
The Analysis of Plato's Republic: the Issue of Censorship

In Books II and III of Republic, Plato[1] argues for the censorship of stories and tales for the youth of their imaginative, Utopian city, and specifically for the youth of the 'ruling' class named the Guardians. He asserts that censoring certain tales, notably ones with violent themes or notions of change and transformation, would prevent the youth of the guardians to have their minds corrupted with vices, and thus rendered unfit for ruling the Utopian city. In some respects, Plato is correct, and in others, Plato is wrong. By examining the story of Odysseus killing the suitors in Homer's Odyssey, and recognizing whether certain elements in the tale would be harmful or helpful to an aspiring ruler, we will see what exactly Plato was correct and incorrect in asserting.

In Homer's epic poem, the Odyssey, the main character Odysseus returns home from Troy to find his wife being courted by a group of wealthy suitors, in order to gain through marriage Odysseus' wealth and land he owned as King of Ithaca. In rage, Odysseus kills the group of suitors in bloody and gruesome detail.

"Those with wily Odysseus, master of cunning, again then started to hurl their sharp-tipped spears at the throng of suitors. Then was Eurydamas slain by Odysseus, sacker of cities, and Amphimedon by Telemachus; also the swineherd's spear slew Polybus, ; then Ctesippus was killed by the cowman, struck in the chest." This is the kind of detail that Plato asserts should be censored from the youth and the Guardians. In this respect, Plato is correct, in that there is no possible benefit to spelling the gruesome account of Odysseus' slaughtering of the suitors. Odysseus is seen as a hero and role model in the Odyssey, and his actions in this story would reflect on the minds of the youth as both noble and heroic to emulate. This kind of violence is not what is wanted to be occurring in the Utopian city, let alone being done by the rulers of the city. The only possible benefit of telling this story is that it would reveal the truth of the world and its harshness to the youthful guardians at an early age; however, this lesson can be taught by multitudes of other tales in much less violent detail. In this interpretation of the story, Plato is correct in that it should be censored.

It is important to note that Hellenics living during the time of Plato would have believed in the Odyssey as fiction, understood to be mainly for entertainment, but also understood to be essential to teaching important life lessons and to understanding and identifying with Hellenic culture. This is important to make that distinction, because it allows us to discuss how the same story, which we just concluded is not beneficial in any way, is beneficial to the minds of a youth in the Utopian city. It is this benefit that Hellenics would have recognized as the life lessons the fictitious Odyssey provided.

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Because Hellenics recognized the epic poem as fiction (after all, it was a poem), they knew that the events that occurred in the *Odyssey* were not accurate reflections of real life. In this, storytellers could easily tell the tale of a violent act, yet immediately afterwards explain how the act was not meant to be emulated in a literal sense, by claiming the author meant to instill emotion and/or virtuous ideology through extreme detail. In the *Odyssey*, storytellers could in effect explain the violent acts of Odysseus as metaphors of, for example: protecting one's family, honor, and providing justice to the unjust, among other ideals. The violent acts were, in fact, not meant to be interpreted as literally violent, but as epitomizing the essence of the above ideals. In this interpretation of the story, Plato is wrong in that it should be censored.

This distinction between interpretations of the story brings up the notion of the difference between a lie and a "real lie" as Plato talks about in *Republic* (382c). In the *Odyssey*, people recognize story as fiction, and thus know it is a lie, meaning the lie is not a "real lie," where the victims of the lie are unaware what they are being told is a lie. Had the story not been recognized as fiction, and instead believed as folklore or the truth, then the actions of Odysseus would become a "real lie," and thus even more damaging to the mind of the Guardian youth. However, because it is simply just a lie, it is both fine and beneficial to teach the Guardian youth, if not for the lessons, but for the value it adds to Hellenic culture, for a Guardian having a sense of identity is essential to loyalty to the Utopian city.

It is also worth mentioning that we only explored the censorship of violent stories. In *Republic*, Plato asserts that there are many kinds of stories that should be censored, most notably ones that involve transformation and change, as well as laughter. Plato believes that these notions would instill vices in the Guardians, just as violent stories would. It should be noted that, just as we found an exception to the violent story's censorship, arguably the most extreme type of story, that the other types would also have exceptions to censorship as well, and should in fact be told to the youthful Guardians. The omission of essential cultural stories would be just as damaging to a Guardian as would the benefit of Plato's censorship.

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