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PLATO: The Republic Book X

Plato (428? -348? B.C.) The Republic (411? B.C.)

[Generally accepted dates]

The Dialogue: Of the thirty-six dialogues attributed to Plato, The Republic forms one such dialogue. In common with the other dialogues The Republic presents a moral problem , examined within the frame of its own terms and principles, argued in all its ramifications and finally laid bare to the core, if still unresolved. The dialogue is between Glaucon and Adeimantus who have both experienced the influence of the Sophists. The main discussion is carried on by Socrates and the subject of the conversation is the role and status of poetry in a “well-ordered State”. The issue has been positioned as one which is contentious because poetry as art is both popular and a source of delight even for the speakers who are trying to establish and understand the reasons that art does not have a just place in a stable, strong State.

The Context: A study of Plato must begin with his teacher Socrates (470?-399? B.C.) His method of teaching was through dialogue and since he taught entirely by word of mouth, he left no writings of his own. Most of the information about him depends on the historian Xenophon and the philosopher Plato. Plato put his ideas in the mouth of Socrates in his early and middle Dialogues. Throughout these Dialogues Socrates is the main speaker and his views are triumphant.

What is the Socratic Philosophy that Plato tries to explore and debate?

“One thing only I know and that is that I know nothing”, is the starting point of Socratic philosophy. Socrates destroyed the false conceit of knowledge binding the Athenians to their ignorance. He conversed with all who would listen. He would ask the same question, *What is*

justice? or Love? or Virtue? He discovered nothing more in what many so-called wise persons told him than a mass of confused opinions. Such questions were not knowledge and holders of such opinions did not possess wisdom. As soon as a definition was given, he would proceed to demonstrate, by a series of directly framed questions, how utterly worthless it was. Not that he claimed to understand the matter himself. He confessed to complete ignorance. However, he realized and admitted his ignorance while others didn't. *This is Socratic irony –the profession of ignorance on the part of Socrates, who is in fact quite wise.* His “victims” called him “sly” pretending that he knows less than they do when he knows more. The Greek for slyness is “Irony”. His object was to prick bubbles. His urbane pretence of ignorance, his eagerness to learn, his readiness to entertain different points of view and his tireless “cross-examination” of his “victims” --- all this proved that so-called knowledge is merely a mass of ill-grounded opinions leading under logical scrutiny to absurd results. Socrates believed that children are born with knowledge already in their souls, but they cannot recall this knowledge, without some help. This is the theory of knowledge as recollection (Greek *anamnesis*). The teacher's role is similar to that of a mid-wife. Plato makes him describe himself as one who assists (like a mid-wife) at the birth of ideas. This metaphor, logically developed by Plato, becomes a whole theory of education.

Plato: The ideology of Plato was essentially rooted in his firm opposition to Democracy. This position gained firmer ground as a result of the martyrdom of Socrates. Plato was said to have fallen under the spell of Plato's magnetic and searching thought, and was shocked when at the age of about 27, he saw his master condemned to death on the charge of corrupting young men and believing in the city's gods. After the disaster, most of the friends of Socrates left Athens for a time, and Plato now had a period of travel. He visited the Greek cities of Sicily and Southern Italy and made political and scholarly friends there. By about 385 B.C. he was back in Athens. He founded near the grove sacred to a legendary hero called

Academos, what became known as the “Academy.” He gathered about him a number of pupils who united themselves in a “museum” or a friendly society dedicated to the Muses. Plato appears to have devoted himself to his “Academy” for the remaining forty years of his life.

The Dialogues and the methodology: Of the thirty-six works that are part of the legacy with the academic world today, there is only one that is not a Dialogue. The rationale for the use of Dialogue as a genre and form of enquiry has been explained and justified. Philosophy is essentially a kind of reasoning. An inquiry that proceeds like a monologue is one-sided. Statements are submitted to criticism by others and tested by what they suggest. This involves dialogue. The typical Platonic dialogue draws out the meanings of a statement in order to test its consistency with itself and with other statements. Plato’s dialogues constitute a philosophical work and masterpieces of literature with lasting influence. Written in prose recognised for its purity and elegance, Plato’s dialogues have become synonymous with philosophy to which the central contribution is the **Theory of Forms**. Closely associated with this theory are two others, namely that the soul is immortal and that all knowledge is reminiscence or recollection.

The Republic, Plato’s declared masterpiece is a dialogic projection of the discussion between Socrates and his friends on the nature of justice and the conversation leads to an outline of the ideal or perfect society, the Republic after which the book is named. Studying it primarily as a book of philosophy it is important to pay attention to the reasoning, the order and connection of thought. A philosopher thinks facts out to their consequences and the truth he holds is reasoned truth. The argument of *The Republic* falls into two main sections.

1. The chief speaker is Socrates who repeats the conversation for an unnamed group the day after it occurs. Those taking part besides himself, he says, were his friend

Cephalus, Cephalus' son Polemarches, Plato's brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus and a Sophist called Thraymachus. The conversation begins with a discussion of old age (Cephalus is a very old man) but this is soon abandoned in favour of an attempt to define Justice. The question raised and discussed is: What does morality mean in a man's innermost life?

2. Plato describes in outline what, as he thinks would be the best form of human society. Beginning with the external organisation of life in the state, Plato discovers that in every part of it, a principle upon which the welfare of the community depends has its roots in the constitution of human nature. Whatever is good or evil in the external order of society depends upon the inner nature of the soul. Myths and the false beliefs taught to literature are considered.

Further discussion of some points in the institution of the ideal society raises the question of the means by which the ideal could be realised. The answer is that human life would be as perfect as it is capable of being, if it is governed throughout by knowledge of the Ideal Forms. The cause of all present evils is that men are blinded by opinions which arise from the transient material phenomenon perceived by the senses. At this point Socrates says that he will describe by an image what is the actual condition of mankind in regard to education and the want of it. ("Allegory of the Cave.") The Allegory depicts the position of man on earth and his deliverance by education. Plato's theory of education springs directly out of the allegory of the cave. Education is like putting sight into blind eyes, it is like turning the eye to the light. Indeed it could only be done by turning the whole body round. Education means not merely illuminating the intellect, but turning the soul another way. The allegory describes a liberator who turns the prisoners round and tries to convince them that the actual images they see in the light of the Sun are nearer to reality than the shadows

they watched in the cave. Socrates suggests that most people spend their lives in seeing only reflections or hearing only echoes without ever seeing or hearing the originals. The cave stands for the visible world in which we live, the fire in the cave representing the sun. Just as the cave represents the sensible world, so the sensible world outside the cave represents the ideal world of Forms.

Knowledge in *The Republic*: Plato's position in relation to knowledge is a lack of trust in any form of knowledge but the intellectual. Poets and painters are altogether ignorant of conceptual knowledge. A work of art has no hold of reality in the way that knowledge has. It represents things as they appear and not as they are or ought to be. Thus begins what Plato calls "an ancient feud between philosophy and poetry." Plato resolves, though reluctantly, that poetry must be banished from the ideal state. The essence of Plato's criticism and analysis is straightforward – since every particular object in the sensible world is only an image its appropriate Form, every representation of such a particular must be at least twice removed from reality. Any particular bed can only be an imperfect copy of the Form of Bed and any painting of that particular bed can only be a copy of a copy.

Well then,

shall we begin the inquiry at this point, following our 'usual method': Whenever a number of individuals have a common name, we assume that there is one corresponding idea or form – do you understand me?... Let us take for our present purpose, any instance of such a group; there are beds and tables in the world – many of each, are there not?But there are only two ideas or forms of such furniture – one of the idea of a bed, the other of a table....And the maker of either of them makes a bed or he makes a table for our use, in accordance with the idea – that is our way of speaking in this and similar instances – but no artificer makes the idea itself: how could he?(Book X)

This also holds for poetry. Poetry, like painting, is only a reproduction of a reproduction (instead of performing heroic deeds, the poet writes about them.) What poetry offers is not 'knowledge' but 'opinion'. That which is grasped by thought, with a dialectical account is the thing that is always real, whereas that which is the object of opinion and belief with unreasoning sensation is the thing that changes and passes away and never has real being.

Then the imitator is a long way off the truth, and can reproduce all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them, and that part an image. For example: A painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter, or any other artisan, though he knows nothing of their arts; and, if he is a good painter, he may deceive children or simple persons when he shows them his picture of a carpenter from a distance, and they will fancy that they are looking at a real carpenter....And surely, my friend, that is how we should regard all such claims: whenever any one informs us that he has found a man who knows all the arts, and all things else that anybody knows, and every single thing with a higher degree of accuracy than any other man – whoever tells us this, I think that we can only retort that he is a simple creature who seems to have been deceived by some wizard or imitator whom he met, and who he though all-knowing, because he himself was unable to analyse the nature of knowledge and ignorance and imitation. (Book X)

Art and Literature: Plato's views on Art and Literature and Education derive from his theory of Forms. Poetry like painting is thrice removed from reality. The artist is a copyist for Plato. He is inferior to the workman or producer because he is an imitator and creates a world of make-believe. Imitation (*mimesis* Greek) is not set by Plato against the creative imagination: he calls a beautiful rhythm " an imitation" of a 'manly', self-controlled character. Imitation enters the very fabric. One is constantly

imitating the forms. “We imitate, not only if we play a part on the stage, but when we sit as spectators, when we read Homer and put ourselves into the place of his heroes. We imitate unconsciously the line and colour of the walls around us, the trees by the wayside, the animals we pet, the very dress we wear.” The depth of Plato’s theory of imitation and his recognition of the power of Art upholds the view that there is no other road to the truth but dialectical reason.

Platonic Forms: The central place in Plato’s system is occupied by the theory of Forms. The Forms constitute a world which exists of itself, is eternal and unchanging and can be grasped by thought. In this pure and independent existence the forms have their abode – here the soul in its former existence has perceived them. All learning and knowledge consists in the recollection of the soul of the forms when it perceives the things of sense. The role of the teacher is like that of the mid-wife who assists at the birth of ideas. The earthly things perceived by the senses are mere fleeting and shadowy images of the eternal world of forms. The earthly things perceived by the senses are mere fleeting and shadowy images of the eternal world of forms.

Each thing is what it is only through the presence of the form it is or through its participation in the form. Through all the multiplicity and variety of just and unjust acts, persons and situations in this world there is in some way only *one* Justice and only *one* Injustice. Thus with every collection of things to which we apply the same name as “beautiful” or “bed” , various as beautiful things are, there is only one Beauty. In each and all of the many beautiful things the *one* Beauty must be there otherwise there would be no sense in calling anything beautiful. The many beautiful things are however, unlike Beauty itself, and unreal in so far as they do not endure.

Theory of Imitation: *The Republic* also discusses the kind of stories that should be told to the guardians in their early childhood and finds many tales about gods that would be undesirable for the purpose. He pleads for censorship of art and cites passages from Homer and Sophocles and others that should be deleted. (Book III) In the tenth book, this attack on art leading to the conclusion that art has no social or educative value (most art is worthless in this respect, according to Socrates) and should be banned from his ideal State.

Then the imitative poet who aims at being popular is not by nature made, nor is his art intended, to please or to affect the rational principle in the soul; but he will appeal rather to the lachrymose and fitful temper, which is easily imitated?.....And now we may fairly take him and place him by the side of the painter, for he is like him in two ways: first, inasmuch as his creations have an inferior degree of truth – in this, I say, he is like him; and he is also like him in being the associate of an inferior part of the soul; and this enough to show that we shall be right in refusing to admit him into a State which is to be well ordered, because he awakens and nourishes this part of the soul, and by strengthening it impairs the reason. As in a city when the evil are permitted to wield power and the finer men are put out of the way, so in the soul of each man, as we shall maintain, the imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less; but thinks the same thing at one time great and another small -- he is an imitator of images and is very far removed from the truth. (Book X)

The basic ground for this banishment, as brought out through the dialogue, is that all art is a case of **mimesis**. Socrates had used this term in the third book, when he discusses three different forms of poetry: Narrative as in Lyric poetry mimetic or representative in Drama, both tragedy and comedy and a mixture of both in Epic. As

the argument/dialogue develops, he uses the term *mimesis* to describe artistic creation as a whole. Plato however, uses the term in two different senses in *The Republic*. It has the general sense, IMITATION and a particular sense REPRESENTATION or IMPERSONATION. The sense of representation or impersonation is brought because in Drama, the author identifies himself (herself?) with his character and in this emotional identification comes to represent or impersonate that character fully. In the theatre this emotional identification extends to the audience. This is undesirable, especially, if the guardians emotionally identify themselves with evil characters.

Mimesis in Book X: In this book the word *mimesis* is used in both senses of representation and imitation: In the case of Tragedy and Comedy and in Homer (through his use of Direct Speech) *mimesis* essentially implies representation. Both representation and imitation are implied in fine arts like painting. Applying his theory of forms, Socrates shows that all products of imitative art are but a third remove from the truth i.e., the essential nature of a thing. If a painter paints a bed it is only a copy of a copy. First there is a form of the bed created by god, then its imitation created by the carpenter and finally its copying by the painter and that too of only a particular aspect (for the painter cannot fully imitate the carpenter). The painter, therefore, is inferior to even the craftsman for he only creates appearances. Plato further remarks that a fine art such as painting is like producing reflections of objects in a mirror. *The Republic*, in effect, attacks realism in art which believes that a work of art is an image of likeness of some original, or holds a mirror up to nature.

An easy way to

accomplish this feat might be quickly and easily accomplished, none quicker than that of turning a mirror round and round – you would soon enough make the sun and the heavens, and the earth and yourself, and other animals and plants, and furniture and all the other things of which we were just now speaking, in the mirror. (Book X)

Implications for Poetry: The implications of most art being imitative are far deeper for poetry than for other arts. Plato attacks poetry not only for being a third remove from truth but also on psychological grounds. Drama represents characters in all kinds of actions, pleasant and unpleasant and in all kinds of emotions indiscriminately. It shows them succumbing to grief and anguish whereas in real life men might like to face up to their misfortunes: the imitative poet is a maker of images, far distant from the truth.

The element of 'being distant from truth' leads Plato to contest the value of poetry as the true source of knowledge. Poets for the Greeks, were infallible guides. But Plato says that they do not possess knowledge, which alone is infallible. He, therefore, refuses to accept the social and educative value of poetry. The full implication of Plato's theory of art is imitation: artists indulge in uncritical copying of an object and are quite uncritically affected emotionally by it. Hence artists especially poets (by far the most influential of artists) stand banished from Plato's envisioned Ideal State.

Overview: The harsh criticism and the extreme penalty of exile for the poets might seem irrational and one may be justified in one's criticism of Plato for ignoring the aesthetic aspect of literature and not recognising that art does try to search for truth which intellect cannot reach with mere logic. Has Plato ignored all this? However, it must be remembered that Plato had concerned himself with the social and educative value alone of art in *The Republic*, especially because poets in his time were considered as the most important source of truth and knowledge. In his quarrel between poetry and philosophy, Plato, by his conviction developed dialogically, sides with philosophy. *Therefore, Glaucon, I said, whenever you meet with any of the eulogists of Homer declaring that he has been the educator of Hellas, and that he is profitable for education and for the ordering of human beings, and that you should take him up again and again and get to know him and regulate your whole life according to him, as we may love and honour all those who*

say these things -- they are excellent people, as far as their lights extend; and we are ready to acknowledge that Homer is the greatest of poets and first of tragedy writers; but we must remain firm in our conviction that hymns to the gods and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our State. For if you go beyond this and allow the honeyed Muse to enter, either in epic or lyric verse, not law and the reason of mankind, which by common consent have ever been deemed best, but pleasure and pain will be the rulers in our State.

Theory of Art

Plato's views on art must have been shocking to his contemporaries and more than two thousand years later the modern mind can only consider him to be perverse when he condemns the greatest artists that Greece has ever produced – and the list includes immortal names like Sophocles and Homer.

A summary of Plato's arguments in Book X.

- All art is representation of imitation (*mimesis*) of an original, that is the form as defined in the theory of Forms.
- An artist's representation is at the third remove from reality or truth. To take the example of a bed, first there is a Form in nature, then its imitation by a carpenter and finally its picture by the painter. The painter and by extension any imitative artist including the tragedian, is inferior to an artisan. What the artist produces is appearance and not reality.
- The claim of the poets and tragedians, especially Homer, that they are masters of all skills and know all about human excellence and religion are baseless. Neither Homer

nor the other poets had a real knowledge of the subjects they wrote about – war, statesmanship, administration, human conduct etc.

- Poetry uses words, metre, rhythm and music to create a picture but if you remove these elements it has no substance left.
- Another way to look at a thing's worth is in terms of its use, manufacture and representation (in contrast to form, manufacture and representation) Only the user knows best about a thing's worth, the artist knows little or nothing about it. The art of representation has no serious value. This is true of all tragic poetry, epic or dramatic.
- Art in general and poetry in particular deals with the less rational part of our nature; the tragic drama depicts grief and suffering of the characters rather than their courage and fortitude in the face of a misfortune.
- Poetry, dramatic poetry in particular most often corrupts even the best characters. It arouses our baser instincts by 'representing' sex, anger, vulgarity. In essence, it perverts our moral sense.
- In conclusion, poetry has a low degree of truth, deals with a low element in our mind and very often has a corrupting influence on the audience. Therefore, the poetry of pleasure and poetry of grief shall both be cast out of Plato's ideal state so that pain and pleasure do not rule in place of law and reason. In short, the poet will be banished.

Glossary

Dialectic: The word means discourse or discussion. It is primarily the art of debate by question and answer. As conceived by Plato, it is the art of increasing knowledge by

questions and answers, and in its final stages the art of grasping the real nature of things. Plato calls dialectic “the coping-stone of the whole structure of knowledge.” It is the highest, because the clearest and hence the ultimate, sort of knowledge.

Lyric: A broad umbrella term to encompass a range of different poetries often associated with expression of the subject’s wishes, desires and recollections. Traditionally associated with music and song; many contemporary poets insist on the musicality of their work. In contemporary practice, the lyric has mutated into different forms. An ‘analytic lyric’ or ‘self-reflexive’ lyric will often draw attention to the linguistic textual making of its own utterance. A ‘discursive’ or ‘expressive’ lyric offers the poet’s voice in a conversational mode, often meditating on the world around.

Mimesis: Greek: “imitation” In the *Poetics*, Aristotle states that tragedy is an imitation of an action. Such a statement, however, does not imply that art and life are synonymous. In his discussion, Aristotle makes it clear that the imitation is achieved not through simple mimicry but by the careful construction of the play; selection and arrangement, consequently are the primary tasks of the playwright.

Muses: In Greek mythology, there were nine muses, the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, or Memory. Though at first one was not distinguished from another, they later had their individual provinces to preside over. Clio was the muse of history, Calliope of epic poetry. Erato of love poetry. Euterpe of lyric poetry, Melpomene of tragedy, Polyhymnia of songs to the gods. Terpsichore of dance, Thalia of comedy, Urania of astronomy. Traditionally, poets appealed to a particular muse for aid in assisting them to compose their works. In later literature, writers have used the notion of the muse but without invoking a specific Classical figure.

Poiesis: Poetry. Greek

Philosophy: Derived from two Greek words: *Philein*=to love and *Sophia* =wisdom. Philosophy means love of wisdom. So speaks Socrates in *Phaedrus* of the teachers of mankind: ‘Wise I may not call them; for that is a great name which belongs to God alone; lovers of wisdom or philosophers is their modest and befitting title.’

Sophists: Wandering teachers who came to Athens from foreign cities.

Symposium: Greek word for ‘Banquet’ or more accurately a drinking party. (Reference to the Dialogues between Socrates and others in *The Symposium*).

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