University of Birmingham
School of Philosophy, Theology and Religion

Taught ProgrammesEssay/Assignment
Cover Sheet 2018-2019

To be included as the first page of all work submitted for assessment

Module Title	Aesthetics Through History
Level	I
Student ID (SRN)	1828260
Essay/assignmenttitle	Critically discuss Plato's arguments against permitting poetry and other art in the Republic.
Actual Word Count	1999

REMINDERS

1. Do <u>NOT</u> give your name on the assignment or in your file name; instead put your SRN on the top right hand corner of each page and include this cover sheet.

2. Assignments should be submitted electronically via the module section on Canvas by 12noon on the published deadline

3. A penalty of 5 marks will be imposed for each working day the assignment is late, until a grade of 0% is reached.

4. There is <u>NO</u> leeway beyond the published word limit for the assignment. An excess length penalty of 1 mark for every**100** words over the limit will be applied. Please note: the word length includes all references, but excludes the bibliography and this coversheet.

5. By submitting this assignment you are declaring that it is not plagiarized, but rather all your own work, and that all quotations from, allusions to and paraphrasing of the work of others have been appropriately cited and referenced.

6. It is your responsibility to ensure you upload the correct version of your essay to the correct assignment section on Canvas. Assignments should be submitted as Word of PDF documents only.

Reflection on Previous Feedback (Optional but Recommended)

In the academic year 2018-19 we are asking you to upload to Canvas alongside each of your summative assessments this individual Student Reflection on Feedback Sheet, which invites you to think about feedback you have had at earlier points on your course and how you have responded to it in your new piece of work. Thinking carefully about the feedback you have received previously can help to improve your performance. It is helpful for the marker to know what feedback you have had previously on similar pieces of work, and how you have tried to act on it. Knowing the range of different kinds of feedback you have had can also help us to use more those kinds that are most helpful to you.

Often the feedback with which our students work identify a range of opportunities for improvement across our assessment criteria: understanding the subject matter fully; analysis; argument; structure; referencing; grammar. Do use this sheet to identify any particular opportunities you have taken, or challenges you have addressed, so that your marker(s) can pay particular attention to these aspects of your work.

The extent to which you have improved on previous pieces of work will **NOT** affect your mark. Your work will be marked on the basis of its own merits as a piece of academic work, **NOT** on the basis of the answers you give in the

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What feedback have you received on earlier assessments, or while preparing this assessment?

How have you responded to that feedback in this assessment?

Plato's 'Republic' is a series of books that attempt to explore the virtue of justice. The Republic contains a thought experiment which consists of trying to make a 'just city' through political philosophy. In creating the ideal city, Plato had to consider many aspects of other philosophies including aesthetics. Plato believed in Timocracy of 'Guardians'; strong, enlightened men who upheld morally good virtues. The Guardians would be put in charge of upholding the morally justified laws **(London, 2018)**. Plato's main concern of Aesthetics featured the affect that would be had on the Guardians. He had three main arguments:

1) Art holds no truth due to 'Mimesis' and the concept of forms

2) Art can corrupt the Guardians ethically through combining contrasting emotions

3) Art will distract the Guardians, preventing them from becoming pillars of justice

I will critique each of these arguments using Schopenhauer's theories of aesthetics. I will begin by Explaining Plato's theories on Forms and Mimesis.

Plato's first argument I will explain and critique comes from book 10 of Republic and relies heavily on Plato's theory of forms. Plato believes that Mimesis, described as imitating or representation, is consistent in all of art. He states that artists, through their art, imitate 'universal forms' instead of actually creating or being the form. Forms are described as the physical characteristics that we see in objects such as weight or shape **(Law, 2018, P1)**. Plato suggests that these forms exist outside of the objects we see them in for a number of reasons; In the Republic he uses the example of a craftsman who builds a chair. Plato argues that the craftsman thinks of the form of a chair as he crafts a physical representation, and that it would be incorrect to suggest that the craftsman made up the idea by himself. He also states that it would be wrong to suggest the chair made by the craftsman is the same as the form in the craftsman's head, and therefore it must be a representation **(Plato; 2018, 596b – 596d)**.

The representation of the form has many large implications for Plato. As the chair is simply a representation of a form, it is a step removed from the actual truth of the form as it is not perfect **(Plato; 2018, 597a)**. Only forms can achieve perfection, unlike imitators who cannot create a perfect form, but merely attempt to. For example, a craftsman could never make the chair seat truly flat, no matter what tools were used in the process. However, the form of flat is perfectly flat. The physical qualities are not shared between chair and form, and therefore it is not purely the form. This mimesis can also be applied to other forms of art, and the art in question can be more than one step away from the truth. If a painter chose to paint the

craftsman's chair, then he'd be taking a flawed representation of a form and making another representation based upon it. This would make the painting two steps away from the perfect form. **(Plato, 2018, 597e)**

Other factors will move art away from the form, such as the painter painting from his own perspective. The angle the painter paints will only give that specific angle of the chair, which is even further than the true form of the chair. Furthermore, a bad painting or crafted chair would not represent the form well; meaning the chair and painting would be even further from the truth. Plato uses these examples in the Republic to suggest that art has no truth due to it consisting of representations only. The compound affect of art being made from art further strengthens his belief that art is inherently corrupt **(Plato, 2018, 597e – 598a).**

Schopenhauer does not directly counter Plato, for he directly responds to Kant. However, Schopenhauer's philosophy naturally disproves Plato's arguments, despite sharing many distinct similarities. Much like Plato, Schopenhauer believes that there is a distinction between what we experience and what the reality of universe really is. Schopenhauer refers to the reality, the deeper truth beyond our initial cognitive abilities, as the 'Will' **(Shapshay, 2018, 1)** Schopenhauer also believes that mimesis takes place when trying to convert an aesthetic experience (the act of seeing art purely as "what" and removing other possible questions) to aesthetic judgement (the act of describing a form of art, like reviewing) **(Shapshay, 2018, 2).**

However, Schopenhauer believes that art is not degraded through representations of the Will, but instead the representations present the opportunity to study the Will itself. Schopenhauer argues that by removing oneself from the 'Will to Life' (the biological predetermination and desires humanity suffers from) through removing one's own ordinary, will-bound cognition, one is able to experience the Will in the art they experience **(Shapshay, 2018, 3.2).** The universal forms Plato speaks of are revealed in this Will, and other deeper truths of the universe can only be revealed through this 'aesthetic experience'. This extends art based upon other art, such as paintings of chairs. Plato's first argument is therefore refutable because different forms of are not degrading away from the truth, but are allowing the viewer to see different glimpses and representations of the deeper truth. For example, a painter who paints a chair is revealing a different perspective of the Will in the creation of the painting, as is the craftsman who made the chair.

The degree to which some forms of art reveal the Will compared to others varies under Schopenhauer's view, but all forms of art reveal a minimum of a glimpse of the deeper truth in the Will. Schopenhauer argued a hierarchy that suggested that the less the art was bound by our perceptions, the more of the Will is revealed **(Shapshay, 2018, 5).** For example, at the bottom of the 'ladder', Schopenhauer placed architecture as architecture reveals very basic universal forms such as geometry and other confirmations too many experiential laws. Adversely, music is at the top of Schopenhauer's ladder for its freedom from all experiential laws except time itself. Therefore, music brings listeners closer to the Will than architecture does.

Schopenhauer indirectly counters this first argument further by discussing the 'Will to Life'. The consequence of banning art in the republic would lead to all Guardians and people alike in the city to be bound by the Will of Life, consisting of biological desires and strivings such as reproduction and survival; all based off Darwinian philosophy of nature. Schopenhauer believed that these biological desires were inherently bad as they were restrictive and away from truth of the universe, and that the freedom from the Will to Life through art made art inherently, morally valuable. Removing art in the republic wouldn't only prevent the Guardians from finding truth, a vital element to justice, but also bind people to their animalistic desires and remove the opportunities to be free from them.

However, as Plato's arguments work independently, this Schopenhauer based response does not deal with problems concerning certain types of art. Plato also states that some 'bad, impure art' can cause ethical problems. Mimesis still takes place throughout art, such as in poetry, in which the poet will change their voice to represent different characters **(Plato, 2018, 393B – 393C)**. Plato uses Homer as an example to argue two points in the Republic. Plato makes the argument that the act of combining juxtaposing emotions that are developed from mimetic art can cause behavioural corruption for the viewer or creator of the art. Plato uses the example of tragedies written in poetry by Homer, suggesting that the combining of sadness (from the plot of the tragedy) mixed with the enjoyment of watching the show corrupts the soul through its lesser part **(Plato, 2018, 605A – 605D)**. The greater part of the soul, holding true moral values, will know that sadness shouldn't be celebrated. Plato also argues that the mixing of these emotions may develop

weaknesses to negative emotions such as pity, causing the Guardians to no longer be strong, ethically resilient men. Plato also addresses concerns that the actors could inhibit the negative traits of characters they play. In book ten he uses the example of the clown, who is more likely to joke and be a comedian in private as much as he will on stage **(Plato, 2018, 606D).** However, it is implied that some art which is 'pure', only pushing and imitating desirable emotions, seems permissible as it will benefit the Guardians emotionally.

A Schopenhauer-like response to this is available by looking at the aesthetic experience. The aesthetic experience must entail removing ordinary cognition, for ordinary cognition is affected by the Will to Life. The viewer must only consider "what" and remove themselves from what the objects mean to them individually **(Shapshay, 2018, 3.1)**. It is in this state that I believe viewers and performers who are able to perceive correctly (and therefore have an aesthetic experience) will be able to distinguish a play or other form of art from a real life experience, and this distinguishing factor means different emotions are formed. It seems reasonable to suggest that the death of a character in a play forms a different emotion to a death of a loved one, and this could be due to the Will manifesting these emotions during the aesthetic experience. Therefore, both performers and viewers of art may not be affected by the perceived 'mixing of emotions' as emotions are not being mixed, a new emotion is formed through the Will.

The emotion created by the Will may affect the viewer or performers nature, but as the Will is deep truth, this should not be seen as a negative but instead a positive. Therefore, art that demonstrates negative emotions do not cause an emotional complication but instead reveals more valuable truths to the viewer **(Shapshay, 2018, 6.2)**. The only art Schopenhauer is wary of is art that prevents the aesthetic experience due to it overriding our ability to become Will-less. This includes heavily erotic or grotesque art. However, it could be argued that if ones desire is strong enough, they can override the heavy cognitive links to erotic/grotesque imagery and become Will-less when viewing this art. Therefore, Plato's second argument fails to explain why bad art should be removed from the Republic.

Finally, if we were to assume I have disproved Plato's prior arguments regarding the censorship of art, Plato could still argue that art is not relevant to the Guardians in their quest for enlightened, ethical wisdom. Plato discusses the idea that art is a natural distraction, and that the Guardians would not be able to master wisdom if they partook in the viewing and creation of it. Plato argues that if one was to 'dabble in all things'; they'd fail to reach a high quality in all of them **(Plato, 2018, 394E – 395A)**. As Guardians have to be morally perfect, and art has no supposed relevance, art should be casted aside so the Guardians can focus on their task.

However, Schopenhauer would argue that the glimpses of the Will available in the manifestation of art allows for new ethical ideas based off the deeper truth. If we do not use this deeper truth to inform the Guardians conscience, the Guardians would be slaves to the Will of their animal like cognition, unable to make true ethical ideas.

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An example of this could be seen in tragedy; the emotions revealed through watching a tragedy could reveal new ideas on how to deal with tragedy, and allow the viewer to inhibit these emotions. This is similar to Nussbaum's theory of gaining insight on emotions and ethics **(Law, 2018, P3).**

To conclude, the many different benefits of art outweigh the supposed dangers of art due to the importance of truth, freedom and understanding. The benefits of being freed from animal cognition, freed from the perceptions it brings, and freedom to discover a real ethical truth through art are all significant to the Guardians and therefore art should be mandatory for the ideal city to exist.

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