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*Focus—Philosophy and Poetry*

Research Article:

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Plato, Aristotle, and Iris Murdoch

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## On Reconcilable Differences between Philosophy and Poetry: Plato, Aristotle, and Iris Murdoch

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Philosophers and poets both seem to admire truth, beauty, and goodness, but they represent them differently in their written work. They compose their visions and worlds in the pursuit of alternative realities that their creative intellect and imagination reveal, usually to the benefit of their audience. However, Plato's dialogues present inconsistent views and overall a mixed appraisal of the poets and the creative arts. On the contrary, Aristotle held poetry in esteem, claiming it is "more philosophically serious than history," because it presents a "general truth or universal (*ta katholon*)" (*Poetics* 1451b). In the words of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and novelist, Iris Murdoch (d. 1999), philosophy and poetry "are both truth-seeking and truth-revealing activities" (*Literature and Philosophy* 10-11).<sup>1</sup> Thus at least these three prominent figures spur us to look for vital commonalities and not merely differences between philosophy and poetry.

The present inquiry contains a three-part analysis. In the first Section, after providing brief working definitions for philosophy and poetry, Plato's dialogues are examined to understand why the creative arts are viewed as bad and harmful, and hence should not enter into philosophy or into the rationally good life.

The second Section examines Murdoch's resolution. Instead of banning artists from the ideal society, she offers substantive though nuanced similarities between Plato's philosophy and her own philosophy and creative writing. She shows how Plato can be understood as offering a useful perspective on the role of the creative arts in living an authentically good life. The third Section offers another resolution for understanding philosophy and poetry, Aristotle's philosophy in *Poetics*, particularly his novel views of classical Greek tragedy and the theater. Essentially then this analysis contends that Murdoch's and Aristotle's responses to

Plato's criticism of the arts show how poetry and tragic drama have a significant place in the philosophical (good) life.

To broach the topic of reconcilable differences, let us begin this inquiry with some common notions of philosophy and poetry. Each appears to have its own domain and takes a disparate form, namely, the prose (creative or analytic) of philosophy versus the verse of poetry and metaphorical expression in the creative arts. Respectively they have their own medium and separate vehicle for expressing and conveying reality and the human condition. They differently depict and express the triumphs, tragedies and everything in between in the particular lives of truth- and good-seeking humans. Tentatively, then, I propose the following brief working definitions of philosophy and poetry.

- Philosophy is non-fictional prose: It impersonally represents itself to others in a conceptual and general writing style and often from a universal perspective.

Whereas,

- Poetry is fictional verse: It personally represents itself in an individual and personal writing style and from a particular perspective.

Generally, poetry is personal; philosophy is not. In other words, the personal lies in the poetical, wherein the subject (person) is at least as, if not more integral as the object of the search. Through the poet's own experiences and writing, personal voice supervenes on those listening or reading the work. For poetry, then, the personal lies in the poet's voice for conveying any impersonal, sensible bearing qualities like truth, beauty, and goodness. In contrast, for philosophy, the impersonal lies in conceptualization and abstraction, wherein the object under investigation is the subject of the search.

Despite their differences, as this inquiry contends, great poets and philosophers have managed to demonstrate critical connections between philosophy and poetry. The stereotypical views of philosophy and poetry above provide some context for my proposal that the search for truth and meaning, beauty and goodness can be found in that sweet spot between philosophy and poetry, that is, wherein both express worldly and otherworldly notions in reaching for higher understanding of oneself, and the other.

### **1. Philosophy vs. Poetry: Imitation (*Mimesis*) vs. Reality**

Strangely, the main interlocutor in Plato's last dialogue, the *Laws*, is the "Athenian Stranger"; (*Laws* is the only dialogue in which Socrates does not appear at all). The Stranger pronounces that, as philosophical lawmakers, they are "also

according to our ability ... tragic poets, and our tragedy is the best and noblest; for our whole state is an imitation (*mimesis*) of the best and noblest life, which we affirm to be indeed the very truth of tragedy. *You are poets and we are poets, both makers of the same strains, rivals and antagonists in the noblest of dramas, which true law can alone perfect, as our hope is*" (817b-c, my emphasis). Further, the *Laws* refers to its own composition of the government and laws for its new colony (the "second best city-state" in comparison to the *Republic*) as "the greatest drama" to use for educating citizens (*Laws* 817a-d; 806d-807e; 957d). [I am using Plato's classical sense of "creative arts," indicated in his terms "*poesis*," "*musike*," and "*tragedia*".]

In a related strain, the significance of the creative arts appears in the dialogues' drama of the philosophic life and court-ordered death of Socrates. In this regard, the portrayal of Socrates musing about the mystical origins of his life-long philosophizing on the day of his death becomes particularly pertinent. On that day, a recurring dream tells him to create new forms of *musike* (*Phaedo* 60e-61a).<sup>2</sup>

From an opposing perspective on creative arts, the Athenian Stranger asserts that "theatrocracy" (rule of the theater) led to the downfall of the Athenian people and their Empire because it instilled the "spirit of lawlessness" .... The universal conceit of universal wisdom and the contempt for law originated in the *musike*—the theater, music, and poetry (*Laws* 700e-701b; also see *Republic* 475e). According to this rationale, to like and enjoy bad "*musike*," (i.e., the kind that gives rise to excessive emotions of pleasure, sorrow, and grief) will lead to a bad character (*Laws* 655e-656b).

A main reason for the negative assessment above stems from Plato the philosopher.<sup>3</sup> Socrates and other main characters maintain that poetry does not represent true reality (*aletheia*), but only its lower counterpart in perception (*eikasia*: imaging; imagining). Poetry thereby stands apart from rational, philosophical accounts of reality, truth, and goodness. But truth like goodness is a rather broad, bold, and beautiful concept, the domain of the soothsayers as much as the poets and philosophers. Admittedly, there is no sure way that words and creative accounts in Plato's dialogues or in the tragedies of Sophocles (or Shakespeare) can do justice in providing a true account of human life, love, and goodness. Love of the Good is especially elusive as it is the ultimate transcendent Other, beyond ourselves, and any certain knowledge about reality and goodness (*Republic* 509b).

From one angle then, creative works and poetry disseminate imitations or mere copies of true reality. From another angle, even today someone can give in to the allure of false dreams, excessive emotion, and illusions, especially when the pursuit and enjoyment of creative arts become, in effect, escapism from reality and

goodness. In this regard, there is an impressive list of reasons found in Socrates' critique and censorship of the arts. In *Republic Bk. X*, Socrates explains that creative "imitators," poets and dramatists produce images and copies "thrice removed" from the truth about reality, and that "the imitator or maker of the copy knows nothing of true existence...." [Socrates sounds overly critical in claiming a painting of a bed is "thrice removed from reality," and summarily that] "tragic poets ... are imitators in the highest degree" (*Republic* 597d-e, 604e, 605b-d).

Still the dialogues offer additional reasons for such strong criticism: For instance, Plato's Socrates denigrates playwrights and poets for being intellectually ignorant of the sources of inspiration for their own art, and especially of its effects on others. As a result of Socrates' *elenchus* with the poets in *Apology* (22a-c), a rhapsode in *Ion*, and a 1<sup>st</sup> prize-winning tragic poet/playwright Agathon in *Symposium*, Socrates objects to their very *raison d'être*. As Socrates demonstrates, it is because they lack philosophical wisdom that poets and tragic playwrights convey harmful falsehoods. In turn, the people who primarily learn about themselves, others, the gods, and higher realities from such creative professions and performances are harmed in their moral being (*Laws* 656b).

Audiences and spectators of the creative arts are apparently harmed in two aspects, in their misunderstanding of reality, and in lacking what is most necessary to learn—how to care for one's character (*psyche*) above all else (*Apology* 30a-b). Presumably, Socratic-Platonic philosophy and its newly found (Socratic) dialectical method provide that type of teaching and learning about virtue by gaining insight into philosophic ideas of truth, beauty, and goodness. Because in these ways Plato's dialogues show why and how poetry and the creative arts spread falsehoods and harms to human character, they must be kept separate from philosophy and the rationally good life.

## 2. Murdoch's Resolution

Despite the many examples and reasons given for banning the poets, nonetheless Plato's dialogues put forth a mixed appraisal of the creative arts. Alexander Nehamas, for one, puts a finer point on this negative-only discussion by noting that only bad poets are banned from the ideal state. Indeed there is permission for the creation and performance of ennobling creative arts, as they are needed for the purposes of learning to be rational and virtuous (Nehamas 59, 69). In other words, creative arts in themselves are not false and harmful; only bad mimetic representations and productions are to be banned, ('bad' meaning they cause harm to human character and society). To illustrate this point, in his imagined

philosophically based states in the *Laws* and *Republic*, good and good-producing creative artists and their productions do have a place in the life of citizens (see *Republic* 388a-e, 395d, 398a, 400d-e). After all, the creative arts acculturate individuals, and are necessary for entertainment and leisure in the citizens' daily lives; they are particularly vital for celebrating religious festivals and special occasions (see *Laws*, 828a-835b).

Similarly, Iris Murdoch offers some illumination about Plato's overall assessment of the creative arts. She explains that his dialogues artistically express the inextricability of beauty, as experienced in body, mind, and heart with valuable higher rarefied truths and goodness that beauty points towards and that attract humans. In holding onto this vision, Murdoch claims Plato "is our best philosopher" ("Literature and Philosophy" 6), further contending that both "modern liberalism and existentialism" have taken philosophy in the wrong direction ("The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited" 270-271).

To reinvigorate philosophy as well as the creative arts, in *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, she makes her own eloquent twentieth-century defense of truth, beauty, and the good. Murdoch is drawn to Plato's *Republic*, particularly, the Allegory of the Cave, which depicts humans as chained prisoners in an unreal world. They must release themselves by "piercing the veil of selfish consciousness" to uncover truth about reality and goodness ("Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts" 376-377). To go beyond one's false world and ignorance involves pain: one needs to suffer in varying degrees. To overcome and transcend one's false deceived self, then, one must also acquire courage to undergo and endure "unselfing," an idea she says she borrows from Simone Weil's *Notebooks* ("Knowing the Voice" 157-160; "Sovereignty of Good" 368-369). Through the process of unselfing, one becomes humble and more honest, more genuinely reflective and attuned to the other. Only then, might someone become enlightened and ultimately bask in the truth and beauty of the Good like in the sunlight.

Inspired by Plato's account of human life and love as moving from illusions to truths, Murdoch contemporizes the genre he created, that is, by writing philosophical dramatic dialogues. In *Acastos*, her own version of Platonic dialogues, one on "Art and Eros," and the other "Above the Gods" on religion, Murdoch re-envisions central themes of Plato's Western legacy. Further, like her philosophy and dramatic philosophical dialogues, so too is the case in her novels. The novels explore and value the quest of the passionate self for a surreal Goodness beyond any merely personal center of self. Through the reader's aesthetic engagement with fictional characters, one sees how love relationships hold out the promise of bringing

the human self in closer touch to ideal abstractions and enduring goodness. Yet Murdoch claims, "There is no transcendent reality [or other world in which we live, love, and learn other than the human one]. The idea of good remains indefinable and empty, so that human choice may fill it" ("Sovereignty of Good" 366).

As shown above, generally, Murdoch writes philosophically and creatively about aesthetic, moral values. She finds that great art is indeed critical for any morality as well as for uncovering the true nature of reality and the other. Thus Murdoch's views are very similar to Plato's: Both hold that the purpose of creative art is philosophical and moral, with a key difference. In contrast to Socrates-Plato, Murdoch and others may reasonably argue that even bad art is useful in helping humans reflect in examining themselves and others. Still, Murdoch's resolution seriously attempts to bridge the gap between philosophy and creative arts: Like the characters imaginatively portrayed in Plato's philosophical dramatic dialogues, so too the fictional characters in Murdoch's novels seek to refine and redirect their desires and longings toward some sublime truth, beauty, and goodness.

### **3. Aristotle's Resolution: Tragic Drama**

Aristotle's *Poetics* now becomes particularly useful for viewing Plato in yet another important light—Plato as a great artist, qua first philosophic dramatist in Western philosophy. In considering this side of Plato, the present analysis can make its case more effectively. There is a "sweet spot" between philosophy and poetry, and Aristotle, like Murdoch, shows what it may be; moreover, it is one even Plato might accept. Yet all three would also hold onto the irreconcilable differences between philosophy and the arts, and rightly so. The present inquiry need only show some significant commonalities, or fruitful intersection between these two fields and writing genres.

As background, the *Poetics* offers an enduring exegesis and illustration that theatrically performed tragedies are integral for the philosophically good life. Tragedies, for Aristotle, are indeed ennobling and critical for becoming an actualized virtuous person and society, making human beings more knowing and more empathic. One can use this Aristotelian lens to discern Plato the author—specifically as dramatist and tragedian. His dialogues (mimetically) represent the first fully developed dramatic philosophical tragedy in Western philosophy, that is, the personalized drama of philosophy itself, as experienced through its first embodiment and vocal proponent, Plato's beloved mentor, Socrates.

At this juncture, Aristotle, in retrospect, helps to show Plato as a tragedian of sorts. Plato's method and style of delivery are unique in displaying a new

philosophy: He employs the voice and character of Socrates and other interlocutors engaged in *elenchus* (examination of self and others in short questions and answers), and thereby composes individual dialogues with diverse casts of personae dramatis. The interlocutors represent average as well as leading citizens and professionals, not only those who populated Plato's world but also forged from his imagination. Plato draws his characters from likes of rhetoricians, naturalistic Pre-Socratic philosophers, politicians, military leaders, creative artists, and artisans.

Arguably, Plato's dramatic dialogues provide evidence that the spoken word in creative play conveys certain truths about reality and goodness. Following this line, it seems reasonable to think that words written for the stage and any creative writing can speak truly. As for Aristotle, then, so too for Plato: Both illustrate how drama conveys truths about their world and can express and convey different, higher, or alternative realities and truths. As Murdoch also suggests, the right words said to someone at the right time, whether in her novels or in actuality, can be illuminating and even result in changing another's life for the better ("The Idea of Perfection").

Therefore, at their core Plato's writings contain considerable Platonic irony in Socrates' denunciations of poetry and the theatre. For, although Plato's dialogues may be non-poetic in their logic and analytic discourse, they are indeed poetic in their dramas. Plato is an impressive symbolist, myth-maker and myth-teller. He uses metaphor, analogy, simile, and allegory in an indirect dialogical medium to convey the most abstract conceptual aspects of his philosophy (eternal perfect Forms, the Beautiful, the One, the Good). Since the time of Plato's philosophy, such entities are often the very stuff and theoretical content of philosophy; yet he chooses to express them creatively—symbolically and poetically as well as logically.

Although, as implied here, Plato created a new genre of writing, i.e., philosophical drama, his dialogues were not considered dramas according to the conventions of theater in the classical age. Presently, however, one can make a better case that his dialogues are plays in themselves, having highly crafted plots, characters, and thematic threads present in different dialogues. Above all, the dialogues contain diverse stories and genres in the dramatic arc of comedy, tragedy, and romance in the life story of Socrates as well as others.<sup>4</sup> Plato's dialogical characters portray an impressive array of leading characters from the famous to the common to the slave-boy in *Meno*, and even the parts played by minor characters are necessary for the dramatic and philosophical coherence of any single dialogue for purposes of comedy, tragedy, (and romance). Plato's Socrates and the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* engage with other characters in a way that suggests these

dramatic personae are the “co-creators” of the philosophic views brought out in a philosophical dramatic dialogue (Lenzi, “Plato and Eco-Feminism” 99).

Despite their respectively diverse styles and methods for conveying philosophy, Aristotle would concur that Plato’s dialogues aim to reveal reality as it ought to be, in theory; yet, for Aristotle, tragic drama also accomplishes this purpose in its essential creative design and artistry. As Aristotle’s *Poetics* maintains, the way things ought to be must underlie good tragic drama (1451b). Nonetheless, herein lies a crucial difference between Plato and Aristotle concerning what ‘ought to be.’ Whereas Socrates criticizes ‘bad’ theatrical tragedies for being false copies of reality, and for harmfully provoking emotions to excess, Aristotle counters with a memorable theory that good theatrical tragedy is an effective and noble medium for “*catharsis*” — the necessary beneficial purging of painful emotions like fear, pity, and rage (*Poetics* 1449b). Interestingly, in a related vein, one may appropriate Martha Nussbaum’s perspective on Plato (not Aristotle) for the purposes of these claims: She demonstrates that according to Plato’s *Phaedrus*, irrationality and emotion [like those evoked by tragic drama] truly have value in the good life.

Returning to Aristotle, because the audience can sympathize and feel for the characters in a tragedy, such feelings can convert to understanding and more tolerance of the vagaries of human character and predicament. For through creative drama, a human being can vicariously experience the tragedy that is the human condition—that humans are mere mortals, neither gods nor mere animals. Being as they are, humans are not in full control of their lives, and do not possess complete knowledge and full consciousness of their vulnerability. As such, individuals (and their states) are subject to uncertainties of fate, fortune, and destiny—those twists of plot, reversals, “*peripeteia*” (recognition), crisis, and catastrophe that constitute not only theatrical tragic drama (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452a), but also seem present in the actual stories of good human characters in the arc of their lives.

In applying Aristotle’s theory to Plato, one might recall the actual tragic biographies of Meno and Theaetetus (hinted at but never discussed in the dialogues *Meno* and *Theaetetus*), as well as Alcibiades’s tragic story in the *Symposium* (and in Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*). Ultimately, the life of Plato’s Socrates arguably represents a tragedy in the story of philosophy, just as Oedipus, or Alcibiades, Antigone, King Lear do in the tragic plays of the some of the world’s greatest playwrights. Likewise, one may experience *catharsis*, and become emotionally purified and more knowing through the diverse dramas enacted in Plato’s dialogues.

Aristotle then, given his *Poetics*, might well concur with Plato's view of human beings in the *Laws*: There humans are said to be "playthings of the gods," or "puppets" having unruly strings like pleasure and pain that control the human mind and body (*Laws* 644e; see 716a-e, 902a-c). Murdoch too highlights a similar perspective for the post-Freudian age: The creative arts stir up hidden, unknown aspects of the human psyche more so than philosophy. The arts transform philosophical ideas into enigmas of the subconscious and even unconscious aspects of the human person, so-called *Eros*, *Thanatos*, and the ongoing inner struggle between good and evil (Murdoch, "Art is"). Similar claims can be made about classical tragic drama.

Still, a critical difference between Aristotle and Plato remains regarding their respective visions of tragedy and theater with respect to how and why humans do or do not attain *eudaimonia* (fulfillment; well-being) in accordance to their virtue and wisdom alone. Although Aristotle claims that (theatrical) tragedy is about people better (more noble and worthy) than those in the world (*Poetics* 1448a), Socrates (*Republic* 604e) disagrees or is ambivalent about whether a wise, virtuous person could possess any *hamartia* or tragic flaw (Moravcsik 40).

Plato would be torn perhaps because tragedies, according to Aristotle's exegesis, show good people experiencing harms or evils, e.g., suffering, partial knowledge, and other limitations that bring about their downfall, disgrace, and misery. At the same time, through *mathos pathei*, "learning from experience" of such 'harms' the protagonist becomes more knowing or enlightened. In contrast to Aristotle, in Plato's imagined ideal worlds in the *Republic* and *Laws*, so designed according to Forms and the Good, human contentment and even *eudaimonia* (divinely sanctioned happiness) come necessarily to the good person, whereas suffering and misery to the bad. Plato does not even portray Socrates as miserable or suffering, despite the great injustice and downfall he endured at the hands of the Athenian people, popular courts, and system of law.

In Plato's dialogues, philosopher-rulers, and someone like Socrates, are most wise and virtuous, hence most fulfilled; tyrants are most ignorant and vicious, hence most miserable. Virtue then is its own reward, and character determines destiny. On the contrary, Aristotle, as an ethical naturalist, exposes the lack of any such sufficient causal connection between one's virtues and *eudaimonia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics Bk. I*, and in his discussion of tragic drama in *Poetics*.

### *Epilogue: Reconciling Philosophy and Poetry*

The foregoing analysis has put forth these main points: 1. Murdoch's and Aristotle's responses to Plato's criticism of the arts show how poetry and tragic drama can occupy their rightful place in the philosophical (good) life. 2. Plato's dialogues embody not only negative criticism of the creative arts, but also positive, poetic, and ideal conceptions. 3. The sweet spot between philosophy and poetry can be found in their common interest and enterprise in uncovering truths about beauty, goodness, and other vital or rarefied ideas and feelings. Moreover, despite their differences, both philosophy and poetry endeavor to uncover the depths of human character, relationships, and the human condition.

All three—Plato, Aristotle, and Murdoch make manifest that philosophy and the creative arts intersect for an overall fruitful net effect and benefit. Through creative intellectual capacities of love and wisdom, they illustrate how one comes to possess higher states of awareness of reality in part, and perhaps, in whole cloth for the enlightened and fortunate few. Thereby, human evils, ignorance, falsehoods, and corruptibility can be superseded by passionate love and transformative redirection of the self toward the truth and the Good. These three writers have artfully communicated some common means and ends in pursuing an authentically good life: unselfish loving, increasing self-knowledge, creative productivity, aesthetic and philosophical contemplation, engagement, and enjoyment.

In sum this analysis has argued that Plato, Aristotle, and Murdoch show that philosophy, poetry, and tragic drama enable and facilitate examination of self and others. In so doing, philosophy and the arts may bring human beings closer to the truth about themselves and others, reality and goodness. Moreover, authentic engagement with philosophy *and* the creative arts of poetry and drama requires the spectator also to be the agent of one's learning and enlightenment. In other words, to become enlightened, intellectually and morally, humans would do well to become participants and co-creators in philosophical dramatic dialogues and the creative arts in any time and place.

#### ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> For a postmodernist view, see Smith 87-89.

<sup>2</sup> The last Section (3) returns to examine the meaning of these enigmatic statements by appropriating Aristotle's *Poetics* to interpret Plato's dialogues in retrospect, in order to illustrate another resolution for bridging the divide between philosophy and poetry.

<sup>3</sup> A main reason for this negative assessment perhaps stems from the difference between Plato the philosopher versus author of the dialogues. One must note that Plato never appears as an interlocutor in his dialogues; hence, scholars continue to debate whether his readers should assume that Plato fully accepts that which his dramatic dialogues present. For instance, Sandra Peterson (2011) demonstrates that those dialogues in which Socrates is the main speaker should be interpreted instead as Socrates' attempt to respond to the questions and issues posed by the dialogue's interlocutors and dialogical context, and not as proposing or expounding upon any coherent systematic theory on Plato's part. In light of such divergent scholarly interpretations, for present purposes, let us distinguish Plato from his dialogical characters. Hence, not Plato *tout court*, but Socrates and other characters are the dramatic speakers expressing their views and accounts.

<sup>4</sup> At the end of the *Symposium* Socrates ponders the need for a third type of drama in between the two common forms, comedy and tragedy, which I assume has come to be known as the "romance" drama.

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