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## Plato's The Republic: Decency and the Arts

The role of art in society has always presented a battle between freedom of expression and decency, as is clearly presented in Book III of The Republic. Plato argues that the purpose of the arts is to promote the virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance; literature must never deviate from the endorsement of these ideals. Ideals to the contrary must be censored so as not to negatively impact the minds of the youth, the leaders of tomorrow. But what importance do Plato's strict standards have in the classical republican philosophy of government, and how do they compare with today's society in America?

It is extremely hard for me as an American to relate to a culture and time where community superceded individuality, and art was nothing more than a means to an end. Since John Locke's declaration of natural rights and the revolutions that followed, there has been a shift in focus from utilitarian ideals of the greater good to a passionate advancement of individual liberty. This shift resulted in art being released from the strain of having to benefit society; there could be art for art's sake, for expression's sake (whether good or bad). However, to Plato art was another tool that could be used to further the virtues of his republic.

Plato faced an interesting dilemma. Education was absolutely necessary for the training of future leaders, but so much of history and literature contained stories of lament and dishonor. Death was a horrible terror; even the strongest heroes lamented over tragedy; the gods were just as immoral and imperfect as humanity. So in order to properly train the young minds in the way of virtue, Plato thought it necessary to censor and rewrite literature to provide positive examples for the guardians. And we must beg Homer and the other poets not to be angry if we strike out these and similar passages, not because they are unpoetical, or unattractive to the popular ear, but because the greater the poetical charm of them, the less are they meet for the ears of boys and men who are meant to be free, and who should fear slavery more than death (57). Plato wanted to remove the weeping and wailing of Achilles to avoid the ...danger that the nerves of our guardians may be rendered too excitable and effeminate by them (57). The other stories of Homer where obedience is encouraged were okay, however.

It was not that Plato necessarily deemed the writings themselves evil, but it was because he wanted to protect the youth from being unduly influenced by characters that succumbed to sorrow and inappropriate bouts of passion. Plato confesses his love for the works of Homer. This is the point at which it is hard as an American to relate because he is reasoning more as a protective father than as a proponent of liberty. If his child knew death was such a terrible thing, they would lament as Achilles did and not be able to make decisions that their leadership position demanded of them. But if the child cannot relate to sorrow within literature, he will feel

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such a misfortune far less than another (58). While many today would view this lack of emotion as somewhat unnatural, Plato believed temperance was more important to instill in the youth than enthusiasm.

Plato's ideal man is stable-minded and well-educated. America's ideal man is passionate and rich. Plato believed the love of money was something that corrupted the ability to make decisions, as he probably viewed first-hand in the realm of Greek politics. Today, it is still something that corrupts a leader's ability to make decisions. So, in essence, few things have changed. But instead of passing laws regulating politicians and lobbyists, Plato chose to attack what he believed was the root of the problem. In the next place, we must not let them be receivers of gifts or lovers of money (61). He proposed the alteration of literature to make it coincide with virtues that discouraged greed. And therefore let us put an end to such tales, lest they engender laxity of morals among the young (63). Though the artistic value of mythology was undeniable, the integrity of such works was secondary to the education of the guardians.

The example of the gods in literature was of great importance to Plato, for if evil was committed by the gods then why should man not follow their example? We will not have them trying to persuade our youth that the gods are the authors of evil, and that heroes are no better than men... (63) Thus, even more literature had to be censored to keep men from using the god's example as an excuse for their own evil. Laughter was also condemned by Plato as being conducive to violence: For a fit of laughter which has been indulged to excess almost always produces a violent reaction (59).

Classical republicanism puts little faith in the nature of man, while the American capitalist ideal exalts man and grants him the potential to do whatever he wishes. So in one sense, classical republicanism is more down to earth in that it assumes man's evil nature. But is censoring reality practical in education, the search for truth? Apparently, to Plato truth is only important in the context of securing the virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance in the community.

He further brushes aside truth in favor of a stronger community: Then if any one at all is to have the privilege of lying, the rulers of the State should be the persons; and they, in their dealings either with enemies or with their own citizens, may be allowed to lie for the public good (60). Plato grants those in authority the moral right to lie because they have already passed through the system of education and are well aware of the common good.

Plato's republic does not immediately promote a rational search for truth, but rather educates man blindly in the ways of virtue, and only then allows him to discover truth after he has been trained properly. Rather than give youth simply the rational means to discover the truth for themselves in the context of reality, evil is censored and only virtues remain. ...[H]e will justly

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blame and hate the bad, now in the days of his youth, even before he is able to know the reason why; and when reason comes he will recognize and salute the friend with whom his education has made him long familiar (73).

To encourage good and justice, Plato believed one should not tell of the injustice of the world. Because if I am not mistaken, we shall have to say that about men poets and story-tellers are guilty of making the gravest misstatements when they tell us that wicked men are often happy, and the good miserable; and that injustice is profitable when undetected, but that justice is a man's own loss and another's gain " these things we shall forbid them to utter, and command them to sing and say the opposite (63). This is practically a universal theme in literature, making it a hard one for Plato to censor. That must mean this theme lends some truth to life, but that was not relevant to Plato because the education of virtue was more important than the education of reality.

Plato seems a bit shortsighted as far as judging the morality of stories such as those by Homer. While it is true that characters lamented, loved money, killed each other, and even feared death, there are underlying themes of virtues that Plato completely ignored. Instead, he quoted isolated lines from the stories that contained a single character expressing sorrow over the death of a friend. A character's lament was to be removed because it would create less whining among men. And instead of having any shame or self-control, he will always be whining and lamenting on slight occasions (59). When Zeus was overcome with sexual desire for Here, the passion of a god that man could relate to was removed because it was indecent for young men. Again, the stable mind was emphasized over any sort of passion. That was how Plato liked his republic.

But in the end, Plato believed that the purpose of art was the love of beauty (75). This beauty is not found in the art itself, but rather in the virtues that the art encompasses-- wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. Unlike the American ideal of freedom from censorship, Plato proposed the ultimate education of future leaders by surrounding them only with the qualities that would make them excellent leaders.

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