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Plato's No Fun Zone: No Poets, No Painters, No Problem

Plato was an Greek, specifically Athenian, philosopher who lived from the late 5th to mid 4th centuries BCE. He is considered one of the founding fathers of Western philosophy. He wrote philosophical dialogues exploring topics like justice, ethics, politics, metaphysics, epistemology, and education. In *The Republic Book X,* he uses a dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon to address the role of imitative works of art and poetry in a hypothetical ideal society that he is building.

This society is a purely utilitarian one where "judgments about what is true, beautiful, or good in any living thing, any human action, or any human art ought to be made only in terms of the use that nature or the artisan intended them for" (Plato 83). He argues that a thing is only as valuable as its uses and that there is no room outside this for beauty or aesthetic appeal. Function is all. Furthermore, he believes that any representation of a thing is an imitation and is limited by what the imitator knows of its true nature:

> So the user will have true knowledge. But the maker will also trust his own judgment concerning the merits and defects of the instrument because he associates with… the man who knows…
>
> Neither knowledge nor opinion can help the imitator to arrive at valid judgments about his own imitations (Plato 84).

He will not conceive of a reason why the painter might paint a flute except as an imitation of a real flute. A representation of a man playing a flute leading snakes into the sea, in Plato's view, must only represent an attempt at pest control through music and cannot be an allegory for religious conversion or a playful children's story. He uses flute making as a prime example of the differences between levels of knowledge and judgement but surely music is one of the proscribed arts? While a flute might have other uses such as signaling or leading a march, it is unlikely that its overall quality would matter for these uses. So Plato picks and chooses which arts are false and wicked and which are not.

He reserves his greatest disdain for poetry, baldly stating that "[p]oets contrive appearances and not reality" (Plato 81) but later on he almost admires poetry done well when he says that:

> When Homer or one of the other tragic poets imitates a grieving hero and causes him to utter extended lamentations or has him chant and beat his breast, you know that even the best of us enjoy it. We are held captive by the imitation; we suffer with the hero, and whoever can most powerfully evoke this mood in us we call the best poet (Plato 87).

He sees how poetry can make you feel and experience things but he disdains "false" emotion rather than the real kind. Truly, citizens of Plato's city would be unthinking automatons who do only useful work and live without joy or any other strong emotion. The catharsis that we feel when we have experienced the poetry and the synthetic emotion, for Plato is not valuable or character building. Only true pain is helpful and only the public, stoic endurance of bad experiences has any value to him. It further ignores the value of poetry in sharing experiences and emotions and in showing us that we are not alone in our experiences.

While Plato's critique of art and poetry reflects his commitment to rationality, utility, and the pursuit of truth. By relegating imitative works to a secondary, almost contemptible status, he highlights his belief that only what is grounded in function and knowledge has value in an ideal society. His arguments reveal an inherent tension between his disdain for the emotional power of poetry and art and their profound impact on human experience. This shows the limits of Plato's utilitarian framework which seek to suppress the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of life in favour of pure functionality. While pragmatism does achieve goals, emotional openness forms a sense of community so that one actually feels like that progress was worth something. Ultimately, while his vision of an ideal society is intellectually rigorous, it raises questions about the cost of prioritizing utility over the richness of human creativity. Plato's rejection of imitative art offers a provocative lens through which to examine the balance between reason and emotion in shaping both individual character and societal values.

Works Cited

Plato, “The Republic, Book X.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism.* Edited by Vincent B. Leitch, et al, 3rd Edition, W.W. Norton and Company, 2018, pp. 78 – 89.