

EXEGESIS OF PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*, BOOK III, 401c-d

“Instead, mustn't we look for craftsmen who are naturally capable of pursuing what is fine and graceful in their work, so that our young people will live in a healthy place and be benefited on all sides as the influence exerted by those fine works affects their eyes and ears like a healthy breeze from wholesome regions, and imperceptibly guides them from earliest childhood into being similar to, friendly toward, and concordant with the beauty of reason?”

This statement is part of the conversation Socrates is having with Adeimantus and Glaucon on the nature of the arts and crafts in the Ideal City. The Ideal City, which Socrates is building in this dialogue, is ruled by a class of guardians, who are akin to “noble hounds” (375e). While the guardians have the “most important” job in the city (374e), they are not the only inhabitants of the city. Prior to this, Socrates refers to the “purification” of the arts and mythology (399e) in the pursuit of making a city that is both virtuous and just. Following the expulsion of the poets from the Ideal City for not always imitating that which is desirable and just for the city in lieu of “one who would imitate the speech of a good person and make his stories fit the patterns we laid down” (398a–b). This exegetical paper will examine the above-excerpted sentence from Reeve's translation of *The Republic*.

In this section of the dialogue, Adeimantus has retreated into the background, patiently listening, only to return at the start of Book IV (419a). A closer examination of the sentence's structure reveals it to be a rhetorical question posed by Socrates to Glaucon, for the preceding and ensuing conversation is between Socrates and Glaucon only. The symbolic importance of the format is important because it allows for the participants of the dialogue to propose alternative pathways and ways of thinking about the goal at hand. The question also explicates the contrast between those practitioners of crafts that suffer from a “lack of grace, bad rhythm, and disharmony” (401a), who, like the misleading imitators that the poets tend to be, must

face expulsion or mend their ways in Socrates' Ideal City. This is reinforced by the use of the word "Instead" at the beginning of the question to reemphasise the contrast Socrates prominently draws and the significantly different conception he puts forth.

From the following line, we know that Socrates is attempting to explicate the "reasons ... that musical training is most important" (401*d*). Socrates is using the extended example of the craftsmen and the kind of work they *must* do instead of what they presently occupy themselves with to provide an analogy to what musical training should do in pursuit of the inculcation of beauty. This is important for in the Ideal City, beauty and brawn in equal measure and relevant usage prove to be essential characteristics for guardians, but even non-guardian residents of the city need to be guided along what Socrates considers to be the path of beauty. The arts and crafts have an exalted position because they are immediate articulations of beauty, and as such must be controlled, else they will inculcate undesirable traits: "lack of grace, bad rhythm, and disharmony" (401*a*), which are all exemplars of poor character. This is why Socrates uses the words "fine and graceful" in this quotation to allude to the concept of beauty and consequently to reinforce the virtues that are intrinsic to the just city he intends to create in the form of the Ideal City.

The importance of natural disposition is revealed in this quotation. The Ideal City must actively "look for craftsmen who are naturally capable" (401*c*) of producing beautiful works to ensure that the pursuit of beauty is not an imposition that can change with norms and standards. The natural disposition inherent in the search for the true craftsmen ensures that the arts and crafts produced are representative of a natural, immutable standard of beauty and do not vacillate in the realm of that which is deceptively fine and graceful and

ultimately beautiful in a relative manner. This attitude toward beauty is representative of the attitude Socrates takes to virtues which must be upheld in their abstract and unitary glory as products and articulations of reason.

Socrates further lays out his reasons for strict controls over craftsmen and artists. He believes that the truly beautiful but not deceptive or imitative of that which is not virtuous must be controlled for the young mind is impressionable and influenced by what is seen. Particularly for the youth of the Ideal City, true beauty “affects their eyes and ears” (401*c*) — Socrates recognises their aesthetic value in that they primarily act upon the primary senses as an input for higher cognition and intellectual thought. The simile “like a healthy breeze from wholesome regions” (401*c*) further operates upon the analogy Socrates is constructing to reinforce the utopianism of the “wholesome” Ideal City. The simile additionally informs the reader that Socrates is not a cultural isolationist but only concerned with the pursuit of truth, even in matters pertaining to beauty, and is willing for his utopian city to incorporate the best from those around it to achieve the stated goal — justice — which is the central theme of *The Republic*. The conviction of Socrates’ beliefs on the openness of his city to the pursuit of truth and justice is alluded to elsewhere in *The Republic* in his descriptions of the necessity of markets and trade.

The role of beauty in the Ideal City is to ensure that its residents “will live in a healthy place” (401*c*). The isolated usage of the word here and throughout his lexicon in reference to the city save for a fit body that comes from exercise implies that health is a resultant attribute of beauty, and therefore a pursuit of beauty is a pursuit of a healthy city that can prosper as long as it keeps its health in check. The success of the Ideal City is important because it must

continue to propagate — it would not matter if the City embraces rational thought, truth, and beauty, if it cannot secure and propagate itself. This is implicit in the quote above but also in the general manner in which Socrates switches between youth and guardians to reflect the pervasive nature of the two inherent qualities that the city exists for, beauty and truth.

Beauty, in this analogy, “imperceptibly guides” (401*c–d*). The epithet assigned to guided signifies that beauty influences the subconscious, and hence must be controlled to tend towards the truth for there is little agency assigned to those who are intuitively guided by what they aesthetically consume. The phrase above could be construed as oxymoronic because beauty is both intuitive and a guide — a guide is a person who can show someone the way but is not always a leader. To hone one’s intuitions towards beauty, therefore, reveals a conscious effort to elevate oneself and hone one’s senses so the guide can be understood and be allowed to show a pathway that the individual and society can together follow.

The exalted function of beauty strongly reveals itself in the passage. Socrates concludes his rhetorical question — which Glaucon unquestioningly but not uncritically agrees to (401*d*) — by stating that beauty guides the youth “into being similar to, friendly toward, and concordant with the beauty of reason” (401*d*). Socrates refines his aesthetical understanding and articulation of the genus ‘beauty’ by declaring the ultimate goal to be the realisation of the beauty of reason and its exalted stature in the Ideal City. Beauty, as is used here, is both functional and purposive, and is driven to make the agreeable an inalienable part of the Ideal City’s resident’s natures. The three types of affinity toward the beauty of reason that Socrates uses here makes use of the *omne trium perfectum* mode of conveying completeness of the analogy at hand, for the three parallelisms he introduces — “similar to, friendly toward, and

concordant with” (401*d*) —are both a rhetorical device and a classical symbol of the completeness of a set used at the closure of a particular line of argument.

By explicating the essential and inalienable nature of beauty but also its relationship to control and censorship, Socrates reinforces that the triumvirate of justice, reason, and beauty is hard to achieve but still manageable with conscious effort. The three are not worth having in anything but a complete set, and therefore must be strived for by society consciously and with all the resources it has. Everything else follows, but before this, nothing follows. This is a maxim that would do us well to follow in its stead.