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Art, Beauty, and Good Life in Plato

Claiming that art can promote human well-being in many ways no longer encounters serious protests: art offers artists opportunities to express their creative talent; it offers the consumers of culture opportunities to enjoy aesthetic values; and, in general, art enriches human well-being. However, this optimistic account can be problematized by the concept of a distinction between the so-called higher and lower arts. If this distinction is accepted, then the optimistic account only holds, for the most part, for true art, i.e. the “higher arts” as opposed to the “lower arts”, which, as it is claimed, produce superficial mass entertainment instead of serious cognitive delight.¹ For example, popular music played on the radio, TV-series, and video games seem to belong to the category of easy entertainment rather than the cognitively more challenging category of true art.² Entertainment in itself is not a bad thing, but it may become a bad thing for people who use entertainment as a substitute of real life, and waste their life in following what happens on TV or the Internet; people constantly staring at their mobile phones exemplify this peril very well. In earlier ages, while there were no TVs or the Internet, there were still various kinds of entertainment available for the people’s enjoyment, much to the irritation of moral philosophers and theologians. Here we can mention only a few examples of the criticism of entertainment going back to Plato’s age of classical Greece.

In the 19th century, Schopenhauer remarked sarcastically that when people have no thoughts to communicate to each other, they fill their boredom by dealing cards to each other (*The Wisdom of Life and Other Essays*, p. 21). Quite similarly, the 17th-century French thinker Blaise Pascal drew attention in his *Pensées* (163–171) to the perils of entertainment, claiming that people seek all kinds of entertainment (*divertissement*) to avoid exploring their own selves in peaceful meditation and self-investigation. In other

¹ For a critical analysis of the arguments brought against popular art, see Shusterman 2000, 169–200.

² Without doubt it can be claimed that a proper understanding of such works as Richard Wagner’s *Ring* cycle or Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* require much more cognitive effort than the works of popular art available through mass media. Wagner’s and Tolstoy’s works were not made for easy consumption, even if Tolstoy’s *What Is Art* suggested a type of art that could address the emotional receptiveness of all people across the globe.

words, Pascal warned that entertainment alienates people from their true selves. In a similar vein from late antiquity, in his *Confessions* (3.2) the church-father Augustine expressed regret over his youthful adventures in the world of theatrical entertainment. As a remedy for the religiously suspicious effects of artistic entertainment, Augustine in the *City of God* (2.14) approvingly refers to Plato's banishment of the arts from the ideal city delineated in the dialogue *Republic*. From the standpoint of the modern world, Plato's critical attitude towards the arts may seem an exaggeration; but, nonetheless, it is still a standard subject of scholarly attention in philosophy and aesthetics.³

Plato's banishment of the arts from the ideal city-state raises, for example, the question of how he can take that position when – as we now are prone to think – art enhances the quality of our life by producing beauty to enrich the life of individual persons as well whole societies. The answer is that Plato does not see art principally as a source of beauty. In fact, Plato seems to make a clear distinction between the value of art and the value of beauty. In his view, artists produce cognitively worthless representations of perceptible things and phenomena, inviting people to find pleasure in such representations (*Republic*, book X). In contrast to this, beauty – the idea of beauty – is a true being to be attained only through intellectual exertion (*Republic* 507b–c). There is thus a great gap, both cognitively and ontologically, between artistic representations on the one hand and the idea of beauty on the other. Even if works of art were beautiful – as they often are – their representative function directs people's attention to the things and events represented, rather than serious philosophical thinking. In particular, representative artworks do not stimulate the audience to pose philosophical questions about the nature of true beauty. In Plato's late dialogue *The Laws* (669a–b), it is stated, as an art critical principle, that mimetic works of art should be evaluated on the basis of their accuracy in representation. Thus, in regard to mimetic art, beauty is not the prime criterion of evaluation.

The separation of the domain art from the domain of beauty is, of course, a mere simplification. In fact, it can even be contested simply by looking at it from the opposite point of view, from the standpoint of their possible unity. It is a relatively modern idea, an idea originating in the 18th century, to claim that art and beauty are connected in some special manner.⁴ This is manifested in typical 18th-century expressions such as 'fine arts', in French 'beaux-arts' and in German 'schöne Künste'. In the 18th and early 19th centuries,

³ Cf. Kuisma (2009).

⁴ For the origin of the modern notion of art, see Kristeller (1951–1952) as well as Tatarkiewicz' (1992) comment on Kristeller.

the attribute ‘fine’ (or *beau*, *schön*) was needed to make it clear that a specific discussion concerned creative art and not a mechanically productive craft. The attribute ‘fine’ or ‘beautiful’ is no longer needed today because, firstly, the term ‘art’ has become an everyday term not in need of clarification,⁵ and secondly, because 20th century avant-garde art has overturned the status of beauty as the prime value of art.⁶ In the modern view, a work can be art regardless of its relation to beauty. Even ugliness can be seen as valuable in artworks; for example, in realistic artworks representing war atrocities and crimes.

In contrast to the 18th-century notion of art, in classical antiquity artworks – poems, statues, paintings, etc. – were not thought to be linked to the concept of beauty in any special manner. And, because of this, there was also no need to separate them. In this light, it is no wonder that Plato discusses matters of art and beauty in different contexts, even within a single book. This is manifest especially in the *Republic*, in which Plato, on the one hand, claims that only true philosophers can understand beauty in itself (αὐτὸ δὲ τὸ καλὸν; *Republic* 479e–480a) and in which, on the other hand, he forbids artists to enter the ideal city-state, *politeia*, without special permission. Permission would be granted only to those poets who produced “songs to the gods and eulogies of good men” (*Republic* 607a). These can of course be beautiful pieces to the ears of many people, but the important point is that Plato does not demand aesthetic beauty from artist in the first place, but rather religious piety and loyalty to the state. Songs to the gods express religious piety, and eulogies of good men express political loyalty. The history of later centuries – and, surely, earlier as well – demonstrate that art has indeed been used to serve religion (images of gods and saints) and the state (statues of statesmen). In this regard, Plato has not produced a radical innovation but confirmed a common custom.

The aim of Plato’s *Republic* is to delineate an ideal city-state which could promote spiritual goodness as well as the physical well-being of all its citizens. In one passage (*Republic* 527c), Plato refers to his ideal city-state by the term *kallipolis* (ἐν τῇ καλλιπόλει), which prompts us to ask whether *kalos* as an attribute of *polis* should here be understood in an emphatically aesthetic sense. In other words, should the ideal city-state be beautiful in the sense that as an environment consisting of urban and rural areas it would be

⁵ An exception to this rule is the congregation of professional aestheticians, who like to discuss, propose and refute definitions of art.

⁶ “I regard the discovery that something can be good art without being beautiful as one of the great conceptual clarifications of twentieth-century philosophy of art, though it was made exclusively by artists – but it would have been seen as commonplace before the Enlightenment gave beauty the primacy it continued to enjoy until relatively recent times.” Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, 58.

beautiful as a whole, containing beautiful buildings, statues, and other sources of aesthetic delight? The overall argument of the *Republic* shows that this is not what Plato was primarily thinking of. Rather than concentrating on architectural or environmental planning, Plato was delineating a society whose beauty would consist in the moral beauty, i.e. moral goodness, of its citizens. This kind of aesthetic shaping of society has given Karl Popper an opportunity to accuse Plato of “aesthetic radicalism”, which treats humans as mere tools in constructing an ideal society.⁷ This, however, is not the right place to discuss Popper’s criticism.

In any case, compared with the moral beauty of the citizens of the *kallipolis*, the outward beauty of an urban setting is considered to be of secondary value. One should not, of course, overinterpret a term used only in passing. The essential aim of Plato’s *Republic* is to plan a society in which the possibility of human good life, *eudaimonia*, could be actualized. At the societal level, *eudaimonia* is possible only on the condition that its citizens are good.⁸ If all or most of the citizens of a *polis* were immoral, it could not flourish because its immoral citizens would always, or at least most of the time, be cheating and robbing each other. This would in turn cause disorder and unhappiness among the citizens. To avoid this possibility, Plato in the *Republic* pays much attention to outlining the right kind of citizen education.

A well-ordered city-state should educate its citizens, who would then willingly fulfil their duties; duties dependent on whether people belonged to the class of rulers, guardians, or workers. And when people willingly fulfil their duties, they act according to the virtue of justice (*dikaiosyne*; *Republic* 432d–434c). Justice is a social virtue in particular for the simple reason that it can be practiced only in social contexts, i.e., between human persons. One can be wise while living alone on an island, but to be just requires that one shows justice towards other people. Just persons promote the good life of the society as a whole, as well as its citizens individually.

All in all, Plato’s program of citizen education has many sides – political, philosophical, religious, economic, military, ethical, aesthetic, and so on. Of these, I will briefly focus on the aesthetic point of view, and from this standpoint it is interesting that Plato accepts as a starting-point the ancient Greek program of education which, among

⁷ See Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 178–182.

⁸ This requirement should be understood in a strict sense: goodness – with or without physical beauty – is a sufficient condition for a society to be both good and beautiful. In contrast, mere outward physical beauty without inner ethical goodness would not produce a society both good and beautiful.

other things, clearly also served aesthetic purposes. Plato has his spokesman Socrates commend the ancient program of education in this way:

What is this education [παιδεία] then? Or is it difficult to find anything better than what has been discovered over many years? I think I am right in saying that we have physical exercise [γυμναστική] for the body and the arts [μουσική] for the soul? (*Republic* 376e; tr. by C. Emlyn-Jones and W. Preddy)

Although Plato piously appeals to history as showing that *gymnastike* and *mousike* are jointly the best foundation for citizen education, he does not accept them straightforwardly in their traditional form, but reforms them for his own purposes. Firstly, he emphasizes that the goal of *gymnastike*, or physical exercise, is not principally the development of physical but of spiritual strength (*Republic* 410b). Spiritual strength in the form of courage for hunting and military purposes had probably always been an implicit part of *gymnastike*; nonetheless, Plato's emphasis is worth noting. Secondly, regarding *mousike*, he rejects the traditional ethical examples and ideals offered by mythological poetry, Homer's and Hesiod's poetry in particular. In fact, a surprisingly large part of the dialogue *Republic* was dedicated to a fierce criticism of poetry. Here, this feature of the *Republic* can be noted only very briefly, with one quotation. Through his spokesman Socrates, Plato criticizes the emotionally effective power of poetry:

But if you allow the Muse of delight in lyric and epic, then both pleasure and pain will rule in your state instead of law and the thing which appears to be the best for the common interest at all times, namely reason. (*Republic* 607a; tr. by C. Emlyn-Jones and W. Preddy)

Thus Plato claims that poetry – and art more generally – aims at producing emotional effect at the cost of rationality.⁹ A warning about the negative consequences for rationality shows that in Plato's view traditional poetry would belong to the category earlier termed as entertainment. Entertainment may be innocent, but if people waste too much time, money, and energy on it, it may alienate them from a real life based on human rationality.

One of the reasons why Plato showed so much interest in political philosophy must have been his disappointment with the Athenian type of democracy. This may sound surprising, since only one generation before Plato's lifetime Athens had reached its artistic and cultural peak in the age of Pericles.¹⁰ For example, the Athenian Acropolis, encompassing some of the sculptor Pheidias' masterworks, was largely built or rebuilt in Pericles' age. But despite the cultural glory, some decades after Pericles the Athenian

⁹ In the *Laws* (657a–659c), Plato admits pleasure some role in judging the merit of mimetic art.

¹⁰ For Pericles' building projects in Athens, see Plutarch, *Pericles* II.xiii.

democracy sentenced to death one of its greatest philosophical heroes, Socrates (cf. Plato, *Epistle VII* 325b–326a). In Plato's view, a political system which puts to death wise men cannot but be seriously ill. As a cure for this, in the *Republic* he has Socrates conduct a discussion delineating a political constitution that would not persecute philosophers but, on the contrary, make them rulers. According to him, only societies ruled by philosophers can guarantee *eudaimonia* for their citizens (*Republic* 473e; 499a–d; 501e). In promoting the *eudaimonia* of societies, philosophers take responsibility for the program of citizen education briefly delineated above. From the philosophical point of view, the goal of this education transcends the horizon of ordinary citizen education. Philosophical education aims at educating philosophers, not just soldiers or workers. Books VI and VII of the *Republic* are especially concerned with this topic.

Philosophers have a special mission in regard to beauty and goodness. It has already been explicated above that in regard to beauty philosophers do not content themselves with perceptible manifestations of beauty, but rather aim for an intellectual vision of intelligible beauty. However, beyond beauty there is the Idea of the Good, which is the most fundamental principle of the Platonic ontology. It is the source of beauty in matters of knowledge and truth.

Then what gives the truth to what is known and the ability to know to the knower, you must say, is the Form of the Good (ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέαν). As it is the cause of knowledge and truth, consider it an object of knowledge. But beautiful as are both of these, knowledge and truth, if you think the Good as something even more beautiful than these, you will think about it in the right way. (*Republic* 508e–509a; tr. C. Emlyn-Jones and W. Preddy)

In this manner, the beauty of truth shows the way towards the Idea of the Good. To know the Idea of the Good appears to be a very sublime and divine ideal.

In the Platonic view, the ultimate goal for the human soul transcends the limits of humanity, and reaches up towards divinity. It is stated, for example, that:

The philosopher who allies himself with the divine and orderly becomes divine and orderly, as far as is possible for a human being. (*Republic* 500c–d; tr. C. Emlyn-Jones and W. Preddy)

The process of becoming similar to divinity is a topic which comes up here and there in Plato's writings. This process can be described with various terms; for example, with the terms *mimesis* and *homoiosis*. In the dialogue *Phaedrus* (252c–d), it is stated that a person imitates (μιμούμενος) the god which he or she is following. In this case, *mimesis* means forming oneself so as to be similar to something else. This should be understood in a deep

sense: on a superficial level, one can imitate the behavior of other people, as actors do on the stage; in a deeper sense, a person forms his or her own soul to accord with a divine ideal. In the *Republic* (esp. book X), Plato severely criticizes mimesis in its superficial sense, i.e. mimetic art producing mere emotional pleasure. In its deeper sense, mimesis comes close to the sense of the term *homoiosis*, a term that Plato usually uses in a more positive sense. In a well-known passage of the dialogue *Theaetetus*, he has Socrates claim that we should escape from the material world to the divine world as quickly as possible. But what does this escape mean? Socrates explains:

[T]o escape is to become like God (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ), so far as this is possible; and to become like God is to become righteous and holy and wise. (*Theaetetus* 176a–b; tr. H.N. Fowler)

This is a double-edged enunciation. First, it is solemnly stated that as humans we should become like a god, but then it is more mundanely explained that this similarity to a god is realized through the virtues of righteousness, holiness, and wisdom. These virtues are sublime ideals, but nevertheless ideals that belong to the human sphere. They form the true *eudaimonia* of human life.

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