The I'Jaz in Plato's *Republic*

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This paper compares Plato's aestheticism, as shown through the literary aspects of his dialogues, to Qur'anic aestheticism. In doing so, I argue that the philosophical attitude underlying Plato's works is as unquestioned as the imitability of the Qur'an.

As with Plato's other philosophical dialogues, Plato's *Republic* represents a style of philosophy that is deeply tied to its literary medium. While Plato's vision of philosophy is inherently poetic, his understanding of poetry is inherently philosophical. In fact, to go one step further, Plato's aesthetic aspirations for philosophy made philosophy a kind of lifestyle, an active engagement on the part of the philosopher. This vision of aestheticism for philosophy has since fallen out of favour with the growing popularity of analytic philosophy, or a style of philosophy that prioritizes obtaining conceptual clarity via utilizing language tools such as predicate logic and very basic English. A comparison to a field in which aesthetics is still highly-prized—namely, the exegesis of the *Qur'an* as a framework of literary analysis—can suggest a new a way of doing philosophy.

The *Qur'an* may seem like a strange choice of comparison, given its religious stance. It is based on the concept of *i'jaz*, or the inimitability of the *Qur'an*, as the spoken word of God. As the foundation of Islamic faith, the key to *i'jaz* is its unquestionable nature. Indeed, though Islam scholars such as al-Baqillani, al-Jurjani and AI-Rummani may take different approaches to understanding the *i'jaz* of the *Qur'an*, the foundation of this inimitability is something that is implicitly agreed upon. When applied to *Republic*, then, the idea of an unquestioned foundation—the *i'jaz* of *Republic*—is counter-intuitive, especially when going by a layman's understanding of Platonic philosophy as being modelled after the Socratic method of questioning, which challenges the grounds upon which all of our knowledge is built. In this essay, I challenge the notion that Platonic philosophy challenges all assumptions and general knowledge. I argue that the foundation of Plato's philosophy as exemplified in *Republic* is an aesthetic aspiration that is as unquestioned and inimitable as the *i'jaz* of the *Qur'an*. In this manner, a reading of *Republic* is an encounter with the philosophical lifestyle Plato advocates just as the *Qur'an* is an encounter with God when taken in its entirety.

To begin, *i'jaz* signifies "the uniqueness and miraculous inimitability of the *Qur'an*, in form, language, style, and content as a revealed part of God's eternal speech" and is "the most miraculous proof of the Prophet Muhammad's mission"[1]. Simply, *i'jaz* arises due to it being God's word. It is the Truth (*haqiqa*), and this *haqiaa* marks the superiority of the *Qur'an* to all other Arabic literature in existence: "In its entirety the *Qur'an* constitutes the quintessence of beautiful rhetoric"[2], expressing eloquence of the highest form which is "impossible to attain by either the Arabs or the non-Arabs, in the same manner that satirical poetry is impossible (that is, to the silenced poet)"[3]. As al-Rummani specifies, the *Qur'an* belongs to "that category of the highest level [which] is miraculously inimitable (*mu'jiz*)"[4], while "the eloquence beneath that level lies in the realm of the (humanly) possible (*mumkin*) as does the eloquence of the people deemed notable for this attribute"[5]. Despite this unbridgeable gap between the eloquence of the *Qur'an* and human attempts at creating the same beautiful eloquence caused by *i'jaz*, *i'jaz* remains an ideal and a form of perfection that needs to be understood to obtain spiritual wealth. This drive to understand naturally encourages debate and discussion from Islamic scholars such as al-Rummani, al-Baqillani and al-Jurjani. These three

[1] al-Rummani 1987, 102

[2] al-Rummani 1987, 105

[3] al-Rummani 1987, 105

[4] ibid

[5] ibid

came from different backgrounds: al-Rummani, for one, was primarily a grammarian and rhetorician who expounded on the effectiveness of the *Qur'an's* literary aestheticism. Similarly, al-Jurjani was a literary theorist and a grammarian, who also contributed greatly to the understanding of the literary merits of the *Qur'an*. al-Baqillani, on the other hand, was a theologian and a legal theorist, and chiefly propagated the argument that *i'jaz* was not dependent on but enhanced by *Qur'anic* rhetoric. As with most Arabic scholars of the day, however, they are all faced with the arduous task of understanding the *i'jaz* of the *Qur'an*.

In other words, *i'jaz* becomes a call for intellectual debate. The engagement with the *Qur'an*, as inspired by its *i'jaz*, continues to stimulate scholarly inquiry in the Islamic world to this day, both in literature as well as other disciplines such as philosophy and theology.

i'jaz is thus an ideal understanding to strive towards, rather than a concept to define and put away. The very idea of the *i'jaz* is tied to its inimitability and mystic nature, a complexity beyond human understanding. Indeed, most scholarly discussions regarding *i'jaz* have to do with pinpointing its mystery by means of analysing its aesthetic form. This has resulted in Qur'anic exegesis being literary in nature, despite the other aims that Islamic scholars may have been pursuing, such as theological or philosophical ends. The jurist Al-Baqillani, for one, opens his exegesis of the *Qur'an* by asking a simple question: "Can the *i'jaz* of the *Qur'an* be recognised by the rhetorical figures (*badi'*) which it contains?"[6]. *i'jaz* is here conceived as an experience which al-Baqillani argues comes from more than just the sum of the *Qur'an's* language-parts. In other words, al-Baqillani views the *Qur'an* as a poetic experience to behold in its entirety. Qur'anic aesthetics, comprising of rhythm, meter, rhyme, metaphors, sound, imagery, irony, and other literary techniques which modern-readers commonly think of as 'embellishments of language' thus become fundamental to our understanding of the messages God conveys through the text of the *Qur'an*. "The *Qur'an* cannot be separated from any of the rhetorical sciences nor from any type of eloquence"[7], though "we do not connect the *i'jaz* with these special aspects (of rhetorical excellence) nor base it on them"[8]. Emphasizing trope as an inherent part of God's Word demonstrates a larger understanding of 'truth', expanding 'truth' to encompass understanding beyond rationality.

The poetic experience of the *Qur'an* (its recitation in Arabic remains an important Islamic tradition to this day) is thus an encounter with God, while the text by itself is a simplification for human understanding—the truth of God cannot be reduced to the meaning of the text. Iranian Arabophone eleventh century rhetorian al-Jurjani furthers this train of thought by differentiating the rational (*'aqli*) from the fantastical (*takhyili*) rhetorical devices but blurring the lines between the two, with *takhyili* referring to "a certain type of figurative language in which it is not only the 'image' that is construed as fanciful or irrational but also the logic behind the placement of the image in the text"[9]. That is to say, "the best poetry is the most truthful"[10]. Good poetry which appears to be disconnected from the truth is merely poetry which displays "the utmost attention to craft and the kind of precision in meaning that requires keen intelligence, penetrating discernment

[6] al-Baqillani 1950, 1

[7] al-Baqillani 1950, 54

[8] al-Baqillani 1950, 55

[9] al-Jurjani 2009, 29

[10] al-Jurjani 2009, 35

and powerful insight"[11].

As such, the unquestioned inimitability of the *Qur'an* functions as an imperative. It is a challenge of sorts to the Muslim scholars, motivating them to obtain greater heights of understanding based on an unquestioned foundation of inimitability and divinity. By using Qur'anic exegesis as a framework of literary analysis, namely the following three ideas: (1) aesthetics grounding Qur'anic inimitability; (2) *i'jaz* simulating intellectual discourse that can be beneficial to scholars from all intellectual backgrounds; and (3) *i'jaz* being the foundation of said intellectual discourse, I will argue that Plato's *Republic* exemplifies an alternative engagement of philosophy that, like the *Qur'an*, cannot be reduced to its textual medium alone and must be read with equal consideration of its rhetorical form. *Republic* is an engagement with the kind of philosophical lifestyle that Plato advocates with words, serving as an imperative and a challenge of sorts motivating scholars to greater heights of understanding.

This formulation of Plato's conception of philosophy is best understood within the context of ancient Athens. Poetry was then the main medium of most forms of communication ranging from theatrical entertainment to political debates. Words and in particular rhetoric were powerful tools for persuading the public, and often lent political power due to the nature of Athens's democracy then: Mass political meetings were held in a fashion highly similar to theatrical performances. The audience, consisting of citizens who had a say in political decisions, listened and actively responded to the political discourse. As such, politicians would often employ the aid of trained orators and rhapsodes in order to garner support for their respective political agendas, and these orators and rhapsodes would make use of dramatic elements in their political discourse. In a joint essay *Drama, Political Rhetoric, and the Discourse of Athenian Democracy*, Ober and Strauss suggest that the close relationship between rhetoric, politics and drama meant that an understanding of the political society must have been accompanied by an equal understanding of Athenian theatre, and vice versa. This was important as Athenian democracy was based on consensus (*homonoia*): Political agendas would be pushed forward only if a consensus was reached. This consensus was more often than not achieved through empty rhetoric. As such, the populist nature of the Athenian democracy resulted in many political decisions that were disagreed with by the elite of the society. Plato was one such member of this elite class, and consequently viewed poetry as an easy way of emotional manipulation.

In essence, the widespread prevalence of poetry, as well as its political consequences, resulted in Plato's rejection of poetry. Plato argued that poetry was used as a tool to sway public opinion via emotions; the weakest and lowest 'weapon' of persuasion. This opinion is clearly elucidated in Plato's construction of a tripartite soul: For Plato, the soul was understood to comprise three parts which could all influence our behaviour and decisions. An appeal to the emotional part of the soul, which is what rhetoric does, may result in bad decisions. In *Republic*, Plato describes the three parts to the soul as that "with which it calculates, the calculating"[12], the part "with which it loves, hungers, thirsts and is agitated by the other desires, the irrational and desiring, companion of certain replenishments and pleasures"[13] and lastly, "the

[11] al-Jurjani 2009, 38

[12] *Plato's Republic*, 439d

[13] ibid

spirited, by nature an auxiliary to the calculating part, if it's not corrupted by bad rearing"[14]. The nature of the tripartite soul is such that the proper hierarchy of control falls with "the calculating part [ruling], since it is wise and has forethought about all of the soul"[15]; a harmonious organization of the soul is then one with a balance of the appetitive and the spirited as firmly guided by the calculating/deliberative, establishing a hierarchy that is "exactly like three notes in a harmonic scale, lowest, highest, and middle"[16]. As such, the appetitive—the part linked to emotions and desires—is both the lowest part and "the most vivid of them"[17].

Plato's rejection of this emotive part of the soul is not a rejection of emotion, but rather an argument that one must not let one's emotions rule over one's decisions. Instead, there has to be a harmonious blending of the three soul-fractions. This suggests that, unlike the strong views regarding the censorship of certain kinds of poetry Plato puts forward in *Republic Book III*, Plato does consider the aesthetics an integral and necessary part of living a good life. The structure of *Republic's* text exemplifies this point as well: It is essentially a series of dialogues between characters with distinctive personalities, and as a narrative that reads well as a story, *Republic* incorporates different rhetorical devices such as powerful analogies and metaphors to aid in the assertion of a point. The Allegory of the Cave in *Republic Book VII*, for example, was used as a crutch in arguing for the importance of seeking the truth as a life-long endeavour. The powerful image of a philosopher-king escaping from his cave (a symbol of the ignorant life) to seek reality (truth) instead of settling for the images (fabrications) that are actually shadows cast by puppeteers (arguably the sophists or rhapsodes who were the primary means of spreading stories and moral tales to the public) remains a powerful education metaphor today. It illustrates exactly what it preaches: Education is not a straightforward act of educators "[putting] into the soul knowledge that isn't in it, as though they were putting sight into blind eyes", but rather an act which "takes as a given that sight is there, but not rightly turned nor looking at what it ought to look at, and accomplishes this object [of looking at knowledge]"[18].

Indeed, Plato himself recognizes that rhetoric and poetic devices are effective in communication, picking up on men's susceptibility to the poetic qualities of "meter, rhythm, and harmony"[19]. Al-Jurjani expounds this point even more lucidly when he characterizes comparisons in the Qur'an as having "a certain magical power which words cannot describe and which the art of exposition fails to match in elegance and beauty"[20]. This 'magical power', ironically, is both why Plato encourages poetics but rejects poetry: The magical quality that is so compelling has its negative and positive effects. Words have the power to distract men from the truth, given that the appetitive is the most overwhelming part of the soul and the one most likely to escape from the parental advice of the calculating part. This is the reason behind Plato's adversity towards poetry, as more often than not poets use the magic of poetry as an appeal to the emotional part of our human soul, thereby

[14] ibid 441a

[15] ibid 441e

[16] ibid 443d

[17] ibid 437d

[18] ibid 518d

[19] ibid 601a

[20] al-Jurjani 2009, 44

"destroy[ing] the calculating part"[21] by indulging in the soul's emotional and irrational portion. al-Jurjani's distinction between poetry that is make-believe and rational—though both have "the same sort of semantic expansion and figurative language"[22] —clarifies Plato's stance: Poetry that is "artfully crafted, elegantly rendered and exploited with subtlety and cleverness, such that, by virtue of its intriguing formulation and its adroit and appropriate use of analogy, a semblance of truth is given and a veneer of veracity is achieved"[23] would be considered as bad poetry as it is "deceptive to the intellect and a form of embellishment"[24].

The resolution, then, as actualized by Plato with *Republic*, is to bring these seductive poetic qualities in line with the philosophical life such that "when you return to its base you find that its speaker is affirming something rational and sound and making an assertion rooted in reason"[25]. Essentially, Plato's stance regarding aesthetics can be determined by how aesthetics is employed; this is definitely in line with the Islamic scholars such as al-Jurjani and al-Rummani, who consider the aesthetics in the *Qur'an* an important avenue for understanding its truths, but the same aesthetic ideals applied to other poetry pieces does not achieve the same effect as the Qur'anic miracle extends beyond its aesthetics.

What then is this fundamental sacred aspect of Plato's *Republic*? What forms the basis of Plato's distinction between the aesthetic work that is *Republic* and other poems that were wildly popular in Plato's time, such as Euripides's *Medea* or Sophocles' *The Oedipus Cycle*? An easy answer can be found with Plato's theory of mimesis: In Book X of *Republic* where Plato expounds on the difference between levels of imitation, he distinguishes between the Ideal Form of the Couch, the craftsman who makes the couch, and the painter who merely captures the appearance of a couch. Likening Plato's Ideal Form to the highest level of eloquence that is expressed by al-Rummani, the next level of eloquence, *mumkin,* will be that of the craftsman who imitates the Form to create a "particular form"[26] of a couch. What ranks the craftsman above the painter is his understanding of what a couch is *in being*, and what makes a good couch—namely, his understanding of what a couch functions as and his ability to create something that could be of use to the people.

Function is thus seen to be a very important consideration in Plato's imitability standard, the reason which has to do with the inimitability of *Republic* in the sense that the very nature of poetry is unlike the nature of paintings and other visual forms of art: Poetry cannot truly resemble a physical object in life. What, then, is Plato aiming to accurately imitate in his idea of good poetry? The imitability of *Republic* thus becomes a puzzle about what is *being imitated*, and the solution this puzzle comes encased in Plato's understanding of a good life. To briefly recount, Plato takes the good life with respect to "what is within", i.e. an internal organization of one's soul. In turn, one's soul is constituted by an appetitive, a spirited, and a deliberative part; the good life is primarily about the soul's ability to "really [set] his own house in good order and rules himself"[27], that is, to organize the different parts of the soul in an

[21] *Plato's Republic,* 605b

[22] al-Jurjani 2009, 38

[23] al-Jurjani 2009, 32

[24] al-Jurjani 2009, 37

[25] al-Jurjani 2009, 37

[26] *Plato's Republic* 596a

[27] ibid 443d

orderly fashion. The poet, while depicting the good life, is supposed to be a craftsman who both creates and uses this idea of a good life. Lear expresses this succinctly: "The beautiful human being *himself* [is] the standard with which beautiful poetry harmonizes"[28], and poets "don't just express the truth, but the truth *as* he sees it, and in a musical-poetic style that strikes him as worthy of his dignity"[29]. For Plato specifically, the good life is equated to a philosophical lifestyle, or the lifestyle of critical thinkers with questioning natures. As every poet expresses his understanding of a good life as exemplified by his own life, this actualizing element comes to constitute the *i'jaz* of *Republic*.

To examine/explore this, we return to the very structure of *Republic*, drawing clearer links to the *Qur'an*; specifically, the examples of *badi'* as listed by al-Rummani with special focus on *isti'ara* (metaphor), which is the "application of an expression to something other than what it is assigned to mean in the original vocabulary ('*asl*) of the language by the way of transference (*naql*) for the sake of clarification"[30]. Beyond that, however, "every metaphor imposes an eloquent explanation for which literal expression is no substitute"[31]. This eloquence in explanation, as al-Rummani goes on to discuss with several cases, is mostly due to the relation of the divine to something more relatable to us as humans, something that we can access with greater ease so as to achieve a more thorough understanding. One striking example is the expression "Mother (*umm*) of the book"[32]. Though it literally refers to the book's origin, the word 'mother (*umm*)' is more relatable as it frames things within a human relationship, expressing the idea of origin and source together with an added dimension of a mother's nurturing and compassionate nature. al-Rummani's point can be applied directly to *Republic*, for the text uses *badi'* as an appeal to the appetitive part of the soul, gaining easy access to the minds of its readers via the most vivid form of impressions, before going on to challenge what the readers take from its literal meaning to foster a deeper, more complex understanding of the text. This deeper understanding includes extra-textual elements such as a literary understanding of Plato's characters and plot structure, which results in understanding becoming a matter of interpretation. This interpretation thus allows readers to situate themselves within the discourse of *Republic*, participating in discussions both within and outside of the text regarding its content, what it means to live a good life.

Essentially, Plato's philosophical lifestyle is a cultivation of questioning critical souls. This is actualized by means of structuring *Republic's* aesthetics such that any reader who engages with *Republic's* inherent poetry will, unknowingly, be participating in the good philosophical life. The text itself engages the audience of that time to "philosophize in a healthy way"[33] through its use of aesthetics in order to obtain "the knowledge to distinguish the good from the bad life...to choose the better from among those that are possible"[34], which is the very essence of the philosophical lifestyle Plato calls a good life. Metaphors (*isti'arat*) thus act as an introduction for readers "to a truth which will later receive dialectical examination"[35], to quote Smith.

[28] Lear 2006, 114

[29] ibid

[30] al-Rummani 1987, 128

[31] al-Rummani 1987, 129

[32] al-Rummani 1987, 132

[33] *Plato's Republic,* 619d

[34] ibid 618c

[35] Smith 1986, 23

Examination to determine *Republic's* deeper meaning will allow all readers will join in a continuing conversation, and by the very act of doing so participate in a philosophical life. In other words, as Tate put it, for Plato "philosophy meant a life to be lived"[36], and "Platonic poetry is not meant to be a text-book of information [...] nor is his [Plato's] ideal poet meant to be a pedant but a man of genius."[37] As such, like the *i'jaz* of the *Qur'an*, the aesthetics of Plato's *Republic* lies at the foundation of its mystique, and functions as a call for interested readers to decipher its meaning and understand its truths, with the very act of deciphering a participation and an encounter with a greater truth beyond human understanding. Just as the *Qur'an* is an encounter with God—as demonstrated by the Islamic practice of reciting the *Qur'an* in Arabic even by Muslims who do not speak Arabic in their daily lives—Plato's *Republic* is an encounter with the philosophical lifestyle, and by the very act of having read it, a reader experiences philosophy as Plato (and his Muslim counterparts) meant it to be lived.

In essence, as Segal wrote succinctly, "Plato's myths, like his poetical language, form a bridge between the darker and the more rational parts of our nature"[38] by using the poetic qualities which appeal to the human yearning for aesthetics to "help the soul accept its passionate impulses and lead them into the service of philosophy"[39]. To restate this conclusion in the terminology of al-Baqillani, al-Rummani, and al-Jurjani, *Republic's* discussion of justice is merely its *ta'kid* (emphasis), while its *badi'* (poetic quality) and *nazm* (structure) merely provide the Greek readers of the time an attractive way to participate in the philosophical life. What is most important, then, is the engagement of philosophical discourse that a reader is forced to partake in. In other words, the *i'jaz* of *Republic* is found in its provision of a philosophical discourse. It takes the axiom of a philosophical lifestyle to be life's greatest good, and offers with its reading experience an engagement with the very philosophical lifestyle Plato preaches. Plato thus becomes the philosopher-poet, engaging with philosophical discourse aesthetically. Beyond just being a poetic demonstration of philosophy, however, what Plato offers with the *Republic* is an entry into a philosophical life.

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[36] Tate 1928, 167

[37] ibid

[38] Segal 1978, 331

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