Commentary on Gill

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I.

At the beginning of the end of the Republic (595a), Socrates looks back approvingly on the constitution of the ideal polis. Of the various features contributing to its design, the point about poetry now strikes him as most important. Since poetry was last discussed, we have learned something about the organization of the psyche, its internal and external dynamics, and what education really involves. Further insight into poetry's psycho-educative effects calls for a revision of the earlier argument. Not only is it clearer why imitative poetry should be altogether excluded. It is also clearer why Plato's concern should extend to a broader range of artistic media, and why its bearing on ethical development is deeper than the account in Bks. II-III made it out to be.

What we come to understand is that "aesthetic experience" is not fundamentally a matter of content, but of form. Art affects, not just the structure of our beliefs, but overall psychic structure. Given that the psyche has its rational, emotional and appetitive parts, there is still a question as to how these parts will be organized, and which part will rule, in each of us. Bk. X reveals the extent to which this may ultimately depend on our cultural diet. Already at 401a-e, Plato suggested that all the arts—poetry, painting, music, sculpture, even architecture—"represent" (are "full of") certain "qualities" (harmony, grace, and rhythm). There is an isomorphism, or "kinship," between these formal

1 This follows immediately on Socrates' remark (at 592b) that the polis he has been describing "exists in theory," and (probably) not anywhere on earth. That he goes on to picture its existing in theory as if there were "a model of it in heaven, for anyone who wants to look at it" makes the shift (back) to poetry seem less like a non-sequitur. Throughout the Republic, Plato describes the philosopher's vision in terms similar to those in which he describes "aesthetic experience" generally. I think this has a significant bearing on the subject Gill and I are discussing, and will try to spell out its significance here.
qualities and good or bad states of character. Why should we "give orders to craftsmen, forbidding them to represent—whether in pictures, buildings, or any other works—a character that is vicious, unrestrained, slavish and graceless," if buildings "depict" nothing (convey no images of good or evil)? Yet, Socrates insists, it does matter for the way the guardians are brought up: whether they come to display the sort of character "that has developed in accordance with an intelligent plan" (400e).²

That is because what we are talking about here is not representational content (the stuff of which right or wrong ideas are made) but a mode of expression which "informs" the psyche on a more basic level. Architectural structures play a role in the development of character similar to that which Plato later insists gymnastics does. If they educate us, it is because they shape the structure of our souls, affecting intra-psychic government, not because they put ideas into our heads. This is the sense in which all art "represents" good or bad character. This representation is not something we simply look at and thereby come to believe. We take it into our psyches, so that we ourselves imitate what it imitates. Why is "education in music and poetry . . . most important"?

First, because rhythm and harmony permeate the inner part of the soul more than anything else . . . so that if someone is properly educated in music and poetry, it makes him graceful, but if not, then the opposite. . . . And since he has the right distastes, he'll praise fine things, be pleased by them, receive them into his soul, and being nurtured by them, become fine and good. (401d-402a)

Plato is unable, in Bks. II-III, to tell us exactly how art affects what he later describes as "the polis within the psyche," since he has not yet done the psychology. But he anticipates the point to be developed more fully in book X. Art does not go straight to our heads: it has a direct effect on the whole soul (not just the thinking part). Where art is concerned, our way of seeing is affected by what we see. Our ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood, fantasy and reality—to think, feel, and desire in harmony with that vision, responding to the world in a psychologically integrated way—is constituted (or not) from the bottom up. Over the course of his investigation, Plato comes to see that, while the psyche can be theorized about, and its parts functionally identified, actual psychological structure is not a given. The relation-

² All of the quotations from Plato found in this commentary are from the Republic, using Grube's translation as revised by Reeve, with occasional (uncontentious) adjustments.