

ON ADMIRATION AND WONDER: Should We Accept Plutarch's Lives in the Platonic City?

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Which mental attitudes contribute to justice? And what cultural practices can we foster to cultivate them? This is to say, what is the relationship between character, politics, and art? In Book X of *The Republic*, Plato's Socrates concludes that poetry cannot be allowed in a just and well-functioning city since "the only poetry that we can accept into our city are hymns to the gods and verses in praise of good men" (607a)¹. The Platonic censorship of poetry may seem odd to a modern, liberal audience, especially if we are to interpret *The Republic* as a political work, but a careful reading of Plato's text reveals the censorship of poetry to be a crucial thesis in the dialogue with a serious philosophical defense. The psychological effects of art, the Platonic thesis states, corrupt the moral character of the individual and threaten political justice. If we are committed to ethics and politics, we must reject aesthetics—or so the argument goes. But those of us feeling drawn to all three commitments may find a champion in the first-and-second-century CE Platonist Plutarch and his biographical writings, the *Parallel Lives*. This rich and complex set of portraits of the "great men" of ancient Greco-Roman history pays particular attention to the interactions between the soul (*psuche*) of individuals, political structures, arts and cultural artifacts, and,

¹ Unless otherwise stated, I use the Griffith translation of Plato's *Republic* and the John Dryden translation of Plutarch's *Lives*. Citations of the Dryden translation are by Life and page number of the Modern Library Edition. On occasion, I will employ the Loeb translation or provide my own and specify which translation it is. Citations to the Loeb and Greek are by book and chapter.

ultimately, philosophy. In this essay, I read Plutarch and his *Lives* as a text of moral and political philosophy responding to the Platonic tradition to which Plutarch feels in debt yet free to challenge and improve². As I will argue, although Plutarch's description of poetry (and other activities and arts, including political ones) follows Plato in his analysis of their psychological risks, he does not exclude them from human life. Instead his *Lives* seek to imitate those psychological effects while inviting the reader to adopt a critical attitude towards arts and politics. In this reading, the *Lives* are an exercise in cultivating wonder of the good and the beautiful (*to kalon*) through an aporetic inquiry into human psychology and community.

I will begin with an overview of Plato's arguments against mimetic poetry in his *Republic*. I then turn to Plutarch in the second section, which will begin with a discussion of the Platonic theses that led Plato to ban poetry and how Plutarch responded to them. This second section includes Plutarch's discussion of the psychological effects of poetry as well as other activities like rhetoric. The third section considers Plutarch's analysis of the end of politics in *Numa* and *Lycurgus*. I then compare in the fourth section Plutarch's aesthetics and politics, noting how they both cause an almost identical passion of "admiration," though in distinct ways. This notion of admiration becomes the heart of the discussion in the fifth section, for it is this sort of passion that leads Plato to censor poetry. To respond to the problems that come with admiration, I argue Plutarch needs to transform it into a more philosophical "wonder," which, like admiration, includes not only a perception of the good in the object and a desire to imitate, but also an inquisitive impulse to scrutinize and learn the truth behind all appearances. I conclude that the *Lives* intend to cultivate this passion towards public life and history, and that it presents a threat to neither human flourishing nor political justice

Plato against Poetry

We may be inclined to dismiss Plato's dislike of poetry as an outdated capriciousness that ought to be ignored. But a careful reading of Plato's text reveals the censorship of poetry to be a crucial thesis in the dialogue (if not the central one). Socrates first suggests that the *Kallipolis* should be wary of poetry early in the dialogue and eventually returns to it in the concluding book. In fact, these arguments against poetry bind the dialogue together, for it is in poetry, or in what poetry represents, that we find the relation between "city and soul" become tangible. Thus, in order to grasp what we should make of the Platonic critique of poetry, we must reconstruct the arguments with Socrates not only one-by-one, but also as a whole.

I would like to begin with the whole. What is *The Republic*, and what does it put forth? Platonic dialogues are individuated by the question into which each inquires; in this case, what is justice (*dikaosune*)? The question, as it begins in the first two books, concerns justice

² As Babut (1994) concludes, the evidence for Plutarch's New Academic approach is not to be explained away as a momentary or instrumental approach to dismantle the arguments of the Stoics or Epicureans. This seems to be Nikoladis (1997) approach, who professes that in Plutarch we see a return to the Old Academy of Plato. But for the French scholar, these moments in Plutarch reveal a deeper philosophical commitment to Socratic inquiry, as "la marque d'une expérience authentique, l'expression d'une réflexion sérieuse visant à justifier rationnellement, fût-ce de manière négative, la validité d'une foi religieuse en une Vérité supra-rationnelle" (1994, 581). I do not commit to either interpretation and leave others to settle this issue; however, as it seems to me, Plutarch is more of a Socratic than a Platonist in the *Lives*, committed to dialectical inquiry into the good, treating Plato and the Greek philosophical tradition as interlocutors on the hand and political history on the other.

within the individual as an ethical virtue. To the extent that it inquires into the nature of justice as a virtue of the individual, *The Republic* seems to be a work of moral philosophy. As such, it is concerned with what individuates human beings and their character; this is a question of what makes them good and what makes their souls wholesome and healthy. This dialogue would need to look at human beings "from the inside," to provide a *psychology* (in the literal Greek sense of an account, *logos*, of the human soul, *psyche*). However, justice is a predicate of an individual as well as of a political structure; as John Rawls put in his *Theory of Justice*, it is the "primary virtue of institutions." This realization early in the dialogue prompts Socrates to propose that in order to discover what justice is in the individual and whether it makes individuals happy, we must first discover what it is in the city. As such, they embark on the project of founding a just and well-functioning city—the Kallipolis—in speech. To this extent, *The Republic* is a work of political philosophy. Some may even use it as a manual for lawmakers. But somebody who reads the text merely as a political manual would miss that Socrates does return to his defense of the thesis that justice as an ethical virtue makes a person happy in itself. This is his end goal, and it is quite telling that the beginning and concluding books are concerned with the defense of justice as a virtue to be desired for its own sake, while its middle books inspect political regimes. As such, it would seem that Plato's political proposals merely serve an argumentative function in his defense of the moral virtue of justice. Under this view, the success of *The Republic* is the application of the concepts and predicates of the Greek's political lexicon to psychology. If this is so, we might see the relation between city and soul to be a mere analogy³.

However, I resist an interpretation that would paint Plato as an "individualist" in the sense of being merely interested in the "inner city" of human beings. Instead, I read Plato (and Plutarch) as an astute observer of human nature, who notices that things outside of us, whether art, politics, or personal relationships, can have a strong effect on our psyche. For we have good reasons to think that, for Plato, the city-soul relation is one of cause-and-effect⁴. We see this fact in Socrates' attention to education, as it is through education that lawmakers can influence the character of the citizens. The question of what will constitute such an education begins Socrates' attack on poetry (*poesis*). This first attack is against the poetry of Homer and the tragedians and takes place in Book III, where Socrates outlines pedagogy as part of his political project. Thus, these arguments serve to justify the censorship in a political community. But his complete attack does not come until Book X, where Socrates argues that all arts that perform "imitation" (*mimesis*) are problematic. I understand both instances of imitation to be the same,⁵ and while the latter argument justifies the ontological

3 In his famous critique of *The Republic*, Bernard Williams (1973) seems to think along these lines. For him, the method of Plato relies on the assumption of the "analogy of meaning," that "the explanation of a city's being F is the same as that of a man's being F" (159). Along with some other premises in Plato's argument, he considers that there is a tension in the background of *The Republic* which threatens the whole project. For, in the last analysis, the contradictions he points out bring forth that "there are grave obstacles to Plato's reading back into the city what he needs for his political conclusions" (167).

4 In his interpretation of Plato's *Republic*, and as a response to Williams (1973), Jonathan Lear (2001) proposes that Plato's problems with poetry and Socrates' education program have to do with the psychological "internalization" of "cultural influences" and the importance of ensuring that the young do not have any morally harmful externals "for Plato, humans enter the world with a capacity to absorb cultural influences. The young psyche is like a resin, able to receive the impress of cultural influences before it sets into a definite shape" (171). I follow Lear in his interpretation of the causal relation between city and soul as being a dynamic process of internalization and externalization.

5 This is the conclusion of Gabriel Richardson Lear (2011) study in which she argues that, against the standard interpretation, the

and psychological problems with *mimesis*, the former justifies why these problems are also political.

The argument in Book X lies in the Platonic distinction between the "reality" (*to on*) of the object and the "appearance" (*to phainomenon*) of it—an artist can only depict the latter (598b). This is true of craftsmen, painters, and even poets. A product of art, then, is an imitation of the appearance of reality. The object of the imitation of the poet is human and divine life and action—but this is an imperfect imitation, for "they produce an apparition (*phantasmata*) and not the reality (*onta*)."¹ This ontology has psychological consequences in Socrates' argument—since poets like Homer can neither depict truth nor possess moral knowledge, consumption of art cannot take place in the intellectual part of the soul as this is the part that engages in true knowledge and reasoning. Instead, when we listen to poetry or look at a painting, this activity belongs to the "element in us which is far removed from intelligence (*phronesis*)" (603b). It is for this reason that we may rationally grasp that human misfortunes are bearable and yet feel great pity for a tragic character in a play. By stirring up certain pleasures and pains related to these passions of anger, pity, love, and so on, art cultivates the more passionate part of the soul—it incentives mental habits in the audience. Therefore, all mimetic arts, insofar as they are in the business of appearance-making, are morally problematic.

Let us now turn to Socrates' argument in Book III, where he takes on the role of city-founder. Soon after Socrates founds his city, he turns to the education of the guardian class, for he needs to ensure that they will be courageous, gentle, and serve the city well. As far as they are asking these questions *as the founders* of the *Kallipolis* and for the sake of justice in the *Kallipolis*, the Platonic education program is a political program as well. For the cultivation of certain moral and physical characteristics is an institutional interest, and so, the fact that Socrates immediately turns to the education of the guardians is quite telling. The *Kallipolis* must provide special attention to what its students are learning if it is to raise them to fulfill their appropriate task. As such, we can detect the background assumption that certain education leads to certain characteristics; therefore, if institutions control education, they control character. Hence, through education, political structures mold the psychologies of their citizens. Socrates then starts out with the Greek model of physical and musical education, slowly examining what to keep and what to throw out (376d); it is here that his attack on Homer begins. His argument here is more specific to epic and tragic poetry: it is pleasing to perform and listen to because of its rhythm, meter, and musical qualities; and so, when students learn Homeric poetry, we risk that "enjoyment of the imitation gives rise to enjoyment in reality" (395c). Yet, his argument in Book III does not amount to much more than his later argument in Book X outlined above.

¹imitative poetry discussed in book III is an instance of the mimetic arts of book X. The problem, she argues, has to do with the "appearance-making" of *mimesis* and the psychological habituation it has on the audience. So, people who often listen to a performance of Homer's *Iliad*, for instance, may make a habit of finding pleasure in the courageous, proud, and violent character-type of Achilles. I follow her in my reading of Plato and Plutarch.

Socrates notes that there are two reasons why they, as founders, need to pay as much attention to musical and poetic education: (a) music and poetry have the greatest effect on character because they penetrate the psyche through tunes, rhythms, and imagery, and (b) anybody with the right artistic education will be brought up to have a certain knowledge of what is good and beautiful (401d-402a). It is no coincidence that Socrates' artistic education program ends "where it ought to end. Music and poetry ought, I take it, to end in love of beauty (*eis tà toū kaloū erōtika*)" (403c). It is worth noting that, as some of Plato's other dialogues like *Symposium* show, this "love of beauty" is not to be considered as something base, as some may interpret erotic desire, but as a certain orientation of the soul towards what is truly worthy of one's desire, the *kalon*. In other words, poetry can influence one's desires and values, or, in a more Platonic sense, one's conceptualization of the good. And if a city can only be just when each citizen has an appropriate notion of what is good for them and the community, founders and rulers must ensure that whichever forces in the city may influence the intentional attitudes of the citizens do cultivate the proper desires and loves. Therefore, since none of the art that he has experienced truly impresses him, Plato has Socrates conclude that their city must censor mimetic art. Homer, Hesiod, the tragedians, whose authority Greece has followed for centuries, need be overthrown, for only prosaic writing depicting true moral knowledge can serve institutional goals of political justice.

Plutarch on Poetry

In summary, these are the Platonic arguments for banning poetry from the city that I argue Plutarch engages:

- (1) The moral character of a human soul has partial causes in external forces.
- (2) The end of politics is to cause good moral characters.⁶
- (3) Poetry is an external force which can cause a vicious character.

If we interpreted these theses as Socrates does in *The Republic*, we would suppose that censoring poetry is in the interest of those who structure the political community. Regardless of whether we accept them in this manner, these observations become part of the Platonic legacy that lurks in the back of Plutarch's works. For instance, his aesthetics suggest a certain critique of the arts, but unlike Plato, Plutarch seems more open to the benefits of mimetic poetry. And so, in his essay *On How the Young Man Should Listen to Poetry*, Plutarch is both wary of poetry's falsehoods and its damaging effects on youths who listen to it without a teacher *and* critical of those philosophers who turn their backs on poetry and do not take advantage of its use (15F)⁷. As I shall argue, Plutarch seems to believe in the three theses

⁶ This thesis is also argued in the *Gorgias*.

⁷ In her study of Plutarch's essay, Gómez Cardó (1999) comments on Plutarch's attempt to reconcile his Platonic tendencies and poetry; for her, Plutarch asserts that the hedonic task of art is independent from morality, even though it is subservient to it. As such, it is the task of the reader to turn the work into something morally productive. She furthermore suggests that something similar takes place in Plutarch's composition of the *Lives*. While I agree with most of her conclusions relating Plato and Plutarch, I cannot help but wonder whether Plutarch really does think of himself as stirring up the irrational part of the soul as Gómez Cardó portrays Plutarch's interpretation of poetry.

stated above, and yet, in a heroic attempt, he takes up the Platonic challenge "to speak in prose on her [poetry's] behalf" (607d-e). His *Lives*, as a work in itself, constitutes a philosophical defense of art.

How does Plutarch view these artistic forms and their influence on people—e.g. thesis (1)—in the *Lives*? In this Platonic tradition, what distinguishes arts like poetry and painting is that they are, *prima facie*, mere appearances of objects⁸. They may *represent* an object that is real and true, and the product itself may be a physical object. But we do not say that mere ink on a page or colors on a frame constitute the art. Its *content* constitutes the art and individuates its causal power over our mental events. To consume art is an activity that takes place within the mind, and so, it is a mental state with certain intentionality. In this sense, art is an appearance; its essence is phenomenal. As a subjective experience, it sits in the soul and molds our psychology by creating certain upheavals of pleasure, pain, and passion; for Plato, this takes place in the non-rational part: "this [irrational] part of the soul he [the poet] arouses and feeds, and by making this strong destroys the rational part" (605b). This is to say, if we are not careful, poetry may recolor our conception of what is good and beautiful (*to kalon*), inciting desires and behaviors contrary to what justice and virtue demand.

I do not see how we could deny the phenomenology and psychology of art which Plato depicts. Plutarch does not, for although they evaluate poetry differently, their description of its powers does not differ. His most pre-eminent lawgivers, for instance, freely use the psychological effects of poetry for moral and political good. Note Plutarch's emphasis on Solon's use of poetry to "to justify his own actions, and sometimes to correct, chastise, and stir up the Athenians to noble performances" (*Solon* 108). He does not even criticize Lycurgus for introducing Homer to Spartan pedagogy, for "the few loose expressions and actions of ill example" of his poems "were much outweighed by serious lessons of state and rules of morality" (*Lycurgus* 56)⁹.

Plutarch even generalizes Plato's thesis—for him, though poetry is paradigmatic, any sort of art or activity which creates a similar impression on the mind may cause a moral-psychological change (*i.e.* in beliefs or desires about the good). Although his philosophical ancestor shows a strong contempt for the sophists and orators, Plutarch notes both the psychological effects and moral advantage of rhetoric. Rhetoric is "in Plato's language, the government of the souls of men, and that her chief business is to address the affections and passions, which are as it were the strings and keys to the soul" (*Pericles* 215). On the other hand, Plutarch shows it may serve as moral motivation: "Panaetius, the [Stoic] philosopher, said that most of his [Demosthenes] orations are so written as if they were to prove this one conclusion, that what is honest and virtuous is for itself only to be chosen" (*Demosthenes*

⁸ This is in line with Plato's ontological argument in book X of *The Republic* against art outlined above. He takes it further than we do here, for he states the painters and poets imitate not the truth of the matter but the appearance (598b). Homer and the tragedians, then, are "twice removed" from the actions of human beings and, as such, poetry stands too far from moral goodness to contain any moral knowledge (598e-600a).

⁹ Plutarch may be responding to Socrates' comments against Homer in book X of *The Republic* when he mockingly compares Lycurgus to Homer: "Sparta is better governed because of Lycurgus, and so are many other cities, great and small, because of many other individuals. What about you [Homer]? Which city says that you are its great lawgiver, or attributes it success to you?" (599e).

396). Plutarch invoking the authority of a Stoic as famed for his ethical and political works as Panaetius signifies that he is not just moved by the illusions of an orator. Rhetoric serves a profound moral and philosophical function here, and it can only fulfill that function because it creates an appearance of virtue which, like poetry, leaves a psychological impression on the audience.

His *Lives* are full of such examples, but I will not go on. It makes sense that Plutarch would feature these moments, considering how rhetoric, poetry, and similar arts are esteemed in both his culture and in the cultures that he wrote about. But Plato lived in similar circumstances; in fact, he chose Homer as his target because he was such an important part of Greek pedagogy at the time. We must suspect, then, that his interest in these arts reveals something distinct about Plutarch's psychology and politics as well as his project in the *Lives*.

Plutarch on Poetry

So far, Plutarch obviously grants *thesis 1*, but seems to reject a strict interpretation of *thesis 3* (though he eventually will partially accept it). Let us now move on to *thesis 2*. Perhaps Plutarch could have rejected the censorship and contempt for poetry if he thought that the feelings, thoughts, and mental habits of people are the business of politics; this certainly seems to be a view that modern audiences might be more inclined to believe. But quite obviously, this is not Plutarch's view. The ethical ends of politics are a background assumption in Plato and more explicitly stated in Aristotle's *Ethics and Politics*. We should not be surprised if Plutarch, who knows these two quite well, thinks similarly.

Now, it is no coincidence that Plutarch chooses to write biographies of statesmen. These are figures whose characters and actions distinguished them because of their rarity and publicity. They acted in the public sphere and invited others to assess their actions¹⁰. For Plutarch, this is a philosophical and moral assessment; he tells us: "my design is not to write histories, but lives. And the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men" (*Alexander* 139). The *Lives* is an ethical inquiry, and if one is to examine what the best life is for a human being, the lives of people known by all is a good place to start.

Is it an accident that they are statesmen, then? Or does there exist an intrinsic relationship between politics and the human good? On the one hand, Plutarch often considers the private lives of his actors and examines their virtue independently of politics; on the other, as a glance over the *Comparisons* would show, his interest lies in their actions in the public sphere and how these actions relate to the sort of moral characters these agents have. And though any number of the accounts demonstrated in the *Lives* hides a complexity worthy of inquiry on its own, this does not undermine Plutarch's method of examining goodness through political actors.

¹⁰ I mean this is in the Arendtian sense. The Plutarchian Life is an imitation of Arendtian action in her work *The Human Condition*, which reveals the agent; and note, furthermore, the emphasis on the "public sphere" and "space of appearance" in Plutarch's choice of writing on statesmen. It is no coincidence that Arendt theorizes the space of appearance in which human life takes place from the Greek *polis*. Though perhaps we should respect Arendt's distinction between the imitation of character and action already present in Aristotle's *Poetics*. In this sense, the Plutarchian Life differs greatly from Arendtian action and Greek tragedy. On the other hand, Plutarch's *Lives* might problematize this distinction, regardless of his emphasis in the *Alexander* on character portrait rather than glorious deeds.

But our question is not what the human good is. We are assuming that Plutarch shares the commitment of his predecessors to moral virtue and its cultivation as necessary for human flourishing. Our question here is whether politics has anything to do with such cultivation in Plutarch's theory, either for the statesmen or for the citizens. As such, for now let us focus on *Lives* which analyze the political projects of its protagonists as separately as possible from their other personal and social projects, the *Numa* and *Lycurgus*. We can read these as discussions of the proper ends and means of the lawgivers.

According to Plutarch, the Romans appointed Numa following the death of Romulus, a Sabine, who, in his almost-absurd piety, is unwilling to enter politics. The story goes that his father and kinsman exhort him to political activity by convincing him that it is a divine command to improve the character of the war-like Romans (*Numa* 86). Numa's initial reluctance resembles that of Plato's philosopher in *The Republic*, who does not want to "return to the cave" and engage in political life, even if her city were better for it. These reasons convincing Numa to join politics also do not substantially differ from the kinds of quasi-lies that Socrates constructs in order to compel the philosophers of the *Kallipolis* to rule (520b); both appeal to a duty grander than themselves. Thus, Numa's story gives us an insight into the correct final cause of political activity. For Numa, this cause "of bringing the hard and iron Roman temper to somewhat more of gentleness and equity" (*Numa* 87) motivates his actions throughout his life. His introduction of public religion and such offices, his distribution of the Romans and Sabines by trade rather than ethnicity, the formation of his calendar, all are done with this end in mind: to instill a certain moral character in the individuals and the community overall. In Plutarch's account, Numa exceeded all expectation, thereby "[softening and charming] into a peaceful temper" not only the Romans, but also the whole of Italy, for "*the love of virtue and justice flowed from Numa's wisdom as from a fountain*, and the serenity of his spirit diffused itself, like a calm, on all sides" [emphasis added] (98-99). If Plutarch considers Numa to "join political power and the wisdom of a philosopher" (*ibid*), it is because he can construct the appropriate structures in Roman society so as to inspire them to "the love of virtue and justice." Therefore, he is a praiseworthy statesman, for "he is the truest ruler who can best introduce it [such a moral character] into the hearts and practice of his subjects" (*ibid*). His success lies there—the end of politics is in the soul of the citizens.

It is no coincidence that Numa is paired with the other lawgiver whom Plutarch praises most, Lycurgus. When he takes over Sparta, he radically changes the structure of their *polis* with a moral end in mind. He leaves no aspect of Spartan society unchanged, affecting institutions, private property, and sexual relations. However, Lycurgus' greatest success lies with the education system that he sets up; he does not write any laws, believing that he could secure just citizens for posterity by merely habituating the youth well through an effective moral education (*Lycurgus* 63). For Plutarch, Lycurgus takes the Platonic model to heart: politics is not a matter of setting laws and policies, but of psychological conditioning. Rulers are the teachers of the ruled; in this model, justice and the well-functioning society do not

arise from a well-laid-out social contract, but from a nation raised to love and desire the right things. Plato's Socrates has the same attitude towards his education program in *Republic* II-III. If we believe Plutarch, Lycurgus' heavily inspired "all those who have written well on politics, as Plato, Diogenes, and Zeno, have taken Lycurgus for their model" (80). Yet, he adds, political philosophers left merely words behind, while Lycurgus was the "author, not in writing but in reality" of a government supposedly oriented towards virtue (*ibid*). Philosophers contemplate the good and live according to virtue in this way, but statesmen, too, share in the good, for their actions need to be guided by a higher model of being. Plutarch goes as far as comparing Lycurgus to the Platonic God (78): Sparta is the product of his work as the universe is that of the Cosmic Maker. The politics of Lycurgus are world-building with the purpose of creating the right conditions for virtuous activity. In the human world, this well-ordered space is as beautiful as the cosmos. There must be something truly fine about such a work, and therefore, the hand behind it must have a special knowledge of human life and skill comparable to that of the divine.

Furthermore, when Plutarch compares Lycurgus and Numa, he praises them both for their performances as rulers. They succeed in giving the Romans and Spartans respectively a proper moral character, even though only Numa does it by persuasion (*peithō*) alone and without force. On the other hand, Plutarch seems to prefer Lycurgus, for Numa fails to cement these moral changes long-term—once he is gone, so is the Romans' serenity. So, if Plutarch assesses their performances according to their ability to cultivate virtue and their failure to sustain it, it follows that a good statesman has a functional end in the moral character of the citizens. In Plutarch's account, therefore, politics and laws are not to ignore any component of the community which could have moral-psychological effects.

Plutarch on the Art of Politics

Given the end of politics, if we see art as an obstacle to human flourishing, as Plato does, should we not censor it? Plutarch's *Lives* offer a subtle response: this tension between arts and politics does not stand. Art and politics are not merely extrinsically related, but share an intrinsic nature. In this section, I argue that Plutarch views political activity as a sort of art that molds character through its phenomenological nature.

It is worth noting that Lycurgus and Numa cultivate moral virtue in the Spartans and Romans not only as lawgivers, but also as examples. Had they been invisible, silent policy-makers, behind the scenes, they would have failed. In praising Numa for not needing force to achieve his goals, Plutarch says: "the multitude, seeing an example of virtue in the greatly manifest and shining way of life of their ruler, they voluntarily follow reason and join him in friendship and concord" (Num. 20.8, tr. my own)¹¹. What makes Numa a statesman close to Plato's philosopher-king is not only his policies and virtue itself, but also that these are open to the Romans, that they *see* those traits they are to imitate in his "the way of life" (*tōi biōi*), qualified by the adjectives "greatly manifest" (*eudelōi*) and "shining" (*lampōi*). Numa's

¹¹ Since my analysis depends on my translation of the Greek, I provide my own here, "αὐτοὶ δὲ τὴν ἀρετὴν ἐν εὐδήλῳ παραδείγματι καὶ λαμπρῶ τῷ βίῳ τοῦ ἀρχοντος ὁρῶντες, ἐκούσιως σωφρονοῦσι καὶ συμμετασχηματίζονται πρὸς τὸν ἐν φιλίᾳ καὶ ὁμοιότητι πρὸς αὐτοὺς"

life is not just visible (*delos*), but "abundantly visible" (*eudelos*), and it stands out as a torch (*lampas*) in the night. Plutarch points us, then, to the publicity and perceivability of political actors.

The public, in witnessing the virtuous actions of these statesmen, experience what I call "admiration" (*thauma*)¹². The topic for the remainder of the discussion will be exactly what admiration is for Plutarch, so I cannot give an exact definition here. For now, we can understand admiration as a mental state focusing on the noble qualities of some object that is seen or perceived in some way. This object stands out from the rest, as if it were not supposed to be there, because of its excellent qualities. Admiration, then, involves pleasure and awe. And if the object of admiration is some action, admiration also implies a desire to imitate. For these reasons, as we are about to see, the images of great political actors leave a certain impression on the souls of those who gaze at them. The end of both political and artistic performance is showing the good, noble, and beautiful (*to kalon*), even if not all such projects succeed (they often fail); in addition, they both leave phenomenological imprints on the soul. In this sense, the art of politics truly is an art like poetry.

In his preface to *Pericles*, Plutarch includes a revealing discussion of the difference between our attitudes toward artists and virtuous people. He begins with the observation that, since the soul (*psuche*) of human beings "by nature has acquired a love of learning (*philomathes*) and a love of seeing (*philotheamon*)," we ought not focus on objects unworthy of our senses but only those which are "good and beautiful" (*tōn kalōn*) (Per. 1.1, tr. my own). As the eye is nourished by the pleasantness and perception of certain colors, so there must exist objects which call our inner eye (*dianoian theanasiu*) to its "proper good" (*to okeion auten agathon*). For Plutarch, these objects lie in "virtuous deeds" (*tois areteis ergois*). He compares these to a secondary type of deed which does not cause imitation, artistic activity. But he describes the feeling of gazing on these two objects as "admiration" (*thauma*). Both refer to the mental state, and a pleasant one for that matter, of a person whose soul is contemplating a certain object which seems beautiful, colorful, and even good. It nourishes our inner eye through the perception of the appearance of something which the perceiving part finds worthy of its attention; namely, noble objects (*ta kala*).

Regardless of the subjective similarity, there is a fundamental difference between the two admirations of virtuous and artistic deeds. Nobody, "at the sight of the statue of Jupiter at Pisa, ever desire to be a Phidias [...] for it does not necessarily follow that, if a piece of work please for its gratefulness, therefore he that wrought it deserves our admiration (*thauma*)"; on the other hand, "virtue (*arete*), by the bare statement of its actions, can so affect men's minds as to create at once both admiration (*thauma*) of the things done and

12 "Admiration" is often a translation for the family of words of θαύμα in Plutarch's *Lives*. Its semantic field is varied and requires some distinctions, which I make throughout this paper. Overall, it refers to the attitude of people towards an object or person when they perceive great and rare qualities in them, sometimes to the point of surprise, puzzlement, curiosity, or desire for imitation. For example, Ariadne "was filled with admiration (ἐθαύμασε) at Theseus' athletic prowess" (Thes.19.3, Loeb trans.); when Theseus and Perithous meet, each "was filled with admiration (ἐθαύμασε) at the beauty (τὸ κάλλος) and was astonished (ἠγάσθη) at the bravery (τὴν τοιμῆν) of the other" (Thes. 30.2); in an argument between Eurybiades and Themistocles, Eurybiades is "struck with admiration (θαυμάσαστρος) at his calmness" (Them.11.3); and so on.

desire to imitate the doers of them” (*Pericles* 202). Art moves the psyche by inciting pleasure, by making us contemplate something seemingly beautiful. This we might call “aesthetic admiration.” On the other hand, “ethical admiration” stems from the appearance of noble actions *and* includes a desire to imitate the actor. Phidias built great things, but none of his works intrinsically suggest that he possessed virtue or motivated his audience to *praxis*. Our aesthetic admiration is for the statue of Jupiter, not Phidias, himself. Furthermore, if we desired to be like Phidias, we would desire to be like Phidias the sculptor, not in himself. On the other hand, the actions of Pericles cause ethical admiration, and, *perhaps*, admiration for the soul of Pericles himself. Thus, we would not want to live the life of an artist like Phidias, but we would want to observe and imitate the life of somebody who acts according to justice like Pericles. Or at least, that is the hypothesis tested in the *Life of Pericles*.

And so, Plutarch, like Plato, separates aesthetics from ethics. However, Plutarch makes the former secondary to the latter, for the good person possesses something that the mere artist lacks. The noble (*to kalon*) present in ethics is not merely apparently good, but is also *actually* good, in the sense that it is the proper good of human beings; it is that thing that everybody implicitly desires. When manifested in a political actor, a person whose actions take place in public, it causes a sort of admiration which, unlike mere aesthetic admiration, inspires the spectators to act nobly and, thus, to live well. This explains how Numa could pacify all of Italy, even though he only legislated in a single city. In contrast, that noble and beautiful object present in aesthetics is more ephemeral, and never necessarily actual, for it is, presumably, a mere imitation of the actual good.

Note that the difference between the artist and statesman is the difference between technical knowledge and practical wisdom¹³. For Plutarch, a good artist never needs to have any practical wisdom to be a good artist, but the technical knowledge needed to produce art that will inspire generations to come. A good ruler requires practical wisdom, for she needs to be acquainted with the proper ends of human lives and all sorts of activities in order to structure the *polis* well. The statesman inspires noble actions because of this quality. In this sense, the human good is more present in the political actor than in the artist. For this reason, to gaze upon the Parthenon gives Plutarch a sense of admiration for Pericles—who organized the whole project at a political level—and not for Phidias, who merely designed it. For a modern American audience, this admiration is akin to the awe that a visitor to Washington D.C. may feel when she gazes on the Washington Monument or the statue of Lincoln.

Nevertheless, I suggest that once we return to the subjective point of view, this objective difference fades. Like aesthetic admiration and pleasure, ethical admiration is still a passion, an affective upheaval disturbing our spirit, desire, and impulses. Psychologically, it seems almost identical to aesthetic admiration, as they both play with our mental phenomena

¹³ This difference is best outlined by Aristotle in book VI in *Nicomachean Ethics* as the difference between *techné* and *phronesis*, but it also appears in Letter 90 of Seneca’s *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* and book V of Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*. This is to say, there is a long philosophical tradition in the Greco-Roman world of making this distinction.

and appearances of the good. But this indiscernibility at a psychological level is quite useful for us. For if this identity does hold, which it seems to, it follows that if the arts are psychologically problematic, then so are politics. Plutarch shows that the psychological effects of politics may turn us to the good for human beings. Therefore, by this *modus tollens* argument, we have no reason to be as suspicious of art and to exclude it from human life. In this analysis, admiration is a passion, but one whose intentionality turns it towards the noble and beautiful (*to kalon*).

Skepticism

Our argument states that aesthetic admiration is psychologically problematic if, and only if, ethical admiration is; since ethical admiration aims at the noble and beautiful in human actions and inspires virtuous activity, it is not problematic, but even positive. It follows that aesthetic admiration is not as problematic as some would make it. This argument sufficiently challenges Plato's attack on poetry, which lied on the moral problems brought about by the psychological effects of appearance-making. But as the protagonist of the public stage, on the eye of all, the political actor also needs to be an exemplary figure and, thus, an expert in appearance-making; nevertheless, she does not cultivate vice, but virtue.

It is not enough to say that a political actor is different from a tragic or epic poet in that the former displays the actual good for human beings while the latter mere appearance. For in fact, both are illusions in one way or another. Whether the admired virtue lies in real people or in imaginary characters is not an epistemic distinction which the audience can completely make. From the audience's point of view, Numa, Demosthenes, and Homeric poets are all performing, causing awe at their actions and pleasure in the contemplation of these scenes. Now, perhaps we could say that only truly good actions can *cause* truly unproblematic admiration; but still, the subjective experience of the audience would not register that as we could easily imagine that a person admiring Numa and another admiring Alexander could have identical mental states. If they do differ, we might still object that this is not knowable to them. And it is in the inner upheavals that the arts reveal their dark colors. However, this response leads us to an even more dangerous path, so we should let an interlocutor speak on Plato's behalf.

Politics, the Platonist objector proposes, is psychologically problematic. For politics is a space of appearances¹⁴. This creates a problem: politics is about our admiration for people who, because of their appearance as noble, move us towards a good life, yet ethical admiration can also aim at a deceptive object, as aesthetic admiration often does.

For example, the Platonist objector points out, Plutarch does tell us that Pericles, in order "to avoid any feeling of commonness, or any satiety on the part of the people, presented

¹⁴ I mean this is in the Arendtian sense of the word: "[the *polis*] is the space appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly" (2018, 199). However, for Arendt agents reveal themselves through action and speech in the space of appearance, whereas for us now, action in the space of appearance is not sufficient.

himself at intervals only” (206). In this way, Pericles can preserve a certain mystic image of excellence before the Athenians. We stand at awe at his public works and oratory, but as far as his actual virtue goes, we have no reason to think that we have any true knowledge of it. It is a problem of *skepticism*: how are we to know that those whom we admire are worthy of admiration? Presumably, we could say, we can distinguish the admirable from the unadmirable because we have some sense of what the ethical is. But the point of ethical admiration in political life is to imitate good characters and learn ethics that way; if we already had such moral knowledge, then we would not need political actors to guide us. On the other hand, if we do not have such moral knowledge, then it is mere chance that we are impressed by the right thing. This is all to say that admiration of virtue seems to be necessarily prior to virtue, if Plutarchian politics is to have any purpose, but unless some act virtuously purely by chance, virtue is necessarily prior to the admiration of virtue. If we rightly admire by chance, even if we have some true opinion about those whom we admire, we will never know whether we properly know that such-and-such is the right object of admiration. This Menoan paradox, still as theoretical as it may seem, does have practical consequences. Younger people, for instance, are the most impressionable, but are also those who know the least about good character (insofar as they have not been raised yet); on the other hand, they are the ones whom a political leader needs to pay the most attention to in her activities and world-building. But once we grant this skepticism as a problem for youths, we may realize that, from the epistemic and ethical point of view, those of us who are not yet sages are effectively children. The threat materializes when we realize that we have no tools to distinguish between what seems good and what is good, especially when it comes to “other minds.” As such, we are prone to confuse the two. Therefore, the Platonic argument follows: if our communities are to cultivate good characters, they cannot risk having deceptive objects like poetry, art, rhetoric, or anything that might create the semblance of the good.

Plutarch sees this threat, for instance, in *Alexander*. Having described an episode in which Alexander gets into a disagreement with Aristotle over publishing some of his works, Plutarch tells us, with some degree of irony, that “[Alexander] was naturally a great lover of all kinds of learning and reading,” for he sleeps with the *Iliad* and a dagger under his pillow, “declaring that he esteemed [the *Iliad*] a perfect portable treasure of all military virtue and knowledge” (*Alexander* 144). The good for Alexander is disguised as military, so Alexander’s engagement with the poem becomes an admiration for the figure of Achilles, “whose gravestone he anointed [...] and crowned it with garlands, declaring how happy he esteemed him, in having while he lived so faithful a friend, and when he was dead, so famous a poet to proclaim his actions” (150). It is no coincidence that Alexander’s vices lie in his love of glory and explosive temper; perhaps had the *Nicomachean Ethics* lay under his pillow, he would have turned out differently. That Alexander thinks of himself as a devout lover of wisdom but also carries the *Iliad* around suggests the extent to which the problem of skepticism goes. For poetry disguises itself as presenting something desirable and alike to the good and beautiful, but reality might be quite different.

Now the Platonist can turn our earlier conclusion against us: since admiration in art is problematic, then it must be in politics as well. In fact, the *Lives* are full of such examples of vicious public figures inspiring others, sometimes to virtue, other times to vice. Like his own hero, Alexander the Great goes down in history as admirable by many; at least Plutarch's Caesar, who imitates Alexander as a hero in an imperial campaign, seems to think so (Caesar 206). Similarly, Demosthenes' rhetoric inspires virtuous actions in the Athenians, but Demosthenes is revealed to be corrupt. While Plutarch sometimes calls Numa a philosopher-king, at other times he mocks Numa's ridiculous religious habits and his failure to secure long-term virtue in Rome. For those of us that grew up listening to the bravery of Columbus, it is akin to then learning of the genocides caused by European colonialism in America. The list of *aporia*-inducing ethical ironies goes on. Plutarch's masterful presentation of the nuances of the *Lives* of these so-called "great men" invites a similar reading to Plato's reading of poetry; politics, like poetry, disguises itself as presenting something desirable and alike to the good and beautiful, but the fact may be quite different. Plutarch, thus, might take the third and final Platonic thesis stated earlier and generalize it to not only art, but also politics. They exist, after all, in the world of appearances, which feed our soul in ways that corrupt its conceptions of what is good.

Is Plutarchian moral and political philosophy, then, as some have recently called it, a "Renaissance of Spartan philosophy"?¹⁵ The Spartan response is insufficient, I suggest, for even Plutarch has his own doubts about the Spartan *polis*. Commenting on their slavery practices and cruelty towards the Helots, he says, "So that it was truly observed by one, that in Sparta he who was free was most so, and he that was a slave there, the greatest slave in the world" (*Lycurgus* 78). But, Plutarch reasons, these practices of hunting Helots, for instance, must have begun after Lycurgus, for Lycurgus is too virtuous to have instituted them (*ibid*). Still, with no other evidence to back this claim, Plutarch raises the question to the reader: was Lycurgus just because he did not hunt slaves, or did he not hunt slaves because he was just? In *Lycurgus*, Plutarch first suggests that Lycurgus did not begin the hunting of Helots, but he refuses to commit to his opinion, bringing this possibility back in the *Comparison of Numa with Lycurgus*, "if we must admit the treatment of the Helots to be a part of Lycurgus's legislation, a most cruel and iniquitous proceeding, we must own that Numa was by a great deal the more human and Greek-like legislator" (*Comparison of Numa with Lycurgus* 102). Plutarch intentionally leaves readers in doubt. As far as we can know, Lycurgus may not have been such a figure to imitate. To dismiss the Spartan objector, not even our best example serves to surmount this moral skepticism.

15 Liebert (2016, 226). In this political theory analysis of the *Lives*, Liebert suggests that Plutarch rejects all of Plato's and Aristotle's criticisms of Sparta for being a timocratic state with a "psychological foundation" on "*philotimia*" (the love of honor) (104); as such, Plutarch's Lycurgus' Sparta "redeems timocracy" (124). I highly respect Liebert's comparison of Plutarch's analysis of Sparta as a response to Plato and Aristotle, and it seems that he is quite right; furthermore, I take his theory of political form in Plutarch to be very insightful. But I cannot help but disagree with his reading of *Lycurgus*; so, I take Liebert to somewhat represent the Spartan objector (though his work contains more nuance).

On the other hand, this case illustrates how Plutarch's method may solve skepticism as a problem for admiration. If he cannot give a definitive answer to whether Lycurgus was a virtuous person and legislator in the last analysis, it is because he does not conjure him up as a novelist does in crafting characters. In writing historical biographies, he needs to compare sources and draw inferences about *factual* truths, from which he makes moral conclusions. He does not intend to construct false narratives, as we sometimes do with children when we need a didactic story. The *Lives* do not present a mere appearance, but a genuine inquiry into the facts of what happened in the past and how to interpret them. Plutarch may be writing lives, but these are historical lives. He seeks to know the actions of each figure and their moral worth, whether they were *in fact* worthy of admiration and remain as admirable. This is to say, we may grant to the Platonist that a fifth-century Athenian may not know whether Pericles is truly admirable. Still, readers of *Pericles* may have a better grasp of the morally relevant facts, dispelling our moral skepticism and thereby bringing us closer to the truth about the human good.

The *Lives*, hence, make us admire correctly. But why have this end? The preface to *Timoleon* suggests that this work is a moral pedagogy for adults; one which proceeds through a critical method (325):

It was for the sake of others that I first commenced writing biographies; but I find myself proceeding and attaching myself to it for my own; the virtues of these great men serving me as a sort of looking-glass, in which I may see how to adjust and adorn my own life. Indeed, it can be compared to nothing but daily living and associating together; we receive, as it were, in our inquiry, and entertain each successive guest, view [their stature and their qualities] and select from their actions all that is noblest and worthiest to know.

The *Lives* aim to teach virtue through political history, not unlike the way in which the Greeks read Homer. But note that there is a selection process taking place—not at an editorial level as much, but at a cognitive and psychological one in the part of the reader. Each life in *Lives* requires a *critical examination* followed by a discriminative process of what we ought to learn and what we ought to avoid. For if we could just learn from Lycurgus what it means to be good and just, then why write *Numa*? Why all these comparisons? So, the inquiry is not merely historical, but ethical and dialectical. For a dialectic examines the appearance from all sides and pierces through it to find a real, latent object. This explains why a reader of any “Life” can neither draw a simple conclusion nor fall in love with its hero. We cannot completely admire any of these men once Plutarch has planted the seeds of doubt. Was Lycurgus truly just? Was Numa a fool? Did Dion's and Brutus' bad fortune destroy their eudaimonic projects? The apparent good of these statesmen cannot stand Plutarch's critical scrutiny. He extirpates our passion of admiration for the “great men” of the past, and with this gone, so is the possible skeptic confusion.

But Plutarch cannot turn his readers into cynics, lest we learn nothing good. Indeed, that deceptive admiration is gone, but Plutarch leaves us with a justifiable, philosophical *wonder*. This is the *thauma* familiar to readers of Plato's *Theaetetus* or Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. It borders admiration in its being a psychological predicate. For Plutarch's language suggests that he judges his own work to have a certain psychological effect as well (*Timoleon* 325):

"My method, on the contrary, is, by the study of history, and by the familiarity required in writing, to habituate my memory to receive and retain images [in the soul (*tais psuchais*)] of the best and worthiest characters."

Like Homer's poetry, Lycurgus' policies, or Numa's prayers, Plutarch's *Lives* are meant to leave certain impressions on our minds. In that sense, they have a phenomenology and, thus, incite passions. However, Plutarch distinguishes them from the phantoms of Democritus (*ibid*), granting his characters a greater ontology than that of Homer's Achilles or the Demosthenes of the *Crown*. "These images of the best and worthiest" are somewhere in between imitation and reality and fluctuate between the two. As such, Plutarchian wonder is a mental state which, puzzled by the appearance of a seemingly great life, contains a desire to inquire and learn what lies beneath—it is an admiration transformed by *aporia*. As a sub-species of admiration, it aims at the ethical good and noble actions, but, perceiving the aporetic tensions lurking in human affairs, this wonder incites to seek the truth in moral and political life. As such, none of Plutarch's "heroes" sufficiently portray virtue on their own; instead, they collectively form an exemplar of virtue for us to recollect and imitate when needed. Once deconstructed, the "images of the best and worthiest characters" constitute a picture which an active intellect needs to put together. Arguably, an infinite amount of *Lives* would be needed to find a perfect account of goodness, but the asymptote nature of virtue merely confirms which attitudes we should have towards those who exhibit them. The right way to engage with great deeds, then, is not to merely rejoice in them as a beautiful painting, nor to imitate them as perfect models, but to investigate them. For, as Plutarch concludes his preface to *Pericles* discussed earlier, "the Good" (*to kalon*) inspires "the spectator (*ten theaten*)" and "forms his character" not merely through "its ideal representation (*ti mimesei*)" alone, but through the *investigation* (*tei historiai*) of its work it [*to kalon*]" [emphasis added] (Per. 2.3, Loeb trans.). Only then can the appearance of goodness become something less deceiving than mere poetic phenomena¹⁶.

Thus, as Plutarch teaches us to read poetry in *On How the Young Man Should Listen to Poetry*, in the *Lives* he teaches us how to properly admire political actors. Still, the *Lives* are not essays, but a form of literature not dissimilar from Homer. Plutarch's writing imitates the ways of life, actions, and souls of human beings—he often compares himself to painters or sculptors creating a portrait. The *Lives* are more than mere prosaic hymns to good

¹⁶ Ultimately, this interpretation would place Plutarch with the New Academics like Arcesilaus, Philo, and Cicero than the supposed orthodoxy of the Old Academy. This is not to say that Plutarch has no Platonist dogma, as Babut (1994) resists or Nikolaidis (1997) insists; rather, this interpretation is in line with Hadot (1995)'s placement of Plutarch with these New Academics (it is worth noting though that Hadot does not analyze Plutarch's works himself but merely follows Babut): for Hadot, what characterizes these Academics is a return to a more Socratic philosophical discourse that is "*critique, interrogatif et aporetique*" (1995, 217). We might imagine the dialectical examination of *Lives* as a "spiritual exercise" in the Hadotian sense.

people; Plutarch embellishes his writing with his skills in rhetoric and poetry, and his subjects are ethically complex at best. And through this imitation of their ways of life, he provokes psychological upheavals, the passions of admiration and wonder. But this latter passion does not completely lie in a part of the soul "far from the intelligence (*phroneseōs*)," as Plato thinks all passions induced by imitative arts do. Plutarchian wonder does have a phenomenological nature identical to a dangerous passion, whether it aims at artistic sublimity or moral and political excellence; still, ultimately, this wonder is an inquisitive disposition, cultivating a love of goodness and wisdom in the person. It is what the Stoics called an "ethical emotion" (*eupathos*). In a word, Platonic philosophy may begin in Plutarchian wonder. As a pedagogical exercise in critical thinking, Socratic inquiry, and moral formation, this aesthetic work is not a threat to either ethical or political life. Perhaps Plato would not welcome *Antony* or *Alexander*, and perhaps a certain reading of the *Lives* would dismiss it as promoting an ideology of "great men". I propose a contrary reading: the *Lives* critiques ideology and forms neither admirers of "great men" nor lovers of honor and power, but critical thinkers who want to discover what is good and just, and are aware of our individual moral fallibilities and epistemic limitations. Therefore, it also serves as a blueprint of how to engage with art and poetry, our political history, and, ultimately, one another. Even Homer's *Iliad*, American presidential debates, conversations at a bar, or Zoom dates may have some goodness, if done correctly. Plutarch exhorts us, on the one hand, to not let our admiration and love of objects mesmerize us and destroy our sense of what is good. On the other, he also tells us not to expel them either from human affairs, but to engage with these wonderful things in our everyday life as interlocutors. Certain Platonisms may tell us that this passionate engagement is dangerous to our mental health and communities. But our conversation with Plutarch's Platonism concludes that the wonder we may feel for poetry, politics, and even other people in our lives, when cultivated correctly, is not just conducive to philosophy, but to ethical flourishing and political justice as well.

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