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„... and indeed not by poetry either“

Mimetic Poetry and the Choice of the Best Life in Plato's *Republic*

Many interpreters of the *Republic* tend to regard book 10 as an „afterthought“, „coda“ or „appendix“ deployed by Plato to wind up or add extra material to an argument that has already come to its final conclusion at the end of Book 9.

When evaluating this widespread view the following issues should be born in mind: (1) The present division of the *Republic* into 10 books makes it tempting to regard Book 10 as a separate entity, but this is deceptive, since the book division was most likely not undertaken by Plato himself. (2) From a formal point of view, there is little to suggest that Plato intended what we know as Book 10 to have the status of an “appendix” etc. Unlike the long digressions of Books 5 through 7 and various other thematic transitions which are explicitly declared as such, the first words of Book 10 (*kai mên ...*) rather mark a continuation of the argument from Book 9. (3) At the end critique of poetry Socrates explicitly links the entire passage to the rest of the dialogue when demanding that nobody should let himself get induced by honour, money, or any political power, “and indeed not by poetry either“, to neglect justice and the rest of virtue (608b4–8).

These aspects suggest that the critique of mimetic poetry is, in fact, meant to be an integral part of the dialogue. Taking Socrates' statement in 608b4–8 as a point of departure, this paper will try to determine the function of the critique of poetry within the

overall context of the *Republic*. The following theses will be put forward and defended: (1) The primary context of the critique of mimetic poetry are the meta-ethical reflexions on the question about *how* and *on which foundations* the *choice* between different kinds of lives can and ought to be made. Key passages are the reflexions on the "good judge" in Book 9 and the choice scene in the Myth of Er. A *qualified* choice requires that the person choosing does not let himself be overwhelmed by external properties thus running the risk of passing a precipitated judgement on the basis of appearance only. Rather, using his capacity of distinguishing reason (*dianoia*) the ideal judge of life should strive to "*see through*" (*diidein*) the life to be judged, so that he on the basis of a thorough examination may pass a qualified judgment on the amount of happiness or misfortune the life in question has to offer. (2) As opposed to these demands, mimetic poetry is flawed or even dangerous in a double sense: first, in that it portrays a flawed emotional mode of judgment, secondly in that its portrayal of emotional judgments will gradually impair the hearers' own capability of making qualified, rational assessments. Socrates' critique of mimetic poetry is thus closely connected to one of the central methodological issues of the dialogue: the question of how to choose the best life.