



Plato's *Laws* on Correctness as the Standard of Art

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*New art is true art
The old masters slew art;
They all learned how to draw,
But they painted what they thought they saw,
Instead of what they saw they thought,
As a liberated artist ought.*

—Whitelaw Savory (and Students), in Ogden Nash's Opening
Chorus for *One Touch of Venus*¹

I. Introduction

Most readers of Plato's dialogues would probably think of him as likely to approve more of the old masters than of new art. The old masters were on the whole far more realistic than modern painters—compare, say, Velázquez *Innocent X* (1650) with Matisse *The Snail* (1953)²—and Plato often seems to take issue with an artist if he departs even slightly from realism. A long section of the *Ion*, for example, is dedicated to showing that experts in charioteering, medicine, and other areas make the best judges about what poets say on those subjects, ostensibly because only experts can tell how realistically the poet represents chariots, medical treatments and the like.³ Even more telling is the view, famously expressed in the *Republic*, which suggests that painters should paint things according to what they actually look like:

It is as if we were coloring a statue and someone approached and censured us, saying that we did not apply the most beautiful pigments to the most beautiful parts of the image, since the eyes, which are the most beautiful

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part, have not been painted with purple but with black. We should think it a reasonable justification to reply, don't expect us, quaint friend, to paint the eyes so fine that they will not be like eyes at all, nor the other parts, but observe whether by assigning what is proper to each we render the whole beautiful. (420b, Shorey trans.)

Similarly the Critias demands "full and perfect resemblance (*homoiotêtas*)" in artistic reproductions:

[S]uppose we consider the ease or difficulty with which an artist's portraiture of figures divine and human, respectively, produces the impression of satisfactory reproduction on the spectator. We shall observe that in the case of earth, mountains, rivers, woodland, the sky as a whole, and the several revolving bodies located in it, for one thing, the artist is always well content if he can reproduce them with some faint degree of resemblance, and, for another, that since our knowledge of such objects is never exact, we submit his design to no criticism or scrutiny, but acquiesce, in these cases, in a dim and deceptive outline. But when it is our own human form that the artist undertakes to depict, daily familiar observation makes us quick to detect shortcomings and we show ourselves severe critics of one who does not present us with full and perfect resemblance. (107b7-d5, trans. Taylor)

In the *Laws*, Plato's final dialogue, the standard of correctness (*orthotês*) is applied to artistic productions. There it is said that a painting is 'correct' if it accurately reproduces the "quantity and quality" (*tosouton kai toiouton*, 667d6-7; cf. *hoson kai hoion*, 668b7) of the original, so that the "equal is equal and the symmetrical is symmetrical" (*ison ison ... to symmetron an eiê symmetron*, 668a2-3), and so that the image has "all the parts and colours and shapes" (668e8-669a1) of the original.

Behind all of these passages lies the general idea, expressed as early as the *Protagoras* (312d3), and repeated often throughout Plato's dialogues,⁴ that painting is a matter of making likenesses (*eikona*), where the more exact the likeness is, the better. The conclusion that we are liable to draw is that Plato prefers realism in the arts, and that when he speaks of correctness in artistic productions, he has in mind something like accurate photo-reproduction (or its equivalent in other media).



This paper is dedicated to arguing very nearly the opposite conclusion. I think that if Plato were to hear Ogden Nash's lines from *One Touch of Venus*, he would respond with qualified approval of Whitelaw Savory's criticism of the old masters. For the actual standard of correctness Plato commends has less to do with artists painting what they "think they see" (the unexamined content of sense perception)⁵ and much more to do with them painting what they "see they think" (the correctly visualised content of true understanding),⁶ if they can ever be brought around to doing that. In Plato's aesthetics, correctness is only ever incidentally related to perceived likeness, and in many cases, "true art" would not involve anything like a photo-reproduction.

I will be considering the standard of correctness as it is described in the *Laws*, but I think of Plato's views there as clarification, not revision, of what he writes elsewhere. At the conclusion of this article I will return to the speeches just quoted from the *Republic* and *Critias* and show how my interpretation may be applied to them. First, however, I must discuss the meaning of *orthotês* with a view towards showing what counts as correctness in the argument of the *Laws*, and what *kind* of standard correctness is supposed to be. I will argue that correctness in art involves an isomorphic relation between expression and intentional object. When an artistic production accurately expresses the essential character of "what it wants to be", then it is "correct". Thus, correctness in art is, for Plato, a philosophical standard, concerned with "what really is". Plato's standard of art is neither purely aesthetic (since it is not about the perceptual qualities of an artistic production *per se*) nor purely moral (since, as I shall argue, to be correct in the required sense an artistic production does not have to depict anything good or even serious). Nevertheless, the failure of an artistic production to achieve correctness invites both personal and cultural criticism. For, setting technical hindrances of all kinds aside, when an artist makes "incorrect" art, it will always be a result of ignorance, which, for Plato, is blameworthy, both in artists themselves and in all who are taken-in by art. To this extent Plato's standard of correctness is irreducibly value-laden.

II. Correctness and Education in the Arts: Laws 642a-657b

The ancient Greek term *orthotês* is an abstract feminine noun based on the more primitive adjective form *orthos* meaning *upright, straight, erect*. The adjective can and regularly does have a strong evaluatively positive sense in its metaphorical uses, whether they are ethical (*righteous, upright, just*), epistemological (*true, correct*) or ontological (*genuine, real*). Forms based on the stem *orth-* occur frequently in the *Laws*, mostly in thematically innocent contexts.⁷ In concrete uses, the noun *orthotês* refers to upright posture, but is more frequently found in Plato in the metaphorical sense of *uprightness* or *correctness*. Used in this sense, *orthotês* always carries evaluatively positive significance and is never remote from the metaphorical significations of the adjective. Thus we shall have to consider at some point whether there are moral connotations to *orthotês* in the *Laws*,⁸ though a decision on that matter can be delayed until after we have examined its meaning as a standard for art.

Orthotês first appears in connection with art at *Laws* I.642a4, where the Athenian expresses the need for an account of *mousikês orthotêtos* (*correctness of art or culture in general*).⁹ Although nothing is here specified about correctness as a standard for artistic productions, this passage shows that the concept of correctness is thematic for the entire account of art and education in Book II. Importantly, it also highlights the ambiguity of the term *orthotês*, thereby indicating that there is no presupposed meaning of it already at work in the dialogue. The meaning of *mousikês orthotêtos* must be specified, as far as possible, in the investigation that follows.

The exact specification of *mousikês orthotêtos* does not follow immediately, however. As is common in Plato's dialogues, the significance of the term is allowed to build momentum before it becomes the focus of attention. For our purposes, there are three preliminary passages at the beginning of Book II that deserve consideration. None of these identifies what it is for an artistic production to be correct, but all three passages help us to understanding the meaning of correctness in the *Laws*. The first passage runs from 653a-655b, where the Athenian embarks on the subject of "correct education" (*tên orthên paideian*, 653a1). The second runs from 655c-656b, where the Athenian rejects the view of the many that the

“correctness of art” (*mousikês orthotêta*, 655d1) is determined by its power to produce pleasure. The third runs from 656c-657b, where the Athenian speaks about the regulation of art based on “intrinsic correctness” (*tên orthotêta phusei*, 657a8) and the difficulty in determining what such correctness is.

(1) Correct Education (653a-655b)

The Athenian says that “correct education” (*tên orthên paideian*, 653a1) is produced when feelings of pleasure and pain, love and hatred are engendered “correctly” in the soul (*orthôs*, 653b7), through “correctly” (*orthôs*, 653b7) training pleasures and pains, so that one hates the things one *should* hate and loves the things one *should* love.¹⁰ It is clear that at this point his interest is the correct development of *ethical* character, rather than of *aesthetic* judgment. But there is more built into the conception of “correct” here than merely what is evaluated as ethically right. There is an isomorphic relation between feelings and objects: hate correlates with hateables, love with lovable, and so on.¹¹ This isomorphism is further developed in two subsequent speeches.

In 654c-d, the Athenian describes the educated musician, the one who sings and dances *well* (*kalôs*, 654b7), as “rectified” (cf. *kat-orthoï*, 654d2) in pleasure and pain, because he is receptive to beautiful things (*kala*) and annoyed by those that are not beautiful (*mê kala*). The Athenian then says that if he and his interlocutors can discover what is beautiful (*kalon*) in singing and dancing, they will know what it means to be correctly educated (*pepaideumenon ... orthôs*, 654d6-7).

Again, shortly after this, the Athenian asserts that, just as one can “correctly” (*orthôs*, 655a8) call the rhythms and harmonies of music “rhythmic” and “harmonious”¹²—ostensibly because there is an isomorphic correlation between these terms and their referents—one can “correctly” (*orthôs*, 655b1) refer to the movements of brave men as beautiful (*kala*) and those of cowardly men as shameful (*aischra*).

In these two speeches the isomorphism of 653b is extended: the educated artist in general will hate hateables and love lovable, but now we are told that the lovable are beautiful things, and the hateables those

that are not beautiful, and further that virtue is among the beautiful things, while vice is among the ugly. Correct education in art, then, involves the correlation of pleasure, receptivity, and attraction with genuinely beautiful things, such as virtue, and the correlation of pain, disgust, and vexation with genuinely ugly things, such as vice. It appears that on this view of correctness, there could be art that is "bad" (in the sense of depicting bad things) but at the same time "correct" (in the sense of producing the appropriate correlative feelings in the spectator). We shall find out more about that presently, but at the moment, we may at least conclude that whatever it is for art to be correct, it is not enough for a spectator merely to be pleased by it.

(2) Correctness of Art (655c-656b)

The second of our preliminary passages looks more closely at the relation between art and pleasure. It shows how correctness in the sense of an isomorphic relation between feelings and objects helps to expose confusion in ordinary people's views about art. According to the Athenian, most people say that correctness in art (*mousikês orthotêta*, 655d1) is a matter of the power it has to produce pleasure. The problem is, however, that the same art produces pleasure in some and pain in others.

Obviously, there could be an enormous range of depictions in art that please people differently. The Athenian wonders about how to account for this variability. "Is it that beautiful things (*kala*) are not the same for all of us," he wonders, "or rather that they are the same, but don't seem (*dokei*) the same" (655c2-3). In view of what we have already learned about the rectified musician, whose feelings of pleasure and pain correlate with what *is* beautiful and what *is* ugly, the conclusion is inescapable that the variability among the many shows that they are not rectified. Specifically, because their pleasures and pains haven't been properly calibrated, they opine things to be beautiful which are not beautiful. The verb *dokeô* at 655c3 is significant. In Ogden Nash's terms, the many are pleased by what they *think they see* (since they think they see beauty), but they are not able to *see what they think* (i.e., they do not realise that what they think is false).

The passage continues to explore the consequences of art when

correctness, in the sense of an isomorphic relation between feelings and objects, is not attained. The Athenian discusses depictions of virtue and vice and their effect on unrectified people. The interlocutors agree that no one would actually *say* that depictions of vice are more beautiful (*kalliona*) than depictions of virtue, but they admit that some men secretly approve of, or are pleased by, depictions of vice. It is suggested that there are two ways of accounting for this: either those men have bad natural characters, but good upbringing, or they have good natural characters, but poor upbringing. Although it is not clearly spelled out, we may presume that in either case the good in them checks them from openly approving of vice, while the bad in them is at odds with this reticence.

The conception of correctness and incorrectness that is emerging so far applies only to the relation between spectators and artistic productions, and not to artistic productions in themselves. Art could depict good men as good, and bad men as bad, but still not be correctly appreciated by an unrectified public. The only productions that will be safe to expose all people to, then, will be depictions of good men and good deeds (cf. 660a6-8).¹³ For it is necessary, stresses the Athenian, that every person will become like what he enjoys (656b1-7). Therefore, a person who is pleased by vice will be corrupted. But the rectification of pleasures cannot be guaranteed for all citizens, because despite the best curriculum some people will have weak or defective natural characters. So censorship is required to protect those who are most susceptible to potentially corrupting art. This leads directly to the third of our preliminary passages.

(3) Intrinsic Correctness (656c-657b)

The isomorphic relation involved in correctness is, I think, fundamental to Plato's theory of art and culture. It plays a decisive role in determining what art should be approved and what art censored in the city. An indication that this is so may be found in our third preliminary passage, running from 656c-657b. There the Athenian states:

[I]n the matter of music this inescapable fact deserves our attention: it has in fact proved feasible to take the kind of music that shows a natural correctness (tên orthotêta phusei, 657a8) and put it on a firm footing by



legislation. But it is the task of a god, or a man of god-like stature; in fact the Egyptians do say that the tunes that have been preserved for so long are the compositions of Isis. Consequently, as I said, if one could get even a rough idea of what constitutes correctness (tên orthotêta, 657b3) in matters musical, one ought to have no qualms about giving the whole subject systematic expression in the form of law. (657a3-b3, trans. Saunders)

Here we turn finally from attention to the correct match between the feelings of spectators and the objects they view, to the correctness that artistic productions may have “by nature” (*phusei*), that is to say, intrinsically. It seems that for Plato, education and censorship in the arts are both contingent on the discovery of what constitutes correctness for an artistic production itself. But notice that, though the two kinds of correctness may be analogous, correct experience of art is clearly a separate matter from the intrinsic correctness of art. If intrinsic correctness in art involves an isomorphic relation, it must be a different one from the relation between feelings and their correlative objects. This opens up the possibility that the moral and cultural applications of correctness involved in education and censorship may be distinct from the specification of intrinsic correctness in art. The Athenian’s admission that discovering intrinsic correctness is a superhuman task suggests that it is a matter for philosophy.¹⁴ Accordingly, he must try his best to work it out, “in some way or other” (*hopôsoun*, 657b2). As we examine his attempt, we should bear in mind that the Athenian never claims to be a philosopher (he has arrived in Crete to assist in the establishment of a new colony, 702c), and his interlocutors are good but untrained (769b4-5); they have grown old in isolation from philosophy (643d, 897e) and are out of their depth in philosophical discussion (892d-893a).

III. Correctness in Art Specified: Laws 667b-679b

In *Laws* II.667b-669b, the Athenian presents an argument that specifies correctness as the standard for evaluation in all the musical arts. The argument is logically messy and presents many difficulties of interpretation. I will therefore begin with a fairly detailed sketch, as follows:



- [1] The most important (*spoudaiotaton*) thing about anything we find charming is either: (a) charm (*charis*) itself, or (b) correctness (*orthotêta*), or (c) benefit (*ôphelian*). (667b5-7)
- [2] One sort of charm is pleasure (*hêdonê*). (667b9)
- [3] In many pleasant activities, there is also some correctness or benefit, e.g.:
 - (a) in the case of food and drink, correctness lies in what is healthy (*hugieimon*). (667b8-c3)
 - (b) in the case of learning, correctness lies in truth (as do benefit, goodness and beauty). (667c5-7)
- [4] Likewise in the case of the imitative arts (*tei tôn homoiôn ergasiai*): when they succeed in producing genuine likenesses (*eikastikai*), there is pleasure; but there is also correctness in the sense of equality of quantity and quality (*isotês ... tou te tosoutou kai tou toioutou*). (667c9-d7)
- [5] We correctly judge by pleasure only what produces neither benefit nor truth nor similarity (*mête tina ôphelian mête alêtheian mête homoiotêta*). (667d9-e4)
- [6] Therefore, no imitation (*mimêsin*)—nor any proportionality (*isotêta*)—should be judged by pleasure. (667e10-668a1)
- [7] Equal is equal (*ison ison*) and symmetrical is symmetrical (*summetron ... summetron*), not because someone thinks (*dokei*) it so, but because of truth. (668a1-4).
- [8] All art (*mousikên*) is representational and imitative (*eikastikên te ... kai mimêtikên*). (668a6)
- [9] Therefore, art is not to be judged, or pursued as important (*hôs spoudaian*), for pleasure. (668a9-b1)
- [10] Art that should be pursued as important is correct art (*mousan ... orthê*). (668b5-6)
- [11] Correctness obtains when the imitation renders complete the quantity and quality (*hoson te kai hoion*) [of the original]. (668b6-7)
- [12] Anyone who would not err about a poem must recognise (*gignoskein*) 'what it is' (*hoti pot' esti*); He must recognise its essence (*ousian*)—what it wants to be and what it is really a likeness of (*ti pote bouletai*

kai hotou pot estin eikôn ontôs). (668c4-7)

- [13] Recognising the essence is necessary to determining the work's correctness, which in turn is necessary to determining the goodness (*to eu*) of the accomplished work. (668c7-d2)
- [14] Therefore, anyone who would be a sensible critic whether in art, or in music, or in anything must recognise first what it is (*ho esti*) he is judging, second how correctly (*hôs orthôs*), and third how well (*hôs eu*) it accomplishes its aim. (669a8-b1)

Two strands of this argument need to be separated out from our investigation of correctness. First, we can overlook the bogus standard of pleasure. There are some intriguing things said about pleasure and art in this argument,¹⁵ but they are clearly distinct from the specification of correctness. Second, we need to detach the standard of benefit from that of correctness. This is more difficult, since the argument appears to depend on their fusion. For even though correctness and benefit are introduced as distinct—benefit is explicitly called a *third* thing (*triton*, 667b7)—they appear to be treated as a single standard in much of the argument (esp. [3], [5]). Thus, we find phrases like “correctness-cum-benefit” (*orthotêta te kai ôphelian*, 667c1; where *te kai* indicates an especially close association) and “correctness-or-benefit” (*tên orthotêta kai tên ôphelian*, 667c5; where the parallel construction emphasises uniformity over distinctness). Moreover, a fused concept of correctness-cum-benefit seems crucial to establishing that intrinsically correct art is important (*spoudaion*, cf. [1], [9], [10]), since there is nothing obviously important about similarity of, size, shape, colour, while there is *prima facie* importance in benefit.

I think that plausibly there is some confusion of correctness and benefit in the course of the argument. Some of it may be resolved by noting that the Athenian has two goals simultaneously: the legislative goal of regulating art, and the philosophic goal of specifying what intrinsic correctness is. Most of the talk about judgment and serious pursuit of art ([5], [6], [9], [10]) is related to the legislative goal, while talk about what correctness is ([4], [7], [11]) is related to the philosophic goal. Regardless of any confusion, however, the Athenian does separate intrinsic correctness and benefit

once again in [13] and [14]. There it is clear (although *to eu* is substituted for *ôphelia*), that understanding intrinsic correctness is necessary for determining or securing benefit. Since that is consistent with the view expressed in our earlier, third preliminary passage, I will take it that this is the overall point about benefit and correctness.

Let us focus, then, on what this argument tells us about intrinsic correctness in art. First, the examples used at the start of the argument [3a,b] remind us that correctness is a relational property. The healthy diet that the Athenian speaks of lies in a relation between nourishment and body. Nothing is said about whether this relation is assumed to be isomorphic, with a direct analogy between trophic and somatic properties, but Greek medical theory supports such an analogy.¹⁶ Similarly, the measure of correct learning, truth, involves a correlation between knowing and what is known. Here, clearly, the relation is isomorphic. Knowing (*gignôskein*) is correlated throughout the passage with what is (*ti esti, ousia*) by way of likeness ([12], [13], [14]).¹⁷

Next, the Athenian turns to correctness in the imitative arts ([4]-[8]). On one generally held account of Plato, he holds the naive view that art imitates originals by trying to *copy* them, shape for shape, colour for colour, proportion for proportion. At first sight, that seems to be exactly the view of the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* ([4], [7], [11]). He says that an imitation is correct if it reproduces the “quantity and quality” (*tosouton kai toiouton*, 667d6-7; cf. *hoson kai hoion*, 668b7) of the original, so that the “equal is equal and the symmetrical is symmetrical” (*ison ison ... to symmetron an eiê symmetron*, 668a2-3). In addition, the illustration he uses to make his meaning clear, seems obviously to have copying in mind. For the Stranger says that in a portrait of a man, it is important that the artist provide the image with “all the parts and colours and shapes” (668e8-669a1) of the original.

The illustration, however, is designed just to make plain the most basic idea of correctness in imitation. It deals with the most ordinary dime-a-dozen objects of sight (*kata tèn opsin hêmîn apeikasiai muriai*, 668d5). In fact, the remove from the musical arts (lyric, choral, tragic and comic productions) to painting involves a reduction from art of major cultural

importance to art of relatively little significance for the Athenian. In important works of art and poetry, the primary target of *mimêsis* is "the beautiful" (*tôi tou kalou mimêmati*, 668b2). In such cases, the Athenian says, just copying an object is not sufficient to create something beautiful, nor is recognising an accurate copy a sufficient condition for determining whether it is beautiful (669a2-7). Since correctness of imitation is supposed to lead directly to benefit and goodness and beauty (cf. *tên de orthotêta kai tên ôphelian kai to eu kai to kalôs*, 667c6-7), we cannot think of correct imitation as mere copying. This suggests a view about imitation that is more sophisticated than usually thought.

We can get a better appreciation of just how sophisticated the view is by examining the correlation, explicitly brought out towards the end of the argument, of correctness with essence (*ousia, ti esti*). In order to judge a work of art, poetry or indeed *anything*, says the Athenian, the critic must first *know* "what it is". On the crude view of imitation as copying, knowing "what it is" refers to identifying an element in a picture or poem or other work. To use the Athenian's own illustration, if a portrait is of a man, then knowing "what it is" is being able to identify *that* it is [a representation of] a man. Note that on this view, the painting of Pope Innocent X by Velazquez will seem more correct than the painting of a snail by Matisse, because it will be easy to identify the subject of the former as Pope Innocent X, while it will be difficult, from sight alone, even to identify the subject of that latter as an animal, let alone a snail.

Clearly this is too simple. It is like treating a painting as a kind of mug shot, to be used merely for purposes of identification. Even police have occasionally seen the flaw in this. Between 1912 and 1930, Sydney police eschewed the stark, metrical style of typical identification mug shots for portrait photography of criminals in natural light, natural dress, natural attitude. These photographs were recently exhibited in Sydney, where curator Peter Doyle remarked, "The photographers seem to have striven to record and reveal character and personal history as much as physical appearance."¹⁸ In so doing, they aimed less at copying and more at trying to know their subjects.

Merely copying something is a matter of rendering what you think

you see. A painter might copy expertly the form of a woman generally regarded as beautiful, as Xenophon says the Athenian painters did when they flocked to see Theodote.¹⁹ Let us imagine that one of them copies her exactly with all of the colours and shapes that appear to the eye, so that the painting becomes a marvel. Even so, according to the Athenian's standard of correctness, the correctness of the painting cannot depend on what one *thinks* (*dokei*, 668a1) is beautiful, but rather on what beauty really is. If Theodote is not really beautiful (as Xenophon suggests), then the painting so depicting her is incorrect.

We can see, then, that the idea of painting as copying is far too simple to satisfy the standard of correctness described in the *Laws*. The Athenian may, for the sake of his aesthetically inexperienced interlocutors (769b4-5), illustrate knowing "what it is" by analogy with identifying a painted thing, but he is explicit that the task of one who would not err is to *know*, of each [whole] work, "what it is" (cf. *kath' hekaston ge ... tôn poiêmatôn*, 667c4-5). There is clearly a difference between knowing the "what it is" of a work and identifying the "what it is" of an element *in* the work, even in the case where only a single element appears in a painting. To understand a painting of a man as a *portrait* is quite a different thing from identifying the object *in* the painting as a man. As soon as we understand this, we see Velazquez's *Innocent X* as much more than a mug shot. Only when we understand this do we see Matisse's *Snail* as art.

Paintings may be complex, with many individual elements organised into an overall unity. This is particularly true of Greek vase painting, which involved complex narratives. But poetry, especially epic and tragedy, could reasonably be said to be far more complex. The *Iliad*, for example, begins with "Rage" (*Mênên*) as its direct object—the goddess is asked to "Sing rage" (*Mênên aeide, thea*). If rage were the "what it is" of the *Iliad*, then the *mimêsis* of rage in its verse is not even possibly a matter of simple copying. The *Iliad* would be a very poor work if it were just a series of accurate descriptions of angry Achilles. To show what rage really is, it must show what rage does to a man, how it affects his relationships, how it relates to his other emotions, and much more besides.

There is evidence in the *Laws* that the Athenian does intend knowing

“what it is” to be more than the simple identification of a copied element in a work. For in the passage in which he speaks about knowing “what [a work] is” ([12] above), he glosses that as “what it wants and what it is really a likeness of” (*ti pote bouletai kai hotou pot' estin eikôn ontôs*, 668c6). It is reasonable to assume that in speaking of “what it wants”, the Athenian is referring to the intention of the work,²⁰ and in speaking of “what it is really a likeness of” he is referring to what Danto called its “aboutness”. Indeed, Danto’s view that “Works of art are representations, not necessarily in the old sense of resembling their subjects, but in the more extended sense that it is always legitimate to ask what they are about,”²¹ seems to be little more than a recapitulation of what the Athenian says in the *Laws*.

IV. Correctness as a Philosophical Standard

If this is a fair interpretation of the argument in *Laws* II.667-669, then Plato’s standard of art is not, as is sometimes thought, a moral standard. The intrinsic correctness of art is not at all determined by moral criteria, but by how perfectly the artwork represents what it is about. However, because so much art—and particularly poetry, choral works, and drama—deals with moral matters, the standard of correctness has immediate moral implications. And some of these implications depend on substantive philosophical views.

For example, suppose a film-maker or a novelist successfully portrays evil characters in a seductive way. Many people think that Leni Riefenstahl did this with Hitler in *Triumph des Willens*, or that Georges Bataille did it with the fictional characters Simone and Lord Edmund in *Histoire de l'oeil*. If it is the case that evil really is seductive, then this aspect of their productions will be intrinsically correct. Whether or not viewers or readers appreciate this is a separate matter, with its own separate moral implications. They might confuse seduction with good, something the Athenian would consider a mistake, but that would be their failing, not a failing of the artist. On the other hand, if an accurate understanding of evil shows that it is not genuinely seductive, then to make it appear so is an artistic failing. An enormous range of subtlety is available in between: a novelist could make evil appear *apparently* seductive but not

really so, and that might be correct. What this indicates, however, is the necessity of understanding both the nature of evil and what the novelist actually shows. Both of these are philosophical tasks, about which there can be much discussion. Both involve *seeing what you think*, rather than merely identifying *what you think you see*. On this view, Plato's standard of correctness, is a opening for philosophical discussion of the arts, not a bar for ruling out any particular content. All art that portrays good so that its goodness can be seen and appreciated, and evil so that its evil can be seen and 'depreciated', is correct art.

There is a caveat, however. On the theory of the *Laws*, the person who makes art, the actor who performs it, the critic, and the spectator, must all, in order to be safe, have a correct alignment between their feelings and the *inner character* of the subject matter. A person who feels disgust, perhaps, or shame (or both) at the sight of Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Children*, or the conclusion of Luis Bunuel's *L'âge d'or* is unlikely to be adversely affected by them. But someone who derives secret pleasure from them will. The Athenian insists that this correlation necessarily affects character:

One presumably? Is not his case inevitably the same as that of one who views the evil characters of bad companions in real life not with disgust, but with enjoyment, condemning their actions in a playful fashion, like one not awake to their vileness (oneirôttôn autou tèn mochthêrian)? In such a case it is, surely, inevitable that a man should grow like whatever he enjoys, whether good or bad, even though he may be ashamed to approve it. The result is absolutely inevitable--and what result could we call more momentous for good or evil? (656b1-7, trans. Taylor)

Here we can see that incorrect alignment of feeling with inner character is a result of ignorance. The person corrupted by evil companions is asleep, oblivious to the reality that surrounds him. Presumably, if he had an understanding of the inner character of his associates, he would revile them. As a second-best alternative, if he were habituated to feeling disgust towards such people, his interaction with them would be correct despite his lack of understanding.

Much of the *Laws* is about the establishment of institutions for achieving this second-best alternative. Out of abundant prudence, morally

ambiguous works are to be censored in favour of works portraying good men and good deeds:

In the same fashion a true lawgiver likewise will persuade, or if persuasion fails, will compel, the man of poetic gifts to compose as he ought, to employ his noble and fine-filed phrases to represent by their rhythms the bearing, and by their melodies the strains, of men who are pure, valiant, and, in a word, good. (660a4-8, trans. Taylor)

The conservative curriculum for the arts described in Book VII rigorously follows this advice. Poets will not be allowed to compose works that conflict with the city's conventional wisdom (801d). Censors will judge compositions, accepting works based on good representation and rejecting works based on bad (812c). They will often recommend that compositions be revised. Importantly they will not defer to the poets' pleasures and desires (*hêdonais kai epithumiais*), but to the more reasoned judgment of the lawgiver (802c). All of this is designed to base the selection of works on reasoned decision about their intrinsic correctness rather than on the emotional receptivities of an ignorant audience. Philosophy is to be the ultimate judge of correct art; as a second-best, law and time-tested tradition will do.

We might expect such a conservative society to produce an abundance of literary pap, of the sort found in Polonius' advice to Laertes in "to thine own self be true" (*Hamlet* I.iii.59-80), rather than the sort of soul-searching, remorseful exposé of sexuality found in Nabokov's *Lolita*. In fact, however, the Athenian is hopeful that philosophical works should replace more familiar genres (811c-812a), and that ultimately the serious pursuit of the finest and best life, which is philosophy, will be recognised as the most genuine tragedy (817b). Conservatism is a feature of the political and cultural theory of the *Laws*, not of its philosophical theory.

V. Implications of Correctness for Plato's Theory of Art

I said at the beginning that I would return to descriptions of art in the *Republic* and *Critias*, with a view towards explaining how they might be consistent with the standard of correctness described in the *Laws*. If I am right that intrinsic correctness in art is a matter of correspondence

between a production and the essential character of its object, then the descriptions in the *Republic* and *Critias* are misleading. Both passages seem quite straightforward, however.

The *Republic* informs us that it would be wrong to paint eyes purple on the isomorphic principle that the best parts should be painted with the best colours. Likewise, it would seem wrong to paint a green stripe down the middle of a face to arbitrate, say, between essential personality and public appearance. Rather, eyes should be painted to look like eyes, and faces should be painted to look like faces. Similarly, the *Critias* tells us that "daily familiar observation" is sufficient ground to find fault with a portrait that falls short of looking exactly like its subject.

Thus, these passages seem inconsistent with the view of correctness I have argued for in the *Laws*. But we need not take these passages so literally. They are, after all, offered as illustrations of more abstract points, just as the illustration of portraiture in the *Laws* was. In the *Republic*, the point of the illustration is to show the importance of a beautiful arrangement of the whole rather than the beautiful depiction of just one part. In the *Critias*, the point is to excuse the inexactness of Critias' speech, by analogy with the inexactness we accept in scene painting, whose elements are relatively distant from us.

I think that both passages have been read too literally by aestheticians and critics of Plato. A more general appreciation of their import reveals elements consistent with the view of correctness in the *Laws*. For example, in the *Republic*, Socrates insists that in painting, pigments should be assigned which are proper to each element. So, perhaps, if the "what it is" of a painting is an eye it should be made to look like an eye. But if the "what it is" of the painting is an expression of the divide between inner and outer, a green stripe down the face might be exactly what is called for. It is the expression of the "what it is" of the *whole work*, after all, that is important.

In the *Critias*, the main thing that is emphasised is that inexact knowledge correlates with inexact expression. But this is exactly what we would expect the theory of the *Laws* to tell us. What is needed is daily familiar observation with the subjects of one's compositions. Only

by getting to know those subjects as they really are, will one be able to display them correctly. That is the work of philosophy.

Notes

- 1 "New Art is True Art" ll. 1-6, in Perelman, S. J. and Nash, Ogden, *One Touch of Venus*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1944.
- 2 To avoid contention over the terms "old master" and "true art" I have used examples from artists explicitly named in these respective categories in *One Touch of Venus*. I have also chosen paintings that I think should be immediately familiar to readers, although admittedly the particular paintings chosen for comparison contrast far more than others that might be chosen.
- 3 See *Ion* 537-541.
- 4 See *Republic* 377e, 597e, *Phaedrus*, *Theaetetus* 144e, *Sophist* 235e, cf. 266d, *Statesman* 311e, *Laws* 667d.
- 5 Indeed, Plato sometimes criticises artists when they paint things simply as they appear (whether to themselves or to others) rather than according to their essential character. See *Republic* 598b, 602 ff.; *Sophist* 236a; cf. *Theaetetus* 208e.
- 6 I think it is likely that when Whitelaw Savory says that liberated artists painted "what they saw they thought" he means something much more subjective than Plato would like. Savory is probably referring to the expression of inward feelings and ideas. I doubt whether such subjective representation would gain much greater approval from Plato than realism. A strong reinterpretation of "saw they thought", however, as "really saw the real objects of thought", suits Plato much better.
- 7 The stem *orth-* occurs 367 times in the *Laws*, mostly (209) in the adverb *orthôs* and then next most frequently (118) in the adjective forms *orthos*, *orthê*, *orthon*, including comparative and superlative forms *orthoteron* and *orthotaton*. In many of these cases the use has no apparent thematic significance (e.g. in the common response *orthôs legeis*). Nevertheless, there are exceptions, e.g. *orthôs* 653c7, 654d7, 655a8, 655b1, discussed below (see also *orthos* in the passage on dancing in Book VII.814-816). The verb forms *diorthoô*, *epanorthoô*, *anorthoô*, *katorthoô*, and *exorthoô* occur 19 times (collectively), and among these *epanorthoô*, "to amend", is the most frequently occurring (11). *Epanorthoô* is a particularly significant term for Plato's analogy between law and painting (VI.769-772), and, insofar as it describes the process by which a painting is improved according to a standard of correctness, is relevant to our investigation. But the discussion in Book VI involves too many additional issues to be treated here. *Orthotês* occurs 21 times in various forms, mostly in Book II (10), and there predominantly in the section between 655-670 (7), which is concerned with the standard of correctness in mimetic arts. Other occurrences of *orthotês* are widely distributed. See *Laws* I.627d3, 642a4; III.700e2; IV.721a7; V.733a6, 734d7; VII.80e1; VIII.841b6, 847e3, IX.853b6; XI.931b1.
- 8 Indeed, the first occurrence of *orthotês* in the *Laws* (I.627d3), though not directly related to the subject of art, apparently does have ethical connotations. There, in discussing the paradoxical phrases "inferior to itself" (*hêttôn autês*) and "superior to itself" (*kreittôn autês*), the Athenian asserts that it is not for the sake of the gracefulness and ungracefulness of phrases (*euschêmosunês te kai aschêmomusunês rhêmatôn*) that they are investigating, but correctness and fault in regard to laws (*orthotêtos te kai hamartias peri nomôn*). It is interesting to note here that *orthotês* is actually contrasted with the aesthetic standard of grace and decorum, and associated with the ethical dimension of fault in *hamartia*.
- 9 The term *mousikê* comes closer to meaning 'art' than any other term in Plato; hence, I have tried to translate it as 'art' wherever possible. But there are places where the discussion is specifically about melody or harmony where the specific term 'music' is more appropriate. One must keep

- in mind, however, that even where the term 'musician' is used, the person so described will have been educated in all forms of poetry as well as music and dance, i.e. not merely a musician in our sense.
- 10 The idea expressed here was clearly of great importance to Plato and the Academy. Indeed, Aristotle paraphrases it when introducing his account of moral habituation at *Nicomachean Ethics* II.3.1104b11-13: "Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; for this is the right education (*hê orthê paideia*)" (Trans. Ross). Although Aristotle departs from Plato's terminology generally, he retains the crucial phrase *hê orthê paidei* for the correspondence of feelings and their proper objects.
 - 11 Isomorphism seems to be implied in artistic correctness throughout the *Laws*. For example, correct music produces notes that are of the same pitch as the words being sung (812d), and correct dancing uses grand movements to represent graceful people, and unsightly movements to represent disreputable people (814e). Songs for men and women are to be composed differently to reflect the differences in their nature (802e), and even particular movements of the limbs in a dance should be isomorphically aligned to the character of the act performed (e.g. noble characters should be portrayed with straight posture, 815b).
 - 12 Interestingly, he says that the chorus-master's term "well coloured" (*euchrôn*, 655a7) is not applied correctly to harmonies and rhythms. Apparently, this is because in the terms "harmonious" and "rhythmic" there are isomorphic correlates to rhythm and harmony, but "well coloured" has no such correlation. The point is obscure, however. Is it because rhythm and harmony are two different things, so that "well coloured" couldn't possibly bear an isomorphic correlation to both? Or is it that the term "well coloured" is the wrong *sort* of term to correlate with harmony and rhythm?
 - 13 In 660a, "composing correctly" (*poiounta orthôs*, 660a8) requires matching appropriate language, choreography and music to depictions of "temperate, brave, and completely good men" (*sôphronôn te kai andreïôn kai pantôs agathôn andrôn*, 660a6-7).
 - 14 In Plato's later dialogues philosophers are regularly described as god-like men. See, for example, *Sophist* 216b-c, *Philebus* 33b (cf. 18b), *Timaeus* 90a-e (cf. 51e5-6, 53d6-7), *Phaedrus* 239c.
 - 15 The Athenian employs an obscure distinction between charm (*charis*) and pleasure (*hêdonê*). Careful reading reveals that 'charm' is always associated with adventitious delight (cf. *sumparepetai*). Any pleasure that accompanies, in an incidental way, some other value, such as correctness, or benefit, or goodness, or nobility, can also be called charming. But there is a context where pleasure is not adventitious; in "free play" (*paideian ge*, 667e6) pleasure is the *only* thing aimed at. Such disinterested delight is merely pleasant, and is the criterion for aesthetic judgment in all cases where correctness or benefit are not pertinent. Here there is an intriguing similarity of thinking between Plato and Kant. Both think that charm, or adventitious interest, cannot be a basis for aesthetic judgment, and both think that a certain kind of pleasure, and indeed play, *do* provide a basis for pure aesthetic judgment, namely that pleasure or play which is not connected to any interest. In the *Laws*, however, pure aesthetic judgment is deemed trivial, while it is of the greatest importance for Kant. See *Critique of Judgement* §§1-14.
 - 16 It is interesting that the Athenian had already spoken about "correctly habituating" (*orthôs ethizôntai*, 660a3) people to good diet, by preparing healthy foods with pleasant tastes and unhealthy foods with disgusting ones. Recall that this correlation of pleasure and pain with good and bad was precisely his aim in establishing the correct education.
 - 17 See *gignôskô*, *diagignôskô* (668c4, c6, c8, d1, e4, e7; 669a3, a6, b1) in connection with *esti*, *ousia* (668c5, c6, c7; 668e1, e5; 669a9).
 - 18 *City of shadows: inner city crime & mayhem 1912-1948* was on at Justice & Police Museum, Sydney, 19 November 2005-11 February 2007.



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19 See Xenophon, *Memorabilia* III.11.

20 Bury actually translates *ti pote bouletai* as 'what its intention is'; see R. G. Bury, trans., *Plato X. Laws 1-6*, Harvard: 1926, p. 143. Note that the Athenian does not speak of the intention of the artist, but the intention of the work. The distinction between intentions of the work and intentions of the artist is an important one in contemporary aesthetics; see Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: 1984), p. 13.

21 Danto, Arthur. C., "Art, Philosophy, and the Philosophy of Art" in *Humanities*, 4 (1983), 1-2, paragraph 8. Notice that in speaking of "the old sense of resembling their subjects" Danto extends, to his own advantage, the common historical prejudice against traditional theories of *mimêsis*.

