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## The Ideas and the Criticism of Poetry in Plato's Republic, Book 10

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### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Ideas and the Criticism of Poetry in Plato's Republic, Book 10 CHARLES GRISWOLD ONE OF THE most frequently cited passages in Plato that bears directly on the nature and number of Ideas occurs at the start of the Republic, Book 10. Here Socrates invokes a "customary procedure" to "set down some one particular form for each of the particular 'manys' to which we apply the same name" (596 a5-8). 1 Thus we seem to have, all at once, the conceptual key to the origin of the Ideas and an indication of their nature. Socrates proceeds to give examples of Ideas, namely, the "Idea of the Bed" and the "Idea of the Table." Two difficulties arise immediately. First, the examples are often seen as being comic, and because of them (as well as for other reasons) many commentators have found it difficult to take the passage seriously. More

importantly, beds and tables are artifacts; yet Socrates' previous discussion of the Ideas in Republic 57 not only failed to refer to artifacts, but also omitted reference to Ideas of things. The Ideas discussed earlier were predominantly what we would call "ethical" or "aesthetic" in nature, z Secondly, the use of the "one over many" i All quotations in English from the Republic are from Allan Bloom's translation (New York and London: Basic Books, 1968). For the Greek text I have relied on John Burner, ed., *Platonis Opera*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900-1907). I would like to point out at the outset that by "Socrates " 1 mean, in this essay, the "Socrates" of Plato's dialogues. 2 Thus 1. M. Crombie says that the criticism of poetry in Book 10 is a "swashbuckling passage, and... it is possible that Plato was enjoying himself by overstating his case"; the choice of beds and tables is "surely derisory"; Plato may have been "teasing us a little" (*An Examination of Plato's Doctrines*, 2 vols. [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962], 1: 147). G. M. A. Grube, in his translation of the Republic, also says that "the painter is here used as an illustration, and if we take the details too seriously they involve many difficulties, such as the existence of Forms of artifacts, that the Forms are created b'y the gods, which they are nowhere else in Plato, and that the carpenter imitates the Form directly" (*The Republic* [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1974], p. 241, n. 4). For a similar approach, see F. M. Cornford, ed. and trans., *The Republic of Plato* (1941; reprint ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 315-16. A. D. Woozley and R. C. Cross, in *Plato's Republic: A Philosophical Commentary* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), remark that in the passages at issue Plato "musters every argument he can think of in justification of what he had said earlier, and that in so doing he is in places less strict in the statement of an argument than he would be [135] 136 HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY argument alone for specifying Ideas leads to the setting down of Ideas for virtually everything ("many" might be interpreted as "at least two")) For if there are Ideas of beds and tables, one supposes that there must also be Ideas of pillows, mattresses, alarm clocks, saltshakers, and so on ad absurdum. A thesis which recreates the ordinary world in order to explain it, however, raises more difficulties than it resolves. The "one over many" argument in itself generates an extreme and finally unintelligible "realism" or "essentialism." But neither here nor in the other dialogues does Plato clearly delimit the range of the Ideas. Yet the Parmenides shows that Plato was fully aware of the "how many" question, among others.4 The beginning of Republic 10 presents us with another difficult question: What is the relationship between God and the Ideas? Socrates asserts that the Idea of the Bed (along with "everything else," and so the other Ideas too; 597d7-8) is produced by God (597e5-7). This passage has concerned interpreters since antiquity, and for a very good reason: it contradicts Socrates' frequent assertions earlier in the Republic and elsewhere that the Ideas are eternal, never coming...

# The Ideas and the Criticism of Poetry in Plato's *Republic*, Book 10

CHARLES GRISWOLD

One of the most frequently cited passages in Plato that bears directly on the nature and number of Ideas occurs at the start of the *Republic*, Book 10. Here Socrates invokes a "customary procedure" to "set down some one particular form for each of the particular 'manys' to which we apply the same name" (596a5–8).<sup>1</sup> Thus we seem to have, all at once, the conceptual key to the origin of the Ideas and an indication of their nature. Socrates proceeds to give examples of Ideas, namely, the "Idea of the Bed" and the "Idea of the Table."<sup>2</sup> Two difficulties arise immediately. First, the examples are often seen as being comic, and because of them (as well as for other reasons) many commentators have found it difficult to take the passage seriously. More importantly, beds and tables are artifacts; yet Socrates' previous discussion of the Ideas in *Republic* 5–7 not only failed to refer to artifacts, but also omitted reference to Ideas of things. The Ideas discussed earlier were predominantly what we would call "ethical" or "aesthetic" in nature.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the use of the "one over many"

<sup>1</sup> All quotations in English from the *Republic* are from Allan Bloom's translation (New York and London: Basic Books, 1968). For the Greek text I have relied on John Burnet, ed., *Platonis Opera*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909–1907). I would like to point out at the outset that by "Socrates" I mean, in this essay, the "Socrates" of Plato's dialogues.

<sup>2</sup> Thus I. M. Crombie says that the criticism of poetry in Book 10 is a "teachbacking passage, and . . . it is possible that Plato was enjoying himself by over-criticizing his case"; the choice of beds and tables is "surely arbitrary"; Plato may have been "teasing us a little" (*An Examination of Plato's Doctrine*, 2 vols. [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962], 1:147). G. M. A. Grube, in his translation of the *Republic*, also says that "the painter is here used as an illustration, and if we take the details too seriously they involve nasty difficulties, such as the existence of Forms of artifacts, that the Forms are created by the gods, which they are nowhere else in Plato, and that the carpenter imitates the Form directly" (*The Republic* [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1974], p. 241, n. 4). For a similar approach, see F. M. Cornford, ed. and trans., *The Republic of Plato* (1941; reprint ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 315–16; A. D. Woodley and R. C. Cross, in *Plato's Republic: A Philosophical Commentary* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), remark that in the passages at issue Plato "wagers every argument he can think of in justification of what he had said earlier, and that in so doing he is in places less strict in the statement of an argument than he would be



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