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## PLATO

MORTIMER ADLER

1 OF 2

**I**T is a mark of wisdom in Greek political thought that the form and content of education receive primary consideration from those who are concerned with the nature and the welfare of the state. Education is, of course, broadly conceived; it is not limited to the problems of a school system, to the administration of official pedagogues and the curriculum of instruction. What ever can be taught is educational matter; anything that shapes the body, forms character or gives knowledge or discipline to the mind, is an agency of education, whether or not its human medium is a person having the social status of a teacher, whether or not the environment in which it occurs is a school. Thus Plato, early in the *Republic*, and preliminary to the discussion of how a just state is constituted, turns to the question of the education of the guardians, those to whom the administration of the state will be entrusted. The field of elementary education divides easily into gymnastic for the body and music for the soul. Music includes all the arts whose patrons are the muses, and among these, literature or poetry is distinguished because, employing words, it can express ideas. The issue,

therefore, arises for the statesman or him who is planning the perfect city, whether there should be any control of the tales which the poets tell children. Plato asks: "Shall we just carelessly allow children to hear any casual tales which may be devised by casual persons, and to receive into their minds ideas for the most part the very opposite of those which we should wish them to have when they are grown up? It should be noted that what ideas the future guardians should have is not here debated, as Plato answers at once that it will be necessary "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." Mothers and nurses are to tell their children the authorized ones only.

The trouble with the poets who have ever been the great storytellers of mankind, the great ones such as Homer and Hesiod as well as the lesser ones, is that they tell lies, and un fortunate ones. It may be the poet's defense that his tale is not a lie if it be understood allegorically; but, says Plato, "a young person cannot judge what is allegorical and what is literal; any thing that he receives into his mind at that age is likely to become indelible and unalterable; and therefore, it is important that the tales which the young first hear should be models of virtuous thought." To tell children the story of how Cronos punished his father Uranus, and how in turn his son retaliated upon him will set them a bad example; the young are likely to think that in chastising their elders, and particularly their parents, for wrong-doing, they are following the example of the first and greatest among the gods.

It must be remembered that in Greek heroic poetry, the gods and demigods were frequently the leading characters. Lying about the gods is the most serious charge that Plato can bring against the poets. They do not represent divinity as it truly is. The misrepresentation of divinity is so important that Plato goes further in his censorship; the old as well as the young should not be permitted to hear the fictions of a changing and changeable God and of God as the source of human misery, the author of both evil and good. The poet who tells such stories should not be given a chorus, which, translated into the conventions of our day, means that he will be denied the privileges of a public performance in the theatre.

Plato is not opposed to lying in itself. The intentional lie may be a justifiable political expedient. But if anyone is to have the privilege of lying, it should be the rulers of the state and not the poets. Either in dealing with enemies or in ruling their own citizens, the leaders may be allowed to lie for the public good. Plato himself gives us an excellent example of such a necessary falsehood, a royal lie which

aims to keep the members of the various classes of society at rest in their respective positions. Furthermore, the myths which Plato so frequently narrates are admittedly fictions, dangerously misleading unless understood allegorically; only then do they yield the moral point for which they are devised. Are the poets, then, objectionable as liars because they are politically and morally irresponsible, because they tell a story for its own sake and not for the good of the state or the moral maxim to be illustrated? Poetry or storytelling is not in itself bad, but it should be the politician rather than the poet who tells the stories. We shall later find Plato admitting that the poet is a rival of the statesman. One of the offices of government, to use a contemporary title, is the ministry of propaganda and public enlightenment, and the poet filling that office shall be the only poet in the state. But in the early sections of the Republic, Plato is interested in the censorship and control of fiction rather than its complete exclusion. He has no hesitation in recommending direct political action in the regulation of the arts, because education is one of the chief concerns of the state, and the arts are among its most effective agencies. He does not fail, however, to recognize some distinction between political and aesthetic standards for judging the arts. What is good according to the former may be bad according to the latter. When we strike out passages from Homer and other poets, we do so, he says, not because they are unpoetical or unattractive to the popular ear, but because, if they are politically or, morally objectionable, "the greater the poetical charm of them, the less are they meet for the ears of boys and men."

It must not be thought that Plato criticized the poets only for their misrepresentation of the gods and similar transgressions with respect to matters of religion. There are many today who would dismiss the Platonic attack too lightly if that were its only focus. The poets must be censored not only for fomenting errors in religious belief, but also for engendering laxity of morals among the young. They depict human life and human action in such a way that, though their tales may possibly afford amusement, they do not form the moral virtues and may even corrupt them. "The poets and story-tellers," Plato insists, "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." It is at this point that Plato recognizes an assumption which underlies his program of censorship. If we are to direct the writer of literature in what he should and should not say about human life, viewing his stories as a source of moral training, then we must know the nature of the good man and what

are the aspects and conditions of a good life. Failing in this, how could the statesman regulate the poet? This, as we shall see, is not the only assumption upon which the discussion rests.

Poetry is, of course, only one of the arts; it is the art of imaginative literature whether written in prose or verse the art of fiction. And of poetry, the two major kinds are the epic, in which the poet is the unaided narrator, and the dramatic, in which the poet tells his story through the actions and speeches of men upon a stage. The distinction is important not only aesthetically but politically, because of the theatre's great popularity with the young and with the masses generally. The production of dramatic poetry involves pantomime which, aided by costume and spectacular staging, embodies the poet's imagination in an effective mimicry of nature. This is what makes plays so popular with children and with mankind in general. Either because dramatic poetry is more effective than any other kind of literature, or because the arts of the stage are more popular than the other arts, Plato excludes the theatre entirely from the state which he would rule. This is the beginning of the long history of censorship, in which dramatic productions have always borne the brunt of the attack. The same grounds which made dramatic poetry the primary object of Plato's concern, leading him to exclude it entirely, whereas the other arts were permitted to exist in the state under supervision, make the motion picture more than any other art the social and political problem of our day. It is not that Plato considers music and the plastic arts less subject to political supervision. He discusses at length the kind of melodies and rhythms that are to be permitted. Music must be directed toward the improvement of the soul. But music and the plastic arts do not as human fully represent life in thought and action as does poetry, whether it be narrative in the form of a novel or of a play. The novel, a modern critic has written, deals fictionally with the conduct of human life; it crosses the path of the moralist at every point. Of the drama, this is even more true, since the conflict of characters in action, without which drama is impossible, is always moral conflict. The difficulty of regulating the drama without regulating it out of existence may be the basis of Plato's discrimination between dramatic poetry and all other arts; to dictate to the poet the moral substance of his play would leave him almost no freedom of creation; it is different from telling the composer of music that it cannot be in the Phrygian mode.

Plato concludes the discussion we have here been summarizing by emphasizing the importance of right education for the welfare of the state, and of the control of the arts to effect the right education. Not only must the arts be properly instituted, but in addition, they

must not be allowed the privilege of novel ties and variations. Any musical innovation, and similarly, any change in poetry from the forms that have been officially authorized, is full of danger to the whole state and ought to be prohibited. It is at this point that Plato seems to recognize the social function of the arts as amusements; but he insists that lawlessness has one of its sources in what at first seems harmless amusement, which if not properly regulated, generates an ever growing spirit of license. "Our youth," he concludes, "should be trained from the first in a stricter system, for if amusements become lawless, and the youths themselves become lawless, they can never grow up into well-conducted and virtuous citizens."

The problem of the arts, and of poetry in particular, is not raised again until the last book of the *Republic*. The discussion that has intervened delineates the structure of a just or well-ordered society. The picture is obviously of the perfect state; it is not an account of earthly cities. It may be an objection to Plato's analysis to say that he has incorrectly analyzed the conditions of an ideally good state; but if that ideal is truly envisaged, it is no objection to point out that it is only an ideal he is setting before us. He himself points this out, adding that whether such a society now exists or will ever exist is no matter, since the ideal is the standard by which to judge the relative perfection of the cities of men upon earth.

At the opening of the last book, Plato, surveying the elements of the constitution he has devised for a perfect state, says that none of the excellences he has instituted pleases him more than his rule about poetry, his exclusion of the dramatists, the players, and the theatre. Despite what would thus appear to be an attitude well settled on the point, he reopens the question in an attempt to justify further his position. In the first place, the poets and all other artists are imitators. Nature itself is an imitation: its sensible appearances imitate the eternal forms in whose reality physical things participate in order to be what they are, how ever imperfectly. The artist, imitating nature, imitates an imitation and is thus twice or thrice removed from reality. It is only the philosopher who, seeking knowledge, contemplates basic realities. The poet or painter or sculptor, working by imitation from the models which nature provides, never gets beyond secondary imitations, and is therefore totally unfitted to teach, since to teach must be to impart knowledge and not merely opinion. The common people, unphilosophical and therefore unaware of the distinctions between being and becoming, knowledge and opinion, suffer the illusion that the poets have knowledge of what they write about, and that what they write about is genuinely real. The poets are, however, not only ignorant men; worse than that, they do not seek the truth. From Homer

down, they have been copying the images of virtue and have never sought to understand what virtue is; and because they imitate virtue and vice, poets are more dangerous than other artists. The ignorant multitude applauds them, and the philosopher, who should be its preceptor, goes unheard. Here again we see Plato motivated by the sense that the poets are his competitors. Earlier the question was not whether the people should be told stories, but who should tell them, the poet or the statesman. Here the problem is the choice of teachers. It seems that for the most part the people learn from the poets rather than the philosophers. And what they learn from the poets either makes it more difficult or almost impossible for the philosophers to teach them properly. Since in the good state the ruler must be a philosopher, or at least philosophically wise, the poets are a nuisance of which the state would be well rid.

In the second place, the poets arouse human passions, and this is without exception bad. This, says Plato, is the heaviest count in our accusation against the poets, and particularly the dramatists, who are most successful in exciting the emotions. The good man, philosophically trained, may not be misled by the illusions of fiction; in his case, well founded knowledge will not yield place to opinion and imagination. But even the good man may be harmed by the appeal which poetry makes to his passions, and there are, in fact, few who are not so harmed. "The best of us delight in giving way to sympathy, and are in raptures at the excellence of the poet who stirs our feelings most." Does not this show, Plato asks, the awful power which poetry has of harming even the good man? Furthermore, "poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if men are ever to increase in happiness and virtue."

Plato is thus moved to a conclusion which is more extreme than his earlier one; not only the dramatists, but all writers of fiction, all poets except those who write hymns to the gods or praises of good men, ought to be excluded from the state; other wise pleasure and pain, not law and reason, will rule it. Yet at this very point at which Plato is being most drastic in his treatment of the poets, he introduces the most significant qualifications of his entire argument. Addressing the poets whom he is about to exile, he relents by saying that if they will only prove their right to exist in a well ordered state, they will be gladly welcomed. This passage by itself is not easy to interpret. Does it mean that Plato is not convinced by his own analysis as he would be were it the sort of clear knowledge that dialectic is that the poets have no place in a well-ordered state? Or is it only a rhetorical point to mitigate the harshness and the impoliteness of the decree banishing the poets? The latter interpre-

tation is clearly supported by the fact that Plato asks the question whether the poets can establish their right to participate in the life of a good state, but does not wait for the answer before completely excluding them. Yet the other interpretation cannot be dismissed; in fact, it is reinforced by Plato's reiteration of a willingness to have the poets defended. "Let them show," he says, "not only that poetry is pleasant, but useful to states and to human life, and we will listen in a kindly spirit; for if this is proved, we shall surely be the gainers, I mean if there is a use in poetry as well as a delight."

The crucial question is thus neatly put. Plato seems convinced that poetry is bad or, at least, less good than philosophy, as a teacher of men, and that the poet is often a dangerously successful opponent of the statesman and the moralist in governing men by law and in training their characters. Yet, admitting for the first time in a kindly spirit that poetry and the arts are a delight to men, he asks whether in addition they are of any use. What does "use" here mean? Even if to provide men with pleasure and delight be useful, Plato's question requires that the utility be something other than such joy. From the point of view of the statesman or any other person concerned with the welfare of society, a thing has utility to the extent that it serves some end which should be achieved because it in turn is a means to the welfare ultimately sought. Plato does not answer this question about the political or social utility of poetry and the arts. But though we must wait for Aristotle to answer it, Plato's argument is weakened by his asking it, whatever other merits or defects it may have.

Before we examine the merits and defects of Plato's argument about the poets, we must consider one other Platonic text that is relevant to the issue, namely, the *Laws*. The *Laws* is significant not only because it is a later and more solemn work than the *Republic*, but because it differs from the *Republic* in some of the latter's most radical provisions, such as the abolition of private property, and the destruction of the family as a social institution by communizing women and children. It has been argued against those who have taken the Platonic position about the exclusion of dramatists or the strict censorship of literature, that they do so inconsistently, because they will not also accept what seems to be the extreme communism of the *Republic*. But Plato himself rejected this so-called communism in the *Laws*, while at the same time embracing the position he took in the *Republic* on the poets. In fact, the code of laws he undertakes to prepare as a guide for human government even more stringently regulates the arts, and as resolutely excludes the dramatic poets.

Chapter One from his book, *Art and Prudence: A Study in Practical Philosophy* (1937)

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