

The Liturgical Rehabilitation of the Body and Poetry in Plato's *Timaeus*, *Ion*, and *Republic*

Plato is critical of the human body and poetry throughout his dialogues. The parallels between his criticisms are significant; most essentially, they are both problematic inasmuch they distract, through the passions, from the pursuit of philosophy. This similarity, bound up at first in the distracting nature of beautiful bodies and poems and the passions they incite, extends also to a potential Platonic rehabilitation of both the body and poetry. Indeed, Plato does not only criticize them; in specific contexts, insofar as they can benefit philosophy, they can be redeemed. This paper will examine how Plato ultimately vindicates bodies and poems—although more subtly than he critiques them. To accomplish this, he approaches them from ethical, cosmological, teleological, and liturgical perspectives.

The parallels in Plato's treatment of the body and poetry stem from fundamental similarities. When souls are placed into bodies, "sensation, desire, and emotions...necessarily become innate in the body" (Miller 1957: 104). As the human organism can embody sensation, desire, and emotions, so too can the poem. In *Republic* X, "poetry comes under harsh criticism for encouraging emotions," which Plato seeks to mitigate (Penwell 2009: 9). Although for Plato, love of wisdom is a type of madness, it is such in the service of the rational soul, which inquires after the forms (see especially *Phaedrus* 245a-250b). Insofar as the body and poetry serve the spiritive or appetitive principles of the soul, they are worthy of condemnation.

Nonetheless, the body finally receives a philosophical vindication in the *Timaeus*. In his approach to the body in this dialogue, Plato seeks to understand it in terms of a broader cosmological schema. This is necessary, "not only because it will help us to lead a good life, but also because the divine purpose in making the physical universe has been 'for the sake of the

good life” (Steel 2001: 110). The body, Plato argues, has been designed to be conducive towards this goal. He likewise depicts the health of the body “as the activation of the body’s powers in the right way,” so that it can accomplish its divine goal of the good life (Prince 2014: 909).

This philosophical vindication, if the parallels between bodies and poems hold, can be extended to poetry as well. Although Socrates excludes most poetry from the ideal city in *Republic X*, he does allow for a particular genre of poetry, namely, the liturgical. Hymns that properly praise the gods may benefit citizens of the Republic. This is because praise of the divine, of beauty, is proper to philosophy and living the good life. These notions of divinity and the good life are also present in the Timaeian teleology of the body, which explains how the body is carefully crafted by divine beings to engender the best life attainable. The *Ion* suggests that good poetry, too, is in fact produced by the divine and transmitted to human rhapsodes via divine inspiration, although this dialogue also lacks the *Republic*’s negative view of Homer. According to the rubric proffered by Timaeian teleology, poetry, insofar as it conduces to a life of excellence, participates in the divine plan and is a worthy undertaking for the lover of wisdom.

To explore the extent to which such a model can truly rehabilitate the body and poetry, notwithstanding the severe critiques they face from Socrates in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, a closer look at key passages from the *Timaeus*, the *Ion*, and the *Republic* is necessary. First, the teleological-liturgical model can be derived from an examination of select passages from the *Timaeus*. Understanding that, within a cosmological framework, what contributes to the excellent life is worthwhile, passages from *Republic X* and the *Ion* can be reexamined in order to understand why liturgical poems escape censure and the importance of divine inspiration (or perhaps inspiration from the forms). This intersection between the body and poetry in Plato hints

at the broader connection between embodiment and language, both in Plato himself and in his reception.

Bibliography

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