

## PLATO AND THE DANGEROUS PLEASURES OF *POIKILIA*\*

### ABSTRACT

*A significant strand of the ethical psychology, aesthetics and politics of Plato's Republic revolves around the concept of poikilia, 'fascinating variety'. Plato uses the concept to caution against harmful appetitive pleasures purveyed by democracy and such artistic or cultural practices as mimetic poetry. His aim, this article shows, is to contest a prominent conceptual connection between poikilia and beauty (kallos, to kalon). Exploiting tensions in the archaic and classical Greek concept, Plato associates poikilia with dangerous pleasures to redirect admiration toward a distinctly philosophical pursuit of the nature of beauty. This is to displace a prominent and problematic cultural sensibility—the aesthetics of poikilia—not to deny that fascinating variety, even in mimetic poetry, may be beautiful. Rather, Plato's cultural critique lays bare an epistemological problem in the ethical psychology of beauty: since they cannot be distinguished from what seems beautiful, how should one respond to fascinating yet dangerous attractions?*

**Keywords:** Plato; pleasure; beauty; *poikilia*; *kalon*; ethical psychology; ancient Greek aesthetics; lovers of sights and sounds

Central to the ethical psychology, aesthetics and politics of Plato's *Republic* is the concept of *poikilia*. Denoting the fascinating experience of various colours, sounds or textures, as well as of intellectual cunning, the concept of *poikilia* embodies a tension in archaic and classical Greek thought that beauty (*to kalon*, *kallos*), though central to living well, can captivate the senses and mind in disastrous ways.<sup>1</sup> It is against this cultural background that Plato uses the concept to caution against attractive but harmful pleasures purveyed by democracy (*Resp.* 557c5, 558c1–2, 559d7–8, 561e3–8), musical and other cultural practices (398d7–399e12, 404d1–e6) and mimetic poetry (604e1–605a6). Because the concept connects ethically deficient psychological, political and artistic structures, Plato might seem to judge *poikilia* unequivocally harmful and *not* beautiful.<sup>2</sup> However, the concept occupies a more complicated role in the dialogue, one with significant implications for Plato's ethical psychology and aesthetics.

\* I would like to extend sincere thanks to Wolfgang Mann, Lydia Goehr, Pauline LeVen, Nickolas Pappas, Elizabeth Scharffenberger and an anonymous referee for *CQ* for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and to Laura Martin for reminders of its contemporary importance.

<sup>1</sup> Though it is uncontroversial to treat *kallos* as analogous to the concept of beauty, it remains standard to construe *to kalon* as primarily the *fine*, *admirable* or *noble* and only derivatively the *beautiful* for lexical reasons discussed by P. Woodruff, *Plato Hippias Major* (Oxford, 1982) and D. Konstan, *Beauty: The Fortunes of an Ancient Greek Idea* (New York, 2014). Yet beauty is, like the *kalon*, an aesthetic and an ethical concept. More specifically, Plato's treatment of *poikilia* is unintelligible without emphasis on the aesthetic dimensions of the *kalon* in ethical motivation and evaluation.

<sup>2</sup> A widespread view: J. Moss, 'What is imitative poetry and why is it bad?', in G.R.F. Ferrari (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic* (Cambridge, 2007), 415–44, at 426, 435–7; Z. Petraki, *The Poetics of Philosophical Language: Plato, Poets and Presocratics in the Republic* (Berlin, 2011), 64–5, 181–5, 235–50; R.S. Liebert, 'Apian imagery and the critique of poetic sweetness in Plato's *Republic*', *TAPhA* 140 (2010), 97–115 and ead., *Tragic Pleasure from Homer to Plato*

A re-examination is necessary because the dialogue grants positive heuristic value to *poikilia* that *presupposes* its beauty. The most beautiful (κόλλιστοι) and precise of visible phenomena, the astronomical bodies and their observable motions—*poikilmata* and *poikilia* in Socrates' phrase (529b1, 529d8)—can and should be studied as models of intelligible astronomical patterns. Indeed, by admiring their complexity, one may come to understand the cosmos as the most beautiful work of a divine, benevolent intellect (529d8–530a7; κόλλιστοι: 529c9–d1, 529e3, 530a6–7).<sup>3</sup> The question becomes not just how this use of *poikilia* coheres with its abuse throughout the dialogue but, more fundamentally, what Plato is doing with and to this concept in the *Republic*. In particular, how does *poikilia* relate to beauty?

This article shows that Plato contests a prominent cultural sensibility—the aesthetics of *poikilia*—which presumes a conceptual connection between *poikilia* and beauty. Plato exploits tensions in the former concept to sever this connection, because, in his view, this connection promotes an indiscriminate pursuit of pleasure and precludes a distinctly 'philosophical' engagement with beauty. Yet, far from denying that *poikilia* may be beautiful, his treatment lays bare a problem in the pursuit of beauty: one must learn to negotiate fascinating yet dangerous attractions, for such attractions cannot be distinguished from the experience of beauty.

At stake in this interpretation is not simply a richer understanding of the substance and detail of a significant if neglected argument of the dialogue. It has broader historical and philosophical ramifications. Because the concept of *poikilia* marks a privileged mode of sense-perception, its genealogy holds for scholars of ancient aesthetics potential insight into how certain ancient Greeks perceived their world. Our current historical narrative, however, takes Plato's criticisms to show that archaic delight in variety gave way to a radically different classical sensibility. To re-examine those criticisms is to re-examine this narrative. Philosophically, by appreciating that Plato grants that *poikilia* may be beautiful, we may cast fresh light onto the decisive role he accords beauty in learning to live well.

My argument proceeds in three stages. Section I outlines the historical sensibility that presumes a conceptual connection between *poikilia* and beauty. The following two sections reconstruct how and why Plato contests this sensibility. I show in section II how the attempt to dissociate *poikilia* from beauty underlies the seemingly disparate charges of immoderate pleasure in the soul, politics and arts, while section III examines

(Cambridge, 2017), 134–55; also B. Rosenstock, 'Athena's cloak: Plato's critique of the democratic city in the *Republic*', *Political Theory* 22 (1994), 363–90; S. Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton, 2002), 93–4, 325; R.W. Wallace, 'Plato, *poikilia*, and New Music in Athens', in E. Berardi, F. Lisi and D. Micallella (edd.), *Poikilia. Variazioni sul tema* (Acireale, 2009), 201–13; J.I. Porter, *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience* (Cambridge, 2010), 86–7; A. Grand-Clément, 'Poikilia', in P. Destrée and P. Murray (edd.), *A Companion to Ancient Aesthetics* (Malden, MA and Oxford, 2015), 406–21, at 415–16, though recognizing the need for reappraisal at ead., *La fabrique des couleurs: histoire du paysage sensible des Grecs anciens* (Paris, 2011), 488 n. 436.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Ti.* 39d2–40a9, *Phd.* 110b5–d7, on which see A. Nightingale, 'The aesthetics of vision in Plato's *Phaedo* and *Timaeus*', in A. Kampakoglou and A. Novokhatko (edd.), *Gaze, Vision, and Visuality in Ancient Greek Literature* (Berlin, 2018), 331–53. *Leg.* 665c2–6, *Menex.* 234c4–235c4, *Phdr.* 277b5–c6 attest the pedagogical value of *poikilos* speech and song, on which see M. Tulli, 'Una Spaltung: Platone, la *poikilia* e il sapere', in E. Berardi, F. Lisi and D. Micallella (edd.), *Poikilia: variazioni sul tema* (Acireale, 2009), 227–38. Prior to questions of development across dialogues is the question of how Socrates can, and why he does, admit the beauty of *poikilia* within the dialogue that criticizes it most severely.

the metaphysical and epistemological dimensions of this critique, an attempt to redirect admiration toward the non-sensible nature of beauty. Both stages reveal a profound ambivalence toward *poikilia*, whether in Socrates' attraction to mimetic poetry or in wonder at the starry heavens, to suggest that Plato recognizes the risk that attractions to beauty may subvert a good life.

### I. THE AESTHETICS OF *POIKILIA*

It is necessary first to review the conceptual history of *poikilia*. For it is seldom remarked, particularly in the philosophical literature, that Plato is concerned with historically specific, descriptively thick and affectively charged meanings of *poikilia* rather than with such thin notions as variety or multiplicity *simpliciter*. It will suffice to focus on patterns of conceptual use that Plato appropriates or subverts, most pressingly the tendency in archaic and classical discourse to presuppose that *poikilia* is necessary or sufficient for beauty. This tendency regulates an aesthetic and ethical sensibility that I shall call *the aesthetics of poikilia*.

In archaic poetry, the adjective *poikilos* praises primarily the fascinating effect of juxtaposing various colours, patterns, fabrics, sounds or other elements. The verb *poikillō* refers to the skilful activity of a craftsperson that produces this effect. The adjective also praises the mental agility of animals, heroes or divinities endowed with cunning intelligence (*mētis*).<sup>4</sup> While the prominence of these terms suggests that archaic poets and audiences relish 'the variegated nature of the objects of their senses',<sup>5</sup> the concept refers not merely to a property of an object but essentially to a fascinated *experience* of a perceiver.

This experience is often explicitly marked as the experience of beauty. Recall Anchises wondering at Aphrodite clad as a maiden in a *pampoikilos* robe:

Now when Anchises saw her, he marked well and wondered (θαύμαινεν) at her appearance and height and shining garments. For she was wearing a dress more radiant than the brightness of fire, beautiful, golden, *pampoikilon* (καλὸν ... παμποίκιλον), so that it shone like the moon over her tender breasts, a wonder to behold (θαύμα ἰδέσθαι).<sup>6</sup>

Connected to the seductive radiance and lush texture of beauty, what is (*pam*)*poikilos* bespeaks divinity; rightly suspecting her a god, Anchises fears the maiden but is overcome by erotic desire (*Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 5.93–106, 185–91). Similarly, when Hecuba wishes to entreat Athena, she selects from among her *pampoikila* robes 'one that was most beautiful in its embroidering, largest, and shone like a star' (ὄς κάλλιστος ἔην ποικίλιμασιν ἡδὲ μέγιστος, | ἄστηρ δ' ὡς ἀπέλαμπεν, *Il.* 6.294–5). Reflecting the privileged status of *poikilia* in archaic gift exchange, these robes, all beautiful, are treasured: gifts for the queen, kept in a vault, befitting the divine.<sup>7</sup>

The essential point, however, is this: whether of persons or artefacts, the fascinating experience of *poikilia* is fundamentally ambivalent even—or especially—when praised as the experience of beauty. Odysseus' description of his marvellous brooch provides an

<sup>4</sup> Grand-Clément (n. 2 [2011]), 418–88 provides a comprehensive lexical survey.

<sup>5</sup> So B.H. Fowler, 'The archaic aesthetic', *AJPh* 105 (1984), 119–49, at 119.

<sup>6</sup> *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 5.84–90. Translations throughout are my own, based on the text of standard editions.

<sup>7</sup> Gift exchange: e.g. *Od.* 15.104–8, 125–7, 205–7; 18.292–6 (collocated with *περικαλλέα*); Sappho, fr. 44.8–10 Voigt.

exemplary case in point, which reveals several aspects of the concept from which this ambivalence derives (*Od.* 19.227–31):

The front part was artfully wrought (δαίδαλον): a hound held a dappled (ποικίλον) fawn in his forepaws, preying on it as it struggled; and all marvelled (θαυμάζεσκον) how, though they were golden (ὡς οἱ χρύσειοι ἐόντες), the hound preyed on the fawn and strangled it, and the fawn struggled with its feet as it tried to escape.

The Homeric poet locates wonder and, by implication, beauty in fascinating optic effects, marked by *poikilos* and its semantic cousin, *daidalos*, which emphasizes elaborate craftsmanship. The former refers first to the dappled aspect of the golden fawn, a common application of the term to an animal's spotted, iridescent or complexly patterned exterior. But it refers also to the apparent motion of the fawn and the hound.<sup>8</sup> Together these referents structure perception around the sensuous surface of the brooch. So it is that viewers perceive the animals *in* the elaborated, shimmering gold, marvelling at how inanimate metal seems to come alive.<sup>9</sup>

And yet the scene is a violent struggle of life and death, a metonym for the *danger* of *poikilia*. The hound captures the fawn like the brooch captivates its viewers, and Odysseus his audience. These comparisons are encouraged by the nested frames through which the poet assimilates the imagination of Odysseus' audience to the gazes of the awe-struck viewers and to the paralyzed fawn meeting the ferocious gaze (as one could render λάω) of the hound.<sup>10</sup> The fawn fears the hound; the *poikilia* of the brooch inspires fear, as an element of wonder (*thauma*); auditors, we shall see, are and should be suspicious of Odysseus. For although *poikilos* refers above to a fawn, it almost exclusively describes dangerous animals, particularly snakes, whose multicoloured, iridescent or complexly patterned skin camouflages, seduces prey or stuns predators.<sup>11</sup> That is, their beauty is focally related to the exercise of cunning intelligence (*mētis*), an ability, linked to virtue (*aretē*) and wisdom or skill (*sophia*), to adapt to circumstances and outwit others through deceit and disguise.<sup>12</sup> In this connection, too, what is *poikilos* designates a beautiful and thus admirable, *kalon*, character. Hence Aesop's fable of the fox and the leopard (Aesop 12 Perry):

The fox and the leopard were disputing their beauty (περὶ κάλλους ἤριζον). The leopard displayed each of the spots adorning his skin (τὴν τοῦ σώματος ποικιλίαν προβαλλομένης), but the fox, interrupting him, said, 'And how much more beautiful (καλλίων) than you am I, adorned not in body but soul' (τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν πεποικίλευμαι).

It is assumed that *poikilia* is sufficient, if not necessary, for beauty. The fox shows his beautiful wiles in manipulating the terms of the contest so that he comes out victorious.<sup>13</sup> The worry is that such beauty also manipulates minds.

<sup>8</sup> Horse: Pind. *Pyth.* 2.8; leopard: Aesop 12 Perry; snake: Pind. *Pyth.* 4.249, 10.46, 8.46; Alc. fr. 1.66 *PMGF*; Thgn. 1.602; bird: Pind. *Pyth.* 4.214–16; Alc. fr. 345.2.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. R. Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture* (Chicago, 2010), 59, 67, 113.  
<sup>10</sup> For the alternate rendering, see Porter (n. 2), 447, following R. Prier, *Thauma Idesthai: The Phenomenology of Sight and Appearance in Archaic Greek* (Gainesville, FL, 1989), 32.

<sup>11</sup> This is the sole use, to my knowledge, of *poikilos* for prey. It seems less an outlier than an inversion of typical associations of animal *poikilia* with predatory or defensive tactics.

<sup>12</sup> See M. Detienne and J.-P. Vernant (transl. J. Lloyd), *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society* (Chicago, 1991), 18–44.

<sup>13</sup> Thus it will fall to Socrates to show that an unjust person, secretly like Archilochus' crafty fox (ποικίλην, *Resp.* 365c5–6), should not be admired and emulated, despite his reputation for justice.

It is significant in this connection that Aphrodite lends Hera specifically a *poikilos* ribbon to seduce Zeus in the famous scene of deception at *Il.* 14.214–21:

Aphrodite spoke and from her breasts unbound the elaborate, pattern-pierced ribbon (κεστόν ἰμάντα | ποικίλον), with all enchantments (οἱ θελκτήριω) inlaid, with erotic appeal and desire there ... ‘Take this ribbon and hide it away in the fold of your bosom. It is elaborate (ποικίλον), all things inlaid. And I think whatever is your heart’s desire shall not go unaccomplished.’

Or we might consider how, at the climax of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra entices the king to enter the palace via the richly embroidered purple tapestries on which, fit for the gods, Agamemnon hesitates to tread in case he should provoke divine envy: ‘Being mortal, it is not for me or anyone to step on *poikilois* beauties (ἐν ποικίλοις ... κόλλεσιν) without fear (ἄνευ φόβου)’ (923–4). Clytemnestra arguably persuades him by exploiting his desire for envy among human beings, directing his attention to the wealth and power that the beautiful tapestries display. However opaque his psychology, though, the crucial significance of *poikilia* as a fascinating yet dangerous attraction is clear: Agamemnon repeats the term three times (923, 926, 936) as he is led inside to be bound and murdered, not only metaphorically but now literally ensnared by Clytemnestra’s woven plot.<sup>14</sup>

The *ekphrasis* of Odysseus’ brooch obeys the same structure: a *poikilos* mind cunningly uses a *poikilos* artefact. None other than Odysseus, often called *poikilomētis* for his wiles,<sup>15</sup> describes the brooch in an artful speech that foregrounds issues of truth-telling and deception. Disguised as a beggar, Odysseus attempts to convince Penelope that he (the beggar) entertained Odysseus. Only moments earlier are we reminded that Odysseus makes many falsehoods seem true (*Od.* 19.203). This is high praise in the agonistic context of archaic poetry—how better to display skill at persuasion than by convincing someone of something false?—yet still such cleverness garners criticism.<sup>16</sup> Penelope is suspicious; she tests the beggar by asking what Odysseus was wearing. The *ekphrasis* convinces her. Plato, we shall see, will buttress the suggestion that audiences guard against the power of *poikilia* by a psychological, political and metaphysical picture of a good human life.

The ground was well prepared. Ambivalence in archaic sources intensifies as the term *poikilos* becomes more pejorative with the rise of democracy at classical Athens. It comes to signify, on the one hand, the opposite of frank speech and transparency and, on the other hand, a barbarian or effeminate character. These latter connotations are due to the fact that members of the aristocracy appropriated from Persia and Eastern Greece a luxurious lifestyle, characterized by expensive clothing, perfumes and golden jewellery, to display their superiority once *nouveaux riches* began to compete in wealth. Through what Leslie Kurke has called the ‘politics of *habrosynē*’, aristocrats relied on

Tellingly, this first use of *poikilos* in the *Republic* comes in Adeimantus’ challenge to Socrates to defend justice for its own sake against the poetic tradition.

<sup>14</sup> M. Mueller, *Objects as Actors: Props and the Poetics of Performance in Greek Tragedy* (Chicago, 2016), 55–6 shows that *poikilia* here relates the beauty and status of the tapestries to Clytemnestra’s clever verbal tactics. For *poikilia* as feminized erotic charm, cf. Pind. *Pyth.* 4.212–16; Eur. *Med.* 1159; Sappho, fr. 1.1–2 Voigt.

<sup>15</sup> *Il.* 11.482; *Od.* 3.163, 13.293; Eur. *IA* 526.

<sup>16</sup> See further N. Worman, *The Cast of Character: Style in Greek Literature* (Austin, 2002), 108–92. Pindar similarly praises his odes as *poikiloi* (*Ol.* 3.8–9, 4.2–3, 6.87; *Pyth.* 9.77; *Nem.* 4.14, 5.41–2), yet could caution against the ‘intricate’ but false tales of other poets (δεδαϊδαλμένοι ψεύδεσι ποικίλοις ... μῦθοι, *Ol.* 1.29).

the beauty and social capital of *poikilia* to reclaim ethical and political status.<sup>17</sup> Those sympathetic to the democracy could then invoke the term to stigmatize political enemies at home and, after the Persian War, abroad. By another turn, anti-democratic critics of the so-called New Music, to which we shall return, invoke *poikilia* as a metaphor for socio-political disorder.

These lexical changes have been taken to show that the concept of *poikilia* no longer tracks the fascinated experience of variegated materials, much less perceptions of beauty.<sup>18</sup> Yet, rather than infer that the aesthetics of *poikilia* becomes defunct at classical Athens, in which case Plato could have no cause to dislodge this sensibility, it is more judicious to infer that the concept becomes more contested in the following two ways: (1) it becomes disputable whether what is *poikilos* is beautiful or otherwise praiseworthy; and (2) the concept comes to function as a label with which to claim artistic or socio-political status for oneself or to deny such claims of others.<sup>19</sup> Such contestation is intelligible, though, only against a conceptual background in which *poikilia* remains tied to beauty, virtue and wisdom.

## II. CULTURAL CRITIQUE

We may now examine how and why Plato exploits these conceptual tensions to displace the aesthetics of *poikilia*. I shall examine how in some detail but might anticipate broadly why: its spurious conception of beauty promotes an indiscriminate pursuit of pleasure and precludes a corrective ‘philosophical’ pursuit of beauty. This criticism depends on an assumption that one becomes like what one admires as beautiful (*kalon*). The assumption strikes a structural correspondence between what one admires and one’s psychological constitution.<sup>20</sup> Before examining its metaphysical reaches in the next section, I shall reconstruct how this assumption animates an attempt throughout the *Republic* to dissociate *poikilia* conceptually from beauty by assimilating the former to harmful, indeed shameful and ugly, pleasures.

### II.1 *Tastes of democracy and aristocracy*

The cultural critique is most concentrated at *Republic* Book 8. There Socrates diagnoses the appeal of democracy in terms of the aesthetics of *poikilia* (*Resp.* 557c4–9):

<sup>17</sup> L. Kurke, ‘The politics of ἀβροσύνη in archaic Greece’, *CLAnt* 11 (1992), 91–120. Grand-Clément (n. 2 [2011]), 328–38, 480–8 traces the broader lexical changes.

<sup>18</sup> So Grand-Clément (n. 2 [2015]), 416; P. LeVen, ‘The colours of sound: *poikilia* and its aesthetic contexts’, *GRMS* 1 (2013), 229–42, at 241. While these and related lexical changes may reflect changes in thought and sensibility, Neer (n. 9) shows that the concept of *poikilia* continues to regulate production and reception of classical sculpture and, in his *Style and Politics in Athenian Vase-Painting* (Cambridge, 2002), Attic red-figure.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. e.g. *PMG* 708.5–10: Pratinas’ satyr-chorus elevates their ‘swanlike song of variegated wing’ (οἶά τε κύκνον ἄγοντα ποικιλόπτερον μέλος) above ‘the spotted toad breath’ (τὸν φρονέου ποικίλου πνοάν) of the *aulos*. This denies and at the same time appropriates the claim of *aulos*-players to artistic superiority, made under the banner of *poikilia*.

<sup>20</sup> A specific case of ‘like encouraging like’ (*Resp.* 425c1–2), this assumption lies behind the scheme of acculturation through beauty at *Resp.* Books 2–3 (401b1–402a6). Cf. 500c7–9 for its metaphysical expression, with section III below.

κινδυνεύει, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, καλλίστη αὕτη τῶν πολιτειῶν εἶναι. ὡσπερ ἰμάτιον ποικίλον πᾶσιν ἄνθεσι πεποικιλμένον, οὕτω καὶ αὕτη πᾶσιν ἤθεσιν πεποικιλμένη καλλίστη ἂν φαίνοιτο. καὶ ἴσως μὲν, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, καὶ ταύτην, ὡσπερ οἱ παῖδές τε καὶ αἱ γυναῖκες τὰ ποικίλα θεώμενοι, καλλίστην ἂν πολλοὶ κρίνειαν.

'Possibly,' I said, 'this is the most beautiful of the constitutions. Like an elaborate cloak embroidered in all colours, this city, embroidered with all kinds of character, would appear most beautiful. And perhaps,' I said, 'many people would judge it most beautiful, as women and children do when they see multicoloured things.'

Notice, first, that Socrates' collocations of 'most beautiful' with cognates of *poikilia* could have little sense were the conceptual connection between *poikilia* and the *kalon* no longer prominent. His remarks are constructed to undermine this connection. Socrates first hazards that democracy *is* (εἶναι) the most beautiful regime, because it permits one to live howsoever one pleases (*Resp.* 557b8–10). He then qualifies that democracy *would appear* (ἂν φαίνοιτο) most beautiful, which by this stage of the dialogue introduces quite some doubt, echoed by the shift from the indicative to the optative mood. Finally, Socrates weakens the claim still further, shifting the grammatical subject to the *many* who *would judge* democracy most beautiful (ταύτην ... καλλίστην ἂν πολλοὶ κρίνειαν).<sup>21</sup> Comparing the many, and many an archaic and classical male, to a woman or a child suggests that they mistake fascinating variety of colours (patterns, pursuits and the like) for the nature of beauty.

It is, indeed, the nature of beauty at issue. The passage neither states nor implies that the diversity of democracy is not beautiful. It is often taken to do so, sometimes on the basis of a mistaken assumption that the term *poikilos* is entirely pejorative or itself connotes 'merely superficial beauty'.<sup>22</sup> This force may be a consequence but cannot be the precedent of passages such as this. Notice that Socrates must labour to reveal an analogous mistake of the many concerning mimetic poetry. Seduced by its musical colours (τῆς μουσικῆς χρωμάτων)—verse sung in naturally charming metres, rhythms and tunings (φύσει ... κήλησιν)—they believe mimetic poets are experts in their subject matter (*Resp.* 601a5–b2).<sup>23</sup> These charms, like the appeal of democracy, are relatively superficial, Socrates implies in a doubly erotic image: were its musical colours stripped off like clothing (γυμνωθέντα, 601b2–3), mimetic poetry would look unattractive, akin to faces of once beautiful boys now bereft of the bloom of their youth (τὸ ἄνθος, 601b7–9). As we shall see, the fact that these charms cannot be extracted from mimetic poetry, particularly for someone under its fascinating spell, reflects a conceptual difficulty of disentangling beauty altogether from *poikilia*.

For the moment, however, our textual parallel shows that democracy seems beautiful to someone who looks uncritically, like the child who judges a tyrant beautiful from the outside without looking into his character (*Resp.* 577a3–7).<sup>24</sup> Yet, while the child is

<sup>21</sup> Cf. N. Villacèque, 'De la bigarrure en politique (Platon, *République*, VIII, 557c4 sqq)', *JHS* 130 (2010), 137–52, at 143.

<sup>22</sup> So Rosenstock (n. 2), 377; emphasis added. Compare Moss (n. 2), 426; Petraki (n. 2), 15 n. 28, 242–3; Grand-Clément (n. 2 [2015]), 415–16. S. Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements: Athenian Politics and the Practice of Philosophy* (Princeton, 2000), 170–1 captures the evaluative nuance.

<sup>23</sup> This charm is soon characterized by *poikilia* (*Resp.* 604e–605a, on which see below), but *skiagraphia* is implicitly linked to *poikilia* by 365c3–6: like a crafty (*poikilos*) fox, the unjust person disguises injustice by a 'façade of virtue', σκιαγραφίαν ἀρετῆς.

<sup>24</sup> So too the tyrant's 'tragic vestige may be seen stripped off' in private (γυμνὸς ἂν ὀφθεῖν τῆς τραγικῆς σκευῆς, *Resp.* 577b1). His bodyguard is, like himself, 'beautiful and numerous and various

mistaken, the same cannot obviously be said of those who judge democracy and, to anticipate, mimetic poetry beautiful.<sup>25</sup> The above passage implies only that it is incorrect to believe that being *poikilos* is identical to, necessary or sufficient for being beautiful. If the ‘colours’ (ἄνθεσι) of democracy are like the bloom of youth (τὸ ἄνθος) to which poetic *poikilia* is compared—as the wordplay suggests—then they should be beautiful, if fleetingly so. What matters is that the text leaves indeterminate the aesthetic status and the potential value of *poikilia*, a score on which we shall continue to find some ambivalence. Plato is unambivalent, however, about the need to displace its prominence as a criterion of beauty.

What is the harm? The tacit argument is that this misconception causes one to pursue pleasure indiscriminately and thus become, psychologically, as disunified as the objects one admires. To bring this argument into view, we might begin by noticing that the comparison of democracy to a multicoloured cloak does not simply convey the diversity of a theoretical model of democracy but diagnoses the aesthetics of *poikilia* as an animating principle of Athenian democracy. The simile refers to and attempts to neutralize two symbols, the Panathenaic *peplos* and the Stoa Poikilē, with which democratic Athens glorified its identity, ideals and hegemony. Both symbols seem to have employed an artistic principle of *poikilia* to valorize *poikilia* as a principle of political composition. Socrates strikes a similarly deep accord between an emphasis in aesthetic judgement on sensory pleasure and the same emphasis in political life. In his estimation, democracy celebrates anarchy and license as freedom and equality, revaluing moderation and shame as illiberal because they inhibit the indiscriminate pursuit of pleasure (*Resp.* 557e1–558b9, 560d4–561c5). To conclude that democracy seems ‘a pleasurable constitution, anarchic and variegated’ (ἡδεῖα πολιτεία καὶ ἄναρχος καὶ ποικίλη, 558c2–3) is to propose that democracy is regulated by the connection first struck in archaic poetry between beauty and the sensory pleasures of *poikilia* and to undermine this connection by rendering such pleasures shameful.

This strategy turns against democracy the very rhetoric by which democrats derogated *poikilia* as an aristocratic appetite for sensual things. The strategy is necessary because, as Robert Seager, Josiah Ober and others remind us, democrats redefined existing political and ethical concepts, leading in many cases to ‘the democratic pillaging of aristocratic values’.<sup>26</sup> Pressed to find a vocabulary to criticize democracy, Socrates uses its own anti-aristocratic valence to unmask its self-image.

Socrates elaborates the psycho-ethical harm of the aesthetics of *poikilia* through his analysis of the individual who typifies democracy, ‘a multifarious man, full of all sorts of characters, beautiful and various’ (καὶ παντοδαπὸν τε καὶ πλείστον ἡθῶν μεστόν, καὶ τὸν καλόν τε καὶ ποικίλον, *Resp.* 561e3–4). The collocation of *poikilon* and

(*poikilon*) and never the same as itself’ (568d6–7). Note here, too, the thick socio-political associations of *poikilia*: the guard consists of *foreign* mercenaries (567e1).

<sup>25</sup> The fascinating quality of *poikilia* has not been taken to complicate Socrates’ attitude toward mimetic poetry, though it has been taken to complicate his attitude toward democracy. For Monoson (n. 22), Socrates admires democracy in so far as it provides philosophy a home and models of human psychology (at 166–9, 223–6). Her case, however, seems strained to compare *παράδειγματα* at *Resp.* 557d8 with 529d8–9. More promising is the observation of R. Blondell, *The Play of Character in Plato’s Dialogues* (Cambridge, 2002), 67, 111, 142–61 that Socrates is characterized by a democratic ideal of versatility.

<sup>26</sup> So R. Seager in his ‘Review of N. Loraux, *L’invention d’Athènes: histoire de l’oraison funèbre dans la “cité classique”* (Paris, 1981)’, *JHS* 102 (1982), 267–8, at 268. J. Ober, *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* (Princeton, 1996), 155 applies the point to the present passage.



*kalon* again evokes and calls into question their prominent conceptual connection. Precisely this connection underlies the envy and admiration of the many for this character, who sometimes (τοτέ) drinks heavily while delighting in the *aulos*, sometimes diets; sometimes exercises, sometimes not; sometimes busies himself with what seems to him philosophy; but who often (πολλάκις) leaps up in the assembly to speak and act as he pleases (561c7–d5). This is the glorious image of cunning Odysseus made political.<sup>27</sup> To those reared on this ethical ideal, the motivational structure of the democratic individual seems beautiful, despite its lack of order and force of necessity. The criticism of democracy therefore extends to the underlying sensibility that supports and is supported by the regime.

The scope of the criticism must be emphasized to appreciate also that the image of the democratic individual criticizes the aristocracy for its delight in *poikilia*. Not only does the simile of the multicoloured cloak require the anti-aristocratic valence that democrats lend the term *poikilos*. Socrates' quip that if the democratic individual 'happens to admire soldiers, he's carried that way, if money-makers, that way' (κᾶν ποτέ τινος πολεμικοῦς ζηλώσει, τούτῃ φέρεται, ἢ χρηματιστικοῦς, ἐπὶ τοῦτ' αὖ, *Resp.* 561d5–7) seems deliberately to parody the aristocratic ideal of a *poikilon ēthos* attested in the elegies attributed to Theognis (Thgn. 213–18 ≈ 1071–4):<sup>28</sup>

θυμέ, φίλους κατὰ πάντας ἐπίστρεφε ποικίλον ἦθος,  
 ὀργὴν συμμίσγων ἦντιν' ἕκαστος ἔχει.  
 πολύτου ὀργὴν ἴσχε πολυπλόκου, ὅς ποτὶ πέτρῃ  
 τῇ προσομιλήσει τοῖος ἰδεῖν ἐφάνη  
 νῦν μὲν τῆδ' ἐφέπου, τότε δ' ἄλλοῖος χροᾶ γίνου.  
 κρέσσων τοι σοφίη γίνεται ἀτροπίης.

My heart, to all your friends keep turning your variable character,  
 Mixing your temperament to the like of each.  
 Create the temperament of a tangled cuttlefish, which always makes itself look  
 like whatever rock it has just clung to.  
 Now be like this; then, at another time, be like someone else in your colouring.  
 Surely skill is better than inflexibility.

The advice is to cultivate an élite sociability, to mingle well with companions. Aristocrats would praise this variable character at symposia, that is, while attempting to consolidate power through ties of nobility in opposition to emerging democratic ideals. And they would *perform* this character, mingling sociably as they adopt fluid personalities by performing poetry as different personae, donning masks in the form of 'eye-cups' and, of course, getting drunk.<sup>29</sup>

Socrates contains the aristocratic ideal of the *poikilon ēthos* in his criticism of the democratic individual—just as, please observe, the democratic individual contains first a symposiast drinking to the *aulos*—to yoke these factions together at the level of aesthetic-cum-ethical sensibility. Both democracy and aristocracy are structured by a conception of beauty as *poikilia*. This is a surprising and revisionary diagnosis, but it reinforces an earlier conceptual move. At *Republic* Book 3, Socrates and Glaucon

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Thuc. 2.41.1 with B.M.W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1964), 121–2: 'the democratic viewpoint ... is Odyssean – an ideal of versatility, adaptability, diplomatic skill, and intellectual curiosity'.

<sup>28</sup> To my knowledge, this allusion has not yet been observed.

<sup>29</sup> On political functions of *poikilia* on sympotic vases, see Neer (n. 9). 'Theognis' as persona of disaffected aristocrat: L. Kurke, 'Archaic Greek poetry', in H.A. Shapiro (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Archaic Greece* (Cambridge, 2007), 141–68, at 144–9.

remove *poikilia* from the material culture of Kallipolis on the grounds that *poikilia* in music causes licentiousness, in cuisine disease (ἐκεῖ μὲν ἀκολασίαν ἢ ποικιλία ἐνέτικτεν, ἐνταῦθα δὲ νόσον, *Resp.* 404e3–4). The μὲν ... δέ clause requires a fairly general sense of *poikilia*, perhaps captured by ‘complexity’—one sufficiently flexible to connote the immoderate pursuit of appetitive pleasure in both musical and culinary practices. Yet it would be a mistake to infer that Socrates is thinning out the concept to fit his philosophical purposes. For he means to indict specific democratic and aristocratic practices for purveying a corrupt conception of beauty.

Democracy is indicted in the charge that, like panharmonic tunings played on multi-stringed instruments (*Resp.* 399c7–8), complex and various rhythmic feet (ποικίλους ... παντοδαπὰς βᾶσεις, 399e10–11) make one graceless, unable to perceive and cultivate the graceful beauty of a virtuous person.<sup>30</sup> For *poikilia* is the staple of New Musicians, whose musical innovations—including increased instrumental range, mixed tunings and prioritizing the modulations of the *aulos* rather than fitting tuning and rhythm to verse (cf. 398d8, 400d4–5)—came to signify democratic revolution and inclusivity. While Socrates may have philosophical reasons to reject the view that music is beautiful to the extent that it excites psychosomatic upheaval, for rhetorical purposes he taps into the anxieties of his élite male interlocutors over the ecstatic power of the *aulos* to compromise their rational rule over themselves and others.<sup>31</sup> His concern is that, because musical structures influence and are influenced by psychological and political structures (424c6–d4), to valorize musical *poikilia* is to reinforce a poor orientation to value in ethical and political life.

Less acknowledged than the democratic affiliation of musical *poikilia* is the aristocratic conception of beauty at stake in culinary *poikilia*. When Socrates recommends a simple diet without, in particular, a Sicilian variety of relishes (Σικελικὴν ποικιλίαν ὄψου, *Resp.* 404d2), he is removing luxuries introduced by Glaucon’s objection that one cannot live *well* in a city of bare necessity because one is ‘without relishes’ (ἄνευ ὄψου, 372c2). Glaucon’s objection is not initially motivated by appetitive desires for pleasure, nor does he now set aside fancier tastes for the good of moderation or health. Rather, the exchange turns on the value of beauty, the *kalon*. Glaucon demands relishes owing to a spirited ambition to preserve his sense of a cultured and beautiful life, one worthy of admiration.<sup>32</sup> He wants to dine in the aristocratic manner to which he is accustomed (ἄπερ νομίζεται, 372d4–e1). Into Kallipolis, therefore, come the delicacies, furniture

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Resp.* 400d9–402a4, especially the primacy of beauty in tuning and rhythm (401d3–e1), discussed carefully by A.-E. Peponi, *Frontiers of Pleasure: Models of Aesthetic Response in Archaic and Classical Greek Thought* (Oxford, 2012), 144–53.

<sup>31</sup> See further E. Csapo, ‘The politics of the New Music’, in P. Murray and P. Wilson (edd.), *Music and the Muses: The Culture of Mousikē in the Classical Athenian City* (Oxford, 2004), 207–48 with the observation of P. Leven, *The Many-Headed Muse: Tradition and Innovation in Late Classical Greek Lyric Poetry* (Cambridge, 2014), 101–3 that musicians politicized their music through the vocabulary of *poikilia*. *Aulos* as locus of anxieties: e.g. P. Wilson, ‘The *aulos* in Athens’, in S. Goldhill and R. Osborne (edd.), *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge, 1999), 58–95; R. Martin, ‘The pipes are brawling: conceptualizing musical performance in Athens’, in C. Dougherty and L. Kurke (edd.), *The Cultures within Ancient Greek Culture: Contact, Conflict, Collaboration* (Cambridge, 2003), 153–80.

<sup>32</sup> Here I am indebted to M.F. Burnyeat, ‘Culture and society in Plato’s *Republic*’, *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 20 (1999), 215–324, at 230–6. P.W. Ludwig, ‘Eros in the *Republic*’, in G.R.F. Ferrari (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato’s Republic* (Cambridge, 2007), 202–31 attends to spirit in this connection (at 225–6), though he takes the passage as evidence that spirited motivation should be eliminated.

and accoutrements of the symposium, notably such conventional *kala* as painting, *poikilia* (presumably, embroidery), gold and ivory (373a1–9).<sup>33</sup> How can Glaucon reject these attachments only moments later? It is at least in part because Socrates has in the meanwhile revalued *poikilia* as emasculate luxuries opposed to the masculine ideal of courage to which Glaucon is also attracted: ‘real men’ do not eat fish, much less Sicilian delicacies (404b5–c6). To regulate the culture by a standard of simplicity (ἡ ἀπλότης, 404e4), then, is to displace a live standard of beauty at classical Athens by revaluing concrete forms of ‘complexity’ as ugly and shameful pleasures, not as emblems of an admirable life.

## II.2 Mimetic poetry reconsidered

The criticism of *poikilia* in mimetic poetry at *Republic* Book 10 follows the same course. Because its historical context and its rhetorical subtext have not been appreciated, however, scholars have mistaken pejorative connotations of *poikilia* for a denial of its beauty. The concept, I argue, expresses Socrates’ simultaneous repulsion *and attraction* toward mimetic poetry, tracing a far more ambivalent response than has traditionally been allowed. This ambivalence reflects a philosophical problem. One must negotiate how to respond to such fascinating yet dangerous attractions because these cannot be neatly separated from the experience of beauty.

The relevant charge is that by presenting ‘the irascible and *poikilos* character’ (τὸ ἀγανακτικὸν τε καὶ ποικίλον ἦθος, *Resp.* 605a5–6), which admits of much *poikilēn mimēsis* (πολλὴν μίμησιν καὶ ποικίλην ἔχει, 604e1), mimetic poets reinforce false values that undermine the rule of reason in the soul. The term ‘irascible’ (ἀγανακτικόν) refers to the non-rational element that relishes in grieving the loss of someone dear (603e3–4) and impedes the ability of reason to measure suffering in light of a wider scheme of value (604c1–2). This element rules tragic heroes and the many to whom they seem beautiful (φαίνεται καλὸν εἶναι τοῖς πολλοῖς, 602b3), unsurprisingly, since virtuous conduct is alien to this motley crew (πανηγύρει καὶ παντοδαποῖς ἀνθρώποις, 604e5), reared as they have been to find *poikilia* paradigmatically beautiful.<sup>34</sup> More opaque is what it means that this character admits of πολλὴν μίμησιν καὶ ποικίλην. Perhaps it is that the dramatic presentation of this character is intricate or that it takes various forms because emotional turmoil can be expressed in various ways.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, the phrase evokes connotations of sensory pleasure, psychological instability and deception that have accrued to the concept of *poikilia*, all of which caution against mimetic poetry. What, more specifically, do the terms of *poikilia* at *Resp.* 604e–605a imply?

<sup>33</sup> Reading καὶ τὴν ποικιλίαν (373a8) with most manuscripts; cf. 401a2. It may refer not only to embroidery if counted among πάντα τὰ τοιαῦτα. For the aristocratic basis, cf. the lists of conventional *kala* at *Hip. mai.* 289d8–290b8, 298a1–5.

<sup>34</sup> I take φαίνεται καλὸν to underscore how value *shows up to someone* on account of her acculturation, reflecting the concern that mimetic poetry *reinforces* false values of the sort that *Resp.* Books 2–3 argues it instils. Here I cannot agree with Moss (n. 2), 424, for whom the force is ontological: ‘value does not *appear*’. V. Harte, ‘*Republic* 10 and the role of the audience in art’, *OSAPH* 38 (2010), 69–96 notes how the audience contributes to the identification of mimetic poetry.

<sup>35</sup> English translations reflect uncertainty whether *poikilos* is a *quality* of *mimēsis* (Grube, rev. Reeve: ‘many multicolored imitations’), a *quantity* (Jowett: ‘a great variety of materials for imitation’; Shorey: ‘many and varied occasions for imitation’) or both (Griffith: ‘highly susceptible to all sorts of varied imitation’). ‘Very intricate [complicated, *etc.*]’ is possible, if unlikely, taking καὶ intensively rather than copulatively.

The tripartite division of the soul provides some clarification. For *poikilia* has become a term of art for appetitive desires, a ‘diverse and many-headed beast’ (θηρίου ποικίλου καὶ πολυκεφάλου, *Resp.* 588c7–8), and the sort of unnecessary ‘various and complicated pleasures’ (παντοδαπὰς ἡδονὰς καὶ ποικίλας, 559d7–8) to which they are directed. To speak of ‘the irascible and *poikilos* character’ is to suggest, by referring jointly to the appetites and a debased form of spirit, the psychological diagnosis of the democratic individual who shamelessly pursues the immediate gratification of all pleasures.<sup>36</sup> This psychological disintegration flows from a false evaluative and metaphysical picture, also suggested by the concept of *poikilia*, which, according to Socrates, motivates the excessive grief of tragic heroes. This is the picture sometimes proffered in tragedy that human life is beset by irreconcilable conflicts of value or by inexplicable suffering in an opaque cosmic order. However accurately this picture may register what Nietzsche called, echoing *Resp.* 602a–b and 604e–605a, the ‘multi-coloured and diverse’ (‘bunt und mannichfaltig’) texture of our lives, Socrates exhorts one to believe that the order of being is knowable by reason and structured toward human happiness.<sup>37</sup> Sympathy for tragic heroes perseveres a false worldview and precludes the philosophical commitments that might correct it.

Alongside these general resonances, however, we should remember that *poikilon* *ēthos* refers in the context of tragedy less to a character ‘stormy, passionate, emotional, full of inner conflict’ than to the rather more specific cunning character of an Odysseus, Prometheus or Medea.<sup>38</sup> This specific reference matters. It throws suspicion toward intellectual cunning at classical Athens onto actual models of democratic citizenship and the tragic poetry that glorifies those models. Such suspicion gains force from the connotation of *poikilēn mimēsis* of clever, tricky, or cunning craftsmanship, developing earlier comparisons of poets and painters to magicians who can create manifold appearances (γοητείας ... ἢ θαυμαστοποιία, *Resp.* 602d5; cf. 598d4–5). These resonances form exactly the pattern of thought we found with Aphrodite, Clytemnestra and Odysseus: a *poikilos* mind (poet) uses a *poikilos* artefact (poetry) to manipulate senses and minds. Socrates unmasks this power by arguing that mimetic poets neither have nor need knowledge to gratify our silliest cognitive capacities. But his debt to this traditional pattern suggests more at work. After all, it leads to the remarkable claim that the mimetic poet *does* possess wisdom (ἡ σοφία αὐτοῦ, 605a3), misdirected though it is toward pleasing the crowd.

This concession of wisdom suggests that the concept of *poikilia* expresses a measure of admiration. While scholars standardly take Socrates to mean that mimetic poetry merely seems beautiful, en route to ‘banishing’ it without equivocation from the ideal constitution, we should take pause from the fact that the overall argument is far more provisional, reflecting what Stephen Halliwell has observed is an unresolved problem for Plato of reconciling a love of philosophy with a love of poetry.<sup>39</sup> Socrates concedes

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *Resp.* 411b3–c3, with P. Destrée, ‘Poetry, *thumos*, and pity in the *Republic*’, in P. Destrée and F.-G. Herrmann (edd.), *Plato and the Poets* (Leiden, 2011), 267–81.

<sup>37</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, §14 in K. Ansell Pearson and D. Large (edd.), *The Nietzsche Reader* (Malden, MA and Oxford, [1872] 2006), 67. Compare Halliwell (n. 2), 98–117, whose discussion of ‘the tragic worldview’ seems more appropriate to the present passage than an emphasis on the ‘heterogeneity’ of imagination (at 94); cf. Liebert (n. 2 [2017]), 145–6.

<sup>38</sup> So Moss (n. 2), 435.

<sup>39</sup> S. Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth: Interpretations of Greek Poetics from Homer to Longinus* (Oxford, 2011), 179–207.

at the start that he would rather not detail the harm of poetry out of fondness and reverence for Homer, but ‘one must tell’ the truth, twice using an impersonal imperative ῥητέον that separates the subsequent criticism from his personal attachment (*Resp.* 595b11, c5). Lest the sentiment, like the concession of wisdom at *Resp.* 605a3, seem ironic, the same emotional complex returns as the argument concludes. Socrates and Glaucon would gladly welcome mimetic poetry into a good political or psychological constitution because they are intimately aware of how enchanted they are by her (ἄσμενοι ἂν καταδεχοίμεθα, ὡς σύνησμέν γε ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς κηλουμένοις ὑπ’ αὐτῆς, 607c7–8), if only her benefit could be shown, whether in metre or by her lovers in prose (607d4–e2).<sup>40</sup> Yet, even without this defence, Socrates’ erotic passion (ἔρωσ, 607e5, 608a1) motivates him not to abandon mimetic poetry. He and Glaucon contrive, like lovers who must force themselves apart from a harmful beloved, to counteract their enchantment by singing a distillation of their argument as an ‘incantation’ while they will listen to poetry (ἀκροασόμεθ’ αὐτῆς ἐπῶδοντες ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς, 608a4–5), presupposing that they will continue to listen.<sup>41</sup> This contrivance and, especially, the erotic imagery, connected like κήλησις at 601b1 to beauty, reflect persistent but conflicted attraction. But perhaps by now this is unsurprising: *poikilia* always connoted danger amid admiration; Socrates has simply inverted the archaic proportions. The concept uniquely traces the contours of this ambivalent aesthetic response.

If this proposal is promising, it is terribly misleading to take *poikilos* at *Resp.* 604e–605a to connote what merely seems beautiful. This is false to Socrates’ phenomenology. If it is not incoherent to say that what one loves merely seems but is not beautiful, it is disingenuous to say that it merely seems beautiful, as though it were insignificant, yet exerts so powerful a hold that one must remain on guard. This is not to deny that Socrates relates *poikilia* to a metaphysically, epistemically and ethically deficient notion of sensory appearance. Nor is to deny that Socrates encourages us to infer that what is *poikilos* is complex and *seems* beautiful, whereas what is beautiful is simple, for example by characterizing what makes music, virtue and gods beautiful ultimately in terms of the ontological nature of the form of beauty.<sup>42</sup> But it is to suggest that this inference belongs to a rhetorical strategy that aligns *poikilia* with what seems (but may not be) beautiful for protreptic reasons, to undermine its analytic connection to beauty. Unless we recognize this strategy, we shall fail to appreciate the philosophical problem that Socrates’ ambivalence illustrates. The problem is that one cannot neatly distinguish the fascinating yet harmful attraction marked by the concept of *poikilia* from the experience of beauty.

An initial difficulty is to identify the offending items. Suppose *poikilia* were opposed to beauty as ‘complex’ to ‘simple’. If, however, its meaning and value are historically specific and constantly contested, as I have emphasized, then what it means to be ‘complex’ cannot be understood in purely descriptive or ontological terms, as though one could distinguish the right kind of music by counting the notes. It is precisely because there is no neutral evaluative ground on which to make his criticism, much less convince a partisan of the aesthetics of *poikilia*, that Socrates must strategically exploit the tensions internal to the concept.

<sup>40</sup> Mimetic poetry is personified as a *hetaira*, on which see Peponi (n. 30), 131–5.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *Phd.* 77e3–9 for a partially parallel incantation against fear of death.

<sup>42</sup> This contrast is best developed by Moss (n. 2), 427, 436.

In so far as one such tension links *poikilia* with deception, a distinction might seem available, after all, along the lines of the contrast between *seeming* and *being*. Yet how is this contrast to be drawn? The case at hand is rather knottier than the one Socrates suggests for comparison. A straight stick in water ‘merely seems’ bent, because we rationally judge it to be straight (*Resp.* 602c11–d3). However, fascination in *poikilia*, like most encounters with beauty, is too absorbing for better judgement to hold sway, too awesomely compelling not to seem beautiful while in its grips. This is a psychological consideration, to be sure. But the underlying difficulty is conceptual. One cannot distinguish *poikilia* from beauty because both are constitutively modes of attractive *appearance*. Like his contemporaries, Plato typically conceives of beauty not in the early modern terms of an objective property or a subjective feeling but in the phenomenological terms of how something elicits in a human being a cluster of attitudes including erotic desire, psychosomatic pleasure, wonder and fascination. Such, however, is also the phenomenology of *poikilia*.<sup>43</sup> If it is a conceptual truth that to be beautiful is in part to appear beautiful, then the contrast of appearance and reality, seeming and being, will be insufficient to demarcate what is beautiful from what is not.<sup>44</sup>

Of course, what seems beautiful may not be so. And it is significant in this regard that, whereas one can ask whether what seems beautiful really is so, there is no meaningful question whether what seems *poikilos* really is so. The metaphysical contrast does here gain traction. But the lesson, I would suggest, is that the apparent beauty of *poikilia* is, first, an appearance to the senses and, second, all there is to being *poikilos*. The structure of this appearance is not the presentation or disclosure of *something else*, as sensible beauty is for Plato (properly understood as) the disclosure of non-sensible being, the form of beauty. The lesson, or consequence, is not that this apparent beauty is illusory. Indeed, Socrates cannot quite claim that it is so. If beauty is the intentional object of erotic desire, which Socrates has for mimetic poetry, he should at some level find mimetic poetry beautiful. This may be at the level of non-rational psychology. But that should only reinforce the complexity of Socrates’ attitude.

In arguing that, despite his cultural critique, Socrates keeps greater company with contemporary aesthetic attitudes than tends to be acknowledged, I mean to suggest that Plato preserves the tension within the concept of beauty remarked at the outset. On the one hand, if mimetic poetry is a dangerous pleasure, it becomes dissociated from beauty, as beauty relates closely to the good. Yet, on the other hand, the psychological—and conceptual—pressure to consider the object of this fascinating, indeed erotic, experience beautiful entails that the pursuit of beauty contains the possibility of peril.<sup>45</sup> Beyond the difficulty of reconciling competing loves of philosophy and of poetry, Plato places under the sign of *poikilia* a more general problem in the ethical psychology of beauty: how should one respond to fascinating yet dangerous attractions?

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *Menex.* 234c5–235b2: funeral orators praise the war-dead ‘so beautifully (οὐτως καλῶς) that they enchant (γοητεύουσιν) our souls, embellishing somehow in most beautiful words (κάλλιστά πως τοῖς ὀνόμασι ποικίλλοντες) praise each man deserves and praise he does not’; so ‘charmed’ (κηλούμενος) is Socrates that for the three days he feels ‘greater, nobler and more beautiful’. It does not disturb the conceptual point that Socrates may be mocking orators, audiences and himself.

<sup>44</sup> *Phdr.* 250d3–e1 suggests the ontological basis of this point: Beauty is most self-disclosive (ἐκφανέστατον, 250d7). See the penetrating remarks of A. Kosman, ‘Beauty and the good: situating the *kalon*’, *CPh* 105 (2010), 341–57.

<sup>45</sup> I discuss this point, and how beauty for Plato comes apart from the good, in the context of erotic desire in ‘The guise of the beautiful: *Symposium* 204d ff.’, *Phronesis* 65 (2019), 129–52.

## III. SIGHTS AND SOUNDS, VISION AND WONDER

This general problem subtends the discussion of cosmic *poikilia* from which we began. There, however, the problem takes shape from a metaphysical contrast between what is sensible as opposed to what is intelligible. The astronomical motions of heavenly bodies may point toward the intelligible, but risk absorbing one's attention further into the sensible world. This metaphysical contrast underwrites why for Plato *poikilia* cannot be analytic to beauty: because it is sensory, what is *poikilos* can be beautiful but not *what it is to be* beautiful. Before we return to the discussion of astronomy, it will help to observe how this particular target comes in the crosshairs of the argument at *Resp.* 475d–480a that lovers of sights and sounds lack knowledge because the many beauties to which they are directed admit of being not-beautiful.<sup>46</sup> Though understandably mined for its epistemological detail, the argument is framed by aesthetic and ethical considerations which have passed unremarked.<sup>47</sup> This passage, I propose, works to displace the aesthetics of *poikilia* by subordinating a rather similar sensibility to a philosophical engagement with beauty.

The lovers of sights and sounds are characterized in two ways, before and after the argument. Each reflects a background concern with *poikilia*. The latter characterization focusses on ethical psychology. Because they do not attend to what remains always the same, lovers of sights and sounds 'wander' (πλανώμενοι) among sensible phenomena that vary every which way (*Resp.* 484b6–7). This is a consequence of the general principle that one's psychology becomes structured like what one admires. By 'wandering' Socrates means not only that their cognitive condition, belief (δόξα), is unstable because it is structured toward changeable items but also that their *characters* are unstable; they *themselves* wander. This is presumably because their norms or standards (νόμιμα), not merely their opinions, of beauty 'wander' (πλανητόν, 479d8) or 'roll around' (κυλινδεῖται) between knowledge and ignorance (479d3–4).<sup>48</sup> The implication, which returns us to the matter of *poikilia*, is that, if one's ethical norms become so unmoored, one becomes vulnerable to thinking, like the democratic individual or the tyrant, that nothing is any more beautiful than ugly, good than bad or just than unjust (538d7–e3). That is, if one attends toward what is sensible, not least its variety and multiplicity, rather than toward an ontological item as unitary and stable as the Beautiful Itself, then one is prone to that shameless pursuit of pleasure later characterized in terms of *poikilia*.

<sup>46</sup> The controlling premise is that, whereas the Beautiful Itself is completely or purely (τὸ παντελῶς ὄν, *Resp.* 477a3; τοῦ εἰλικρινῶς ὄντος; 477a6, 478d4–5, 479d5), sensible beauty is beautiful relative to some time, place, person, respect or comparison class; cf. *Symp.* 211a1–b5. The temporal condition is here forefront. The crucial move in the question-and-answer exchange is whether the many beautiful 'things' (objects or properties) will seem somehow ugly (φανήσεται, 479a8). Future tense is needed, because a lover is less likely to grant that a beloved now seems ugly than that beauty will fade. This is particularly so in the context of *paiderasteia*, which prefaces the argument: Socrates notes that lovers manage to admire any putative facial flaw of their beloveds (474d2–475a3).

<sup>47</sup> The few scholars who connect the argument to the *poikilia* motif do so by relating the ontological deficiency of the sensible world to the multiplicity of *poikilia*: Petraki (n. 2); Liebert (n. 2 [2017]), 136 n. 45; Moss (n. 2), 426–8, 437, citing (at n. 35) *Ti.* 50d5: becoming as such is ποικίλου πάσας ποικιλίας. It is true that *poikilia* connotes multiplicity and that lovers of sights and sounds are comparable to, if not members of, audiences of mimetic poetry (cf. *Resp.* 601a5–b2, 604e1–605a6). However, the concept does not appear in this passage and never refers in the *Republic* to precisely the ontological deficiency of the sensible world. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to clarify this point.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *Resp.* 484d1 τὰ νόμιμα καλῶν τε περὶ καὶ δικαίων καὶ ἀγαθῶν, 'norms about beautiful [noble, admirable], just and good things'.

This is not to say that one of the lovers of sights and sounds' norms of beauty is *poikilia*. The text does not enter such detail. But the way in which these lovers are first characterized brings the aesthetics of *poikilia* more fully to the fore. Glaucon, we will recall, objects that, if a *philosophos* were simply a lover of all kinds of learning, then 'many strange people' (ἄτοποι) would be philosophers: lovers of sights (οἱ φιλοθεάμονες) seem to enjoy learning, as do lovers of sounds (οἱ φιλήκοοι), though the latter folks would rather attend every Dionysian festival than a serious discussion or some such study (λόγους καὶ τοιαύτην διατριβήν, *Resp.* 475d1–9). Glaucon suggests that common forms of intellectual culture, usually denoted by 'lover of sounds',<sup>49</sup> including spectating and perhaps criticizing theatre, are just so much noise compared to philosophical discourse.

The theatrical context recalls the historical fact and foreshadows Socrates' criticism of *poikilia* as a cultural standard of both beautiful poetry and ethical character. So should the sensibility of the lovers of sights and sounds. They are positively attracted to beauty in so far as it 'appears to be many ... manifesting itself everywhere' (πανταχοῦ φανταζόμενα πολλὰ φαίνεσθαι, *Resp.* 476a6–7). Like those enraptured by the wondrous movement of Odysseus' golden brooch, they are attracted to beauty at the level of material composition: they 'embrace beautiful sounds, colours, shapes and everything fashioned out of them' (τάς τε καλὰς φωνὰς ἀσπάζονται καὶ χροὰς καὶ σχήματα καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐκ τῶν τοιούτων δημιουργούμενα, 476b4–6). The proliferation of beauty in these phrases suggests that lovers of sights and sounds are not merely focussed on sensible beauty as opposed to some Platonic 'form' of beauty, as is most everybody. They are rather more stringently unwilling to grant that the variety of sensible beauty could be united or explained by a single principle (οὐδαμῆ ἀνεχόμενος ἂν τις ἐν τῷ καλῶν φῆ εἶναι, 479a5–6). This orientation to beauty is remarkably congruous to the aesthetics of *poikilia*.

Plato must demarcate these figures from philosophers, and in so doing articulate the metaphysical limitation of the aesthetics of *poikilia*, because philosophy is characterized by a competing love of beauty. Seldom is the similarity duly emphasized, perhaps because readers assume that Plato opposes aesthetic and philosophical engagement as Glaucon does.<sup>50</sup> Yet Plato has Socrates immediately remind Glaucon that these 'strange' lovers of sights and sounds are *like* philosophers (ἀλλ' ὁμοίους μὲν φιλοσόφοις, *Resp.* 475e2–3), just as he will have to remind Glaucon that the 'strange' (ἀτόπους) prisoners of the allegory of the cave are 'like us' (ὁμοίους ἡμῖν, 515a4–5). The similarity is two-fold. Like philosophers, lovers of sights and sounds are committed to and enjoy learning, and they attempt to learn through an erotic pursuit of beauty. But the philosopher, who loves the spectacle of truth or being (τοὺς τῆς ἀληθείας ... φιλοθεάμονας, 475e4–5), pursues what lovers of sights and sounds deny, namely all manifestations of beauty

<sup>49</sup> See LSJ s.v. φιλήκοος; cf. *Resp.* 535d5, 548e5.

<sup>50</sup> An impression furthered by labelling the lovers of sights and sounds derogatorily 'aesthetes'; e.g. D. Sedley, 'Philosophy, the forms, and the art of ruling', in G.R.F. Ferrari (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic* (Cambridge, 2007), 256–83, at 257–9. The obverse assumption, also common, is that the (sensible) *kalon* is here 'purely aesthetic' and non-ethical. Yet the *kalon* comes along with the just and the good, as elsewhere, and interest in learning at Athenian theatre extends beyond artistic technique to ethical and political matters, contra R. Gosling, 'Republic Book V: τὰ πολλὰ καλὰ, etc.', *Phronesis* 5 (1960), 116–28, at 121–2. For sensitive attention to these points, see C. Meinwald, 'Who are the *philothaemones* and what are they thinking? *Ta polla kala* in Republic V', *AncPhil* 37 (2017), 39–57. At *Ap.* 22c3, *πολλὰ καὶ καλὰ* describes insights into human life and the divine; at *Symp.* 209e2, virtuous deeds.



and pre-eminently the Beautiful Itself (476b6–c4).<sup>51</sup> This creates a difference in ethical epistemology. The philosopher does not presume that one learns how to live well by attending plays to acquire, through sensation and cultural authority, putative exemplars of beauty or virtue as opposed to pursuing a systematic body of knowledge of their nature. And this creates, in turn, an aesthetic difference. The philosopher engages with beauty as grasped perceptually and intellectually, seeking in the many beauties a unifying principle by which to comprehend the variety in which lovers of sights and sounds revel, that they may discern sensible beauties *as* participants in the Beautiful Itself. The point to emphasize is that, if the philosopher shares some of the aesthetic habit as characterizes the aesthetics of *poikilia*, Plato must undermine this sensibility to make viable the pursuit of philosophy. Indeed, so far as ethical and epistemic progress relies on the *vision* of beauty, Plato competes on shared terrain.

This is terrain staked out by the study of astronomy discussed at *Republic* Book 7. Socrates extends the above argument but brings the ambivalent role of *poikilia* and its beauty centre stage. The heuristic value of admiring the heaven, we will recall, is qualified by Socrates' joke that to count contemporary astronomy among 'higher' studies, as Glaucon suggests, is to think one can learn something 'by looking with his head thrown back at decorations (*poikilmata*) on the ceiling' (ἐν ὀροφῇ ποικιλμᾶτα θεόμενος, *Resp.* 529a10–b2). The term *poikilmata* captures the sensible nature and relative superficiality of observable astronomical motions, 'adorned', as it were, 'on the visible surface' of the heaven (ἐν ὀρατῷ πεποικιλται, 529c8–9), as well as of their varying speeds, positions and orbits. These motions are thus not the 'true' astronomical motions, knowledge of which requires geometry. Yet this does not prevent the sort of mathematical astronomer whom Socrates advocates, for example Timaeus in the eponymous dialogue, from admiring how the 'wanderings' of the planets are 'wondrously elaborate' (τὰς τούτων πλάνους ... πεποικιλμένους δὲ θαυμαστῶς, *Ti.* 39d1–2) or, indeed, from reserving highest praise for those brightest, most beautiful, fixed stars that embellish (πεποικιλμένον) the sky as a veritable adornment (κόσμος) of the cosmos (*Ti.* 40a3–9).

Our initial puzzle was how Plato can have Socrates similarly praise the *poikilia* of the cosmos as beautiful while seeming to disparage *poikilia* as a harmful and rather *not* beautiful pleasure. The solution, we have seen, is that Plato grants that *poikilia* may be beautiful and its experience beneficial, but he exploits tensions within the concept to subvert its prominence as a cultural conception of beauty. Here in the context of astronomy, however, that pattern of admiration serves his philosophical purposes. By comparing astronomical motions to none other than Daedalus' plans for self-moving statues (*Resp.* 529e1), Socrates can appropriate a trope in archaic poetry of admiring the starry sky and prevailing associations of *poikilia* to beauty and divine expertise.<sup>52</sup> Just as Daedalus' plans show the beautiful work of an intelligent craftsperson, the beauty and precision of the visible cosmos reveal it to be the most beautiful working-up of sensible material by the demiurge (530a6–7) and make it a useful model in the proper study of astronomy (529d8–9). To admire *poikilia* in this way is to restructure

<sup>51</sup> We are surely to recall the opening of the dialogue: Socrates went down to the Piraeus to observe the inaugural festival of Bendis and found the processions beautiful (*Resp.* 327a3–4). A.W. Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context* (Cambridge, 2004) analyses this appropriation of the practice of *theoria*.

<sup>52</sup> See Grand-Clément (n. 2 [2011]), 548–52 for this archaic trope, echoed also at *Phd.* 110b5–d7.

admiration toward the non-sensible nature of beauty. The point of displacing the aesthetics of *poikilia* is ultimately to put admiration of the beauty of *poikilia* in its proper place.

Why not conclude, perhaps more simply, that Plato distinguishes a beneficial from a harmful species of *poikilia*?<sup>53</sup> This strategy, though elegant, suppresses the essentially problematical character of the concept. Not only may only a rare philosophic few benefit from admiring astronomical motions but this benefit cannot eliminate—and Plato's re-conception of beauty merely mitigates—the risk of becoming more deeply absorbed in sensible beauty and its pleasures. This is a consequence of the fact that cosmic *poikilia* is intelligently arranged yet sensory, sitting precisely at the juncture of a deep ambivalence in Plato concerning the role and limits of vision in the philosophic life. Put generally, vision is a metonym for the foolishness of the senses but a metaphor for knowledge, and the vision of beauty often a necessary means to advance from the former toward the latter.<sup>54</sup> The role of *poikilia* sharply focusses this broader ambivalence, ramifying on a cosmic scale the psychological ambivalence of Socrates toward the fascinating experience of mimetic poetry. Just as with the complexity of his phenomenology, so too we cannot in general distinguish beneficial from harmful species of *poikilia* or modes and objects of fascination. This distinction is either unavailable from within such an absorbing experience or inadequate to its *combination* of admiration and fear. We must hold both sides together to appreciate how ethical and epistemic progress for Plato must confront a problem of responding properly to fascinating yet dangerous attractions.

This conclusion contains an insight into the ethical psychology of beauty. Plato's treatment of the aesthetics of *poikilia* depends on the recognition that cultural conceptions of beauty shape in fundamental and non-rational ways the kind of life one admires and aspires to live. Balanced against the promise of beauty to manifest what a good life consists in and to move one to live accordingly is an acute worry that its experience can mislead: the pursuit of beauty is rife with anxiety and risk. Both sides of this coin reflect how beauty for Plato names both a cultural and philosophical problem and a potential solution: its wondrous—one might say fascinated—experience has the unique ability to disrupt how one ordinarily lives and to intimate more nourishing ways of living. But if one cannot tell this experience apart from the experience of *poikilia*, the dangers of the latter infiltrate the former; and if one must pursue beauty to live well, these dangers cannot be escaped and must be negotiated as one learns what it means to live well. A sense of beauty guides how we live. We follow its lead at great peril.

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<sup>53</sup> As does the singularly sensitive treatment of Tulli (n. 3), e.g. at 235: 'Platone pratica la *Spaltung* di matrice arcaica, divide. La *poikilia* negativa della produzione poetica non è certo la *poikilia* positiva.'

<sup>54</sup> See N. Pappas, *The Philosopher's New Clothes: The Theaetetus, the Academy, and Philosophy's Turn Against Fashion* (New York, 2017), from whom I borrow the contrast of metonym and metaphor; and particularly in this connection, F. Gonzalez, 'The power and ambivalence of a beautiful image in Plato and the poets', in P. Destrée and R.G. Edmonds III (edd.), *Plato and the Power of Images* (Boston, 2017), 47–65.