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## Review

# Poetic Justice: Rereading Plato's Republic

Jill Frank

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In her landmark work, *Poetic Justice: Rereading Plato's Republic*, Jill Frank makes a series of what will certainly be read as deeply controversial claims. Frank maintains that Plato's *Republic* enacts and endorses a reading practice that provides a political and ethical education in self-governance. In order to see this, we need to engage with the *Republic* as it presents itself, namely, as a representation at a third remove from the truth as per the definition of *mimēsis* in *Republic* 10. The skilled reading enacted by the *Republic* is not simply a practice of *logos* (speech and reason) but also intimately bound with appearance and *aisthēsis* (the sensation of particulars), namely, aesthetics. The *Republic*, in its self-conscious presentation of itself as a mimetic image, thereby disavows the authority of philosophy as the only authentic discourse, and instead, opens up a different practice of authority that is decisively democratic in spirit. I will return to the political implications of these claims later. But first, the only way through all of this controversy, as the claims themselves suggest, is to read.

In Chapters 1 and 2, Frank examines the *Republic's* use of the Greek *poikilon*, which signifies complexity, variety, plurality, and also beauty, and is usually understood to be subversive to philosophic virtue and central to the *Republic's* 'quarrel' with poetry: Socrates uses the word to describe the characters of the banned mimetic poetry in *Republic* 10, and to designate what is effaced in the ideal city by the censoring of poetry and music in the early education of the guardians (*Republic* 2–3). But Frank argues that, whereas the *Republic* condemns any *mimēsis* that invites *identification* between things as they truly are and things as they appear, the text endorses, and in fact enacts, a mimetic practice that encourages *disidentification* between truth and appearance. *Poikilia* features importantly in the distinction (pp. 38–44).

When Socrates describes the stars, poetic characters, political constitutions, or the soul as *poikilia*, he prompts a mode of reflection about those images that depends 'not on imitating what appears [or] on knowing a stable, universal truth beyond appearance' (p. 40) but instead, on perceiving those images as appearances



and thereby always ‘false to true reality’ (p. 70). Variegated, intricate, beautiful and false, mimetic representations do their work in the register of sense-perception, and experience, and ‘prompt attention to gaps between truth and representation’ (p. 65). Representations invite reflection on what is made to appear and what is not made to appear. Frank calls this mode of reflection ‘imagination’ (p. 40) and argues that through it mimetic knowledge is cultivated and formed.

In Chapter 3, Frank shows that the *Republic* prompts mimetic disidentification through the staging of failures and intentional deceptions. Here, the focus is on the early educational curricula of the ideal city in *Republic* 2–5, which is meant to produce the courage, moderation and justice required of perfect guardians. For Socrates’ interlocutors – and most readers of the *Republic* – the education succeeds. But Frank shows that Socrates repeatedly refers to this success as a deception (the Greek word *mēchanē*, pp. 88, 100, 107–108) and that the ethical failures of the education are in fact prefigured in the city’s founding institutions: although the guardians are guaranteed to be good by the laws that govern them, those laws must ‘twice be secured against injustice’ (p. 95), once by the noble lie and again by the communism of the ideal city. Glaucon and Adeimantus, Frank points out, do not wonder why the guardians, successfully educated to goodness, require these and other constraints. But we might. On Frank’s account, Plato stages these and other failures in order to prompt the reader to disidentify with the dialogue’s characters, and in so doing, ‘wonder about the questions and topics about which the characters do not wonder’ (p. 137). The mimetic pedagogy of the *Republic* thereby also develops capacities in the reader to see *in* and *through* deceptions, and as Frank shows in Chapter 4, to ‘call persuasive lies to account’ (p. 18).

Whereas scholars typically read Plato as being antipersuasion, Frank reads the *Republic* as ‘developing and also performing a practice of persuasion as “internally persuasive” discourse harnessed to philosophy’ (p. 114). Here, she sees the grammatical possibility offered by the ancient Greek ‘middle voice’ (p. 122) verb form. Middle voice persuasion is difficult to discern because it looks exactly like the passive voice (the Greek *peithesthai*), but is crucial to the distinction between persuasion and obedience. When the middle voice is used, the subject of the verb is seen as acting upon itself: to be persuaded requires that the ‘persuadees participate in their own persuasion’ (p. 127). Whereas modalities of force and deception in speech may secure obedience, they will always fail to truly persuade insofar as they compromise the very condition of true persuasion, made possible by the middle voice. The *Republic*, Frank shows, is thereby not antipersuasion, but a mimetic representation of nonpersuasion that stages the ethical and political failures of mistaking deception and force in language for true persuasion.

In Chapter 5, Frank notes that the *Republic* presents *eros* as a problem for ethics, politics, and philosophy: Socrates names it the ‘internal tyrant’ and bans the mimetic poets from the ideal city because their poetry ‘emancipates *eros*’ (p. 142). But the dialogue also offers an *eros* oriented to truth, tethered by virtue, wisdom



and/or reason, and seemingly distinctly philosophical. Scholars are thereby tempted to read the *Republic* as seeking to limit (purge, transform, sublimate, or control) *eros* to render it safe for philosophy, ethics, and politics. But for Frank, *eros* can never be made safe precisely because ‘philosophic *eros* bears in itself the risks of everything from which is differentiated’ (p. 169). Those risks, Frank shows, are brought to appearance in the *Symposium*, where the staged failures of *eros* as ‘a possessive and instrumental practice’ (p. 163) in the symposiasts’ speeches condition and enact an *eros* that is ‘to be forever in desire in relation to things that can never be fully or entirely possessed’ (p. 167). *Eros* must court its own risks insofar as its satisfaction – whether honor, power, immortality or knowledge – would also necessarily be its end (p. 155). The *Symposium* shows that there is no route to this understanding of *eros* except in the failed experiences of our desire for particular beautiful and good things. On Frank’s accounting, this *eros* orients to philosophy precisely because it is constituted by the same ‘necessary absence’ (p. 166) and perceptual practices that induce the perplexity (*aporia*) that provokes philosophic wonder.

In Chapter 6, Frank therefore shows that, unlike those for whom the *Republic*’s treatment of matters aesthetic positions sensation as a rival to *logos*, perceptual experiences also do ‘constitutive work’ (p. 173) in the *logos* of philosophical dialectics. Through an engagement with the *Theaetetus*, Frank shows that noetic intellection and rational calculation are inadequate to the practice of philosophy oriented to ethical and political matters, even as it is made to appear in the *Republic*. Instead, she reads both dialogues as ‘marrying’ practical wisdom (*phronesis*) to philosophy: an orientation of the soul toward particular things and not abstracted from them. Similarly to *its* erotic counterpart, this mode of knowing requires that it fails to achieve what it seeks: the philosophic failures made to appear in the *Republic* are failures of *phronesis*, namely, of ‘truly noticing the things of sense perception’ (p. 179).

Reading the *Republic* in this way makes possible what Socrates calls ‘the most beautiful justice’ and what Frank labels ‘poetic justice’ (p. 215). This justice, whose formulation is attributed to the poet Simonides in *Republic* 1, ‘seeks to give to each what is owed’ (p. 215) and thereby requires that we orient to particulars (*phronesis*) so as to ‘render to each what is fitting to *them*’ (p. 217). Significantly, it brings to appearance middle voice persuasion, which is only possible through an attention to particulars, and serves to underscore that justice is nothing ‘we can hold apart from our own activity’ (p. 217) because it depends on mimetic knowledge. If the *Republic*’s mimetic pedagogy is thereby a practice of self-authorization, we might then understand poetic justice to be a condition of self-governance ‘by way of the always fallible authority of one’s own experiences, perceptions, opinions, imagination and conversations’ (p. 224).

It is not difficult to see why scholars might take issue with *Poetic Justice*. The breadth and depth of Frank’s claims, to which this review can only partially and



briefly attend, are startling and deeply original. I have tried to show how Frank's reading brings to appearance a *Republic* conditioned by failures and inconsistencies, in which *logos* is intimately connected to sense-perception, and whose engagement depends critically and self-consciously on mimetic poetry, persuasion, and *eros*. What is striking about Frank's book is not simply that she uncovers a *Republic* with which most of us will be unfamiliar, but that she does so by refusing all manner of theoretical, political, or interpretive posture, in favor of simply reading. That reading – attentive, careful, slow, and thorough – takes the *Republic* for what *it* presents itself to be, namely, not a copy of an original but a complex and varied mimetic representation that invites critical re-reading. Frank shows this reading practice to dislodge our modern interpretive commitments to Plato, including, as her careful engagement with extensive secondary literature shows, our presumptions regarding the political and philosophical authority of the *Republic*. What is brought to appearance instead is a text whose radical critique of all authority – elite, tyrannical, philosophical, as well as the authority of democratic Athens – is itself deeply democratic in spirit, and makes possible for us, contemporary readers of Plato, a reimagining of our own democratic authority.

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