

William K. MARTIN¹

Beder University

Plato, Aristotle and The Arts

Abstract

The “big questions” regarding the nature of our human existence have been addressed by religions and philosophers from time immemorial. Concomitant with these questions has been the great debate regarding the worth of literature and the arts. After a short review of the “big questions,” this essay considers the opposing viewpoints of two great philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, in their assessments of the worth of the Arts.

Before I returned to academic life, I made a successful career as a capitalist; a very successful career. And it took me far too long to adequately consider the question, “Who am I?” It was almost an epiphany – it was unsettling to realize that I was not the five- or six-hundred square meter house I lived in, my gated community, the four or five cars in the driveway, or the 8000-euro piano in the living room. None of this got me closer to what it meant to be human, of living a life worthwhile. And certainly “Who am I?” is not sufficiently answered with my bachelor, graduate, and PhD diplomas framed on my office wall.

It was late in life that I realized how the benefits of literature and the arts would assist in bringing meaning.

The paper concludes with an explanation of how literature can play a significant role in assisting each of us to better understand our place in this world.

Key terms: *“the big questions”, “Who am I?”, “What is truth?”, meaning of life, Plato, Aristotle, arts, literature.*

¹ William K. MARTIN PhD
Beder University

The big questions in life have likely been around since advent of humankind on this small planet. And I would suspect that every man or woman has taken the time to ponder these questions at one time or another in the span of their life. Those whose foundation in life rests on faith or religion can take some satisfaction that most religions offer some relief: Where did I come from? Who am I? Why am I here? How should I live? Where am I going? By another short list, it is plain that philosophy, to a degree, addresses some of these same questions: What is the meaning of life? What is truth? And how should I live as a responsible individual?

It is interesting to note that after Pilate heard the charges against Jesus of Nazareth, he had one question: “What is truth?” And then he walked away without waiting for an answer. Pilate considered the question unanswerable, relative, and brushed off both the question and the answer as unimportant. However, four hundred years before Christ, Plato posited that our understanding of what was true was the most important consideration we could have as individuals. In his famous “Allegory of the Cave,” he made the argument that all of us are living in a counterfeit world, we are living a lie, that there is another world, another realm of perfection of things, ideas, emotions – perfections he imagined in this unseen world which he called Forms. What was true, he said, could only be found in these eternal Forms. Regarding human behavior, he insisted that it was critical that we focus on the perfect, as it were, the perfect Form – for example, the true Form or nature of love, friendship, family ... Plato considered that Poetry or Art was one the greatest obstructions to our focus on what was true. In the end, he rejected Art – insisting that Art was simply another counterfeit of truth.

Plato charged that the poet imitates the true idea of love, for example, and then reader or listener, takes this imitation and counterfeits again with his/her own response. Thus, the poem or art is thrice-removed from the true Form which it purports to represent: from the true, perfect Form, to the poet, to the poem, and finally to the reader. Much like that old game of telephone, where the beginning message is true, but ends up garbled after it is passed on from one person to another. Considering the damage done by artists and poets, in his *Republic*, he famously said that he would banish all poets from his ideal community.

This brings us to the great debate which has been going on now for over twenty-four-hundred years, and it is this debate which is the topic of these remarks: What is the worth of Art? The worth of Literature? The worth of Liberal Arts? Especially so in this age of advancement and technology.

His student Aristotle took exception to Plato in this regard. Aristotle, argued that Art gives something more which is absent in the actual. While a poet creates something less than reality, he creates something more as well. While we can look up the definition of love or honesty in the dictionary, that hardly tells us how we experience love or how to be an honest person. For Aristotle, Art exalts, idealizes and imaginatively recreates a world which has its own meaning and beauty. While he agreed with Plato that Art is an imitation, he says, it does not take us away from the Truth. Art leads us to the essential realities of life.

At the center of Raphael's painting, *The School of Athens*, Plato and Aristotle catch our eyes immediately: While Plato is looking up, to the perfect Forms, Aristotle is pointing out to the world, the world in which we live. As with Aristotle, I am not rejecting the sciences, the advancements in technology, medicine, or communication – I derive great benefit and I greatly appreciate living in this age. But again, perhaps we fail to give adequate attention to other opportunities which can enable us to understand what it means to be human. I go back to the question, the debate: “What is the worth of Art regarding our human condition?”

Let me just share some moments in my classroom discussions from this last year and how art can elevate us and our students beyond Plato's simple focus on Forms. A close examination of Diego Rivera's *The Flower Carrier* reveals the almost criminal disparity between the haves and have-nots; Sylvia Plath's “Metaphor” gives the reader a better sense of a woman in her pregnancy; Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* illustrates the worth of friendship in the most dire situations; Shakespeare's *Othello* painfully narrates the consequences of lies, manipulation and the tragedy of jealousy; Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, lost innocence and the futility of war; Picasso's *Guernica* gives a stark representation of war and its horrors; Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun and Other Palestinian Stories* gives its readers, especially Western readers, a better understanding of the tragedy in Palestinian relocation and alienation; and finally, Shirley Jackson's “The Lottery” disturbingly communicates the danger of blindly following tradition.

One of the reasons that prompted these remarks is that I recently attended an informational meeting on a university in another European state. It was a great meeting and I recognized the great opportunities this school offered. But the one thing that got my immediate attention was that in this higher education institution, offering scores of undergraduate and graduate degrees in business, law, finance and technology – there were no offerings in liberal education – nothing in the arts, literature, or philosophy. I understand this – we live in the time of amazing technological

and informational advancements. And to be blunt, I recognize that that's where the money is. But I wondered how the minimizing or the elimination of liberal education requirements lends itself in answering the "big questions": Who am I? Why am I here? How should I live? What is the meaning of life? Or simply put, what does it mean to be human? I recall a line from Martha C. Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity* (MARTHA, 1998) in defense of a liberal arts education, "a higher education that is a cultivation of the whole human being for the functions of citizenship and life generally." Before I returned to academic life, I made a successful career as a capitalist; a very successful career. And it took me far too long to adequately consider the question, "Who am I?" It was almost an epiphany – it was unsettling to realize that I was not the five- or six-hundred square meter house I lived in, my gated community, the four or five cars in the driveway, or the 8000-euro piano in the living room. None of this got me closer to what it meant to be human, of living a life worthwhile. And certainly "Who am I?" is not sufficiently answered with my bachelor, graduate, and PhD diplomas framed on my office wall.

It was late in life that I realized how the benefits of literature and the arts would assist in bringing meaning. Not to put too fine of a point on it, now in my second career, I teach literature. And every piece of literature I pick up or discuss with my students, brings me closer to what it means to be part of humanity. I gain empathy for my fellow travelers; I gain a better understanding of what I am doing here. Yes, Plato was correct in saying that literature and the arts are two or three times removed from his Forms of perfection, perhaps the perfection from where we came or to where we hope to go. But as Aristotle emphasized, we live in this world, and it is in this world in which we live and our place in it that is worth examining. Again, I am not rejecting the sciences, the advancements in technology, medicine, or communication, but we ignore at great risk to ourselves and to others if we have not answered these questions: What am I doing here? Who am I? How should I treat myself, my family, my colleagues, my world? At the end of my life, will I have done any good? Literature and art enable us to think about and ponder these matters.

Let me close with this final thought from Plato's beloved teacher and mentor. Socrates said, "An unexamined life is not worth living." And I get it, I hate exams, too. And self-examination is probably the toughest exam we will ever take. In the words of Tiny Tim, from one of my favorite pieces of literature, "God bless us all; every one of us" as we consider our separate and connected journeys.

Selected BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Armstrong, Angus. "Aristotle's Theory of Poetry." *Greece & Rome* 10.30 (May 1941): 120-125.

Belfiore, Elizabeth. "A Theory of Imitation in Plato's *Republic*." *Transactions of the American Philological Association (1974-2014)* 114 (1984): 121-146.

Brownson, Carleton L. "Reasons for Plato's Hostility to the Poets." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 28 (1897): 5-41.

Cohn, Robert Greer, and Robert Conquest. "The Humanities, in Memoriam." *Academic Questions* 8.1 (1994): 60.

Deneen, Patrick J. "Science and the Decline of the Liberal Arts." *The New Atlantis* 26 (2009): 60-68.

Duncan, Thomas Shearer. "Plato and Poetry." *The Classical Journal* 40.8 (May 1945): 481-494.

Edman, Irwin. "Poetry and Truth in Plato." *The Journal of Philosophy* 33.22 (Oct. 22, 1936): 605-609.

Frank, Erich. "The Fundamental Opposition of Plato and Aristotle." *The American Journal of Philology* 61.2 (1940): 166-185.

Gulley, Norman. "Plato on Poetry." *Greece & Rome* 24.2 (Oct. 1977): 154-169.

Ikpe, Ibanga B. "The Decline of the Humanities and the Decline of Society." *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 62.142 (2015): 50-66.

James, David N. "The Acquisition of Virtue." *The Personalist Forum* 2.2 (1986): 101-121.

Ketchum, Richard J. "Paradigms and the Form of the Good." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 11.1 (Jan. 1994): 1-21.

Lindsay, James. "Aristotle and the Criterion of Truth." *The Monist* 31.3 (Jul. 1921): 470-475.

McCormick, Kathleen. "Finding Hope in the Humanities." *College Literature* 28.3 (2001): 129-140.

Nehamas, Alexander. "Plato the Imperfections of the Sensible World." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 12.2 (Apr. 1975): 105-117.

Nussbaum, Martha C. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Olafson, Frederick A. "Philosophy and the Humanities." *The Monist* 52.1 (1968): 28-45.

Partee, Morriss Henry. "Plato's Banishment of Poetry." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29.2 (Winter 1970): 209-222.

Rees, B. R. "Aristotle's Approach to Poetry." *Greece & Rome* 28.1 (Apr. 1981): 23-39.

Wilson, J. Q. "The Humanities, in Memoriam." *Academic Questions* 8.1 (1994): 60-66.