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Socrates and Plato on Poetry

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In this paper, I contrast the attitudes towards poetry given to Socrates in Plato's early dialogues with the sharply critical views he expresses in Plato's *Republic*. Scholars noticing such differences have generally explained them by offering a developmentalist account of Plato's career as a philosophical writer, who began by attempting more or less accurately to reproduce the philosophy of the historical Socrates, but later used the character of Socrates simply to express his own views. The more generous view of poetry we find in the early dialogues, then, would represent the views of Socrates, and the critique in the *Republic* would be Plato's own. In finding this difference between the two, I provide new evidence for developmentalism, therefore, but in doing so I dispute several earlier arguments for some of my conclusions — particularly those involving the status of the *Gorgias* as a transitional dialogue.

Developmentalists have offered an impressive number of reasons for thinking that the *Gorgias* is a transitional dialogue, which is why my support for this conclusion today may seem unexciting. Thomas Brickhouse and I have labored in many of our recent works, however, to show that the reasons developmentalists have given for this assessment of the *Gorgias* are inadequate.¹ In particular, we have argued against those who have found novelty in either the picture of the afterlife Socrates endorses in that work, or in moral psychology that grounds his defense of justice. Instead, I shall argue that the best indication of the transitional nature of the *Gorgias* is to be found in Socrates' critical attitude towards poets and poetry—one that accords well with the famous critique in the *Republic*, but which conflicts with the far more generous views given to Socrates in Plato's earlier works.

I build my argument in four stages. I will first very briefly review Plato's critique of poetry, so memorably offered in *Republic* X. I will then survey the attitudes and views about poetry given to Socrates in the early or Socratic dialogues other than the *Gorgias*. In the third section, I will show how various things Socrates says about poetry in the *Gorgias* anticipate Plato's critique in the *Republic* and contrast with the much more favorable attitudes Socrates betrays and expresses in the dialogues developmentalists have generally agreed are early or Socratic. I will then attempt to show why this change in Socrates' attitudes towards poetry cannot be explained as a change in either the metaphysics or the moral psychology Plato gives to Socrates in the *Gorgias*—these being two of the most common grounds developmentalists have given for perceiving shifts from the early to middle period works. The difference, I conclude, is in the way Plato applies the moral psychology he had all along given to Socrates, rather than in the conception of

the moral psychology itself.

Part I: Plato and Poetry

Plato's criticisms of poetry and its effects, in the *Republic* especially, but repeated and even expanded elsewhere (especially in the *Laws*) are well known, and versions of his complaints reappear in every new call for some sort of censorship. Very briefly, let us remind ourselves of their gist. Poetry would be severely censored in Plato's so-called "noble state," the *kallipolis*, on two main grounds: One is that poets are imitators, and poetry dupes us with imitations, and the other is that poetry arouses "the beast" within us—our appetites, which, when aroused to the point of unruliness, can overthrow reason's management of the soul.

In both cases, Plato's critique is fairly straightforward. As for imitation, Plato thinks that we need to be especially vigilant about the sorts of imitations we permit the citizenry to be exposed to, as the wrong kinds can corrupt them: "All such poetry is likely to distort the thought of anyone who hears it, unless he has the knowledge of what it is really like, as a drug to counteract it" (596b).² The reason poetry is likely to "distort...thought" is that it does not really produce any *real* good, nor are poets actually able to educate others, so that their students can be proven to do genuinely good works (599a-600e). It produces no real good because poetic imitation turns out not only to be without knowledge, but even without right opinion of what it imitates (602a), and therefore impresses others only by distortions (601a-b).

The poet's deceitful imitations can be corrected by our rational parts, but even so, the opposite appearance remains evident to us (602e). According to Plato's application of the principle by which he partitions the soul, this shows that the part of the soul on which the imitations work must be different from the one by which we correct such deceptions—one of the "inferior" parts within us (603a). In the case of poetry, Plato regards its deceits as arousing the part "that leads us to dwell on our misfortunes and to lamentation, and that can never get enough of these things, is irrational, idle, and a friend of cowardice" (604d). Plato concludes,

So we were right not to admit [the poet] into a city that is to be well-governed, for he arouses, nourishes, and strengthens this part of the soul and so destroys the rational one, in just the way that someone destroys the better sort of citizens when he strengthens the vicious ones and surrenders the city to them. Similarly, we'll say that an imitative poet puts a bad constitution in the soul of each individual by making images that are

far from the truth and by gratifying the irrational part, which cannot distinguish the large from the small but believes that the same things are large at one time and small at another. (605b-c)

Plato concludes his critique with these remarks:

In the case of sex, anger, and all the desires, pleasures, and pains that we say accompany our actions, poetic imitation has the very same effect on us. It nurtures and waters them and establishes them as rulers in us when they ought to wither and be ruled, for that way we'll become better and happier rather than worse and more wretched. (606d)

Plato's condemnation of poetry, then, is grounded both in metaphysics and in moral psychology.

Part II: Socrates and Poetry

Given Plato's later condemnation of the genre, we might reasonably look for anticipations or similar statements of such hostility in the earlier or Socratic dialogues. But in fact, except in the *Gorgias*, as we shall see, we do not find such hostility in the early dialogues at all. Plato does have Socrates criticize poets' pretense of wisdom, of course, listing them after the politicians as those he first supposed would refute the apparent meaning of the oracle to Chaerophon.

After the politicians I went to the poets—those who write tragedies, dithyrambs, and the others, so that right in the very act of questioning them, I would catch myself being more ignorant than they are. Then when they read their poetry, which I thought they had really worked at, I asked them what they meant in order to learn something from them. Now I'm embarrassed to tell you the truth, but I must say it. Virtually everyone present could have given a better account of what they had written. After a little while, I realized this about the poets: They composed what they did, not out of wisdom but by some kind of natural ability and because they were divinely inspired, just like seers and prophets. For even though they in fact say many fine things, they don't know what they're saying. It was evident to me that the

poets had been affected in some way like this. I found out that because of their poetry, they thought they were the wisest of people in other ways as well, which they weren't. (Ap. 22a-b; trans. Brickhouse and Smith)

So, in the *Apology*, at any rate, we find that Socrates' critique *in no way* denigrates *poetry*, even as he dismisses the poets themselves as know-nothings. In fact, we find within Socrates' critique an explicit recognition that within poetry one will find "many fine things"; one simply shouldn't look to their putative authors for an explanation of any of these fine things. In the *Ion*, even as he makes the same critique of the poets' lack of knowledge, Socrates repeats his judgment that poetry must be the result of inspiration from divinity, and acknowledges that poetry can be good (*agathos*—533e6), beautiful (*kalos*—534a2, b8, 534d8, e3, 535a1) and worthy (*axios*—534d3). Of course, not all poetry is good, beautiful, or worthy—all but one of the efforts of Tynnichus of Chalcis were beneath anyone's notice (534d). The one exception, Socrates claims, is proof that divine inspiration is the source of the poetry that is good.

In this more than anything, then, I think the god is showing us, so that we should be in no doubt about it. That these beautiful (*kala*) poems are not human, not even *from* human beings, but are divine and from gods; that poets are nothing but representatives of the gods, possessed by whoever possesses them. To show *that*, the god deliberately sang the most beautiful lyric poem through the most worthless poet. (534e-535a)

Much the same, surprisingly favorable, attitude towards poetry shows up elsewhere in the early or Socratic dialogues, as well. In the *Protagoras*, although Socrates eventually insists that the correct interpretation of poetry is controversial and indeterminate (347e; a similar criticism is made at *Hp. Mi.* 365d and at *Rep.* I.331e and 332b), he enthusiastically credits the poem under discussion (one by Simonides) as "one to which I had given especially careful attention" (339b), and as "full of details that testify as to its excellent composition; indeed, it is a lovely and exquisitely crafted piece" (344a-b). And even immediately after proposing to leave poetry and poets behind in their discussion, in less than a Stephanus page later we find Socrates quoting Homer (348d), a poet he says he regards as "the best and most divine" in the *Ion* (530c).

Indeed, Socrates' knowledge of the very poets Plato was so eager to expel from the *kallipolis* is abundantly evident in the early or Socratic dialogues, in the frequency (I count at least 32 instances³) with which he manages to cite or actually

quote poetry from memory. Indeed, Plato provides us with instances of Socrates citing or quoting poetry in every one of the dialogues generally regarded as early or Socratic but one (*Hippias Major*), and even in the one exception, Socrates playfully likens himself to a (bad) singer of dithyrambs (292c). Moreover, in the many citations and quotations, Socrates proves to be impressively versatile in his knowledge of poetry, able to quote (extensively) from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—indeed, actually speaking more than three times as many actual lines from Homer in the *Ion* than his interlocutor, the Homeric rhapsode (19 lines to 6, respectively)—but also from a remarkable variety of poets from other genres, including Hesiod, Pindar, Solon, Simonides, Theognis, and Cydias the love poet, as well as from several of the tragic works by Aeschylus and Euripides. Plato's Socrates, in the early or Socratic dialogues, is plainly presented as someone who knows lots of poetry.⁴ And Socrates did not just read poetry: In the *Phaedo*—which stylometry has counted among the early dialogues, but which content analysts have placed in the middle period—we are told that Socrates himself actually wrote poetry, as he awaited execution (61a). Although sometimes he characterizes himself as disagreeing with what he finds in poetry, not once (outside of the *Gorgias*, that is) do we find him, in the early or Socratic dialogues, as claiming that poetry is intellectually or morally corrosive in the ways Plato has him aver in Book X of the *Republic*.

Part III. Socrates on Poetry in the *Gorgias*

The *Gorgias*, however, though continuing to depict Socrates as one who can recite poetry from memory (and, indeed, actually adds the comic poet, Epicharmus, to Socrates' repertoire—*Grg.* 505e), provides a stark departure from the Socrates of the other early dialogues. Gone, in the *Gorgias*, is the Socrates who supposes that at least a lot of poetry derives from divine inspiration, and that poets, though perhaps “out of their minds” when they channel the Muses, nonetheless depend directly upon divinity in saying “many fine things” in their poems. Instead, in this dialogue, the poets are derided as paltry flatterers, who pander to the crowd, peddling only pleasure and not benefit: Poetry, Socrates proclaims to Callicles, is merely “a kind of playing to the crowd” (*Grg.* 502c; adapted from Zeyl trans.). Socrates does not mention all genres of poetry in his critique, but he instead singles out the composition of at dithyrambs and tragedy (at 501e and 502b, respectively). Socrates' disgust at such enterprises is explicit and heated. His presentation drips with sarcasm when he discusses tragedy:

Socrates: And what about that majestic, awe-inspiring practice, the composition of tragedy? What is it after? Is the project, the intent of tragic composition merely

the gratification of spectators, as you think, or does it also strive valiantly not to say anything that is corrupt, though it may be pleasant and gratifying to them, and to utter both in speech and song anything that might be unpleasant but beneficial, whether the spectators enjoy it or not? In which of these ways do you think tragedy is being composed?

Callicles: This much is obvious, Socrates, that it's more bent upon giving pleasure and upon gratifying the spectators.

Socrates: And weren't we saying just now that this sort of thing is flattery?

Callicles: Yes, we were.
[...]

Socrates: So now we've discovered popular oratory of a kind that's addressed to men, women, children, slave and free alike. We don't much like it; we say it's a flattering sort.

Callicles: Yes, that's right. (Grg. 502b-d, excerpted)

He makes the same objection against those who compose dithyrambs (at 501e-502a). To those who have read *Republic X*, both the tone and the ground of Socrates' criticism will be familiar. Socrates here likens the poets to those orators who seek only to gratify and please their audiences. In doing so, they actually *harm* those they gratify:

Socrates: And isn't it just the same way with the soul, my excellent friend? As long as it's corrupt, in that it's foolish, undisciplined, unjust and impious, it should be kept away from its appetites and not be permitted to do anything other than what will make it better. Do you agree or not?

Callicles: I agree.

Socrates: For this is no doubt better for the soul itself?

Callicles: Yes, it is.

Socrates: Now isn't keeping it away from what it has an appetite for disciplining it?

Callicles: yes.

Socrates: So to be disciplined is better for the soul than lack of discipline. (505b)

Those who seek merely to gratify, therefore, end up strengthening their audiences' appetites and weakening or destroying the discipline over the appetites that is best for the soul. And just as we find in the *Republic*, the lack of discipline over the appetites is characterized as a kind of psychic *disorder* among different parts of the soul (506e).

Now, it has often been proposed by developmentalists that the very moral psychology that grounds this critique is what is new in the *Gorgias*. In fact, as Brickhouse and I have now argued many times, this claim cannot be sustained in a review of the early dialogues. The appeal to the activity of appetites and passions in human psychology—sometimes claimed not to exist in Socratic moral psychology⁵—is, on the contrary, ubiquitous throughout the early dialogues. In the *Apology*, for example, Socrates pleads with his jurors not to allow anger to overwhelm their judgment of the case (34c-d, 37a, 38d-e). In the *Laches*, Socrates says that pleasures, pains, appetites, and fears all provide opportunities for people to display courage (*La.* 191e4-7), and in the *Charmides*, Socrates draws a distinction between appetite, which he says aims at pleasure, and what he calls *boulesis*, or wish, which he says aims at what is good (167e1-5). Socrates himself shows a degree of susceptibility to the effects of such an appetite being aroused in him, in the notorious passage in the same dialogue in which he describes himself as struggling for self-control as he suddenly burns with desire (155d4) for the youthful Charmides.⁶ Rachel Singpurwalla has recently shown that the actual psychological criticism of the effects of poetry, in *Republic X*, is best understood as following the discussion of the power or appearance, in the *Protagoras*, which she compellingly argues reveals a Socratic commitment to non-rational desires.⁷ So, there is no novelty in the actual moral psychology Plato gives to Socrates in the *Gorgias*—even if it is the first dialogue in which the distinction between appetites and other motivational factors begins to sound as if it is to be understood

as deriving from different *parts* of the soul.

Now, of course, the metaphysical distinction, on which Plato grounds one of his two main criticisms of poetry in the *Republic*, is not given in the *Gorgias*. I might count this as significant evidence for my conclusion that the *Gorgias* is transitional—having one, but not both of Plato’s later criticisms of poetry—but for the fact that the Socrates of the early dialogues (including the *Gorgias*) actually had access to all that he needed to make the same criticism.

Plato’s complaint, after all, is that poets (and painters) create appearances that are in some way distortions of, or unfaithful to, reality. Now, Socrates certainly *did* recognize a distinction between appearance and reality, even if he did not characterize this distinction in terms of separated Forms and participants. In the *Protagoras*, for example, Socrates explicitly recognizes several examples in which things appear differently than they really are: For example, proximity can make things seem larger than they really are, whereas distance can make things seem smaller than they really are (356c). Socrates notes that the same can be said for thicknesses and pluralities, as well as for volumes of sound (356c). His main point in this passage is to get Protagoras to agree that the same is true of pleasures and pains, and that the “craft of measurement” would allow us to correct such appearances in each case and thus calculate the real values of things effectively (356e). Indeed, as Singpurwalla has seen so clearly, this discussion in the *Protagoras* is plainly recalled at *Republic X*. 602c ff. when Plato makes his metaphysical critique. The distinction between appearance and reality, moreover, may be found in other places in the early dialogues, as well. So if Plato had wanted Socrates to formulate a criticism of poetry in terms of this distinction, he already had all that he needed in the way of formulating the critique.

In fact, however, even when Plato has Socrates characterize poetry in terms that seem almost intended to create such a criticism, in the early dialogues, he does not pursue them *as a criticism*. Consider, for example, the way in which he positions rhapsodes in relation to poets and the gods (or Muses):

Ion: Somehow you touch my soul with your words, Socrates, and I do think it’s by a divine gift that good poets are able to present these poems to us from the gods.

Socrates: And you rhapsodes in turn present what the poets say.

Ion: That’s true, too.

Socrates: So you turn out to be representatives of representatives.

Ion: Quite right. (535a)

The above passage comes within Socrates' famous analogy to magnetic rings, according to which each of a series of iron rings (terminating in the audience) receives the magnetizing effects of "the Heracleian stone" (536a). Socrates certainly *could* here intimate that each subsequent ring—as a step *down* from the last—was inferior; but he does not at all draw such an inference. Instead, as he concludes the argument, the image is only taken to show that each of those who comprise the rings magnetized by "the Heracleian stone" does what he does "as someone divine, and not as a master of a profession (*technikon*)" (542b).

Part IV. Summary and Conclusion

I have argued that the moral psychology of the *Gorgias* is not new. The recognition of non-rational desires deriving from our appetites, on which the critique of poetry and other aspects of the argument in that dialogue derive, can be found throughout the early dialogues. Moreover, the metaphysical distinction between appearance and reality (and even a hierarchical conception of this distinction, in the case of poetry), by which Plato has Socrates make one of his criticisms of poetry in the *Republic*, is also readily found in the early dialogues. Yet in the dialogues generally regarded by developmentalists as coming before the *Republic*, only in the *Gorgias* is the moral psychology of appetites (and our need to control them) turned against poetry. Before the *Gorgias*, moreover, it is not at all that Plato failed to recognize the often potent effects poetry can have on those exposed to it (including tears and hearts skipping beats and hair standing on end at *Ion* 536c-d). Even so, Socrates somehow managed not to think that poetry was such a bad thing; indeed, he perceived such power as indicating its source in divinity. But when we get to the *Gorgias*, we discover that Socrates now takes a very different view: "We don't much like it; we say that it's a flattering sort [of thing]" (502d, also quoted above).

It might be worthwhile to consider what might have brought about such a change of heart—not in Socrates, I don't imagine, but in Plato. For this, I'm afraid, I have no interesting suggestions to offer. One might hope to find the rationale for Plato's change of heart in the actual arguments he offers in his criticisms of poetry—but as I have argued, these were all entirely available to Plato when he wrote the earlier dialogues, but he nonetheless refrained from using them in the ways that have made his arguments in the *Republic* notorious in literary circles. I suspect, instead, that Plato's change of heart derived from some conflicts he may have had with other members of the intellectual community in the Athens of his time, or else as a result of his own personal musings about poetry and its effects on people. Perhaps he became skeptical of Socrates' acceptance of the traditional association of poetry with divinity, and came thus to attribute its powerful effects

on us as deriving from what is bestial, rather than what is divine. This, at any rate, is the clearest evidence of his change of heart—a change, as I have tried to show, he expressed for the first time in the *Gorgias*.

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NOTES

¹ See, for examples, Brickhouse and Smith 2007, Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 97-101, and Brickhouse and Smith 1999, 217-229.

² Trans. Grube-Reeve. All translations in this paper will be those of the Hackett *Plato: Complete Works* unless otherwise indicated.

³ *Euthphr.* (12a [unknown author], and possibly 15d [Homer, *Odyssey*]); *Ap.* (28c-d [Homer, *Iliad*], 34d [Homer, *Odyssey*]); *Cri.* (44b [Homer, *Iliad*]); *Charm.* (155d [Cydias], 161a [Homer, *Odyssey*], and possibly 173a [Homer, *Odyssey*]); *Lach.* (188b [Solon], 201b [Homer, *Odyssey*]); *Lys.* (212e [Solon], 214a [Homer, *Odyssey*], 215c [Hesiod, *Works and Days*]); *Euthyd.* (possibly 285c [Euripides, *Medea*], possibly 288c [Homer, *Odyssey*], 291d [Aeschylus, probably *Seven Against Thebes*], possibly 302d [Euripides, *Ion*], 304a [Pindar, *Olympian*]); *Prt.* (309b [Homer, *Iliad* and/or *Odyssey*], 315c-d [Homer, *Odyssey*], 339b ff. [Simonides, fr. 542], 340a [Homer, *Iliad*], 340d [Hesiod, *Works and Days*], 348d [Homer, *Iliad*]); *Meno* (76d [Pindar, Fr. 105 Snell], 81b-c [Pindar, fr. 133 Snell], 95d-e [Theognis], 100a [Homer, *Odyssey*]); *Hp. Min.* (365a-b [Homer, *Iliad*], 370a-c [Homer, *Iliad*], 371b-c [Homer, *Iliad*]); *Ion* 538c [Homer, *Iliad*], 538d [Homer, *Iliad*], 539a [Homer, *Odyssey*], 539b-d [Homer, *Iliad*], possibly 541e [Homer, *Odyssey*]; *Rep.* I (328e [Homer, *Iliad* and/or *Odyssey*], 334a-b [Homer, *Odyssey*]). If we wish to include the *Gorgias*, we get an additional four such cases: 492e [Euripides, *Phrixus* or *Polyidos*—see Dodds, note on *Gorgias* 493e10-11], 505e [Epicharmus, unknown work], 516c [Homer, *Odyssey*], 526d [Homer, *Odyssey*].

⁴ In the *Phaedo*, which is sometimes also treated as transitional, we are told that Socrates himself undertook to write some poetry while he awaited his execution in prison (60d-61b).

⁵ Traditional developmentalist accounts have claimed that Socrates did not recognize the existence or activity of non-rational desires, such as those deriving from appetites or passions. For different examples of this claim, see Cooper 1999; Cornford 1933; Frede 1992, xxix-xxx; Irwin 1977, 78, Irwin 1979, note on 507b, 222, and Irwin 1995, 209; Penner 1971, Penner 1990, Penner 1996, Penner 1997; Reeve 1988, 134-5; Reshotko 1990, Reshotko 1992, and Reshotko 1995, 336-341.

⁶ Socrates' recognition of appetites, and why these cannot be understood in terms of the desire for the good, is admirably discussed in Devereux 1995.

⁷ Singpurwalla, 2003, esp. 4-7. She makes this connection even more strongly in a more recent, revised version of this paper now entitled, "Reasoning with the Irrational: Moral Psychology in the *Protagoras*."