

In order to understand the relationship between poetry and philosophy, it seems natural to examine each of their goals.

Philosophy, at least in Plato's mind, seems straightforward.

It is the pursuit of truth: a method of transcendence that leads to realm of the form.

Poetry's goal is harder to grasp.

In Plato's mind, it seems that poetry is simply the result of an inability to practice philosophy.

He writes,

Do you suppose, then, that if a man were able to produce both the exemplar and the semblance, he would be eager to abandon himself to the fashioning of phantoms and set this in the forefront of his life as the best thing he had.

I do not.

However, if one is unable to produce the truth and is aware of this, then what would motivate them to produce an imitation?

Why not simply accept their limitations and move on?

Plato would likely answer that we all desire beauty and as such, we naturally seek it, even if it is only the phantom of true beauty.

From the speech of Diotima in the Symposium, it seems that the beauty that everyone seeks is synonymous to the truth that philosophy pursues.

In this case, the goal of philosophy and poetry are one and the same: the truth.

If we concede to Plato that poetry and philosophy share the same goal, the conclusion that philosophy is strictly superior to poetry becomes seemingly inevitable.

Poetry, being restricted to imitations, simply cannot reach the level that philosophy is able to reach.

This hierarchical relationship, however, does not feel natural.

Poetry is able to do much that philosophy cannot.

It enchants its listeners, flooding them with emotion.

It explores new realms with vivid imagination and brings along its listeners.

Poetry and philosophy affect us in different ways.

In fact, Plato agrees with this saying that poetry and philosophy affect different parts of the soul; philosophy appeals to reason while poetry appeals to emotion.

Plato implies that the part of our soul related to reason is superior in that it is the only one that can lead us closer to the truth.

If poetry's true goal was the truth, then why does it not affect the "correct" part of the soul?

Is it simply that poetry fails spectacularly to the point where it completely misses its aim?

Or Plato may be wrong in assuming that the part of our soul related to reason is the only one that can lead us closer to the truth.

Perhaps, poetry's goal is not the truth after all.

Let us explore these possibilities to get a glimpse into the nature of poetry.

Does poetry in fact fail to affect the part of the soul related to reason?

The rebuttal against this claim is actually quite simple.

Poetry affects our emotions.

Emotions can affect our intellect or reasoning.

Hence, poetry can affect our intellect or reasoning.

Plato's idea, of course, should not be reduced to such a simple position;

We shouldn't simply stop at whether or not poetry affects the part of soul related to reason, but we must venture to ask how it affects this part of the soul.

Plato argues that emotions interfere with our intellect.

For example, when someone is facing difficulties, reason tries to find the best solution to solve the problem while emotions "[lead] us to dwell in memory on our suffering."

Even from our own experience, this power of emotions over the intellect seems evident and uncontroversial.

However, do emotions and poetry only have a negative effect on the part of the soul related to reasoning?

Are they simply distractions that lead our intellect astray?

Plato seems to believe so saying that "we can admit no poetry into our city save only hymns to the gods and the praises of good men."

But why allow "hymns to the gods and the praises of good men"?

If poetry is as shallow as Plato seemingly claims it to be, hymns to the gods would only fill people with false piety; they would be blindly following the gods without reason, only guided by their emotion.

The same is true for praises of good men.

What good is there in admiring goodness without knowing what goodness is?

In fact, could we not say that these are the most dangerous kinds of poems, for they fill us with the illusion of piety and the illusion of goodness when in truth they teach us nothing?

This, of course, is under the assumption that poetry is shallow and cannot teach us anything.

If Plato wants to accept hymns and praises of good men into his city, he must reject this assumption.

It may be that poems do more than simply fill us with feelings and that when these hymns affect our soul, they actually give us insight into the truth, making us more pious.

It may be that poetry, while failing to convey meaning, points us towards our goal;

We become more inclined to pursue piety and goodness.

These two possibilities seem promising in explaining the nature of poetry.

In the former, we can see poetry as a sort of vessel that can contain philosophy, conveying truth and meaning.

In the latter, we can think of poetry as the wheel of a ship, directing philosophy towards its goals.

Whichever explanation we choose, we can see that poetry aids philosophy in achieving its goal.

It seems unlikely that Plato was unaware of this relationship between poetry and philosophy.

So why was Plato so against poetry?

If it could aid us in the path to truth, shouldn't it be praised and recommended?

It may be that he was acutely aware of this power of poetry over philosophy which made him so cautious in dealing with it.

Let us both consider poetry as vessel and poetry as a directional guide.

Poetry as a vessel is extremely powerful.

A single poem told by a single poet could easily be heard by several listeners.

These listeners in turn could relay this poem to those around them.

With a good enough poem, it would not take long before the masses have heard of it.

Now, if this poem contained philosophical ideas and conveyed them to its listeners, then the masses would naturally learn these ideas.

If these ideas were good and true, there would be no problem.

However, it seems Plato was afraid of the opposite case: when the ideas would lead people further from the truth.

Even today, we see the effects of mass media over the general population.

Considering that people in Plato's time had less access to different content, the effect of each poem must have been much greater than today.

Poetry as a directional guide faces a similar issue.

A guide is only as good as it is accurate.

In fact, it's better to have no guide at all than to have one that points the wrong way.

This is likely why Plato is so cautious about the "magic" of poetry.

Not only can it spread so easily, but it can also lead us to the entirely wrong direction.

As such, it is imperative that the poet understands both the direction and content of their poem.

However, Plato claims that poets are often ignorant of the possible effects of their poem;

They "neither know nor opine rightly concerning the beauty or the badness of his imitation."

From this we can conclude that Plato's main claim is not actually against poetry itself but rather the ignorance of the poets who write poetry.

Plato chose to deal with this ignorance by banning poetry altogether.

But what if we could educate our poets so they were both philosophers and poets?

Why Plato believed this was implausible is unclear and beyond the topic of this paper.

However, it seems evident that at the very least, poetry and philosophy are not against each other.

They share the same goal.

They can synergize to affect both the emotion and the intellect, leading us to this goal.

It is precisely this synergy that Plato was both aware and cautious of.

While Plato's caution is justified, we must not be afraid to utilize the power of poetry.

Instead, we must educate ourselves so that we can wield this power responsibly and through this, it seems that both philosophy and poetry will lead us closer to the truth.