticism leveled by some today against violence and sex in the media. Like Plato, they argue that violence and sex in the media cause us to be a more violent, sexually obsessed culture. This affects not just the people who consume the violent images, but the entire community of which they are a part.

- Art was potentially dangerous for several reasons:

a) Art was essentially deceptive. (Ep.)

b) Art was mainly concerned with sensual pleasure. (M, Ep., Eth.)

c) Further, Art was psychologically de-stabilizing. (for the individual) (Eth., Ps.)

d) Art leads to immorality. (Eth.)

e) Art was politically dangerous. (threat to the common good) (Po. Ps.)

“ there is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry; of which there are many proofs, such as the saying of ‘ the yelping hound howling at her lord,’ or of one ‘ mighty in the vain talk of fools,’ and ‘ the mob of sages circumventing Zeus,’ and the ‘ subtle thinkers who are beggars after all’; and there are innumerable other signs of ancient enmity between them.

Notwithstanding this, let us assure our sweet friend and the sister arts of imitation that if she will only prove her title to exist in a well-ordered State we shall be delighted to receive her –we are very conscious of her charms; but we may not on that account betray the truth.”

If her defense fails, then, my dear friend, like other persons who are enamoured of something, but put a restraint upon themselves when they think their desires are opposed to their interests, so too must we after the manner of lovers give her up, though not without a struggle. We too are inspired by that love of poetry which the education of noble States has implanted in us, and therefore we would have her appear at her best and

true; but so long as she is unable to make good her defense, this argument of ours shall be a charm to us, which we will repeat to ourselves while we listen to her strains; that we may not fall away into the childish love of her which captivates the many. At all events we are well aware that poetry being such as we have described is not to be regarded seriously as attaining to the truth; and he who listens to her, fearing for the safety of the city which is within him, should be on his guard against her seductions and make our words his law.

At all events we are well aware that poetry being such as we have described is not to be regarded seriously as attaining to the truth; and he who listens to her, fearing for the safety of the city which is within him, should be on his guard against her seductions and make our words his law.

- Entire Republic can be seen as an argument for allowing Philosophy to do the work accorded to Poetry
- In Plato's defense, today it is widely agreed that the arts do not produce the kind of reliable knowledge or moral wisdom that the sciences and philosophical argument produce. (And Artist still bay at Science and Philosophy)
- But do we beg the question against the arts by looking exclusively for propositional knowledge (see renderings of molecules).
- Arthur Danto reminds us, " Plato did not precisely propose that art was mimesis, but that mimetic art was pernicious."

PLATO ON MIMESIS : ANOTHER APPROACH

<https://assignbuster.com/platos-republic-essay-sample/>

Both Plato and Aristotle saw in mimesis the representation of nature. Plato wrote about mimesis in both *Ion* and *The Republic* (Books II, III, and X). In *Ion*, he states that poetry is the art of divine madness, or inspiration. Because the poet is subject to this divine madness, it is not his/her function to convey the truth. As Plato has it, truth is the concern of the philosopher only. As culture in those days did not consist in the solitary reading of books, but in the listening to performances, the recitals of orators (and poets), or the acting out by classical actors of tragedy, Plato maintained in his critique that theatre was not sufficient in conveying the truth. He was concerned that actors or orators were thus able to persuade an audience by rhetoric rather than by telling the truth.

In Book II of *The Republic*, Plato describes Socrates' dialogue with his pupils. Socrates warns we should not seriously regard poetry as being capable of attaining the truth and that we who listen to poetry should be on our guard against its seductions, since the poet has no place in our idea of God.

In developing this in Book X, Plato told of Socrates' metaphor of the three beds: one bed exists as an idea made by God (the Platonic ideal); one is made by the carpenter, in imitation of God's idea; one is made by the artist in imitation of the carpenter's.

So the artist's bed is twice removed from the truth. The copiers only touch on a small part of things as they really are, where a bed may appear differently from various points of view, looked at obliquely or directly, or differently again in a mirror. So painters or poets, though they may paint or describe a carpenter or any other maker of things, know nothing of the

carpenter's (the craftsman's) art, and though the better painters or poets they are, the more faithfully their works of art will resemble the reality of the carpenter making a bed, nonetheless the imitators will still not attain the truth (of God's creation).

The poets, beginning with Homer, far from improving and educating humanity, do not possess the knowledge of craftsmen and are mere imitators who copy again and again images of virtue and rhapsodize about them, but never reach the truth in the way the superior philosophers do.