

Mixed pleasures, interpassivity, and the ethical dimension of art

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1. Plato's pathology of the mimetic arts

Plato's almost complete banishment of poetry and other arts from his ideal polis seems to be something like a symptom of aesthetic discourse - symptom in the Freudian sense of a symbolic form which does not seem to make much sense if taken literally but which indeed carries an unconscious meaning and a hidden affective load that communicate themselves and that will keep on returning until they are analyzed and made conscious. For very much ink has been spilled on Plato's notorious critique, yet it remains an ever-recurring topic in aesthetics and in political philosophy. So we might wonder if there is a hidden pleasure involved. If this was so, then indeed it would be a symptom also in the paradoxical sense of an enforced enjoyment, of a pleasure that is unpleasant in that it imposes itself upon us.

The major thesis of my talk today will be that with his attack on the arts Plato is the first to provide elements of a philosophical doctrine of a symptom in the psychoanalytic sense of the term - and that for the Plato of the *Republic*, the *Philebus* and the *Laws* mimetic art has a so to speak symptomatic structure particularly because it carries hidden affects, affects we tend to be unaware of. Towards the end of my talk I will emphasize that for Plato to say that there are symptomatic affects in works of art is another way of saying that in mimetic art there are necessarily mixed pleasures involved. Against this background, I will finally contrast Plato's view on mixed pleasures in works of art with a postmodern defense of mixed pleasures as it can be found in the so called theory of

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interpassivity by the Austrian Robert Pfaller. Thus I want to briefly point at what following Plato would be the ethical dimension of art or at least one fundamental aspect of it.

I come to my first point, Plato's critique of works of art as being symptomatic of hidden affects. If we look at Plato's modern commentators, we must acknowledge that they elucidated his critique of the arts in many respects and that they showed great erudition. However, what almost all of them also show is uneasiness and embarrassment. Somehow, it seems, one does not get to final terms with Plato's critique of the arts, it appears to be a never ending story. Eric A. Havelock in his book *Preface to Plato* of 1963 speaks out for many when he wonders: „Why does Plato feel so committed to a passionate warfare upon the poetic experience as such?“ (Havelock 1963, p. 15, cf. 26) Another example is William Greene, who in an article doubts whether Plato “Does [...] mean us to take it all seriously?“ (Greene 1918, p. 55) I won't review the entire passionate warfare. Instead I will focus on one passage in the 10th book of the *Republic*, at Stephanus 606a-b, where Plato, as many commentators agree, anticipates Aristotle's famous theory of catharsis, a theory laid out about 35 years later in the *Poetics*. It is in this passage of the *Republic*, I argue, that we find a key to a better understanding of Plato's attack on the arts. It will also help us to understand his critique of mixed pleasures and thus serve us as a link to the theory of interpassivity. I won't reconstruct Aristotle's theory of catharsis either. Just let me refer to his famous statement that: „Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action [...] and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions.“ (Aristotle 1932, chap. 6, 1449b26) In other words: Tragedy arouses certain passions, particularly pity and fear, and by the same token frees the spectators from these passions.

Now in the passage in the *Republic's* 10th book that I am referring to, Plato delivers an anti-cathartic theory. According to Plato, the spectator of a tragedy or a comedy is not at all cleansed from the passions that he witnesses on stage and that he identifies with. The exact opposite is true. The tragic passions set fire on the irrational parts of the soul. Why is that? It is because the spectator not only enjoys the tragic or comic passions performed on stage, as it were in a cathartic mode, getting rid of them as Aristotle would have it. In fact, he also contracts real passions which, going unnoticed, actually underpin the tragic ones. They feed on them. They are parasitic in the etymological sense of the Greek *parasitos*, who is literally one who eats at the table of another. Accordingly one German commentator has called this argument of Plato's an „Ansteckungstheorie [contagion theory]“ (Franz 1999, p. 156) as Plato seems to hold that the spectators' irrational passions, which ought to be disciplined by reason and *thumos*, get psycho-somatically infected.

Now let me give you the passage that I am referring to in full in the translation of Adam James of 1929. Please pay attention. It might be hard to follow the sentences as they have a change of syntax in them. You are listening to Socrates speaking to his sparring partner Glaucon: “[606a] If you would reflect that the

part of the soul that [...], in our own misfortunes, was forcibly restrained, and that has hungered for tears and a good cry and satisfaction, because it is its nature to desire these things, [and because it] is the element in us that the poets satisfy and delight, and [if furthermore you would reflect] that the best element in our nature, since it has never been properly educated by reason or even by habit, then relaxes its guard over the plaintive part, [606b] inasmuch as this is contemplating the woes of others and it is no shame to it to praise and pity another who, claiming to be a good man, abandons himself to excess in his grief; but it [the plaintive part] thinks this vicarious pleasure is so much clear gain, and would not consent to forfeit it by disdaining the poem altogether. That is, I think, because few are capable of reflecting that what we enjoy in others will inevitably react upon ourselves. For after feeding fat the emotion of pity there, it is not easy to restrain it in our own sufferings.” [606c] [...] “[And] does not the same principle apply to the laughable, [...]?” (Adams 1929)

The bottom line of this passage is that spectators of tragedy enter into aesthetic identification, because they seek “vicarious”, substitutional pleasure. They speculate on a cathartic feeling, but they do so without realizing that they are buying into mixed pleasures - pleasures which turn out to be a losing bargain. They ignore that they perforce contract real passions which will weaken their rational self-control. So far, so bad. The point that I want to emphasize here is one which is not too obvious, but which is most important for a full understanding of Plato’s critique of the arts, in any case for his critique in the *Republic*, the *Philebus* and the *Laws*. It is the term „inevitably“ in one of the last sentences just quoted. I repeat what Socrates says there: “That is, I think, because few are capable of reflecting that what we enjoy in others will inevitably react upon ourselves.” The adverb “inevitably” here translates the impersonal phrase „anankē“ of the original text. “Anankē” or “anankē estin” here and elsewhere literally means: „it is necessary that“. The greek original of the sentence reads: “apolauein anankē apo tōn allotriōn eis ta oikeia” Literally: To enjoy forcibly from that which is from the other towards that which is one’s own. Of course there exist quite a few comments on this passage in the secondary literature, and I briefly want to introduce you to some of them. However, to my knowledge none of them – just like many translators who simply miss the point – none of them states let alone emphasizes or develops on the „anankē“, the necessity that is clearly marked in Plato’s argument. The German scholar Max Pohlenz is an exception to this rule (Pohlenz 1965, p. 471).

Here is the first of these commentators, Adam James, to whose translation of the *Republic* we just listened. He states that Plato’s argument must be understood as a critical anticipation of Aristotle’s theory of catharsis and he shows sympathies with Plato’s argument: „According to Plato, the emotion grows by what it feeds upon, and becomes more and more troublesome and deleterious in real life, the more we indulge it at the theatre; according to Aristotle, tragedy effects the ‚purgation‘ of pity and its kindred emotions and tends to free us from their dominion in matters of more serious moment (Poet. 6 1449 b27). Aristotle hopes

to effect by means of theatrical stimulation what Plato would attain by starving the emotions even in play.” And James concludes: “It is obvious that the Aristotelian theory of the drama was in this important respect developed in direct and conscious antagonism to the Platonic, to which [...] it owes much. I think it may fairly be argued that Plato’s view is not less true to experience than that of Aristotle. [...]“ (Adams 1929, pp. 415f, n 13) In a similar vein, another commentator, Stevens, states that: „[...] Aristotle is answering Plato’s objection in the tenth book of the Republic (606b) that tragic poetry by stimulating the emotions, and especially pity, tends to unfit a man for meeting his share of misfortune courageously.“ (Stevens 1948, pp. 183f.) By contrast, Havelock sides with Aristotle and claims that Plato’s “pathology of the audience at a performance of poetry” has “[...] a ring of mob psychology about” it. It “does not sound too much like the mood and attitude in which modern theatre-goers attend a play [...]”. (Havelock 1963, p. 26) Greene paraphrases Socrates’ argumentation as follows: “ [...] [P]oetry can harm even the good; few escape its evil influence. It calls forth our sympathy for imaginary woes, whereas in real life we restrain our feelings; and out of sentimental pity grows a real weakness. In the same way, the enjoyment of comedy tends to turn us into buffoons. In general, poetry feeds and waters the passions, instead of drying them; it enthrones the passions, rather than the reason.” (Greene, 1918, p. 53f.) These comments all disregard - or in any case underestimate - the necessity clearly stated in Plato’s argument and straightforwardly expressed in the term “anankē”, i.e. “inevitably”.

By the way, Plato’s ananke in this passage of the *Politeia* is obviously indebted to the sophist Gorgias of Leontini. Gorgias claimed in his *Encomium of Helen* that through poetry, through learning from the good and bad fortunes of other people, the soul experiences very own passions, in Greek: *idion ti pathēma*. (EH 9)

Precisely, Gorgias spoke of the necessity this poetic experience involves. According to Gorgias the soul feels these pleasurable passions even if reason knows that there is an artistically contrived force involved – and, like Plato, Gorgias uses in this context the term “anankē”. (EH 12) In my view, this necessity is the key to the understanding of Plato’s critique of poetry and the arts, at least in the *Republic* which, as you know, will end in its tenth book with an elaborate account of ananke, of Necessity with a capital N, as a supreme and all-encompassing cosmic force to which even the Gods bow.

And let me add that according to Hegel’s *Lectures on the philosophy of religion* this Ananke marked the limits of the self-reflection of the spirit of Greek antiquity. In the figure of Ananke the classical Greeks represented to themselves the fact that there is something not yet understood, unaccounted for in their lives. Something that, according to Hegel, was later reflected, conceived, *aufgehoben*, sublated, in Christian religion and philosophic science. In Plato, the result of this anankē is that the irrational impact of the mimetic arts can in no way be eschewed. There are passions, Plato seems to hold, which strike through any aesthetic medium

whatsoever. This is why art is essentially dangerous. Among the passions that art arouses there are passions that cannot be contained.

Let me add another remark: From my psychoanalytical perspective this idea of Plato's of a necessary affective blow that we receive whenever we engage with works of art seems to hint to a basic premise of Freud's psychoanalysis and of Lacan's theory of subjectivity. According to them, we must presuppose in subjectivity a primal repression in which a primal representation of the libidinal drive is constitutively repressed. Constitutively means: the repression of this primal representation, of the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* as Freud calls it in his text on *Die Verdrängung* of 1915, this repression is constitutive for the subject of representation. In other words: there must be presupposed the suppression of a primal representation in order to make possible representation as such. This is because only if human beings are thought of as having repressed their drives and in the first place the most vital, the sexual drive, only then can they establish a representing relationship towards themselves and towards the social other and the world.

Now one interesting point about Freud's theory of repression is that while the representation of the drive is repressed, its affect is not. The representation becomes unconscious. Yet the affect stays, and can have a variety of destinations: for example, it can attach itself to other, non-repressed representations or it can psychosomatically invest the body (as in hysterical neurosis) or it might eventually be sublimated. So from this psychoanalytic prospective it seems attractive to integrate Plato's insistence on a radical affect in the mimetic arts as an early hint to the primal affect that, according to Freud, refers to the conditions of possibility of representation as such. Just like Freud's primal affect Plato's radically real affect could be thought to make its presence palpable not only in works of mimetic art but in any form of representation, in a dream or a daydream as much as in perception consciousness or referential language use. Be this as it may: when designing the ideal polis, Plato is perfectly serious. From his rationalist prospective, it is just consistent to throw out the baby with the bath water, namely to throw out the mimetic arts with the irrational passions, passions that they not only depict but also convey. For Plato this is in any case better than accepting the evil affective surplus enjoyment that almost all mimetic depictions of passions necessarily imply.

2. Plato as a critic of the mixed pleasures of perversity *avant la lettre*

These findings also fully match with what Plato says in book IX of the *Republic* where he prepares the renewed attack on the mimetic arts of book X. In book IX he describes the tyrant, the most dangerous threat to the polis, as somebody who completely follows his irrational impulses. In doing so, he is like a sleepwalker. He lives in passionate dreams even though he is perfectly awake. He is enslaved to

the imaginary pleasures that befall him at night through the shadowy images of his dreams. He saves them for the day: as a tyrant he is in a position to live them at the expense of his compatriots. Now with respect to the arts it is a fact for Plato that artwork and dreamwork share a characteristic shadowiness. To him there is no doubt that the scene-paintings of tragedy and comedy are no less vehicles of passionate desires than the shadowy images of our dreams. Both arouse the irrational appetite of the soul and nurture it. And we have just learned that in the case of the arts this happens in a necessary and also fairly unnoticed manner.

Since the pleasures which artworks yield are necessarily affected by real passions, they are necessarily mixed pleasures, and this is for Plato a character which they share with the vulgar pleasures of everyday life that he discusses in Book IX of the *Republic*. Unlike the pure pleasures that are proper to the rational part of the soul, they essentially imply their respective counterpart: The pleasure of drinking implies the pain of thirst. The pleasure of stilling one's hunger is symbiotic to the pain of hunger. Similarly, poets contrive their plays in such a manner that they are made up of mixed pleasures. This is why, in his later dialogue *Philebus* Plato will call the mixed pleasures of everyday life the pleasures of the "comedy and tragedy of life" (Plato, *Philebus*, 50b). It is also in the *Philebus* that Plato discusses more in detail how it is that confronting the mimetic arts we are subject to mixed pleasures. His prime example here, at *Philebus* 48a following, is comedy. I want to reconstruct it in the following in order to get at what could be the ethical dimension of art according to this argument.

For Plato in the *Philebus* as later for Aristotle, the comic pleasure is based on a position of better knowledge. The comic protagonist is laughable in our eyes because he acts while not knowing things that we as spectators do know. However, while it would be just to enjoy the ignorance of an enemy, enjoying the ignorance of a friend or a sympathetic character on stage for Plato is unjust. For Plato, and in contrast to what Aristotle will later argue in his poetics – for Plato it is not admissible to even laugh at the seemingly harmless inferiority of a comic character on stage. The reason for this is that the seemingly harmless inferiority of the comic character, his lack of knowledge that we are aware of from a position of presumable better knowledge, that this staged lack of knowledge corresponds in us as spectators to a hidden affect of malice, that is an aggressive enviousness, which according to Plato pops up as a painful and necessary affect. This affect is a concomitant ingredient of comic pleasure in the very sense in which Plato had written in the *Republic* about the real affect which we necessarily enjoy from the other when watching a tragedy.

Now in what sense precisely is this malice a problem for Plato? It is problematic because our malice, our *phthonos*, can be interpreted as a proof of our own ignorance. When indulging in comic pleasure we ourselves fall short of the Delphic command *gnōthi seauton*, 'Know thyself!' Plato appears not extremely clear in this passage of the *Philebus*, but if I interpret his argument correctly, it must imply two dimensions, an epistemic and an ethical one, which in this case are

two sides of the same coin. The epistemic dimension would be that the comic play, on a first level, glosses over the fact that our presumable better knowledge as spectators contains itself an ignorance – namely the ignorance of our “unconscious malice” (Stevens 1948, p. 180). We think we laugh at somebody who does not know, but in fact we ourselves do not know – namely about the malice, the evil pleasure that enters into the set-up of our comic enjoyment. So in this straightforwardly epistemic sense we ourselves are ignorant, it is us who ignore an underlying pain. On a second level, this underlying pain itself can be taken to be a proof of an even more profound ignorance of ourselves. For malice, which is a pain, becomes enjoyable in comedy precisely in the form of the mimetic ignorance of the other on stage. We believe that we enjoy somebody else’s ignorance (namely the represented *anoia* of the comic protagonist). But what we in fact enjoy is our own ignorance, since through comedy it is not mirrored to us, so that it would yield an insight, but staged as being the ignorance of an imaginary other about which we are supposed to laugh. Being glossed over, dissimulated, it becomes enjoyable. Comedy – this is Plato’s accusation – makes us enjoy our actually painful ignorance.

Of course we might say that Plato’s account is not the whole story and that following Aristotle we could think of artistic work as precisely yielding this sort of insights. In this line of argument Hegel, for example, held in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* that the truly comic necessarily implies self-consciousness on the part of the comic subject, so that the spectator may mirror his own self-consciousness in it. This mirroring would then deliver the joy of insight that is no mixed pleasure in the platonic sense of the term but a cathartic, sublimated, sublated, *aufgehoben* one. However, I believe that Plato’s critique of the arts hits a crucial point, if only because we cannot be sure that all mimetic art really accomplishes this insight. If it does not, then the second, ethic dimension becomes important, which resides in the fact that we also disavow the aggressivity of our malice. It is an aggressivity that may seem harmless, but Plato might say that we indulge in it here in comedy in a so to speak aesthetical distance, and with pleasure, so that later in real life we are prepared to be really aggressive against the social other.

That Plato really hit a point can furthermore be shown with regard to contemporary psychoanalytical discourse, and I thus come to the end of my talk. It actually is compelling to see how the Platonic topic of mixed pleasures pops up there again. It is particularly Robert Pfaller with his theory of interpassivity who indeed explicitly affirms the experience of mixed pleasures. It was Freud’s view, it is true, that human passions are essentially ambivalent. But Pfaller and to some extent also Zizek want us to freely live out this ambivalence. They want us to enjoy our mixed pleasures like Plato’s tyrant and like Plato’s spectator of tragedy and comedy, not only because they believe that pleasures are necessarily mixed, but particularly because they see the real danger in theories like Plato’s, in ascetic idealisms, where natural pleasures get repressed and repression becomes exploitable for the sinister political purposes of an ascetic priest. To Pfaller, for example, contemporary neoliberalism is the most refined form of such an ascetic

idealism, having its roots in Plato. Pfaller calls perversity the kind of enlightened hedonism in which we intensify a pleasure by freely admitting its inevitable opposite, for example by admitting hate to mingle with love in a husband-wife-relationship. The advantage of such a perverse mixture of pleasures according to Pfaller is that the quantities of pleasures would not neutralize each other mutually, but rather add up. Hence we experience an extremely intensified pleasure. Loving and hating perversely would be a much stronger pleasure than, for instance, the pleasure that derives from hate that has been sublimated into love.

Pfaller's prime example for the experience of mixed pleasures is the so called canned laughter, the pre-recorded sounds of laughter and joy that accompany so many television sitcoms. Canned laughter, according to Pfaller, allows the spectator to entertain an ambivalent position and to enjoy mixed pleasures. While naively enjoying the show, with canned laughter the spectator can also experience an additional pleasure: the perverse pleasure of a secret feeling of contempt for the show as well for himself, a feeling he may have as he knows that the sitcom is trash after all. Like Plato's spectator of a comedy he thus undergoes a mixture of pleasurable with unpleasurable feelings. Or rather: he can enjoy pleasure and pain, comic relief and self-contempt, at the same time. The canned laughter allows him to be ambivalent because it allows him to make himself believe that it is not him after all who is laughing about this trashy show but rather an unidentified imaginary other, the contemptible other whose laughing he is listening to. Pfaller bases this idea on a passing remark of Jacques Lacan who, in his seminar on the Ethics of psychoanalysis, had stated that the choir in classical Greek tragedy might have had the function to absorb and assume a passion that otherwise might be too hard for the spectator to take.

However, I think that in the perspective of Plato we can see the both epistemological and ethical-political shortcomings of Pfaller's indeed counter-enlightening view. If we straightforwardly adopt the mixed-pleasures-approach to things, we evidently skip the question of whether there are good or bad pleasures, an eminently epistemological and ethical-political question that we cannot avoid, a question so essential to Plato's philosophy as a whole. Epistemological a question it is because we gloss over our own truth if we indiscriminately buy into mimetic representations of the other. Ethical-political is this question because we must not treat the social-political other like a character on the stage of our imagination. We gloss over our own truth, precisely because, as Plato had suggested in the aforementioned passage of the *Philebus* – precisely because the dangerous point about comedy and its possibly interpassive pleasure lies in the fact that it renders ignorance enjoyable. Far from yielding an insight, it is a pleasurable symptom of our own ignorance. So I conclude that Plato's critique of the arts hit a crucial point, even if he throws out the baby with the bath water. This point is that there is a primal affectivity in our representations that cannot be accounted for with rational means. Art can be a privileged form of access to this primal affectivity as it hints to the conditions of possibility or representational subjectivity as such – but it can be that only if it manages to point out or even work through this affectivity

and the unconscious meanings to which it refers, something that for example many contemporary situation comedies obviously do not achieve. If art does not achieve this, then it functions as a lure, a decoy – or rather as a bribe. Art then becomes a corrupting gift, as Plato says at *Laws* 656b, a mere vehicle of a so to speak “secret commission”. If we do not manage to fend it off, the false pleasure that art secretly passes on to us will corrupt us – “inevitably” (Plato 1967, 656b).

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