

Plato: *The Republic*

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Abstract

The Republic was written approximately between 380 and 370 BC. The title *Republic* is derived from Latin, being attributed to Cicero, who called the book *De re publica* (About public affairs), or even as *De republica*, thus creating confusion as to its true meaning. *The Republic* is considered an integral part of the utopian literary genre. The second title, *Peri dikaiou* (περὶ δικαίου, On Justice), may have been included later. The central theme of the book is justice, argued with the help of several Platonic theories, including the allegorical myth of the cave, the doctrine of Ideas, dialectics, the theory of the soul, and the design of an ideal city. *The Republic* is

considered by many academics to be the greatest philosophical text ever written, being the most studied book in top universities.

Keywords: Plato, The Republic

Plato: The Republic

The Republic (Ancient Greek: Πολιτεία, *Politéia*) was written between about 380 and 370 BC. A. E. Taylor states that the Republic was already written in 388 (Taylor 2009), and G. C. Field suggested the date of 375 BC (Hornblower, Spawforth, and Eidinow 2012) The title *Republic* is derived from Latin, being attributed to Cicero, who called it *De re publica* (*On Public Affairs*), or even *De republica*, thus creating confusion as to its true meaning. *The Republic* is considered an integral part of the utopian literary genre. The second title, *Peri dikaiou* (περί δικαίου, *On Justice*), may have been included later.

The Republic is only the third part of a larger project that was to include an ideal history of Athens, as well as a political and physical philosophy. The dialogue takes place in Piraeus, in the house of Cephalus in Syracuse (Platon 1848).

The book is divided into 10 books: the first deals with the subject of justice; in the next two books Plato expounds his theory of the "ideal state"; the fourth and fifth books deal with the relationship between things and ideas, between the sensitive and supersensitive world (hyperuranion); books six and seven describe the theory of knowledge; the eighth and ninth books talk about the state and the family; and the last book examines the idea of the immortality of the soul with the Myth of Er.

Stylometric studies suggest that the first book was written previously and separately from the other nine (Brandwood 1992, 96–97). Dümmler suggests that it was originally published as an

autonomous dialogue, (Dümmler 1889) with a view to a later sequel (Szlezák 1992, 368). Charles Kahn emphasizes the close connection between the various books of the *Republic* (Kahn 2008).

The central theme of the book is justice (Brickhouse and Smith 2022), argued with the help of several Platonic theories, including the allegorical myth of the cave, the doctrine of ideas, dialectics, the theory of the soul and the project of an ideal city. *The Republic* refers to what is called *φιλοσοφία περὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπινα* ("philosophy of human things"), being presented as an organic, encyclopedic and circular work, with an emphasis on the relationship between the universal and the particular.

There are several interpretations of the *Republic's* architecture, including the hypothesis of a "concentric composition", an "arched" structure, "large vaults" in which justice is the center of balance, or a "mirror" structure (Mathieu 2014).

Benjamin Jowett highlights several aspects of the book, which he considered to be the most important (Jowett 1892): (1) the dual character of the *Republic*, a Greek state and a kingdom of philosophers, the paradoxes of the *Republic* as Morgenstern called them (community property, families, the rule of philosophers, the analogy between the individual and the state), the subject of education, essential differences between ancient and modern politics suggested by the *Republic*, comparison of the *Republic* with *Statesman* and *Laws*, Plato's influence on his imitators, and nature and value political ideals and religious ideals.

Richard Lewis Nettleship regards the *Republic* as a book of moral philosophy (Nettleship 1958), in which the real question is How to live best, inseparable from the question: What is the best order or organization of human society?

Philip Allott states that *The Republic* is about three codependent and co-determinant things: "the individual human being, human society, and the universe - I and We and All," developing "a

philosophy of what we think that we know (epistemology) and a philosophy of what we choose to do (morality).” (Allott 2011)

Many philosophers saw in *The Republic* a first sketch of socialism (Plato and Stelli 2007), emphasizing the communal and anti-individualistic aspects highlighted in the concept of collective good and in the idea of the community of goods, women and children.

Popper glimpsed in the ideal state of the philosopher of *The Republic* the prototype of the modern authoritarian state with the hierarchical structure of society, the cult of rulers and the purity of race. He considers that *The Republic* "was meant by its author not so much as a theoretical treatise, but as a topical political manifesto" (Popper 2020, vol. 1: 162).

The Republic is considered by many academics to be the greatest philosophical text ever written (Gibbons 2001), being the most studied book in top universities (Ha 2016) (Jackson 2016).

Martin Luther King, Jr., said *The Republic* would be the only book he would take to a desert island with the Bible (Sharpe 2019).

Characters

Socrates: philosopher, professor of Plato, who occupies most of the dialogues, developing the theme of the ideal city.

Thrasymachus: sophist, who initiates the discussion, initially arguing that justice is "the profit of the strongest".

Cephalus: elderly owner of the house hosting the dialogue; he argues that justice and happiness in life consist in the accumulation of material goods.

Glaucon: A student of Socrates who accompanies him from Cephalus

Polemarchus: pupil of Socrates, son of Cephalus

Adeimantus: student of Socrates.

Cleitophon: Athenian politician

Summary

Book I: Socrates arrives at the house of Cephalus, where he begins discussions about old age and presents his own model of happiness and justice. Polemarchus also expresses his opinion on justice and justice as a duty, to do good for friends and evil for enemies. Thrasymachus expresses his opinion on political justice, arguing that justice is practically the utility of those who are stronger. Socrates intervenes by saying that if those in power were tyrants, they would harm everyone, and they could all be controlled by injustice. Justice is a virtue of the soul, as Socrates says, thus contradicting Thrasymachus who sees injustice as a virtue.

Book II: Glaucon intervenes by talking about the right life and the categories of good, stating that human justice consists in obtaining its own advantages. An unpunished injustice requires the force of power. True justice for the common man would be a "disguised injustice." Adeimantus intervenes, stating that justice is sought only for the reputation it gives to the just man. Socrates proposes the analysis of justice in an "ideal city", starting from the origins, from the primitive nucleus, a simple village of peasants with specific tasks which then expands and needs security, and later a consciousness of the people which consists in knowledge and education, exposing the tasks of each citizen.

Book III: Presents the duties and artistic education of the city's guards, who must not be corrupted by poetry and literature. Socrates distinguishes three types of poetry: imitative, narrative, and mixed. The lie should be reserved only for leaders with the intention of doing good ("noble lie"). Guardians must beware of imitation, going only on virtuous actions. Their education focuses on gymnastics and medicine, and the legal field, for a healthy body and a clean soul. Thus, the city which, a little earlier, was considered dependent on laziness, will be purified. Only artists and

workers who will create beautiful things should be admitted to the city. Adeimantus and Socrates then discuss useful speech and imitative speech, the problem of love and medicine.

Book IV: Resume the issue of justice among citizens. Adeimantus asks if the guards are happy with the constraints imposed on them, and Socrates states that everyone in the city is satisfied with the tasks they have, with a proper education. The main virtues are wisdom, courage, temperance, to which is added justice, the sum of the three virtues. Wisdom (specific to leaders) involves deep knowledge and the ability to give good advice. Courage is a skill specific to soldiers, to constantly protect judgment on things to be feared and on them. Temperance (specific to workers) implies that citizens should be neither too rich (because they will stop working) nor too poor. Later Socrates analyzes the types of soul, making an analogy with the black and white city horses, led by a moderating coachman.

Book V: At the urging of Adeimantus, Thrasymachus, and Glaucon to discuss the communities of women and children, Socrates describes the family relationships in the city: the wives of the warriors will all be common to all; none of them will live especially with any of them; in the same way children will be common, and parents will not know their children, nor will the latter their parents. Marriages between "better" citizens favor the good of the city, and children must be shared, supporting the common brotherhood. He goes on to talk about the importance of philosophy for politics and making a comparison between the individual and the city, both presented as unified bodies. The philosopher must practice the constant search for truth, thus being the one who makes the least mistakes, so the best representative of politics for the ideal city.

Book VI: The discussion of the fate of philosophers and sophists continues, arguing that the philosopher is best suited to rule wisely. Socrates makes an analysis of Greek politics. He points out that governments have always despised the philosopher, through the allegory of the

ship, in which the helmsman is a blind, wise old man who is constantly challenged by the people on board who want to rule. The philosopher-king ensures the salvation of the city. He makes the analogy between the idea of good as the highest knowledge and the sun which, in its perfection, shines with wisdom. Then draw a line with four segments: sensitive images, sensitive objects, mathematical entities and Ideas, which can be known by imagination (*εἰκασία*), faith (*πίστις*), discursive reason (*διάνοια*) and intelligence (*νόησις*), respectively.

Book VII: Socrates discusses the myth of the cave to make us understand the obscurantism of man's ignorance, from which he must be able to free himself to find the true "light" of wisdom. The philosopher breaks the chains and emerges from the cave into the outside world, a metaphor for the ascending dialectic, thus understanding that the inside of the cave is just a distorted reflection of the real world which is the intelligible world. After realizing the existence of another better and truer world, Socrates continues the training of the philosopher-king, stating that he must continue his study of mathematics, geometry, and dialectics. The philosopher is the one who rises to the contemplation of the idea of Good, and this is why he is the best possible guardian.

Book VIII: Here Socrates makes the deepest analysis of the happiness of the righteous and the unrighteous. He talks about the main forms of government: aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy and tyranny (the worst). It favors the aristocracy to the detriment of the oligarchy and democracy, which over time become corrupt and lead to worse forms of government, such as timocracy and tyranny. In the oligarchy, the poor will revolt against the rich and build a democratic regime that promotes the power to do whatever you want. But freedom and equality lead to unrest, children no longer respect their parents, and lazy and profiteers will appear, and finally anarchy that will favor the tyrant who will present himself as a protector. Socrates' conclusion is that

because of the impulsiveness of the human soul and corruption, the intervention of the philosopher is necessary.

Book IX: Socrates insists on the idea that the tyrant, although he rules by fear, is himself a slave to his own passions. Socrates details the metaphysics of pleasures, praising the right rational pleasures of the philosopher, superior to the other two irrational parts of the soul. Socrates then recapitulates: the people will be happiest in the aristocracy, less in the timocracy, and less in the oligarchy, and so on to democracy and tyranny. There are three parts to the soul: the rational part or the intellect, the part that seeks bravery and honor, and the lower part that seeks only pleasure. It highlights the difference between the ruling philosopher and the tyrant, and appeals to an allegory by dividing the soul into a polyphonic monster, a lion and finally a man who, thanks to the lion, dominates the monster, guaranteeing justice.

Book X: The last book discusses poetry and imitation. The poet, and art in general, imitates sensitive objects, so they generate an illusion based on hidden passions that contaminate the soul and make them bad citizens. Therefore, such artists would be banned in the ideal city, but the dithyrambs (praise of the gods) and epics must be preserved. Socrates reiterates the immortality of the soul. Vices hurt him, but they don't destroy him. Finally, he exposes the "myth of Er" in Pamphylia, who was found dead after a battle but was resurrected at the funeral home because he had been ordered by the Supreme Judges to be the messenger of the future. The purity of the soul can be obtained only after it has freed itself from the limitations of the human body, deserving only then the reward after death, that is, eternal life in contemplation of the truth.

The internal unity of this last book has often been questioned, being seen as an appendix to the other nine books (Babut 1994), as being written later to the other books of the *Republic*, or even it is the work of a publisher who imitated Plato's work.

There are many interpretations of the *Republic* by dividing it in this way according to the subjects treated, one of the best-known classifications of Bertrand Russell, in *A History of Western Philosophy* (Russell 2013, bk. I, part 2, cap. 14):

1. Books I – V: Defining justice; ideal communities ("utopia"); guardian education;
2. Books VI – VII: Philosophical leaders; the myth of the cave; the theory of forms; political regimes;
3. Books VIII-X: Practical forms of government.

Jowett highlights five "natural divisions of the *Republic*, as follows:

1. Book I beginning - II 367: Morality of everyday life and theories of that time.
2. Book II 368 - V 471: Specifying the system involved in the existence of the moral being.
3. Book V 471 - to the end of Book VII: The ideal morality or philosophical religion and its real or metaphysical basis.
4. Books VIII - IX: Checking the connection between "well-doing and well-being, by concomitant variations of ill-doing and ill-being"
5. Book X: The psychological corroboration of the "criticism passed upon unreal appearance, pointing out the connection between the unreal in cognition and in feeling". (Bosanquet 1895)

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