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# *The Republic of Plato: A Philosophical Odyssey*

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## Abstract

*The Republic*, written by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, is a timeless masterpiece of political philosophy and ethics. Composed around 380 BCE, this influential work presents a comprehensive vision of an ideal society and explores fundamental questions about justice, morality, and the nature of the human soul. *The Republic* is not just a treatise on politics but also on ethics, education, psychology, and epistemology. Its discussions on the nature of justice, the importance of knowledge, the role of education, and the qualities of leadership have remained relevant through centuries. Plato's vision of a just society, governed by wisdom and reason, has inspired and challenged thinkers, leaders, and political systems throughout history, making it a cornerstone of Western thought.

**Keywords:** Plato, The Republic, Greek philosopher, Politéia, ideal city, philosopher-king, characters, Socrates

## Republica lui Platon: o odisee filosofică

### Rezumat

*Republica*, scrisă de filosoful grec antic Platon, este o capodopera atemporală a filozofiei și eticii politice. Compusă în jurul anului 380 î.Hr., această lucrare influentă prezintă o viziune cuprinzătoare a unei societăți ideale și explorează întrebări fundamentale despre dreptate, moralitate și natura sufletului uman. *Republica* nu este doar un tratat de politică, ci și de etică, educație, psihologie și epistemologie. Discuțiile sale despre natura justiției, importanța cunoașterii, rolul educației și calitățile conducerii au rămas relevante de-a lungul secolelor. Viziunea lui Platon despre o societate justă, guvernată de înțelepciune și rațiune, a inspirat și a provocat gânditori, lideri și sisteme politice de-a lungul istoriei, făcându-l o piatră de temelie a gândirii occidentale.

**Cuvinte cheie:** Platon, Republica, filozof grec, Politéia, oraș ideal, filozof-rege, personaje, Socrate

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## Introduction

*The Republic*, written by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, is a timeless masterpiece of political philosophy and ethics. Composed around 380 BCE, this influential work presents a comprehensive vision of an ideal society and explores fundamental questions about justice, morality, and the nature of the human soul.

*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* (*περὶ 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).

## Characters

**Socrates:** philosopher, professor of Plato, who occupies most of the dialogues, developing the theme of the ideal city. Socrates is the central character and philosopher who leads the discussion. He questions and challenges the other characters' beliefs and ideas to explore the nature of justice and the ideal state.

**Glaucon:** a student of Socrates who accompanies him from Cephalus. Glaucon is one of Socrates' interlocutors and represents the view that people are naturally selfish and only act justly because they fear punishment or seek rewards. He challenges Socrates to explain why justice is intrinsically good.

**Adeimantus:** student of Socrates. Adeimantus is another interlocutor who argues that people generally view justice as a means to an end rather than a virtue in itself. He asks Socrates to demonstrate that justice is beneficial in its own right.

**Thrasymachus:** sophist, who initiates the discussion, initially arguing that justice is "the profit of the strongest". Thrasymachus is an early interlocutor who presents the view that justice is the advantage of the stronger and that rulers create laws to serve their own interests. Socrates engages in a lengthy debate with him to refute these ideas.

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

**Polemarchus:** pupil of Socrates, son of Cephalus

**Clitophon:** Athenian politician

### Summary

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.

### **The Books**

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)

## **Book I**

Socrates arrives at the house of Cephalus, where he begins discussions with several characters, including Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus, about the nature of justice. The initial conversations explore various definitions of justice, such as speaking the truth and repaying one's debts, but these are found wanting.

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**

Socrates continues to challenge Thrasymachus's definition of justice, and they explore the question of whether it is more profitable to be just or unjust. Glaucon and Adeimantus, Plato's brothers, challenge Socrates to defend justice for its own sake, independent of any rewards it might bring. 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", the Kallipolis, 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**

In Books III-IV, Socrates starts outlining his ideal state, focusing on the education and training of the guardian class. He introduces the concept of the "noble lie" as a means to shape the beliefs and attitudes of citizens. The dialogue discusses the role of philosophy and the philosopher-kings in governance.

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**

In Books V-VI, Socrates explores the idea of the philosopher-king in more detail, emphasizing the importance of wisdom and virtue in leadership. He discusses the philosopher's education and the nature of the philosopher's soul.

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. The philosopher-king, with the highest knowledge of the Good, is deemed the ideal ruler because only philosophers can recognize true justice and the true form of the good. 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.

### **Book VI**

Socrates outlines the education and training of the guardians, the warrior class of the city, who will also include the rulers or philosopher-kings. 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.

Here Plato introduces his Theory of Forms, according to which the material world is a shadow of a more real and unchanging world of Forms or Ideas. The most famous illustration of this theory is the Allegory of the Cave, where prisoners chained in a cave mistake shadows on a wall for reality, symbolizing the philosopher's journey from ignorance to knowledge of the Forms, especially the Form of the Good. He draws 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**

In Books VII-VIII, Socrates introduces the allegory of the cave, a powerful metaphor for the philosopher's journey from ignorance to enlightenment. He delves into the philosopher's role in understanding and pursuing the Form of the Good.

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.

Plato describes the decline of the state from the ideal aristocracy, ruled by philosopher-kings, through timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and finally tyranny, each government type corresponding to a specific kind of unjust individual. This decline illustrates how deviations from the ideal state lead to various forms of injustice and unhappiness.

### **Book IX**

The dialogue returns to the discussion of the ideal state and the philosopher-kings. Socrates discusses issues like censorship of art and poetry in the city and the nature of desires and appetites. He 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 dialogue concludes with a critique of poetry and the arts, which Plato argues can lead the soul away from truth. 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.

### **Legacy**

*The Republic* is not just a treatise on politics but also on ethics, education, psychology, and epistemology. Its discussions on the nature of justice, the importance of knowledge, the role of education, and the qualities of leadership have remained relevant through centuries. Plato's vision

of a just society, governed by wisdom and reason, has inspired and challenged thinkers, leaders, and political systems throughout history, making it a cornerstone of Western thought.

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.

## THE REPUBLIC OF PLATO: A PHILOSOPHICAL ODYSSEY

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).

### Conclusion

Overall, *The Republic* explores the nature of justice, the ideal state, and the role of philosophy in society. It remains a foundational text in political philosophy and ethics, and it continues to inspire discussions on justice and the nature of a good life.

Throughout the dialogue, *The Republic* addresses a wide range of topics, including justice, the nature of the soul, the ideal state, the role of education, and the philosopher's quest for wisdom and truth. It remains a foundational work in political philosophy and ethics, offering insights into the nature of justice and the ideal society.

*The Republic* remains an enduring classic in the realm of philosophy, offering profound insights into justice, ethics, education, and governance. Plato's vision of an ideal society, guided by philosopher-kings and grounded in the pursuit of the Good, continues to stimulate philosophical debates and inspire political thought. While the practical implementation of Plato's utopian ideas may be challenging, his exploration of fundamental human questions about morality and justice will always be relevant to our understanding of society and the human condition.

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