Imitation as a Political Tool:

Analyzing Orwell's and Plato's Philosophies of Language

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In Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" and Plato's Republic, both thinkers discuss one of language's most problematic yet potentially unavoidable features: imitation. Orwell sees imitation as a symptom of individual linguistic practice; Plato thinks that it is inseparable from language. Orwell and Plato agree that poor use of language, particularly in the written sense, can lead others to believe certain unrealities, threatening the political stability of society. This paper will put Orwell's discussion of the political effects of good and bad writing in conversation with Plato's views of what constitutes a morally (and thus politically) good myth. While there can be positive aspects to imitation (such as imitating virtue), the imitation of vice poses great concern to both authors. Finally, the paper analyzes the proposed solutions and how Orwell and Plato both propose a methodology of virtuous imitation.

I. Introduction

Orwell's and Plato's works address the intersection of political and linguistic philosophy and the moral importance of literature, especially as expressed through imitation. In "Politics and the English Language," Orwell connects the decline in language with the decline in political institutions. For him, the copying of problematic linguistic habits (i.e., *imitation*) is correlated with the blind acceptance of dangerous political ideas and a refusal to think for oneself. Orwell believes that imitative language can aid totalitarian regimes by allowing them to justify actions through euphemisms and deceit. In his seminal work, *The Republic*, Plato develops his political philosophy by establishing a hypothetical ideal city, or polis. Plato maintains that the success of the polis is dependent on the attainment of justice, led by rulers who perceive the Good. Literary imitation–the indirect attainment of Truth through the propagation of myths and poems–can either promote virtue and harmony in a city or destroy it through vice. Although separated by a gap of 2,200 years, both thinkers arrive at the same conclusion: literary imitation can be used either for good or bad and this can affect the stability of the political state.

II. Language, Imitation, and Politics for Orwell

Orwell views language as a means of communicating political ideas. Even if the message "reinforc[es] the status quo," there is no work of language that is apolitical.[1] Literature[2] is a "recording [of] experience" that is influenced by the "fears, hatreds, and loyalties of a directly political kind [that] are near to the surface of everyone's consciousness."[3] If literature is

[1] Satta, Mark. "Goerge Orwell." In Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022. https:/iep.utm.edu/george-orwell/, sec 5b.
[2] In *Politics* (1946) Orwell writes: "I have not here been considering the literary use of language, but merely language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought" (par. 31). Nevertheless, his essay *The Prevention of Literature* expresses his belief that there are political implications to literature. *Politics* is the primary Orwellian text discussed here because of its extensive treatment of imitation. *The Prevention of Literature* identifies the causes for the restraint on author's creativity.
[3] Orwell, George. 1946b."The Prevention of Literature." The Orwell Foundation. https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/the-prevention-of-literature/, par. 10.

influenced by such factors, then language–as the form of literature–can be influenced by the very same factors. We do not live in a void, and language is a reflection of our interactions with others. One of Orwell's main concerns, therefore, is that language can be reflective of bad political ideologies. He suspects "that the German, Russian, and Italian languages have all deteriorated...as a result of dictatorship."[4] For example, emphasis on certain patriotic language and the tabooing of particular words, such as *capitalism,* can affect how people perceive the world. He also argues that "the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes."[5] When the voice of a particular group is amplified, the language of a society often shifts in that group's favor. For instance, consider the effect of TikTok on modern language: certain slang words and phrases (e.g., *6-7*, *aura points*, *chat*, *cooked*) have seemingly become ubiquitous among the vocabulary of Generation Alpha. Some of these terms originated on TikTok while others were brought there from other platforms. In either case, TikTok *amplifies* this particular language to the point where the use of such slang influences other generations.

This raises the question: Is what we say original, or is it an imitation of some other idea or cause? Although he does not directly address the question, Orwell hopes that language can be as close to original as possible. He believes that words should be "chosen for the sake of their meaning," not automatically using commonly heard phrases for the sake of convenience.[6] Here, Orwell establishes the paradigm of thought preceding language. Originality in language is the ability to freely choose how to express one's thoughts, even if certain ideas might be influenced by other factors.[7]

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[4] Orwell, George. 1946a. "Politics and the English Language." The Orwell Foundation. https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/, par. 25.
[5] Orwell, "Politics," par. 25.
[6] Orwell, "Politics," par. 9.
[7] Refer to Orwell, "The Prevention of Literature."

Orwell believes that the decline of language is attributable to unoriginality. Orwell calls this unoriginality *imitation*.[8] Under Orwell's understanding, imitation is a reversal of the thought-precedes-language paradigm. This reversal occurs when the linguist prioritizes the expression, or mode, of speech over the content of thought. Orwell identifies four such examples: dying metaphors, operators (verbal false limbs), pretentious diction, and meaningless words (see Fig. 1). These examples are "ready-made phrases,"[9] modular blocks of language one can use to construct a thought. Language becomes the "gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug."[10] The creative process of writing suffers because of this laziness, as language becomes a game of repeating what others say and is limited by the linguistic blocks available to form sentences. This inhibits the freedom of individual thought and is conducive to maintaining control by political regimes.

Fig. 1 The Four Imitative Tools

Tool	Examples[11]	Problem[12]
Dying metaphors (par.10)	*Ring the changes on, no axe to grind, on the order of the day*	"They save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves." "Many of these are used without knowledge of their meaning."
Operators/verbal false limbs (par. 11)	*Render inoperative, make contact with, exhibit a tendency to*	"They save the trouble of picking out appropriate verbs and nouns, and at the same time pad each sentence with extra syllables which give it an appearance of symmetry."

[8] Orwell, "Politics," par. 2.
[9] Orwell, "Politics," par. 17.
[10] Orwell, "Politics," par. 17.
[11] Examples compiled from "Politics." The author acknowledges that he is guilty of using these tools, including in this paper.
[12] All quotes from their respective paragraphs.

Pretentious diction (par. 12)	*Phenomenon, element, effective, eliminate*	"...used to dress up a simple statement" "...used to dignify the sordid process of international politics" "...an increase in slovenliness and vagueness"
Meaningless words (par. 13)	*Romantic, plastic, fascism, justice*	"The person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different."

Imitation limits thought, and it can also be weaponized by political agents. Orwell discusses three types of imitation utilized by regimes for political purposes: groupthink, ambiguity and euphemisms, and generalization and excessive word use. All three obscure the meaning of what someone wants to say, affecting Orwell's thought-before-language paradigm.

a. Groupthink

In ordinary language, people "may be almost unconscious of what [they are] saying,"[13] as if their minds are part of a single collective consciousness. Orwell characterizes this collective groupthink as being "favorable to political conformity."[14] If the language of a group has been reduced to a set list, then it is likely members of a political community will think in conformity with each other. This can lead to problems such as blind acceptance of a bad political proposal or ideology put forth by the government. For example, in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the brainwashed citizens are fed the lies of the Party: War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength.[15]

b. Ambiguity and Euphemisms

[13] Orwell, "Politics," par. 22.
[14] Orwell, "Politics," par. 22.
[15] Orwell, George. 1949. *1984*. New York, New York: Signet Classics, p. 4.

Orwell identifies contemporary phrases[16] that act as euphemisms, evoking a sense of moral rightness or ambiguity. This sort of ambiguity is particularly dangerous because it creates a disconnect between what the author intends and what the reader understands. He gives the following examples:

> Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside…huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population or rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*.[17]

In these cases, the severity of government actions is downplayed or even given a patriotic twist. This makes it easy for people to overlook and not challenge such incidents, creating a disconnect between what they perceive and what is occurring.

c. Generalization and Excessive Word Use

Using ambiguous words contributes to the generalization of a passage, causing it to lose its meaning. The excessive use of words–which can be achieved through dying metaphors and operators (verbal false limbs[18])–adds unnecessary filler, which can result in readers becoming confused or losing the sense of meaning conveyed in the articulation. Generalized passages can be applied to a variety of ideas. The following shows a passage that Orwell quotes from Ecclesiastes and his demonstrated generalization of such a passage:

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[16] As of time of writing, i.e., 1946

[17] Orwell, "Politics," par. 23; original emphasis.

[18] Operators, also called verbal false limbs, turn a simple verb (e.g. tends) into a phrase (e.g. exhibit a tendency to) by adding on a noun or adjective (par. 11).

Fig. 2 Original and Generalized Versions of Ecclesiastes 9:11

Original Version	Orwell's Version
I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth [sic] to them all (Ecc. 9:11)	Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity but that a considerable element of the unpredictably must invariably be taken into account.

In Orwell's generalized version, the text loses its emphasis on the author's perspective and lacks the examples given in the original. The generalized version is colder and likely to be misinterpreted by the reader,[19] while the original version is clear and invites further reflection into the reader's personal experience.

This reflection represents good use of language for Orwell–when the reader knows what the author is saying and can form appropriate judgments based on this information. In Orwell's eyes, the proper use of language can be inferred from the health of the political state: "...to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration."[20] When the author and reader (or speaker and listener) agree about the content of what is written or said, then there is a common ground from which to debate and discuss political ideas. Language is "an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought."[21] Thus, even bad political ideas ought to be given a place in public discourse, for so long as they are clearly articulated, they can be debated. To this point, Orwell raises an interesting question: "Since you don't know what Fascism is, how can you struggle against Fascism?"[22] Good linguistic and political practice

[19] Refer to Problems with Meaningless Words (Fig. 1)
[20] Orwell, "Politics," par. 2.
[21] Orwell, "Politics," par. 31.
[22] Orwell, "Politics," par. 31.

demands that we know what we talk about, so that we agree about how the government should function.

III. Language, Imitation, and Politics for Plato[23]

For Plato, language is an attempt at communicating some unchanging, eternal Truths (i.e., the *Forms*). In *The Republic*, his linguistic focus is on poetry and storytelling. Much of Book X expresses Plato's concerns with imitation, or *mimesis.* A natural feature of language, *mimesis* is essentially a "copy of a copy" of Ultimate Reality.[24] Plato demonstrates *mimesis* in both the Allegory of the Cave in Book VII and the discussion of art in Book X. In the Allegory of the Cave, prisoners have been placed in a cave from their youth and are chained facing a wall. A fire behind them provides light, and they can see the shadows of figures carrying various things, such as statues reflecting on the wall in front of them. It is only these shadows that the prisoners are familiar with, not the real objects themselves. These objects are also imperfect representations of what they try to convey.[25] For example, Plato discusses a simple painting of a couch. There is the *eidos*, or Form, of a couch, there is what a craftsman designs into a couch, and finally, there is a painting of the couch.[26] If someone who does not have any prior experience with a couch looks at a painting of a couch for the first time, then that is all they experience about the couch. Of course, this painting is based on the physical representation of a couch—what the craftsman makes. Yet, the craftsman is not perfect, and the couch will inevitably have a few flaws within it (e.g., the proportions could be slightly off). Thus, a hypothetical perfect couch must exist, from which we get the notion of *couch*.

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[23] It should be noted that this paper is only concerned with Plato's treatment of the political implications of *mimetic Logos* in *The Republic* and not with writing or Logos generally (which would require an inquiry into *Phaedrus*).
[24] Amadi, Cornelius Chukwudi. "Art as Imitation in Plato's Philosophy: A Critical Appraisal." AMAMIHE: Journal of Applied Philosophy 20, no. 1 (2022):125-138. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.34138.62405.
[25] Plato. The Republic of Plato. Translated by Allan Bloom. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2016. 514a–516c.
[26] Plato, *The Republic*, 595c–597e.

If what we see or experience is never perfect, then this presents serious implications: Plato believes that there are no new ideas; it is impossible for language, art, or thought to be original since it is always representational, and thereby mimetic in nature. Instead, the good Platonic student would be one who aspires to get as close as he can to knowing the Good and shares this knowledge with his fellow companions (the prisoners living in the darkness of the cave). This is the course of education prescribed by Plato for the ideal ruler.[27]

Platonic imitation presents risks for the moral and political integrity of the state through two means: insidious imitation and the discouragement of virtue. The former has already been discussed at length by Orwell when he identifies the subtle tactics of dictators in changing the meaning of words. The latter is a unique Platonic approach to political philosophy.

a. *Insidious Imitation*

Like Orwell, Plato alludes to the possibility of imitation miscoloring the Truth. Poetry and language, in general, dress up Truths. Plato compares this process of dressing up Truths to being like a painting of objective reality. This is where Plato agrees with Orwell: the painter (poet) can misrepresent what they perceive, which influences public opinion. Such imitation takes advantage of "the sight's being misled by the colors"[28] to "produce…a bad regime in the soul."[29] People can more often be swayed by emotion than by pure reason. The frightening realization for Plato is that the poets producing the imitation have no knowledge of "what way each thing is bad or good" and imitate "whatever looks to be fair to the many who don't know anything."[30] For example, Plato questions the great poet Homer, supposing that he did not understand anything he recounted, and thus he is of no use if one wants to be instructed in

[27] Plato, *The Republic*, 519b-520d.
[28] Plato, *The Republic*, 602c.
[29] Plato, *The Republic*, 605b
[30] Plato, *The Republic*, 602a-b.

virtue.[31] Still, people listen to him because of the artifice with which he speaks and not the content of the message.[32] This directly parallels Orwell's criticisms of those who use phrases because they sound appealing without any consideration as to what they mean. Yet, a distinction must be made between the two thinkers: Plato does not believe that a purely evil Master Imitator can exist[33] while Orwell says that such imitators do exist, especially among the ruling class.

Plato identifies two ways in which imitation misrepresents Truth: lies and performances. Poetry has a dualism of both truths and falsehoods.[34] These falsehoods come in two forms: noble lies and malignant lies. Noble lies are pieces of fiction that do not corrupt the soul but rather are told either for entertainment or instruction in virtue.[35] Malignant lies pervert the Truth and can corrupt the soul. For example, Plato questions the myths of the atrocities of Uranus and how Cronos took revenge on his father.[36] Is it possible for the gods to do evil? If the gods are supposedly good, then does that justify their often abhorrent actions? These stories and the questions they raise are dangerous in Plato's view because they can give a false notion of the Good, inspiring others to *do wrong*. Such an occurrence would bring disorder to the state.

The other abuse of imitation is through performances. If poetry already presents base ideas through the dialogue or behaviors of characters, then both the actors performing it and the audience are at risk of accepting this information as true or good.[37] As discussed earlier, the imitators have no knowledge of what constitutes the Good, so blind acceptance of the content of

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[31] Plato, *The Republic*, 599a-601a.
[32] Plato, *The Republic*, 599a-601a.
[33] Plato believes that if one has experienced the Good, then one will be inclined to pursue it and even "undergo anything whatsoever" to live by the truth of the experience (516a-e).
[34] Plato, *The Republic*, 376e.
[35] Plato, *The Republic*, 377a–378a.
[36] Plato, *The Republic*, 377e-378b.
[37] Pappas, Nickolas. "Plato's Aesthetics." In The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman . Department of Philosophy, Stanford University, 2024. plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/plato-aesthetics. §2.2

the performances as Truth is akin to the still-chained prisoners living in the cave, blissfully unaware of the darkness they live in.[38] Yet, Plato is careful to caution that performance is not always base. Rather, "human nature...is unable to make a fine imitation of many things."[39] For example, men should not imitate women, slaves, animal noises, or natural phenomena (such as the sound of thunder) because "imitations, if they are practiced continually from youth onwards, become established as habits and nature, in body and sounds and in thought."[40] This can perhaps be thought of as Plato's greatest sin: the denial of Truth by acting against one's nature.[41] As Plato's disciple, Aristotle, would explain, if one wants to become virtuous, one must *perform* virtuous (and not base) actions.[42] This will be expanded on in a later section to reframe performative *mimesis* in terms of the act of performing virtue.

b. *Discouragement of Virtue*

Plato is a proto-virtue ethicist and designs his ideal city around virtue. Plato reasons that each part of a city needs to function properly for the city to work well. Insidious imitation threatens the virtue of citizens. For example, it can provide a false notion of the Good. To fully understand this, the city must be discussed in depth.

In the city, Plato establishes a hierarchy of roles: the Guardians (ruling class), the Auxiliaries (military), and the Artisans (producers and consumers). This hierarchy corresponds to the soul. Plato identifies three motivations of action within a soul: wisdom, courage, and desire.[43] A properly ordered and virtuous soul mirrors the hierarchy of the city: wisdom rules over courage and desires. Courage, the "preservation…of the right and lawful opinion about

[38] Plato, *The Republic*, 516a-e.
[39] Plato, *The Republic*, 395b.
[40] Plato, *The Republic*, 395c-396b.
[41] Sin is used in the analogical sense (lit. *shortcoming within nature*).
[42] Aristotle. 1999. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett. 1103a-1103b.
[43] Plato, *The Republic*, 435a-436b.

what is terrible" motivates the soul to choose the Good.[44] Desires, when kept in check, supply the basic needs of an individual (e.g., food, shelter, drink). Uniting the three in harmony is moderation.[45] In this way, the soul is much like the city: it has a Guardian (Wisdom) who rules in accord with virtue, Auxiliaries (Courage) to protect the soul from being corrupted by what is terrible (vice), and Artisans (Desires) who keep the individual functioning.

If the soul were to experience corruption of virtue from disordered *mimesis*, then the city's virtue would be corrupted too. The virtue of a city is to seek its own good (self-preservation).[46] This is not possible when the citizens cannot seek the good of their own souls. Plato, after all, designs the ideal city based on having ideal souls.[47] So, without the ideal souls, there is no ideal city.

IV. Orwell's Solution: Thoughtful Writing

In "Politics and the English Language," Orwell puts the onus of solving the language problem on his readers. If English "is full of bad habits which spread by imitation," they can be countered "if one is willing to take the necessary trouble."[48] Orwell offers two sets of advice: a list of six questions the "scrupulous writer…will ask himself," and six style and grammar rules.[49] The questions will first be considered to develop a summative understanding of Orwell's text, and then the style and grammar rules will be used to develop a linguistic categorical imperative.

a. *The Six Questions*

Each question is a reflective guide for authors during the entirety of the writing process. It must be noted that questions five and six must also be asked after the fact (i.e., once the author

[44] Plato, *The Republic*, 430b.
[45] Plato, *The Republic*, 430e.
[46] As demonstrated by the natural order of a city: Guardians rule wisely, Auxiliaries defend, and commonfolk sustain the city.
[47] Plato, *The Republic*, 435b.
[48] Orwell, "Politics," par. 2.
[49] Orwell, "Politics," par. 17.

has written something and prior to publication), indicating that no writer is perfect and will inevitably make mistakes, even if they scrupulously follow Orwell's rules. Plato and Orwell agree that disordered imitation must constantly be fought off to develop a virtuous writing ethic.

1. *What am I trying to say*? Because of the imitative nature of language, people can become "almost unconscious of what [they are] saying."[50] The worst writing practice is for someone to write something without knowing its meaning, so that the bad habit can be spread to someone else. Thus, the first step in properly expressing one's thoughts is to formulate the idea within the mind.
2. *What words will express it?* This goes back to Orwell's thought-before-language paradigm. Since writing communicates political ideas and someone's perspective of truth, words are contingent, dependent on one's thoughts. In asking this question, the writer actively acknowledges that their goal is to express an idea as accurately as possible so as to be understood by as many people as possible. Writing is transformed from a passive writing down of ideas to active engagement with these ideas.
3. *What image or idiom will make it clearer?* Orwell does not completely object to the use of literary devices, only those that do not represent the author's "mental image of the objects he is naming."[51] He also notes that "the sole aim of a metaphor is to call up a visual image,"[52] strengthening the reader's understanding of the author's intent. Still, it must be considered that certain devices—particularly dying metaphors and pretentious diction—are so overused or superfluous that they can have the opposite effect, creating confusion or making the text bland.

[50] Orwell, "Politics," par. 22.
[51] Orwell, "Politics," par. 17.
[52] Orwell, "Politics," par. 17.

4. *Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?* Fresh, vivid words stand out to the reader because they do not conform to the same constrained use of words all too common in ideological regimes.[53] Such images act contrary to the issues of generalization and excessive word usage discussed previously; they make the linguist's idea clear and can enable mutual understanding between the communication partners.
5. *Could I put it more shortly?* Ideas can get lost in particularly lengthy passages. The art of linguistics is a creative process: saying just enough to get the idea one wants to express across, but not so much that other unintended ideas can be perceived. Using an excessive number of words can create an excessive number of interpretations for a text. Additionally, Orwell advises using words with fewer syllables.[54] Word count is not the only issue. The longer the word, the greater the difficulty exists in comprehending its meaning.[55]
6. *Have I said anything that is unavoidably ugly?* Satta (2022) interprets Orwell as believing that literature possesses aesthetic value.[56] Additionally, it appears that Orwell considered the subjectivity of the individual such that "literary merit can be assessed either in terms of artistic merit or in terms of subjective appreciation and that these two forms of assessment need not generate matching results."[57] Orwell does not give a clear indication as to what constitutes artistic merit,[58] yet it appears that the framing of this question suggests we have an innate capacity to evaluate what is aesthetically pleasing. Furthermore, the phrase *unavoidably ugly* suggests that some works of literature can be

[53] Refer to pgs. 1-2
[54] Orwell, "Politics," par. 17.
[55] See Augustine. (1998). *Confessions* (H. Chadwick, Trans.). Oxford University Press. Book IV, Ch 10, §15.
[56] Satta, "George Orwell," §5a.
[57] Satta, "George Orwell," §5a.
[58] Satta, "George Orwell," §5a.

agreed upon to be unaesthetic (if it is unavoidable then it is necessary and thus universal to that work). Language ought to be good, true, and beautiful, so that the political systems operating are good, true, and beautiful.

b. *A Linguistic Categorical Imperative*

Kant's categorical imperative for ethical action may seem unrelated to Orwell's political writing. Yet, as discussed, writing has serious moral implications. People act based on how they interpret a piece of writing; hence, the content must be understood by both parties. Orwell provides the following six rules for ethical writing:[59]

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech that you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Rules 1-5 can be thought of as the First Formulation of the Imperative.[60] By giving universal rules, Orwell suggests that ethically and politically moral writing is possible and is incumbent on each person. It is thus possible to achieve "political regeneration."[61] Orwell remarks that it only took the "jeers of a few journalists" to kill phrases such as "*explore every avenue* and *leave no stone unturned.*"[62] In this sense, imitation can be self-defeating. We can

[59] Orwell, "Politics," par. 29.
[60] See Johnson, Robert, and Adam Cureton. 2022. "Kant's Moral Philosophy." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/. §5.
[61] Orwell, "Politics," par. 2
[62] Orwell, "Politics," par. 27.

influence others not to commit certain violations (Rules 1-5) while the way each person expresses thought is unique to them. People will imitate our lack of imitation.

Rule 6 is akin to the Humanity Formula of the Categorical Imperative.[63] Conceding that it is possible that "one could keep all [the rules] and still write bad English,"[64] Orwell's main intention is to prevent the further degradation of political thought. Thus, "say[ing] anything outright barbarous"[65] can be compared to Kant's prohibition against not viewing the humanity of moral subjects as an end in itself.[66] Proper language is respectful, and not decadent, nor inviting "mental vices."[67] In the struggle for excellent writing, writing becomes an act of virtue. This virtue also requires us to acknowledge that we are prone to flaws and must actively work to change our habits[68] Still, Orwell remains hopeful that a proper imitation of writing virtue can lead to "some worn-out and useless phrase [sent]...into the dustbin, where it belongs."[69]

V. Plato's Mythological Solution

Plato's response to the concerns of imitative writing is his state-censorship program. Using the imitative nature of language to his advantage, Plato devises an education program for the citizens. Although imitation cannot be eliminated in its entirety, if certain myths that promote virtue or vice are removed from the public consciousness, then at least some of the problematic effects of imitation can be reduced, i.e., the distortion of the Truth. Further, Plato believes it is possible to experience the Truth. He calls philosophy "that ascent to what *is"*[70] and prescribes for the future rulers of the city "to go to the study which we were saying before is the greatest, to see

[63] Johnson, Robert, and Adam Cureton, "Kant's Moral Philosophy," §6
[64] Orwell, "Politics" par. 30.
[65] Orwell, "Politics" par. 29.
[66] Johnson, Robert, and Adam Cureton, "Kant's Moral Philosophy." §6
[67] Orwell, "Politics," par. 3.
[68] Orwell, "Politics," par. 31.
[69] Orwell, "Politics," par. 31.
[70] Plato, *The Republic*, 521c; emphasis mine.

the Good and to go up that ascent...[and] not to permit them...to remain there."[71] The Guardians' knowledge of the Truth is only useful if it can be shared (imitated) through governance. He writes:

> …it's not the concern of law that any one class in the city fare exceptionally well, but it contrives to bring this about in the city as a whole, *harmonizing the citizens* by *persuasion and compulsion*, making them share with one another the benefit that each is able to bring to the commonwealth. And it produces such men in the city not in order to let them turn whichever way each wants, but in order that it may use them in *binding the city together*.[72]

The political integrity of the state (*harmonization*) is of paramount concern to Plato. Additionally, *persuasion and compulsion* can refer to the propagation of myths. Myths are first taught to children before any other form of education because they contain elements of both truth and fiction and can be easier to digest.[73] With this in mind, and knowing the imitative nature of language, Plato believes that mythologies are an easy way for the instruction of virtue among the citizens. His mythology-censorship plan has three parts: (a) banning false myths about the gods, (b) banning myths which might discourage virtue, and (c) encouraging myths to promote virtue.

a. False Myths About the Gods

These myths have already been partially addressed in a previous section of the paper. Certain myths about gods portray them as bloodthirsty or base beings that seek domination and power. As previously mentioned, one of the problematic issues with this is that it can encourage the *imitation* of such behavior (e.g., rape). Plato's other concern is for an accurate depiction of

[71] Plato, *The Republic*, 519c-d.
[72] Plato, *The Republic*, 519e-520a; emphasis mine.
[73] Plato, *The Republic*, 377a.

Truth: "The god must surely always be described such as he is, whether one presents him in epics, lyrics, or tragedies."[74] The Truth is a realization of the Good; knowing the Good enlightens the mind to see truth.[75] Turning away from the Truth is not choosing what is good. The pursuit of Truth then becomes a moral act insofar as one prefers a lesser good over a greater good.[76] The Guardians, as philosopher-kings, must be "god-revering and divine insofar as a human being can possibly be."[77] The Guardians are to imitate the gods, who are the cause of all that is good.[78] This rightly-ordered imitation will produce fruit in the city, such that the "laws are going to be well observed."[79] The people will look to the Guardians as god-imitators and thus imitate their virtue, preserving the integrity of the city.

b. Myths Which Might Discourage Virtue

Plato recognizes that certain myths, while true, would discourage virtue. A soldier who goes into battle should not be told about Hades because this might cause him to be "fearl[ful] in the face of death."[80] One cannot read that Achilles or Priam, relatives of the gods, were in lament because it would be unbecoming of a Guardian to show such emotional vulnerabilities.[81] Plato confirms his belief that poetry can be dangerous because its imitative nature can cultivate vice within people. Even if they do not directly lead to vice and are "sweet for the many to hear," they should not "be heard by boys and men who must be free and accustomed to fearing slavery more than death."[82] Plato recognizes that emotion mediates perception of the *Logos* (i.e., the Truth),

[74] Plato, *The Republic*, 379a.
[75] Plato, *The Republic*, 508de.
[76] It must be noted that Plato does not consider Truth to encompass the entirety of the Good. The Good also includes "existence and being" and much more (509b). Still, if the Good "provides the truth to the things known" (508d-e) then not to pursue Truth is not to pursue the Good.
[77] Plato, *The Republic*, 383c.
[78] Plato, *The Republic*, 379bc.
[79] Plato, *The Republic*, 380a-c.
[80] Plato, *The Republic*, 386a–b.
[81] Plato, *The Republic*, 388a-d.
[82] Plato, *The Republic*, 387b.

which can corrupt virtue. Thus, we see the performative aspect of *mimesis* and how emotions can be transferred from myth to the listener. For this reason, Plato prefers "a man [who] appears hard to bewitch and graceful in everything, a good guardian of himself and the music he was learning, proving himself to possess rhythm and harmony on all these occasions."[83] On a practical level, having stoic leaders and soldiers would enable rule by reason rather than simple emotion.

c. Myths to Promote Virtue

The first two pillars of Plato's plan involve the redaction of certain myths from the public record, particularly those that promote vices, even if they are true. If Plato wants to construct an ideal city, then it would make sense for him to endow the city with a mythology, as nearly all civilizations have their own unique anthologies of tales. This mythology differs from the others, however, in that it is specifically directed towards governance of the city through the rightly-ordered imitation of virtue. Here, the paper will consider the Myth of the Metals.

The Myth relies on Plato's assumption that, as physical characteristics are hereditary, so too are characteristics of the soul. Thus, he proposes telling the citizens that "the god, in fashioning those of you who are competent to rule, mixed gold at their birth...in auxiliaries silver; and iron and bronze in the farmers and the other craftsmen."[84] One cannot help but wonder if these conditions of the soul were taken from Hesiod's *Works and Days*.[85] Yet, Plato turns the tale of *Works and Days* around: unlike the progressively worse ages of humanity, the different types of metal-based souls represent the different capacities for virtue. He warns against being upset if a child is born with a bronze or iron soul: this simply means that the person's virtue is to be a craftsperson or a farmer.[86] Also, unlike *Works and Days*, Plato's Myth of the

[83] Plato, *The Republic*, 413d-e.
[84] Plato, *The Republic*, 415a.
[85] See Hesiod. 1988. *Theogony and Works and Days*. Translated by Martin L West. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[86] Plato, *The Republic*, 415a-c.

Metals enables multiple types of souls to exist at once rather than each generation of soul dying out and begetting a new one and emphasizes the importance of each metal-type. Silver souls for auxiliaries are needed as much as gold souls are needed for Guardians.[87]

The Myth also seems directed toward persuading individuals to perform their functions within the city. Plato worries citizens would not perform the task for which they are suited,[88] and this reimagining of Hesiod's tale is his attempt enough to convince them otherwise. Plato's other concern is ensuring there are enough gold-souled individuals. He acknowledges that while a gold child can be born from a silver or even bronze or iron parent, a silver or bronze child can be born from a gold parent.[89] As a result, he turns to hunting dogs for inspiration. Just as hunting dogs are bred to elicit the best offspring, Plato believes that "there is a need for the best men to have intercourse as often as possible with the best women and the reverse for the most ordinary men with the most ordinary women."[90] This creates an issue: it would seem almost impossible to regulate citizens' sexual habits. Plato proposes a few different solutions: holding marriage festivals and sacrifices, fabricating lots (so that the best man will always end up with the best woman), and creating a rewards system so that access to intercourse is based on performance in war.[91] By ritualizing procreation, Plato endows a ceremonial and perhaps even mythological element to it (as it is seen as a sacred event). Tales told about the rituals certainly would be imitative, but in the sense that they aim at producing virtue.

[87] The proper ordering of the city requires all three levels to be in harmony with each other.
[88] Plato, *The Republic*, 420b-421c.
[89] Plato, *The Republic*, 415a-c.
[90] Plato, *The Republic*, 459a-460b. One prevalent interpretation of Book V is that Plato is not being serious and instead is joking. Nevertheless, this paper takes the position that Plato was serious in his dialogue.
[91] Plato, *The Republic*, 459e-460b.

VI. Conclusions

This paper considered the positive and negative political effects of language, as expressed by Orwell and Plato. Both authors agree that language expresses imitative qualities. The paper argued that imitation is morally neutral and is the process whereby virtues or vices are copied. Orwell thinks that imitation, when used as a means of not thinking for oneself, is a cause of poor writing and can be fixed with some effort. Yet, he also believes that just one person's shunning of a meaningless phrase or word can influence others to do the same. Plato, meanwhile, sees imitation as intrinsic to language because language seeks to describe a higher reality that cannot be fully understood. Although imitation puts a constraint on language, it should not be seen as something completely immoral, but only as a limitation. Both authors develop strategies that direct imitation, either in its capacity as a morally neutral feature of language or as a limitation in our ability to express reality, to inspire virtuous habits. For Orwell, this virtue is the ability to write and express one's thoughts clearly and accurately. Readers can then evaluate and make judgments on the content of the political message. This would help prevent people from mindlessly absorbing certain beliefs that allow for morally abhorrent political regimes to essentially control thought. For Plato, these virtues enable the proper functioning of a well-ordered society by directing its citizens toward a unified end: the good of the state.

While both Orwell and Plato agree on the importance of virtuous imitation, their solutions stand in stark contrast. Orwell criticizes the very remedy Plato proposes (i.e., state-censorship) and links censorship and political control over language to the effects of poor imitative practices. Still, Orwell would not be opposed to telling tales that promote virtue. His opposition would be to the absolute control of the government over such stories. Thus, one way to reconcile the two's beliefs is via educational programs that promote moral values through

stories and allow students to think for themselves, helping them attain Truth. Both beliefs invite further reflection on the role that writing has in political stability and on the extent to which writing or storytelling can be considered a moral act.