



Plato and Art: Controversies, Political Engagement and Education

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Abstract

Plato's views on art are rather controversial and provocative. On the one hand he maintains a suspicion for artists, reaching the point of claiming that they should be expelled from the ideal city that he envisages and describes in his *Republic*. On the opposite side he considers artistic training, in music and poetry but not in painting, as an essential component of the good education, again in the *Republic*, elevating art's role in the society. Various attempts have been made by Platonic scholars to interpret and consolidate these seemingly contrasting notions, by focusing on Plato's usage of myths, in his literary style that involves dialogues, and other elements. Here I suggest an additional point that is based on the premise that Plato differentiates arts depending on their substance, viewing painting, poetry, and music with progressively decreasing hostility. He also targets primarily the artist and his social role but dissociates the artistic creation, which becomes the property of the city. As such, art can and should be censored, and it should be politically charged and engaged, for the collective benefit.

Keywords: ancient philosophy; Plato; artists; artistic creation; social role of art

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Plato and art: Controversies, political engagement and education

Plato's position on art and the artists is rather controversial, complex, and if judged by today's standards, it is extreme. His overarching opinion is rather negative and reaches the point of claiming that artists should not be allowed in the perfect city, his Kallipolis that he describes in the Republic (Partee, 1970). By negating a form of human creativity that appeared as soon as human civilization emerged, Plato seems to deny a component of human nature that we consider as inherent to it. This is because he sees art as corruptive and misleading, misleading people from seeking the true knowledge. The celebration of art, of the artistic creations, and of the artists, is also associated with the cultivation of a series of moral deficits, which supports his view that art and the perfect city are incompatible notions. The foundation of Plato's rejection of art lies in that art is essentially an imitation of reality and therefore, it misleads people from seeking the truth, the pivotal ideal of Platonic philosophy.

Yet, this represents the partial truth only regarding how Plato views artistic creation because, at the same time, he also identifies an essential role in it, in the context of education, seeing it as a fundamental component of the process that will eventually deliver citizens capable of attaining their role in the society. This is particularly pertinent to the golden class of guardians that, in order to become accomplished rulers, they are required to have received artistic education.

The complex relationship between Plato and art, is also reflected in his extensive use of myths that are not rational constructs and they are not falsifiable. Therefore, they contrast reasoning that he so meticulously develops throughout his philosophy. In 12 out of his 26 authentic dialogues he uses the term "*myth*" 87 times, referring to both traditional Greek myths and his own creations (Partenie, 2009). Idealist philosophers like Hegel, despite their profound appreciation for Plato and of his

recognition in the pivotal position among rationalists (Surber, 2019), he “... *treated Plato’s myths as mere regrettable embellishments*” (Keum, 2020). Popper had adopted a more radical position, denouncing the use of Myths by Plato, and Plato in general, for arguing that they provide ideological foundation of totalitarian regimes (Popper, 1963; Keum, 2020). The debate regarding the integration of Plato’s mythology in his rationalistic thought is still ongoing, recognizing among other arguments the conciliative dynamics of the persuasive power of using imaginary constructs, their appeal to the psyche of the audience, as well as the different meaning of the term *myth* (μύθος) between contemporary and archaic societies (Partenie, 2009; Keum, 2020).

Besides the extensive use of Myths, Plato’s complex relationship with artistic creations extends to his writing style as well. Plato wrote almost exclusively¹ dialogues, which as a literary device appear incompatible with the accurate and precise rationalistic thought he develops. Yet, compared to his contemporary drama that he loved, his dialogues remain relatively blunt, frequently ironic, and devoid of strong emotional charges, advanced literary complexity, and elaborate schemes. As such they appealed more to the readers’ reason through his argumentative speech, than to their emotion (Tarrant, 1948). It is also rightfully noted that in developing the construct of philosophy, Plato had to utilize genres that were mainstream in the Athenian society and therefore received well by his audience (Nightingale, 1995).

1 People as individual and socially engaged entities

To get a better appreciation of Plato’s views on art we should consider that for Plato the individual has a dual substance and purpose. First, their existence in its quest for living a meaningful life is underlined by the pursuit of true knowledge that is devoid of imitations. Within this frame the images should be understood and comprehended only as approximations of the true forms. This is a foundation of his rationalism and an imperative for reaching eudemonia, the true happiness that ex-

¹ Referring to Plato’s 13 Epistles that nonetheless, except the seventh, are not considered authentic.

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tends beyond pleasure, and is based on virtue (Price, 2012). In parallel though with this purpose, individuals live in cities within societies, at which they have to fulfil roles that supersede their individual needs and desires. To operate as such,² they have to undergo training towards the development of a philosophical mindset, and be subjected to education since their childhood, by a manner that has to enable their social function. This dual substance of people, both as individual beings that need to attain eudemonia, and as citizens of a society within the Polis that has goals and purpose higher than that of its citizens, creates conflicts that characterize and reflect the controversy that is identified in Plato's views on art. The reason behind this is that eudemonia originates from the nurturing of the intellect, while the success of the city relies on the advancement of a collective psyche at which the group's goals are superior to those of the individual. In the first, art stands in an opposing position as it does not convey true ideas and perceptions and does not contribute to the acquisition of knowledge, but in the second, art is in synergy as it targets the soul on which the collective social aspirations and desires rely on.

A series of specific components characterize these views, that when seen in concert can explain what may appear initially as a controversy and contribute to reconciling the platonic ideas that initially appear as opposing each other. These include the role of art in education, his explicit view on art as targeting the soul instead of either the intellect or the body, and finally that his distrust targets primarily the artists and not their actual artefacts and products. Through that, he develops a politicized perception for art and of its role in the society that can explain art's necessity and mission in the society. It also explains the diminutive opinion Plato holds for the artists as the carriers of artistic creation and the recipients of the corresponding fame and benefits. This negative opinion eventually evolves into a form of socioeconomical criticism that ultimately targets the democratic processes of ancient Athens and their vulnerability to opinion (δόξα), as opposed to true knowledge (ἐπιστήμη or γνῶσις) (see also note 7, below).

2 Plato focuses on the golden classes of rulers.

The dissociation of the artists from their artistic creations justifies its censorship and legitimizes the engagement of art in the achievement of a political (civil) purpose. This way, art is not just a function that is performed for some pleasure, to entertain the emotional soul, but it acquires a mission and aims to the collective good. All together these notions may explain the seemingly contradicting views of Plato on art that can be resolved by appreciating that in Plato's view, art should exist to fulfil a different mission than what it does today, and as perceived in the mind of the contemporary man. This mission involves deeply the cultivation and education of people towards a defined goal, that to be accomplished it has to be administered and regulated centrally by the state through the class of rulers/guardians that are in charge of it.³

2 Some historical context

Artistic creation in the classical period held high position in the society. Artists were celebrated figures and enjoyed both fame and wealth. In festivals, especially in poetry, competitions were taking place at which poets were competing with each other for the awards (Henderson 1989). The city was sponsoring the production of a number of performances which reflects the public acceptance of art and of its social role. Not only contemporary poets were active and impactful, but also past poets, like Homer, who held a special position in the collective psyche of the Hellenes. He was viewed as a master teacher in the Hellenic world and people were frequently referring to Homer both for moral guidance, and as a reference for the retrieval of historical or even practical information, like shipmanship for example.^{4,5} Homer's and other poets' poems were recited in these public events by the rhapsodists, the poets' reciters, who

3 Analogous engagement of art for a collective purpose, and regulation by the state has been seen in the last century in totalitarian regimes, both at the far right and far left side of the political spectrum. Of course, along the same lines is the criticism against popular culture, albeit not centrally administered and intentionally performed by a systematic manner, as explicitly expressed by the Frankfurt School and other ideological fronts of the New Left (Reitz 2000; Adorno 2003)

4 In Book X (606e) (Republic) Socrates refers to Homer as follows: "*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 things...*".

5 In Ion (530a–542b) he refers to Homer at various instances to provide examples showing that the rhapsodist (Ion) does not possess the knowledge of the Homeric poems that he recites.

also enjoyed fame and wealth, were participating in competitions, and were considered themselves as experts in their field. In the dialogue *Ion* (see below) a dialogue between Socrates and Ion takes place.

Politically, the time at which Plato lived and wrote, was a period of turmoil during which direct democracy was practiced, following a period of tyranny.⁶ Plato's teacher and protagonist in his dialogues Socrates, was sentenced to death during this period, with the accusation of corrupting the youth. Plato's views on art, on the basis of its relation to people's opinion (*doxa*),⁷ by targeting the irrational soul, are highly relevant to his negative views on democracy.⁸

3 A hierarchy in arts reflects Plato's distrust

In this historical environment, Plato developed his ideas about the perfect city and how this should be governed, that are expressed in detail in the *Republic*.⁹ In this perfect city (Kallipolis) he concluded that the artists and their art have no place and should be expelled. His argumentation is based on his philosophical ideas about the *forms*¹⁰ and his mandate that peoples' eudemonia is intrinsically linked, and indeed dependent, on the pursuit of truth. Artistic creation, especially poetry and painting, are just imitations and therefore do not contribute to the overarching purpose and thus, they should be banned (Halliwell, 2002;

6 This followed periods of civil war and the war with the Persians. These, along with the past, Archaic as it is usually called, period have inspired extensively artistic creation, especially poetry (tragedies). Comedies commonly were inspired by contemporary issues. In Aristophanes' comedies occasionally Socrates makes an appearance and is presented in a rather comic view. Aristophanes himself also participates in Plato's *Symposium*.

7 It is probably interesting and self-explanatory that in modern Greek, *doksa* (δόξα) can be translated as fame. Nevertheless, opinion (*doksa* or δόξα in ancient Greek) is translated as γνώμη in modern Greek, which is a derivative of the verb γνωρίζω (know). It seems that through times, the meaning of opinion and knowledge have been inversed in modern Greek.

8 It has to be considered that this was a period that was characterized by the highest degree of intellectual freedom, even higher than today probably, at which even the most controversial ideas could be supported publicly and did not cause marginalization (Kiaris 2023). Of course, with "due democratic processes" Socrates was condemned to death, but even this may suggest that there was not sacredness in people and ideas.

9 The discussion in this manuscript is based primarily on book II,III and X of the *Republic*, and on the dialogue *Ion*.

10 To describe his *forms* Plato used the terms *eidos* and *idea* interchangeably.

Destrée & Herrmann, 2011).

While, typically, when Plato's ideas on art are discussed, art is treated as a generality, and irrespectively of the specific type of art that is used as an example, the same conclusions apply to all of them. It seems however, that this is not the case, and Plato treats different arts, such as painting, poetry, and music, differently. This is related to the reasons that according to Plato, art should be banned, and the specific relationship of each type of art with these reasons. To that end, it seems that different distance is maintained by Plato on the different arts and a different criticism is applied, which establishes a hierarchy in them. This hierarchy reflects the degree of Plato's distrust on the specific arts, and inversely, their potential role in the society.

Probably the one that Plato sees in a more negative manner is painting, and by extrapolation sculpture as well.¹¹ Painting is discussed extensively in the Republic (Book X) as regards to its lack of essence and value. With painting, images are reproduced, or imitated,¹² which are in turn images of true forms. Their product, the painting, is just a subjective approximation of another approximation, which in turn is also an imitation.

“...painting or drawing, and imitation in general, when doing their own proper work, are far removed from truth, and the companions and friends and associates of a principle within us which is equally removed from reason, and that they have no true or healthy aim.

(Republic, Book X, 603a,603b)¹³

and

“The imitative art is an inferior who marries an inferior, and has

11 Architecture may also be included in this category, in terms of its decorative faculty, nevertheless it carries a utility, a craft that serves some purpose, which differentiates it.

12 Imitation is a widely used term, yet the term simulation would be probably more appropriate since it implies an “unreal” reality in concert with what Plato meant. In Greek the term is μίμησις which can be translated to mimicking.

13 Excerpts are taken by <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>. Translated by Benjamin Jowett

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inferior offspring”¹⁴

(Republic, Book X, 603b)

This subjectivity is emphasized by the example he offers, of a painting of a bed. He argues that a bed will look completely different depending on whether it is drawn from the front or the side (*Republic, Book X, 598a*). Furthermore, the painter may have completely no knowledge of what he paints, as opposed to a craftsman that should have at least some, which reduces even further the value of painting. A painter can easily paint a shoemaker or a carpenter convincing people, especially children and ignorant people, that indeed the ones he painted are the actual craftsmen. This however is false and misleading because by not knowing the corresponding crafts, the painter could not have painted the craftsmen that practiced this craft (*Republic, Book X, 598c*). For these reasons, Plato views painting very negatively. Noteworthy he discusses painting as a talent or skill that can be successful (with reference to its product), albeit valueless, but he does not make any explicit discussion for the artists, the painters, from the perspective of their creative force as divine inspiration. This [divine inspiration] is something that is done meticulously for the poets, especially in *Ion* (Büttner, 2011; Collobert, 2011; Kiaris, 2023a). Furthermore, while both poetry and music are recognized and discussed as subjects of the education of children, painting is not, which again indicates that while music and poetry have both something to offer, even conditionally, painting has not.

With poetry things are more complicated. He recognizes in his argumentation the same limitations with painting, that they are imitations as they describe events, plots, or generally situations, but he goes a step further. He attacks Homer personally, the most prominent poet of the Greeks, as regards to its true knowledge and contributions. For example, he asks whether Homer possessed, or not, true knowledge, and concludes that he did not. Otherwise, he would have a true legacy established and some cities would have benefitted by his poems, in terms of their rule and their political situation, after attending his teachings and

¹⁴ The actual term used by Plato is *φάβλη* that is translated as is typically translated as inferior. A more accurate translation of the term probably is corrupt, unacceptable, or immoral.

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guidance.

“if Homer had really been able to educate and improve mankind
--if he had possessed knowledge and not been a mere imitator
--can you imagine, I say, that he would not have had many fol-
lowers, and been honoured and loved by them?”

(Republic, Book X, 600c)¹⁵

For poetry he also finds a series of moral limitations as well, on different grounds. For example, by presenting Gods as not perfect and good, the poet (and the reciter) demoralizes people, as he cultivates distrust that is especially negative for the children. Also, the actors and the reciters, by having to say or recite negative aspects of people and Gods, they acquire vice themselves as well. Nevertheless, he recognizes value in poetry, by appealing to the irrational – as opposed to the rational -soul, both the vegetative and the appetitive, and this can be used for the education of the children. Children have not developed their rational soul yet but they remain sensitive to stimuli that appeal to their vegetative and the appetitive soul, which can be targeted by appropriately formulated poetry. This value is also indirectly implied by his adherence to the literary device of the dialogues, recognizing its power in persuading people and also in describing peoples’ character (Nightingale, 1995; Blondell 2002).

Music though, while also recognized as an art, remains at an untouchable position regarding this argumentation. Because of its nature, music as a creation is not an imitation but remains a creation that appeals to the soul. Thus, it is discussed extensively from the perspective of its educative value but is not discussed in the Republic, in Book X, when Plato performs his systematic attack on the arts, poetry and painting in particular.

¹⁵ Book X is abundant of passages at which Socrates criticizes Homer’s contributions and value.

4 Art as education

When Plato discusses his ideal society, in the Republic (Book II and III), he explicitly links the operation of such society to an appropriately constructed educational system that aims to produce citizens capable of attaining their roles.¹⁶ Such education must start early, at childhood, and proceed by a manner that operates like a dream, as he says, according to which when children “wake up” and exit the womb, they will already have this knowledge imprinted in them and will be prepared to fulfil their mission.

“They are to be told that their youth was a dream, and the education and training which they received from us, an appearance only; in reality during all that time they were being formed and fed in the womb of the earth, where they themselves and their arms and appurtenances were manufactured; when they were completed, the earth, their mother, sent them up; and so, their country being their mother and also their nurse, they are bound to advise for her good, and to defend her against attacks, and her citizens they are to regard as children of the earth and their own brothers.”

(Republic, Book III,414d-e).

At this phase, children cannot appreciate and process information at a fuller scale by using their underdeveloped yet reasoning, but their mind and soul are becoming receptive, and artistic cultivation sets the frames for this process to occur. For example, it teaches the appreciation and love of beauty that is a prerequisite for the future citizen in order to function efficiently in the society. This acknowledgement shifts art from the domain of conscious and actively pursued knowledge (against which Plato’s typical critique is targeted) to the position of unconscious cultivation. As such, education, especially at its earlier stages, is com-

¹⁶ The significance of an education that is “centrally” administered should also be viewed in relation to Plato’s hostility against the sophists: “...Why, that all those mercenary individuals, whom the many call Sophists and whom they deem to be their adversaries, do, in fact, teach nothing but the opinion of the many, that is to say, the opinions of their assemblies; and this is their wisdom....” (Republic, Book VI, 493a). He recognizes that in their lack of reasoning, and the utility of “convincing argumentation” sophists mislead, something that wouldn’t happen if philosophically inclined educators were the teachers.

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pletely different from the learning process that is based on reasoning, but it provides a solid foundation and a fertile ground for training that will occur at subsequent stages.

Of course, within Plato's aristocratic system this has to target primarily the class of gold, the guardians, which will have as a duty to operate as the society's leaders and protectors. In such educational system both the body and the soul have to be trained, and while for the first this is attained by gymnastics and physical exercise, in the second it is done by art, music in particular (Hall, 1972). Importantly, both music and gymnastics should work together and not separately and should target the *philosophical mind* that requires training in both. In this scheme, music targets the soul, that is distinct from the mind and the intellect, but possesses an equally important role with them for the development of citizens that can fulfill their social role. He also makes an explicit discussion regarding why music should precede gymnastic, on the basis that a soul that is keen to arts, which teach the love and appreciation of beauty, provides a better foundation for the guardian class than a soul that is already keen in gymnastics but will not be able to attain its role in the society as it will not be able to appreciate beauty and what is good. Only a soul that started appreciating beauty, through art, is receptive to all other types of subsequent training and cultivation.

-“And what shall be their education? Can we find a better than the traditional sort? --and this has two divisions, gymnastic for the body, and music for the soul.

-True.

-Shall we begin education with music, and go on to gymnastic afterwards?

-By all means.”

(Republic, Book II, 376e).

In the Republic, Plato uses as an example and discusses extensively the warrior class of the guardians for two reasons: First, it is the superior class, and the demands are enhanced. Second, this class probably may

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appear as the one that is the least relevant to the arts on its capacity as warriors. This contradiction, by arguing and substantiating why warriors should possess artistic training, strengthens his arguments as it proves what appears initially as the less likely and self-evident.

He also discusses about poetry and proposes that it should be meticulously censored. This is not done for the reasons that censorship usually happens, to protect the existing system and to promote a form of ideological purity. It should be done on educational grounds, on the basis of the interests of the society. Poetry, according to Plato, should be devoid of descriptions on the deficits of Gods, showing them as bearers of human weaknesses. Children need to have strengthened a perfected perception of the world in order to consider this as the natural state of things and act accordingly as future leaders. By perceiving Gods as having weaknesses and by acting motivated by jealousy, passions, and revenge, will strengthen the perception that vice is inherent in the world and as leaders will be more receptive to vice in the future. Poetry should also be devoid of explicit descriptions of human suffering, in order to strengthen emotionally the children and make them become better and more capable warriors. By presenting mourning and sorrow as a common and acceptable emotional state for the heroes, the fear of losing their friends and war companions may interfere with their actions during combat and therefore, with the interests of the state.

This censored presentation of poems, Plato argues, is justified by that only individuals exposed later in their lives to injustice and the mishaps of life can be just and fair to others, as they will not grow up, thinking that unfairness is an inherent component of peoples' lives. This argues in support of his ideas that while art is essential, it should be offered by a manner that is partial. This comes in sharp contradiction with the perceived training of doctors that by targeting the body, as opposed to the soul, must be exposed to diseases early and constantly to become better physicians. Judges and statesmen however are better to experience injustice, only later in life, when they are able to process it and handle it.¹⁷

¹⁷ In modern Greek there is a saying that freely can be translated as "trust young doctors and old lawyers". This is aligned with Plato's ideas on the different requirements for these professions.

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Plato also discusses about music making arguments regarding different types of music and their appropriateness to different tasks, contexts, and lifestyles. This again is used as an argument in favor of the subjective nature of music, and art in general, that can be adjusted according to the needs and purposes they fulfill. In the absence of an objective mission and purpose that has to be fulfilled independently of the carriers, it remains to the society to determine the goals of art and how these are integrated in civil life. Yet, by recognizing this, he does not conclude that art is irrelevant, but it uses as a given, that art should be indeed an intrinsic component of education.

An important point is that in all his arguments, Plato (Socrates) does not refer to music, the art that he focuses more on the Republic when he discusses education in Book II and III, as an artistic product of specific creators that convey specific messages and ideas. He rather views music through the lens of it being an educational component that has to be censored, not being either too hard and abrupt, or too soft and maybe unappealing. Purposely though he does not refer to the musicians, the creators, as opposed to poetry at which specific poets and especially Homer are mentioned. He only discusses this in relation to the tutors that should have knowledge of this [music], and also the ability to contextualize it in the educational process: Where this music came from is irrelevant for the purposes of its educative value. It is there and exists as a property of the society and can be used accordingly, to serve its needs.

It is interesting that Plato is against innovation in music (and gymnastics) implying that the practice and teaching in these disciplines is already available and ready to be applied to fulfil their purpose¹⁸.

“...music and gymnastic be preserved in their original form, and no innovation made. They must do their utmost to maintain them intact. They must do their utmost to maintain them intact. And when any one says that mankind most regard. The newest

¹⁸ The acquittance of simple music is repeatedly mentioned (and also of poetry that lacks extravagant schemes that aim to impress). Apparently, “simple” represents a baseline upon which more complex schemes can be built through innovation.

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song which the singers have, they will be afraid that he may be praising, not new songs, but a new kind of song; and this ought not to be praised, or conceived to be the meaning of the poet; for any musical innovation is full of danger to the whole State, and ought to be prohibited. So Damon tells me, and I can quite believe him;-he says that when modes of music change, of the State always change with them.”

(Republic, Book IV, 424b-c)

As he mentions, new methods in music may foster social upheaval which is obviously undesirable in his Kallipolis. This apparent conservatism of Plato should not be viewed as a denial for progress and discovery of new types, or even denial of sciences and what they may have to offer. It should be rather viewed as an advocacy for the application of the existing knowledge and wisdom in social practice, which is the main challenge in the society and its further development towards what he perceives as the perfect city¹⁹. With this in mind, the innovator in music has no place as he really has nothing valuable and concrete to offer in the society. His attraction towards the simple ways, devoid of extremities and extravagances also falls into this interpretation as he repeatedly argues that similarly to poverty, luxury and wealth are also not desirable because they will lead to corruption and will result in living meaningless lives at which the role of individuals in the society will not be attained.

5 Political engagement and censorship of art

With these positions, Plato recognizes in art an essential role for the function of the society by a manner at which it has to be integrated in it and is necessary for its appropriate operation and its efficient function. This role is similar to that of medicine that should be practiced for the benefit of the society and not of the individual. For doctors for example

¹⁹ An interesting divergence can be made here in comparing Plato's views with those that predominated in modernity, albeit the latter is largely based on Plato's philosophy (Whitehead, 1929). Innovation and the primacy of science are instrumental in modernity, but Plato was rather skeptical towards innovation. Nonetheless, reason was pivotal for both Plato and modern thinkers.

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he states that it is pointless to treat someone in a way by which the patient will be removed from the society for a prolonged period.

“--if a man was not able to live in the ordinary way he had no business to cure him; for such a cure would have been of no use either to himself, or to the State.”

(Republic, Book III, 407e)

Thus, doctors should not serve the individual patients, and of course not the art of medicine, but rather the city that requires its citizens for its operation. In analogy to this, music that is extravagant and not simple will eventually serve the music as a domain of human creativity but replenished from its social role as depicted through the lens of its educative mission. Ultimately this will offer the artists a central role in the society which however, deviates from how Plato sees the integration of their musical creation in the function of Kallipolis. This contributes to our understanding of why Plato distrusted artists but recognizes education in art as indispensable.

Plato in his views, highly politicize art viewing it as a social construct rather as a creation of individuals, and this originates from his notion that the city is a fundamental unit in the society. A well-functioning city will make the citizens live well and their happiness is inherently related to the city's function. A dysfunctional city, that is unjust for example, cannot have its citizens happy, irrespectively of how well they may do at the individual level. Such politicization of any aspect of social domain and function, including art, is indicated by a series of ideas put forward in his dialogues:

First, his acknowledgement that artistic cultivation should occur in children like a dream, and not filtered through critical interrogation by the children that are incapable of doing so as yet, raises art to the level of an essential educative component of the development of the ideal citizen that fulfills his (or her, since women could very well be rulers) mission in the society. As such, artistic culture precedes learning²⁰ and is im-

²⁰ Learning here is not used in the Platonian way of recollection that underscores the acquisition

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plemented by a manner that provides the foundation for the subsequent training to occur.

Second, by recognizing the city, as opposed to the individual, as the unit which should operate well, artists as individual creators do not have a distinctive role, since art should fulfil a social mission. This applies to both the poets and the creators of art in general, and the reciters that trigger emotional responses to the audience and emerge as experts.

Third, art targets the soul and should be censored because if it doesn't and is subjected to criticism by presenting conflicting and inconsistent ideas, it will be too late, and its role as an instrument of education would not be attained. Furthermore, if the creator is not dissociated from its creation, censorship would not be able to apply, since artistic creation would not be owned by the city and the society, but by the creator. The creator of art in that case could provide an expert opinion regarding his artistic creations that would carry more weight than those of the city that uses art for education. Therefore, for Plato, art is treated as property of the society (city) and therefore possessive ideas about who has the right of interpretation is not suitable and fruitful. By dissociating artistic creations from their creator, these problems automatically resolve.

With all these ideas, art for Plato is committed for the fulfilment of a purpose. This purpose culminates in the development and operation of Kallipolis, his perfect city, and art serves this purpose and becomes deeply political. To that end, interrogation and the seeking of knowledge, which are fundamental components of living a good life, for Plato should proceed by other means that target the intellect, with dialogue for example, and not by art that targets the soul. Plato's dialogues present an example of how art should be done, devoid of complex stylistic details and producing a text that is narrative at which reason and argumentation predominates.

These arguments, nevertheless, generate a contradiction, a paradox by

of knowledge. It implies the process by which progressively the citizen accumulates and develops all the required skills that will allow him to perform his social function.

letting the experts of this domain outside the ideal city. Furthermore, it suggests that this essential social role of art is restricted to the children, upon which it will play an educational role, but not in the adults upon which will only provide pleasure or will inflict emotional responses. The latter apparently is not considered essential because adults' pleasure is irrelevant, or most likely, when defined as eudemonia it should be linked to knowledge which cannot be attained by art. The paradox however remains because artists, as educators, should remain in the city and not expelled, to teach children and cultivate their souls.

A possible resolution is that maybe art for Plato since it is collectively owned and therefore rightfully altered and censored, it is also collectively created. It was common practice in the ancient Greek world, for poets not to create their stories *de novo* based purely on their imagination, but rather to adapt existing myths, alter them and modify them accordingly. Despite the extraordinary skill of some, such as Homer or the other poets of the classic world, poetry always possessed at some extent, a degree of collective ownership, from the level of the myth it originated from, to the manner it was performed and recited in a personified manner. This justifies his strong views on the censorship of artistic creations and is further supported by his position for the divine inspiration of the poets (see below), that further diminishes their ownership of their artistic creations.

6 Reciters and divine inspiration

To appreciate Plato's position in art, especially from the perspective of his contemporary society²¹ at which reciters were prominent figures, one should probably start by examining *Ion*, the most underappreciated of his dialogues (Capuccino, 2011; Kiaris, 2023a). In this dialogue, Plato puts Socrates in discussion with *Ion*, the most famous rhapsodist of the time, and tries to show that *Ion* has no specific knowledge of the poems he recites since for every possible aspect, there are always others with more authoritative opinion than him. Charioteers and doctors for exam-

21 The criticism is very applicable today as well

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ple can both express more valid opinion than Ion on the corresponding passages that mention skills relevant to their domain of expertise.

Two possible arguments can be put forward to alleviate this apparent distrust of Plato for art, poetry in particular in *Ion*, as widely perceived. First, Plato, through Socrates, does not target Homer who wrote the poems but rather Ion, the reciter who functions as translator²². Plato's criticism exposes Ion as ignorant and likely his criticism also possesses undervalued components of sociopolitical criticism. Rhapsodists enjoyed privileged status in the society by having fame, and also by getting money for a function that they could not comprehend and therefore was not true and just. They were able to elicit cries to their audience and motivate them emotionally, yet at the same time they only cared for getting high payments, a fact that according to Plato and sarcastically for Ion, would make him lough of joy.

Ion says "... *for if I make them cry I myself shall laugh, and if I make them laugh I myself shall cry when the time of payment arrives*".

(*Ion*, 535c)

Thus, it is specifically the reciters that are targeted for the specific function and role they had in the society.

Another point in this dialogue that supports this notion is the statement of Ion that while as a reciter he does not have more valid opinion than the experts, doctors or charioteers for example, a function that he would perform interchangeably is that of the military generals. He argues that by being a good reciter he would also be a good general as well, by being capable to motivate people in going to war, in analogy to being able to motivate people cry with the poems he recites.

²² Plato nevertheless targets Homer in the *Republic* (Book X) suggesting that he is not bearer of true knowledge. He does not present him though as a comic figure, as he does with Ion in the dialogue *Ion*, his reciter, and his criticism focuses on his creations (poems) and the lack of legacy established by Homer that would have proved his impact. In his criticism on Homer, Plato does not identify ulterior motives, just lack of true knowledge. In *Ion* though he does so by indicating that money from the audience motivated him.

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“...To me there appears to be no difference between them [the art of the general and a rhapsodist]” (Ion, 540c)

Of course, in that case he treats the generals, not as strategists but rather as those that should be able to inspire people. This should be seen among others, as criticism and suspicion for democracy and the Athenian turmoil that preceded Plato's period, considering that generals were elected officials. People in a democratic state may elect in office, not those of merit but rather the ambitious ones that can motivate the voters to vote for them. Thus, in the context of Athenian democracy, a popular reciter and an elected general have equal chances to advance forward and motivate people effectively.

Second, in Ion, Plato makes another important point that can be of assistance in understanding his views on art and artists. He refers to the artistic creation as a divine inspiration that was dictated by the Gods and the Muses, on their will. At this point, Plato refers to the poets as interpreters (of the gods) and the reciters as the interpreters of the interpreters. Yet, it has to be considered that in ancient Greek the term *ερμηνεύς* is used interchangeably for both the translator and the interpreter, and in that case the poet is more accurately depicted by the term interpreter while the reciter is more accurately provided by the term translator. The difference between the two is that the first is required to possess knowledge and understanding of the material while the second may not. Divine inspiration in that case should be seen as a metaphorical concept, in consistency with his extensive use of myths throughout his writings, used by Plato to describe an extraordinary creative achievement, and not literally. A modern version of this critique is Searle's Chinese room argument according to which the possession of a perfect manual in Chinese is not sufficient for someone to know how to speak Chinese, although he could pass the test against someone that is outside the room but does not know that the responses they receive originate from the application of the instructions of the manual (Searle, 1980). Although this argument is used today to prove that artificial intelligence will never reach the level of comprehension of the human mind, it highly relates to the diminishing point of view of Plato for the intellectual capabilities

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and the comprehension of the reciters (Kiaris, 2023a).

Furthermore, the divine inspiration of the poets, a point that is not based on rational argumentation but rather on the persuasion of Plato's audience by targeting commonly accepted notions of his society, functions by reducing the poets' ownership of their poems, which further renders censorship fully justifiable.

Nonetheless, Plato's views on the world did not involve divine involvement and his whole philosophy consists of discussion on what people should and not do, deciding consciously for themselves, in order to live the good life. Gods do not have an instrumental role in Platonian cosmology and people can make decisions for themselves, for their benefit, irrespectively of Gods' will²³. Therefore, within this context at which divine entities may or may not exist, but people can become better, based on their will and education, divine inspiration should not be seen as something related to what Gods want and mandate. It would be an oversimplified notion to think that Plato literally suggests that Gods at some point, have decided to use the poets and instructed them to write specific and particular poetry. He only wanted to emphasize the magnitude of the poets' achievement when they produced a major poem, that could only be done under a creative surge, with the involvement of Gods apparently implying greatness.

The distance of Plato from the involvement of Gods in peoples' daily life is also supported by that Gods should be depicted only as good in children, during the earliest stages of their education. By that, Plato implies that Gods do not only possess virtue but vice as well, and it is the duty of the educational system, for the benefit of its recipients, to filter the vice out²⁴. By that, Plato acknowledges that Gods do not have the

23 As C. Castoriades puts it "...The members of this society know for sure that, what is going to happen, has to be done by them, and then offered to themselves and to the society as a whole. It's a society that knows the art of making institutions and laws for itself. This sort of 'self employment' guarantees the project of autonomy and defends the interests of society, since it allows its members to exist as autonomous individuals within its framework" (Papadopoulou, 2000; transl. from Tassis, 2011). Summative discussion of Castoriades' ideas on autonomy and antiquity is provided in Castoriades (1983).

24 Plato's arguments in Book II of the Republic rotate around the notion that if Gods are good it does not make sense for them to transform and have created something bad, thus Gods did not create everything. "...Then God, if he be good, is not the author of all things, as the many assert, but he is the

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capacity to instruct and reveal themselves to children and it is up to the adults, and specifically to their tutors, to develop the image of Gods to the children as they see fit for the better function of the society. Gods, in their essence, as it is implied by Plato, remain peoples' creation and thus, they are malleable and their depiction fully adaptable according to peoples' will and priorities. In the Republic, Plato performs a systematic descend and deposition of Gods, spirits, heroes, and even of the afterlife, suggesting that these entities and conditions are far from being perfect and devoid of human deficits, as they are presented in tragic or epic poetry. Even the vivid laughter of Gods in comedies falls into this category and is used as an argument against their inclusion in the traditional educational program of younger children. With that, Plato explicitly suggests that Gods are a human construct, and as such, it can be altered at peoples' will.

In that case, divine inspiration is just metaphorical since it would become controversial to acknowledge the divine authority of Gods, and therefore of their literary ability to inspire at will. The poet needs to possess knowledge of the topic he describes or the criticism he expresses, functioning as an interpreter of existing phenomena, emotions, social conflicts, and moral dilemmas that preoccupy people. It is the poet's job to express them by a manner that is comprehensible and accessible to people. The reciter, however, would not necessarily need to be able to understand this, and thus, is limited to function only as the poet's translator. If this is not done adequately, then appropriate censorship should do so. Otherwise, it is paradoxical to have the audience cry, and therefore be receptive to the deeper meaning of the poem and the messages that the poet wants to convey, at a time at which the reciter does not, as he explicitly indicates in *Ion*. He emphasizes this distance of the reciter from the artistic creation even further when he describes them as only seeking money from the audience. Using thus their skill purely as a moneymaking task.

cause of a few things only, and not of most things that occur to men." (Republic Book II, 379c). This deconstructs and decomposes Gods as creators and shows his distance from theological considerations in his cosmology.

7 Conclusion

An apparent hostility is conventionally recognized by Plato against art and artists. Here I tried to show that this is indeed the case but reflects only a part of the truth. The main points that are of assistance in this are the role of art in education, the distinction and hierarchical classification of different types of art in terms of their substance and therefore role, and ultimately, the use of art as an instrument for political goals in the governance of the city that justifies its censorship.

Plato recognizes a superior value for art in education, and by dissociating art from artists it makes it rightful for the art to be censored in order to achieve its social mission, in the attainment of the perfect city.

“Then the first thing will be to establish a censorship of the writers of fiction, and let the censors receive any tale of fiction which is good, and reject the bad; and we will desire mothers and nurses to tell their children the authorized ones only.”

(Republic, Book, II, 377b-c).

By saying that, Plato recognizes that political perfection should start very early, in childhood, and should be done before the individuals reach political awareness which will then guide them based on reason, as in his golden class of guardians when they become intellectually mature.

Another point that is important in interpreting the views of Plato in art is his distinction of arts to different types, regarding their exact substance. Far more hostile, Plato is for painting that does not seem to bear any considerable value and accumulates all his negative ideas about artistic creation and its role in the society. Everything Plato identified as negative for arts in general is directly applicable to painting. Music on the other hand, since it is not attached to a specific image, it is not an imitation and thus, remains an independent human creation that appears more favorable to Plato. Therefore, music is chosen among the arts as the one that can function as an instrument of education from the earlier stages, preceding not only other arts but gymnastics as well. Poetry is

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positioned somewhere in between. It possesses value and an appreciated role by targeting the soul but should be censored in order to fulfill its mission in training.

Art, in Plato, should be seen as highly political and actively engaged in the creation of the perfect city. As such, art becomes the rightful property of the city, and thus, its censorship by the ruling class is justified. Art is a collectively possessed artefact and in the hands of the rulers can be adjusted accordingly. The lack of aspired innovation in music and gymnastics, further supports these notions because an innovator in arts (and artists) may disrupt the harmonious relationships established and challenge the rulers' authority. This is also aligned with Plato's idealism that suggests that eudemonia is independent of material achievements and remains a state that can be attained by what is so far available without the requirement of new instruments or media.

By acknowledging the political role and integration of art in the society, Plato's position can be comprehended and his views in art can be valued further.

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