

Platonism: Three Removed From Plato

In my intro to philosophy class this last spring semester (in which we read Plato's *Republic*) I was blessed to have an art student who was not just "a lover of sights", but was also someone who, at times, could be moved by the necessity of argumentation. So in reading Book X – where Socrates and Glaucon conclude that the works produced by imitative artists are "at the third remove from that which is and are easily produced without knowledge of the truth"(600e) – and while most of the others in class were doing their best Euthydemus and Lysias imitations (waiting to hear what to include in their next speech that was due), this girl was sincerely conflicted.¹ No one would doubt the pleasure derived from the works of these imitative artists, but until one can speak on their behalf and "show that [imitative art] not only gives pleasure but is beneficial both to constitutions and to human life"(607d), the imitative artists are to be exiled, lest they bring pleasure at the expense of what is beneficial. What is a girl to do who is both a lover of imitative art and moved with conviction by Socrates' argument? It's as if two parts of herself – call them the poet and the philosopher – are at war with each other and she doesn't know who to trust, who is friend and who is enemy... Again, what is a girl to do, or rather, what is a teacher to do for such a student that is so conflicted?

One thing that might be tried is to acknowledge that this argument against imitative art – and the so-called *Theory of Forms* that informs it – is, according to the language of Book X, itself an imitation², itself none other than a movement within an imitative work, as Plato's *Republic* is Plato imitating Socrates retelling a conversation, and in so doing, imitating not just

¹ For those who might not remember, both Lysias and Euthydemus were the first mentioned as being present with their brother Polemarchus (328b). They are (at least to someone who has read *Republic* twice a year and has read *Pheadrus*) conspicuously silent throughout the discussion.

² Nietzsche's reading of Plato could be construed as doing this, as he positions the "constructors of truth" among the artists. For this, see his *On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense*.

the “words or actions of a good man in his narrative”(396c), but also the words and actions of “disease, sexual passion, drunkenness, [and] other misfortune.”(ibid.) Perhaps this argument against poetry (and the *Theory of Forms* that informs it) is itself diseased, a fit of passion, drunk or some other misfortune! So, I guess, if one is a lover of imitative works of art and is unwilling to consider such works to be an enemy, yet the argument compels one to exile the sights and sounds that are themselves “imitations of appearances”, then why not commit the argument against imitative art to exile? This would at least be a logically consistent move.³ However, as mentioned, to remain logically consistent, one would also have to throw out the rest of *Republic*, and if one is truly a lover of imitative art, then one is going to be just as hesitant to do this, as some of its images are the most pleasing in all of literature, from the opening peripatetic scene of Socrates and Glaucon (teacher and student) leaving a festival and walking upwards home to the temple of Athena (apparently discussing just how one should honor and love the gods), to the “healthy” city built upon the principle that none of us is self-sufficient (allowing us to see what a life looks like that desires what is necessary), to the comparison of a city to a soul, the allegory of the cave, the many-headed beast, the Myth of Er. Even here we are no clearer on who to trust (the poet in us or the philosopher) than Polemarchus was when he exclaimed “I don’t know any more what I did mean, but I still believe that to benefit one’s friends and harm one’s enemies is

³ Of course it would be logically consistent only insofar as one is neglecting (or as Nietzsche might say, forgetting) the mimetic aspect of language. That is, if *we* exile imitative art for the reasons given in *Republic*, then *we* are not being dialectical, because *we* would be imitating Glaucon, who is un-dialectically following Socrates wherever he leads him. This story (i.e. Book X of *Republic*) could be very beneficial for anyone educating others to be dialectical: if one cannot provide an account of imitative art as not only pleasing but also beneficial to human life and constitutions, then one might do well in staying away (lest they be taken in by, say, a speech from Lysias), or having someone else lead them. An analogy here might be something like this: If you are the Tractarian Logical Philosopher, if that book is a description of *you*, then the logically consistent next step would not be to lecture on such matters, it would be to be silent about them, perhaps go and do something else like teach grammar and read Lewis Carroll and Charles Dickens to children in rural Austria or something. That is, until one is awakened to the possibilities of language outside of the propositional (and reading Carroll and Dickens and teaching children might actually help facilitate such an awakening).

justice.”(334b) Or it’s as if we are compelled by both of these parts of ourselves – the philosopher and the poet, reason and desire, the part that seeks benefit and the part that seeks pleasure – to consider Plato and his *Republic* a friend.

Perhaps instead of seeking a wholesale banishment or inclusion we (I say “we” because this is no longer just her problem; in being her teacher it is mine as well), we could pay attention to particulars⁴ and ask what Socrates might mean when he says (directly after concluding the argument exiling imitative art, mind you):

“Nonetheless, if the poetry that aims at pleasure and imitation has any argument to bring forward that proves it ought to have a place in a well-governed city, we at least would be glad to admit it, for we are well aware of the charm it exercises... isn’t it just that such poetry should return from exile when it has successfully defended itself?...we’ll allow its defenders...to speak in prose on its behalf and to show that it not only gives pleasure but is beneficial both to constitutions and to human life. Indeed, we’ll listen to them graciously, for we’d certainly profit if poetry were shown to be not only pleasant but also beneficial...because the love of this sort of poetry has been implanted in us by the upbringing we have received under our fine constitutions, we are well disposed to any proof that it is the best and truest thing.”(607c)

What sort of defense does he have in mind? And it again should be noted that this is not just a question that lovers of imitative art have to answer, it’s a question for anyone who has gleaned anything from a Platonic dialogue, whether it be a beautiful image, or character that (somehow) compels one to travel upon the rough road of virtue, or a so-called *Theory of Forms*. It is a defense that must demonstrate that poetry (or imitative art in general) is not only pleasing but beneficial.

A necessary first step in providing such a defense would be to determine: “What counts as beneficial to a constitution and to human life?” The most popular contenders, all of which

⁴ I’m not just stealing this phrase from Wittgenstein; I think that reading Plato’s dialogues as first works of literature is what comes natural to one whose reading and thinking has been influenced by Wittgenstein. And if what follows is worth anything, it’s not just natural, it’s *right*.

have their voice in *Republic*, all are the same contenders Aristotle addresses in Book I of *Nicomachean Ethics* and, if I'm not mistaken, are the most popular today (twenty-four hundred years later), they are: Honor, Wealth, Pleasure (or, if this is different, the Freedom to satisfy any of one's pleasures), Power, Virtue and what those who read Plato as a *Theorist of Forms* say is his answer: Knowledge.⁵ The contender I'd like to discuss in the remainder of this essay is the last. Two questions immediately arise here: 1. "Is this a good answer?" and 2. "Is it Plato's?" Now, as far as I've been able to tell, both of these questions can be answered by reading any of Plato's dialogues, but because of my student's particular conflict I will be looking at *Republic*. Perhaps you are saying to yourself or whispering to another "We think that you're slacking off and that you've cheated us out of a whole important section of the discussion in order to avoid having to deal with it—as though it were something trivial—that just because one answer is given in one dialogue that it's going to be the *same* answer given in all of them, as if all the dialogues are friends possessing everything in common!"(449c), to which I'll say at this juncture: *That*, Adeimantus, is part of my point: resist the temptation to generalize and theorize and *read* the dialogues *as* dialogues, *as* conversations for a particular purpose, and I will address this point soon.⁶

The Allegory of the Cave which opens Book VII of *Republic* is introduced by Socrates in order to "compare the effect of education and of the lack of it on our nature."(514a) To make this

⁵ I have seen this answer attributed to Plato most recently in an article by Louis Markos:

<http://www.theimaginativeconservative.org/2013/10/platos-big-mistake-knowledge-is-virtue.html>.

⁶ The mistaken reading of Plato that I'm discussing in this essay is actually quite similar to the one Adeimantus makes that begins Book V: he recalls what Socrates says in Book IV, that "if by being well educated they become **reasonable men**, they will easily see these things for themselves...that marriage, the having of wives, and the procreation of children must be governed as far as possible by the old proverb: Friends possess everything in common."(423e) Adeimantus quotes him as saying "**anyone** could see"(449c), but of course you can see, that that's *not* what Socrates said; not **everyone** could live according to that proverb, but the reasonable, that is, educated person, could. Adeimantus needs a drug other (and perhaps stronger) than a proverb. He might need a "noble falsehood" about forms.

comparison we are asked to “imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling...they’ve been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around.”(514a-b) What are they doing down there? Well, they are staring at the wall in front of them, captivated by the shadows being displayed there. What are the shadows of and where are they coming from? There is a fire burning far above and behind these captives, and there are people further up in the cave, closer to the fire “carrying all kinds of artifacts...statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material.”(515a) Do any of these people talk to each other or say anything? Some “of these carriers are talking, and some are silent”(514c), and, says Socrates, “if [these prisoners] could talk to one another, don’t you think they’d suppose that the names they used applied to the things they see passing before them?” to which Glaucon agrees.(515b) One might want to ask here “What is so *captivating* about a shadow?”, but as Socrates says, they don’t know that what they are looking at *is* a shadow, let alone a shadow of a statue or an artifact.

Then we are asked to imagine “what being released from their bonds and cured of their ignorance would naturally be like if something like this came to pass.”(515c) In order to do this, though, we must imagine another person⁷, someone who compels the prisoner to “stand up, turn [his] head, walk, and look up toward the light”; this mysterious liberator “points to each of the things passing by, asks him what each of them is, and compels the newly but reluctantly freed individual to answer. Then the liberator “drags the former prisoner away from there by force, up

⁷ Unless one is able to get out on one’s own, for “what grows of its own accord and owes no debt for its upbringing has justice on its side when it isn’t keen to pay anyone for that upbringing.”(520b) But who’s that?!—And anyone who has read Book II’s principle for the founding of a city “none of us is self-sufficient, but we all need many things” that we cannot provide for ourselves.

the rough, steep path, and he doesn't let him go until he has dragged him into the sunlight.”(515c-516a)

But who is this mysterious liberator? He is someone who was compelled in the same way to make the same journey himself. He is, Socrates says, someone who has reminded himself of his first dwelling place (i.e. ignorance), and his fellow prisoners, and what passed for wisdom there, and when he remembers all of this he counts himself happy for the change and pities the others; he is compelled to go back down and help the others go through what he's gone through. But let's be clear of one thing here, Socrates does not say that what compels this educator is only pity, nor simply the duty to a principle such as 'none of us is self-sufficient', it is also *his own happiness* (516c)⁸. I stress this point because it will help us to resist the common and powerful temptation to think that what is opposed to ignorance here (that what the educator's happiness consists in) is knowledge. If their happiness consisted in knowledge then they wouldn't go back down into the cave, “they”, says Socrates, “would refuse to act, thinking that they had settled while still alive in the faraway Isles of the Blessed.”(519c) It is precisely this temptation that Socrates is trying to get the boys in *Republic* to resist, for he says that if this story is true then “here's what we must think about these matters: Education isn't what some people declare it to be, namely, putting *knowledge* into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes.”(518b) What then *is* education if not “putting knowledge into souls that lack it?” that is, what does getting out of the cave of ignorance consist in if not knowledge? The answer, according to the story is that:

“the power to learn is present in everyone's soul and that the instrument with which each learns is *like* an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body. This instrument cannot be turned around

⁸ For example, think of the first thing (or one of the first things) one wants to do after hearing a great piece of music or reading a good poem or seeing a good film: it is to share it with others. We just are compelled to do this, we want others to experience the goodness also and with us.

from that which is coming into being without turning the whole soul until it is able to study that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely, the one we call the good...*education is the craft concerned with doing this very thing, this turning around*, and with how the soul can most easily and effectively be made to do it.”(518c-d, my italics)

Knowledge alone does not differentiate between the good (useful and beneficial) on the one hand and the bad (useless and harmful) on the other. If it did eugenics would be an impossibility.

Much can be done with knowledge of medicinal chemistry, such as aiding a patient in controlling their cholesterol; but it can also be used to produce a more pure form of methamphetamine.

Knowledge, according to Socrates makes one’s vision keen and able to sharply distinguish things (519a), but on its own it does not get one any closer to the good or, if this is different, it does not get one closer to *being* good. In fact, it allows one to do more harm, as a vicious person with keen eyesight is more dangerous than one without it. To get closer to the good one needs more than an ability to discern differences in things, one also needs virtue. Or, knowledge on its own can get one to be “keen”, “sharp” or maybe even “clever”, but *not* good, that requires a turning of the whole soul, a cultivation of not just reason (intellect), but the whole person: reason, emotion (spirit) and desire⁹. This is what Socrates means by education and this is what is opposed to ignorance. To put that in a slightly different way: If we as educators are guarding against ignorance, then we’re going to need more than just knowledge, we also need virtue.

So let’s take stock: in Book X imitative art is exiled because it “keeps company with a part of us that is far from reason”(603a), however, reducing education to “putting knowledge into souls that lack it” is warned against in Book VII precisely because knowledge *does not* “keep company with” this other part of ourselves. Now, those who are concerned solely with arguments may say

⁹ This can also be seen in Book IV by looking at the unifying relation between the virtues Wisdom, Courage, Moderation and Justice (“You can’t have one without having the other” – Grammatical Remark).

that this is a blatant contradiction, that the argument in Book X contradicts the Allegory of the Cave in Book VII. But there is, of course, another possibility: *It's not an either/or!* The Allegory of the Cave is beneficial in that it is aiding Glaucon, the others (and ourselves) in resisting the temptation to think that one is good because of expert knowledge in a discipline or an ability to perform some, intellectually complex, high-paying, honored function; the argument in Book X is beneficial in aiding all of us in resisting the temptation that something is good simply because it is pleasing. Both are required in guarding against ignorance, education consists in both. Plato's *Republic*, therefore, in doing both, is *beneficial* in both ways. What could be more beneficial to both constitutions and to human life than that? The answer, as far as I can tell, is nothing. Plato's *Republic*, then, is precisely the kind of art that is both pleasing and beneficial.

Reading Plato as a Platonist, that is, reading his dialogues as cleverly constructed theories of forms has yet another undesirable effect, which can be acknowledged if we once again turn to the imagery of the Allegory of the cave. The carriers in the cave, those that are “carrying all kinds of artifacts...statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material”(515a), are an odd bunch, to say the least. Their lives are devoted to keeping the prisoners below right where they are; if the prisoners turn around and put forth the time and effort to focus on what's really going on, not only will the carriers have to find something else to do (because the prisoners are no longer captivated by the shadows), but they'll probably have to find somewhere else to do it, for if the prisoners are cured of their ignorance, they will recognize that the carriers were partly responsible for them remaining right where they were, in ignorance. This does not mean, however, that all the carriers are giving the prisoners false information. We can imagine one of the carriers holding up a wooden statue of a human being and speaking the words “I'm holding up a wooden statue of a human being”, or even “You are looking at a

shadow of a wooden statue of a human being.” What the carrier is saying is not false, it’s just that: 1. it’s unclear what role this non-false statement could possibly play in the life of the prisoner; and 2. the prisoner is not in a position where this information can be true *for him*, as *he* is not in a position to be able to distinguish between shadow – statue – reality. For example, when Polemarchus quotes Simonides saying that “Justice is giving to each what is owed to him”(331e), had Socrates said, “No, you’re wrong, Justice is doing one’s own work and not meddling with what isn’t one’s own...it is the power that makes it possible for [the virtues of wisdom, courage and moderation] to grow and preserves them”(433a-c), even though this is the conclusion they come to (and no better conclusion is ever come to), at that early point in the discussion it would have done Polemarchus no good, as he’s determining his friends by their usefulness, considering the lives of everyone else as expendable for the satisfaction of his desires, and thinking he’s pretty hot stuff because he’s read a little of the wise and godly Simonides. To carry this even further, Plato could have just presented this conception of Justice and done away with the characters Socrates and the others, but this again would have done us no good, as the point isn’t just to *know* what justice is, it’s to get us to actually desire it, desire to *be* it. However, we can also imagine among the carriers someone who really believes that what he is doing *is* good for the prisoners; he doesn’t know any better, it’s what he learned as good and, hey, he at least isn’t saying anything other than “You are looking at a shadow of a wooden statue of a human being.” Thrasymachus, on the other hand, is different. We can imagine Thrasymachus conducting his classrooms much like the other carriers: he probably sounds great lecturing, and his class is probably pretty easy: just regurgitate back to him what he says as if it’s the most amazing thing you’ve ever heard and pay the fine (I mean, tuition fee). But he is

different than the carriers I've described as he hasn't the slightest concern for the good of those below him¹⁰.

The question I want to address, though, is: where do we put Plato when read as a theorist of forms? It is of course true that there are poets (and other imitators) among the carriers, holding up their works as beautiful, true and good when they are not (and some of them, like Thrasymachus, are doing it without the slightest concern for the beautiful, the true or the good), but the philosophers who reduce education to knowledge (even if what echoes from the walls of the cave is "knowledge of Biology", "knowledge of Economics", "knowledge of God", "knowledge of Forms"), are no more turning souls to the good, no more getting them to *be* good, than any other carrier. What this means is that those who read Plato as some theorist of forms are positioning him among the other carriers, doing no more good than any other sophist or imitator. And what this means for those Platonists who are captivated by this reading is that *they* are at the bottom of the cave, "at the third remove from that which is"(598e), captivated by shadows.

How did this happen? It happened precisely because it is all too easy to reduce education (and of course, the *act of reading*) to "putting knowledge into souls that lack it." When we resist this temptation, however, we see that the so-called ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry is really a quarrel over shadows: the philosopher is claiming victory because he has knowledge; the poet is claiming victory because he has influence, but Plato with *Republic* is saying: the poet and the philosopher are not enemies (that's Book I); Neither of them is self-sufficient (that's Book II); If one of them does well, the other does well, if one does badly, the

¹⁰ If Socrates doesn't come back down with Glaucon, then, when Cephalus leaves again to "look after a sacrifice", Polemarchus and the others are left alone to be influenced by Thrasymachus and his speeches and the further procession of the festival in honor of Bendis.

other does badly too (that's Book III); The excellence of one requires the excellence of the other (that's Book IV)...we could keep going, but let's just read it again.