

The Republic Plato

Raymond Larson
Translator and Editor



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The Republic

Crofts Classics

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PLATO

The Republic

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*synoptic table of contents**

Preface and background to the Republic **xiii**

Introduction **xxiii**

Principal Dates **xlvi**

CURRENT OPINIONS OF JUSTICE REFUTED **(Book 1) 1**

INTRODUCTORY SCENE (327a–328b). SOCRATES AND
GLAUCON ARE BROUGHT TO THE HOUSE OF CEPHALUS,
WHERE THE MAIN DISCUSSION TAKES PLACE.

INTRODUCTORY DIALOGUE (SOCRATES AND CEPHALUS,
328c–331d). **2** STATEMENT OF PROBLEM: *What is
justice?*

First Definition (Cephalus, 331a–d): **5** Justice is
telling the truth and returning what you receive. This is shown
to be inadequate; one should not return a weapon or
tell the whole truth to a madman.

Second Definition (Polemarchus, 331d–336a): Justice is
giving each his due, which is equated with giving help to
friends and harm to enemies.

Refutation (332c–335d). **6** By analogy from the
crafts, Socrates reduces this definition to absurd conclu-
sions: a) 332c–333e. According to this definition, justice
has no specific sphere of activity, as the other crafts do

*The table of contents indicates the main logical division in the
argument of the *Republic*. The traditional division into ten books
does not always coincide with natural breaks in the argument.

(medicine cares for the body, etc.), except perhaps for guarding things. It is passive, and therefore useless. b) 333e–334b. **8** One who knows how to guard something also knows how to steal it. Therefore the just man is a thief. c) 334c–e. **9** Friends are those we think good, enemies bad. It is just to help the good and harm the bad. But we often mistake the one for the other. In that case, it is just to harm friends and help enemies. d) 335b–d. It is just to harm enemies. But harming people makes them less just. Therefore, according to Polymarchus's definition, justice makes people unjust.

Third Definition (Thrasymachus, 338c–343a): **13** Justice is *the advantage of the stronger*. This phrase refers to justice in the *state* rather than in the *individual*. Rulers (“the stronger”) make laws for their own advantage or profit. Their subjects (“the weaker”) must obey these laws, and this obedience is justice. Justice therefore consists in the weaker acting to the advantage of the stronger.

Refutation (339b–e): **14** Thrasymachus admits that rulers can make mistakes and pass laws to their own disadvantage. But it is *just* for their subjects to obey these laws. Justice would therefore be as much the disadvantage as the advantage of the stronger.

Redefinition of Ruler (340d–341a): **15** Thrasymachus argues that a ruler is a craftsman, and, as such, uses knowledge to practice his craft. Mistakes occur through lack of knowledge. A man who errs in ruling lacks knowledge, and at that moment he is not a ruler. A true ruler never makes mistakes.

Refutation (341c–343a): **16** Socrates shows that other crafts pursue the advantage of their subjects. Medicine does not seek the advantage of medicine, but of the body. But medicine “rules” the body and thus is “the stronger.” Hence the stronger rules for the advantage of the weaker. Thrasymachus's definition has been shown to contradict itself, for justice is in reality the advantage of the weaker.

New Argument (343a–348a). **18** Thrasymachus now argues that *injustice* (a) *profits a man* and (b) *makes men happy*.

Refutations of (a): i) 345b–348a. **20** Analogy from crafts: a craft profits its subject, not its practitioner. ii) 348b–350c. **23** A proof that just men are wise and good, unjust men ignorant and bad. If injustice makes men ignorant and bad, it can hardly be profitable. iii) 350d–352c. **26** Justice is more efficacious than injustice. Injustice is divisive; even criminals need justice to work together.

Refutation of (b), 352d–354a: **28** Everything has a specific function, which it performs well with its proper excellence. The eye's function is seeing, which it performs well with the excellence of sight. The soul's function is living, which it performs well with the excellence of justice. Just men live well and therefore are happy.

Conclusion (354a–c). **30** Confession of failure. We have learned nothing because we were examining attributes of justice rather than its essence, what it is in itself.

JUSTICE REEXAMINED, IN THE STATE AND IN THE INDIVIDUAL (Books 2–4) **31**

THE PROBLEM RESTATED (357a–367a): What are justice and injustice in themselves?

Glaucon (357a–362c). The “popular view:” Justice is not *natural* but *conventional*—an agreement of the weak to protect themselves from the strong. It is a compromise between the best life (committing injustice) and the worst (suffering injustice). The best life is that of a successful criminal who has a reputation for honesty.

Adeimantus (362d–367e). **35** People praise justice not for itself but for the rewards it brings. Socrates must show that justice and injustice are good and bad in themselves, apart from rewards and punishments.

THE PROBLEM EXAMINED AND SOLVED (368c–445e). **40** Justice may be easier to find in a state than in an

individual. Socrates therefore proposes to construct an imaginary city and search for justice first in it and then in the individual.

Origin and Composition of the State; its Ruling Class (368e-434d)

First Stage of the State (368e-372d). The minimal city, founded on need and based on mutual aid; necessary occupations (farmers, craftsmen, merchants, laborers); specialization of labor; money.

Second Stage of the State (372d-427c). **44** The luxurious city: unnecessary occupations, art, war. War creates classes: workers (civilians) and guardians (soldiers). Later (414b) expanded to three classes: *workers*, *auxiliaries* (soldiers), and *guardians* (rulers).

ELEMENTARY EDUCATION of the guardians (376c-415d). **48**

Poetry (literature and music), 376e-403c. Poetry and music examined for their effects on character and censored accordingly: plots, genres (392c), and music (398c, p. 67).

Gymnastics (physical education), 403c-412b. **73**

Instilling and testing patriotism and leadership, 412c-415d. **81** "Noble lie" (414c): myth of the four metals, which is intended to keep the three classes from intermingling.

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS of guardians and auxiliaries (415d-427c). **85** Communism, no private property or money; necessary legislation, etc.

Conclusion (427c-434d). **94** Discovery of the four prime excellences in the state.

WISDOM = the knowledge of the guardians (428a-429a). **95**

COURAGE = the auxiliaries' opinion of "what is and is not to be feared" (429a-430c). **96**

TEMPERANCE = agreement of all three classes about who should rule and be ruled (430d-432b). **97**

JUSTICE = each of the three classes "tending its own business" and not preempting the work of another (432b-434d). **99**

Composition of the Soul (434d-441c). **101**

Conflict within the soul shows that it must consist of distinct parts. These turn out to be three, corresponding to the three classes in the city: the *rational part* (intelligence, corresponding to the guardians), the *spirited part* (the aggressive part, corresponding to the auxiliaries), and the *desiring part* (the appetites, corresponding to the workers).

Conclusion (441d-444e). **109** Discovery of the excellences in the soul, corresponding to those in the city. *Justice* = each of the parts of the soul tending its own business, with the rational part ruling.

DEGENERATE REGIMES AND SOULS, INTERRUPTED (445b-449a) **113**

Socrates begins to list the inferior types of city and man, but the others interrupt and demand he explain the above city in detail.

DIGRESSION: THE BEST REGIME AND MEN (Books 5-7) **114**

THE BEST REGIME, ARISTOCRACY (Book 5, 449a-474a)

Organization of the Best Regime (451c-461e). **116**

Both women and men will have the same tasks (451c-457c).

Women and children will not be private possessions but common to all of the men. Marriage arrangements, eugenics (457c-461e). **122**

The Superiority and Possibility of Such a City (462a-473e). **126**

Such a city will be the best and happiest (462a-466d). It will be a single unit, like an organism, with all loyalties directed toward the state rather than toward families or other smaller groups within the state.

Excursus: regulations for warfare (466e–471c). 131

Such a city is not impossible (471e–473c). 136

Reminder that the best state is only a model, not completely realizable in practice (472b–473b). It is possible only if *philosophers become kings or kings philosophers* (473c–3), 138 because only philosophers know the true *good* for man and the state.

THE BEST MEN: PHILOSOPHER KINGS (GUARDIANS),
BOOK 5, 474b–BOOK 7 139

Definition of Philosopher (474b–480a): a lover of knowledge. Knowledge is only of the eternal Forms or Shapes. Distinction between conjecture and knowledge and between their respective objects, opinion and truth.

The Philosophic Nature (485a–503e). 147 A guardian must possess love of knowledge, ease of learning, courage, justice, temperance, etc.

Higher Education of the Guardians
(504a–535a). 165

Aims (504a–521b): The highest object of knowledge is “the shape of the good,” which one must know to be a good guardian. The good and the nature of reality are illustrated by three similes:

THE SIMILE OF THE SUN (506e–509b). 168 The sun is to the visible world as the good is to the intelligible world.

THE SIMILE OF THE DIVIDED LINE (509d–511e). 171 Socrates divides the sensible and the intelligible world into four classes (images; things; mathematical objects; Forms), which are apprehended by four corresponding faculties of the mind (imaging; trust; understanding; intellection).

THE SIMILE OF THE CAVE (514a–521b). 174 The cave represents the sensible world, the prisoners are nonphilosophers, and their fire represents the sun. The upper world outside the cave represents the intelligible realm, the released prisoners are philosophers, and the sun represents the good.

Curriculum (521c-535a): **181** a) Arithmetic, 522c-526c. b) Plane geometry, 526c-527c. **186** c) Solid geometry, 528b-d. d) Astronomy, 528e-530c. e) Harmonics, 530d-531c. **190** f) Dialectics, 531d-535a. The first five studies accustom the mind to dealing with intelligible things. Dialectics is the method that permits us to understand and explain the essence of things, the highest of which is the good.

Selection of the Guardians (535a-540c). **195**
The guardians will be those who have mastered the above studies and have thus recognized the true nature of reality and of the good. How, when, and by whom these studies should be pursued. The philosophers must be *forced* to govern for the sake of the governed.

Brief Excursus (540d-541b). **200** Method of instituting the best regime in an existing city.

DEGENERATE REGIMES AND SOULS, RESUMED FROM BOOK 5 (Books 8 and 9) **201**

CAUSE OF CHANGE OR DECLINE IN A STATE: CIVIL WAR
(545c-547c). **203**

Prediction of when the change in the best city will occur:
the "Nuptial Number."

DEGENERATE REGIMES AND MEN, DESCRIBED AND COMPARED (547c-592b). **205**

The four types of regime and of men; their inferiority to the aristocratic type. The characteristics of each; the cause and manner of their degeneration from the previous types.

Timocracy (rule by honor) and the timocratic man
(547c-550b).

Oligarchy (rule of the wealthy few) and the oligarchic man (550c-555b). **208**

Democracy (rule of the people) and the democratic man (555b-562a). **213**

Tyranny (dictatorship) and the tyrannical man (562a-580a). **220**

The five types are judged for their goodness and happiness and ranked in the order in which they were presented: Aristocracy and the aristocratic man are the best and happiest; tyranny and the tyrant are the worst and most miserable (580a-588a). **237**

Conclusion: The aristocrat is just, the tyrant unjust. Therefore justice makes a man happy, injustice makes him unhappy (588b-592b). **247**

DENUNCIATION OF IMITATIVE POETRY (Book 10, 595a-608b) **251**

DISCUSSION OF POETRY RENEWED FROM PP. 48-73.

Poetic representation is twice removed from reality (the Form, the visible object, the poetic representation). It is an imitation of an imitation, and therefore illusory, deceitful, and evil (595a-602b).

Imitative poetry appeals to the emotions rather than to the mind (602c-605c). **259**

Imitative poetry deforms character (605c-608b). **263**

IMMORTALITY AND THE REWARDS OF JUSTICE (608b-End) **265**

A PROOF OF THE SOUL'S IMMORTALITY (608c-612a): Each thing is destroyed by its own natural evil. The soul's evils are not strong enough to destroy it. The soul is therefore indestructible and immortal.

REWARDS OF JUSTICE AND PUNISHMENTS OF INJUSTICE IN THIS LIFE (612b-614a). **269**

REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS AFTER DEATH (614a-621d). **271** *The Myth of Er:* the fate of the soul after death.

Appendix: The Spindle of Necessity **279**

Bibliography **283**

preface and background to the Republic

Faced with the formidable task of reading the *Republic*, a person may well ask: Why bother? We surely have enough problems of our own to bemuse us, some of which concern the survival of our species. Why worry about obsolete issues raised by a man dead for over 2000 years?

This is a legitimate question, and the answer is that real problems do not go away but, like beauty, merely change their appearance. Science and technology have made great progress since Plato's day, but the central concerns of art and philosophy remain much the same. Plato was both an artist and a philosopher, and in spite of his outspoken hostility to poetry, he wrote poems, some of which have survived. One, an elegy on the death of his friend Dion, ends like this:

Here in your broad-meadowed homeland you lie,
honored by townsmen,
O, you that maddened my soul with desire, Dion.

These lines, written by a man in his seventies, show that Plato was an emotional being and not just a detached intellectual wrapped up in navel-gazing and otherworldly speculation. And their poignant beauty still touches us. Beauty doesn't really change; she just changes her dress.

So also with the central issues of philosophy—they are still matters of life and death. Only their outward appearance has

changed. The main question of the *Republic*, What is justice?, strikes us as odd; it is not one that we would be likely to ask, at least in this form. But when we penetrate the question's disguise and see that it means "How should a person live to be happy?" we perk up our ears. This could have something to do with us. As we read on, other gray, bewhiskered questions shuffle out and huddle around the first: What is the purpose of life? Is it pleasure, wisdom, happiness, or what? What is the good life? What form of government will allow us to live the good life and achieve its true purpose? Is there life after death? What does our answer to the last question mean for the way we live?

These are questions that people still ask, though perhaps not in Plato's words. Plato's answers to them deserve our attention, not only because he is a powerful, original thinker who may have thought of things that might escape us. Even his manner of expression, which strikes us as odd because of his remoteness from us in time and circumstance, can be valuable if it encourages us to view our problems in a different light. In reading Plato we come to recognize that though circumstances vary, human nature does not, and that his problems are really our own, seen from a different perspective. There is an old maxim in science: When you get stuck in a problem try to look at it from a different point of view. The same technique can be useful in philosophy, in questions of life and death. One could not find a better introduction to these than Plato's *Republic*.

Plato is not only a great philosopher; he is also a brilliant prose stylist. J. S. Mill nicely sums up the two sides of his genius: "[Plato's] dialogues . . . are the still unrivalled types of the dialectic process . . . and afford an example, once in all literature, of the union between an eminent genius for philosophy and the most consummate skill and feeling of the artist" (*Edinburgh Review*, April 1866, p. 332). Plato is master not of one, but of many different styles—from the elevated to the strikingly simple, from the pompously inflated to the colloquial—and he often juxtaposes them for incongruous or ironic effect. He also loves to parody the styles of other writers: philosophers, orators, and especially playwrights and poets. Irony, subtle as well as conspicuous, pervades his work. In the *Republic* (392c–398b), for example, he makes

Socrates ban from the ideal state literature of the type of Plato's own dialogues—including the *Republic*—as being morally subversive. Plato is as fond of absurdity as he is of relentless logic; he enjoys metaphors, jingles, and puns; and he delights in the music of language.

It will be obvious that no translation can match the style of such an original. Nevertheless, I have often strained for effects in English similar to those of the Greek, in the hope that behind these awkward attempts the reader may sense an author of great power, brilliance, and beauty.

The translation of Greek terms into English is notoriously difficult: words like justice, temperance, excellence, and wisdom are inadequate to express the meaning of their Greek counterparts. For want of better alternatives, however, I have retained most of the traditional Platonic vocabulary; significant departures are indicated in the footnotes.

One about to read the *Republic* for the first time may be curious about the historical and cultural situation in which its author lived. Plato was born into a time of political, moral, and intellectual upheaval. The Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.) had been raging for three years and was to drag on for another twenty-four before ending in Sparta's defeat of Athens. Almost all of Greece was embroiled in this civil war, which pitted city against city and divided cities and even families into bloodthirsty factions of "oligarchs" (pro-Spartans) and "democrats" (pro-Athenians). The political stage was awash with the blood of civil slaughter and poisoned with party strife, which drove its victims to place party loyalty above public safety and vengeance above self-preservation. Old governments fell overnight by treachery or force, disgruntled partisans of one side or the other betrayed their cities to the enemy and handed their fellow citizens over to be murdered and enslaved. Thucydides, an eyewitness, describes the poisoned atmosphere in chilling terms:

If a man plotted and succeeded he was considered intelligent; if he suspected a plot he was more clever still. But the man who planned ahead in order to have no need of plots or suspicion was considered disloyal to his party. . . . It went so far that party affiliation

bound men closer than family ties, because party members were more ready to commit open aggression. . . . It was more important to avenge an injury than to avoid being injured in the first place. . . . Thus every kind of wickedness arose in Greece because of civil war (*History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.82–83).

The civil strife that rent the rest of Greece did not break out in Athens until late in the war. Despite two plagues that swept the city shortly before Plato's birth (one of which killed Pericles in 429 B.C.), and despite frequent reversals and heavy losses on the battlefield, life went on much as usual. Throughout most of the war, Athens kept the political and cultural supremacy she had acquired under Pericles with the founding of an empire and with the production of such masterpieces as the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the statues of Phidias, and buildings like the Parthenon—works that moved Plutarch, five centuries later, to declare: "Each possessed even then an instant archaic beauty, yet remains to our day in the prime of freshness and youth. A kind of eternal newness blooms upon them, preserving an aspect untouched by time, as though these works were endowed with a perennially blossoming spirit and an ageless vitality" (*Life of Pericles*, 13). These words describe Plato's dialogues as aptly as they do the works of the Periclean Age. By the beginning of the war Aeschylus was dead, but Sophocles and Euripides were still to produce some of their finest tragedies, and Aristophanes had not yet written his first comedy.

Philosophy flourished during the war as never before. Athens, long a center of intellectual activity, attracted learned men called "sophists," who lectured and taught to admiring crowds. Socrates roamed the streets looking for truth. Young men argued and discussed philosophical questions in the gymnasiums and wrestling schools. This was the intellectual heyday of Athens, the period in which most of Plato's dialogues are set. But the end of the war brought a drastic change. Athens lost her naval empire and with it much of her optimism and verve. Political and social life fell into disarray and only gradually recovered. Sophocles and Euripides were dead, political comedy was no longer performed, and the arts entered a period of decadence. From

our point of view, Athens' greatest period of philosophy was yet to come, with the founding of Plato's and later of Aristotle's school. Athens would remain the cultural and intellectual leader of the West for many centuries. But to Plato the fall of Athens and the death of Socrates a few years later must have signified the end of the age of giants.

Such were the circumstances in which Plato grew up. He came from an old aristocratic family, rich, powerful, and respected; and his birth and upbringing marked him out for a career in politics. Perhaps the most momentous event in his life was meeting Socrates. This must have happened when Plato was quite young, because his older brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus (who play important roles in the *Republic*) and his uncles Charmides and Critias were all companions of Socrates.

From Socrates Plato picked up interests that remained with him for the rest of his life. Socrates wrote nothing; he carried on his relentless search for truth by cross examining people. This method of question and answer, the famous Socratic *dialectic*, determined both Plato's philosophical approach and the form of his writings, which are all *dialogues* between a questioner (usually Socrates) and one or more respondents. Socrates discussed moral issues rather than questions of natural science, which had been the main preoccupation of earlier philosophers. He looked for universal definitions. He would ask a person to define some common word that applied to a large number of disparate things or to a wide range of dissimilar acts. To a question such as "What is justice?" for instance, he was seeking not an example in the form of this or that just act, but the essence underlying all just acts, the universal "justness" whose presence in any particular act makes it just and allows us to recognize it and so designate it. His respondents, confident of their ability to define the terms they used every day, naturally became annoyed when they ended up looking like fools under Socrates' interrogation. The unpopularity he won by deflating the self-importance of important men was one of the things that eventually brought him to trial.

Toward the end of the war, civil strife also broke out within the walls of Athens. As the tide of war turned against the Athenians, more and more of the city's people began to criticize the democratic government, which had made a se-

ries of bad mistakes, had often acted arbitrarily, and had sometimes degenerated into mob rule. This dissatisfaction enabled the oligarchic party to seize power in 411 B.C., but the democracy was quickly restored. After their victory in 404 B.C., however, the Spartans replaced the Athenian democracy with a pro-Spartan regime of thirty rulers, called the "Thirty Tyrants." Two of the Thirty, Critias and Charmides, were Plato's relatives, and Plato had high hopes that they would put an end to the ineptitude of the discredited democracy and establish a just government founded on reason and order. His hopes were drowned in blood. The Thirty liquidated 1500 leading citizens (among them Polemarchus, who appears in Book 1 of the *Republic*), drove another 5000 into exile, and confiscated their property. This regime, says Plato (*Letter 7*, 324d), "made the former one look like gold." It did not last long. In the following year (403 B.C.) the exiles returned, overthrew the junta of thirty, and restored the democracy. Plato's uncles were executed. The restored democracy put an end to bloodshed and re-creation, and even critics of democracy, like Plato, praised its moderation. Yet four years later this government tried and executed Socrates, who had defied the Thirty and whom Plato calls "the justest man then living" (*Letter 7*, 324e).

These events had a shattering effect on the young Plato. He resolved to give up his plans for a political career and devote himself to philosophy. But he never ceased thinking about political problems. The events of his youth made a deep impression on him. The strife that had torn Greece convinced him that civil war was the greatest evil for a state and unanimity the greatest good. The greed and violence of the Thirty filled him with hatred for tyranny, while the unjust, arbitrary acts of the Athenian democracy, especially the execution of Socrates, confirmed his distrust of democracy. He came to the conclusion "that all existing states are governed badly and their laws are almost incurable without incredible resources and some luck" (*Letter 7*, 326a). All his life he worried about the problem of good government. His solution, that either philosophers must become kings or kings philosophers, is one of the theories presented in the *Republic* (473c, ff.).

He even tried to put his theory into practice. At forty he visited Syracuse and met Dion, then about twenty. The two formed a passionate, lifelong attachment, immortalized in the poem cited above. Plato introduced Dion to his philosophy, and Dion introduced Plato to his father-in-law Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse. Both learned quickly: Dion was attracted by the force and beauty of Plato's ideas, Plato was repelled by the viciousness and intrigue of Dionysius's court. Plato sailed home, but after the death of Dionysius some twenty years later, Dion and others urged him to return. The new ruler, Dionysius II, was young, teachable, interested in philosophy, and a king—the perfect candidate for philosophical kingship. Plato reluctantly went, but his attempt to educate Dionysius was a fiasco. Plato blamed the failure on Dionysius, but the truth was that political realities had refused to conform to philosophical schemes. Plato was induced to return and try again a few years later, with equally disastrous results. He went home in defeat. Shortly thereafter Dion took Syracuse by force. Bloodshed and confusion ensued, and Dion was assassinated. Thus ended the attempts to put a philosopher king on the throne of Syracuse.

These events occurred many years after the time of the Peloponnesian War, to which we must now return. Concurrent with the war, Greece had undergone a revolution in its moral and intellectual life. Central to this process were the *sophists*, traveling professional teachers, who began to arrive in Athens around the middle of the fifth century, B.C. They taught natural science and the new disciplines of logic and rhetoric. These studies caught on quickly at Athens. Their effect was to undermine belief in the traditional religious and moral values that had formed the basis of society. Natural science seemed to dispense with the gods, and logic seemed to reveal that truth was unattainable or even nonexistent. Rhetoric was an important subject in a democracy like Athens, where political power depended on one's ability to speak persuasively in the Assembly. But if truth is unknowable and if the gods do not exist or care about men, then the object of rhetoric is obviously not truth but persuasion, and telling lies is neither shameful nor immoral—provided you don't get caught.

By the end of the war, therefore, Athens—or at least a large part of her population—had developed an attitude that was both skeptical and relativistic in religion, morals, and thought. Natural laws, not the gods, govern the universe and society. Traditional moral standards, once considered absolute, were no longer seen as guides to right conduct, since they clearly had not been handed down by the gods but invented by men. It followed that laws and customs based on these standards are merely human inventions and so bound to be fallible, since a number of men are no more exempt from error than one. Society can hardly claim, therefore, that it knows what is right for the individual better than the individual himself. Once the rules of religion and society have lost their validity, right conduct—justice—becomes a matter of individual choice. But no two individuals choose the same way: Who is to decide between them? I may, for example, believe it right to murder my father to inherit his estate. If so, no one can persuade me that I am wrong, because I can always argue that it is right *for me*. Some external, universally recognized standard is needed to judge the act. Without it, right conduct for me consists in killing my father without getting caught.

Plato fought all his life against this vicious relativism, which infected not only ethics, but logic, science, politics, and religion. In his search for universal standards Plato continued and extended Socrates' search for universal definitions, and he did it by much the same method: dialectic. As a result of his studies he discovered the Forms, which provide absolute standards not only for ethics and logic, but for all areas of human life. To learn more about the Forms, the reader is referred to the Introduction, and to the text of the *Republic*.

The page and section references printed in the margins of the text are those of the Stephanus edition, which are used universally for citing passages from Plato. The division of the *Republic* into ten books is due not to Plato but to his early editors and probably to the length of the papyrus rolls ("books") on which the dialogues were written. The books have become traditional, even though the divisions are sometimes not very logical.

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Raymond Larson

introduction

The *Republic* is a dialogue, that is to say, a conversation. Since it is a conversation recorded between the covers of a book we cannot help but begin by *reading* it, but I think the author wants us as soon as possible to *join* it, to be converted from passive perusal to active participation, to be drawn in among the other silent “interlocutors.” As it happens, in a number of Platonic dialogues there are people present who say nothing or next to nothing out loud; in the *Republic* we are told of four (328 b). In fact one of these, Clitophon, who makes only a brief intrusion into the conversation here, is to be thought of as having a few things to say on his own about the topic at hand, which is justice. For there exists a brief but brisk dialogue between him and Socrates, a companion piece to the *Republic* which, if it is not by Plato, is at least by someone versed in the spirit of Platonic dialogues. The reader is, I think, invited to be present just as these people are, and with them to smile or snicker at witticisms and inside jokes, to groan in outrage at trick arguments, to nod approval at satisfying formulations, to recall contradictory passages of conversation, to appreciate the return of a theme and, in sum, to check and fill out the recorded conversation with an unwritten inner accompaniment—to be always just on the brink of breaking in. Indeed the vocal characters themselves make it clear that they are by no means Socrates’ unwitting stooges, but wary and critical participants. For example, at one point Adeimantus somewhat pugnaciously breaks in:

“Socrates, no one could dispute what you say—your listeners are in the same position as always. . . . They think that because of their inexperience at question and answer the argument leads them astray a little bit

at a time until finally, when all the bits are collected, they find themselves lost in apparent contradiction to what they said at the start. . . ." (487 b).

—a rebuke to which Socrates yields quite gracefully.

Perhaps nothing in or about the Platonic dialogues is more worth dwelling on than their dialogue form, especially in the *Republic* which itself contains a discussion of its own literary type. In Book 2 (392 d ff.) Socrates divides all myth telling and poetry into two styles. One is the *narrative* style, in which a poet candidly and on his own account retells an event. The other is the *imitative* style in which he speaks as a dramatist with the voice of another and conceals his own authorship. The former style is honest, the latter deceptive. It is to this latter style that the *Republic* itself appears to belong (see Book 3, Note 15), since Plato is entirely hidden behind this imitation of a conversation between Socrates and others.

This distinction between narration and drama may not appear so very interesting until one becomes concerned with the truth-telling and thought-provoking powers of the written word, the word which has been abandoned by its speaker. For then it appears that narrative, from myth to treatise, is indeed an undisguised attempt by an author to talk *at* a reader, an attempt which leaves that reader the defense of well-directed resistance or bored disengagement, while drama and dialogue draw him helplessly into a fictive world of vivid but spuriously attributed speech. Now Plato will not talk *at* us, that is, write clear and convincing treatises, because he considers that knowledge cannot be simply conveyed into the soul by words (518 c), nor will he involve us in one of those exciting dramas which provide nothing but an artificially heightened appearance. The ingenious solution is the dialogue written, like the *Republic*, in the *first person*. For that form does retain some of the immediacy of drama, and yet at least one of the authors of the dialogue, namely Socrates, is very much present and responsible as the teller of the tale. Such a dialogue form overcomes the dangers of poetry while preserving its power to move the soul. And given a chance, that is what the "reading" of a Socratic dialogue will do.

Given a chance—there is the trouble. For through centuries the very assumption that readers needed to be introduced to these dialogues has well and truly obstructed access to them. Most works of advanced learning begin so abruptly, in a place and on a plane where we are not, that we need to be prepared for and led into them. Not so with a conversation guided by Socrates, which is carefully devised to begin where any human being already is and to go on by such steps as everyone can follow. Dialogues are themselves nothing if not patient preparations—for what they themselves best reveal.

Therefore anyone who undertakes, as I am about to do, to write yet another introduction should do so with some embarrassment and many warnings. One convincing way to issue such warnings is to enumerate—and illustrate—some of the sins against the text an introducer will perforce commit.

part I

on “backgrounds”

The first service we have come to expect from an introduction is to be provided with a “background” to the work, an intellectual, historical, politico-socio-economic, or biographical frame within which it will first become intelligible. Raymond Larson gives us a background statement (see p. xv), but he would be the first to caution us on the use of background frames of reference in interpreting the text.

One such frame is Plato’s and Socrates’ Greek origin, which presumably makes them “Greek thinkers.” (There is, of course, a much larger origin whose impact is, however, so controversial that it is usually dismissed: These men happen to belong to the human race, a circumstance which may override the fact of their birth in an alien time and place.) Now as to the illumination supposedly provided by this Greek background, let us set aside a small quandary, namely that “what the Greeks thought” is not least of all culled from the Platonic writings themselves. There still remains a question: Is it possible for a writer to be so deep, so original in

the strong sense, that he can be defined neither from, nor even against, his social setting? It is a question to be especially asked about a writer who gives this description of the way in which a philosopher might be received by his society upon his return from the realms of thought:

“... They’d say he came back from above with ruined eyes. . . . And if they could get their hands on the man who was trying to release them and lead them upward, wouldn’t they kill him?” (517 a).

—the very fate, of course, of Plato’s older friend Socrates. Hence an introduction to a work in terms of the intellectual history of the time is apt to amount to an implicit denial of its originality.

But surely a sketch of the historical or political setting is needed to make a text accessible! For example, the “dramatic date” of the dialogue *Republic*, that is, the time at which it is taking place, is an interlude of peace during the Peloponnesian War (whose main parties were Athens and Sparta) in the latter part of the fifth century B.C. Athens is at this time still a democracy. The scene of the dialogue is the port of Athens, the Piraeus, a proletarian stronghold of democratic feeling, at the house of a rich merchant whose family will later be destroyed by the democratic party. A hilariously repellent description of democratic modes and morals, uncannily reminiscent of conservative accounts of the turmoils of our sixties, is put by the aristocrat Plato into the mouth of the craftsman Socrates (562 c ff.), who has already foretold his own execution, also by a later democratic regime. Hence students are usually introduced to the *Republic* as a deeply antidemocratic book. But let me cite a bit of text. Socrates has just been satirizing democracy:

“And, you know, it’s just the place to go shopping for a regime.”

“How come?”

“Because it’s permissive and has every kind, so that anyone who wants to construct a city, *as we just did*, ought to shop in a democracy as in a regime bazaar. . . .” (557 d).

I have italicized the telling phrase. It seems to me to indicate that the book is far from being uncompromisingly antidemo-

cratic, for within it attention is being drawn to the fact that a dialogue concerning ideal cities is best carried on, and is indeed being carried on, in a democracy. In this point many introductions prejudice our reading of a text, whose judgment on our favored political form is justly complex, by making too coarse an application of historical circumstance. So also with economic conditions: The fact that the privileged Plato, a slave-owner to boot, conceives through Socrates a communitarian society so radical as to leave modern communism, scientific or utopian, looking quite pale should warn the reader to use the author's local situation most cautiously in interpreting his work. For where real thinking is going on, external facts determine at most the the point of departure of the inquiry. Mere circumstance is precisely what thought penetrates and goes beyond.

Similarly inessential may be authors' biographies. Those facts that do have some significance, like Socrates' trial and condemnation for corrupting the youth of Athens, are usually written right into the text. One circumstance, which lends the *Republic* a certain special pathos, is not mentioned, namely the fact that Socrates' young interlocutors, Glaucon and Adeimantus, are Plato's brothers. Neither of them achieved any distinction in later life, and that too turns out to have a certain significance, as we shall see.

For the rest, a list of the chief dates in Plato's life is supplied us here by the translator (p. xlvii). Of special interest is the fact of Plato's middle trip to Sicily, subsequent to the composition of the *Republic* (see especially Mr. Larson's discussion, p. xix). He had gone rather reluctantly, yielding to the demand that he should have the courage to try in practice his alternative plan for the realization of the best regime: that "kings and regents become genuine philosophers." Long before the composition of the *Republic*, its first and preferred plan, namely that philosophers might themselves be accepted as kings, had been demonstratively dashed by the execution of Socrates. Now the philosophical education of the Sicilian tyrant Dionysius had proved to be a failure as well. We may cautiously conclude that before, during, and after the writing of the *Republic* (which he kept revising until his death), Plato knew that its central proposal was impractical. This understanding too can, as we will see, help to cast a certain light on the intention of the work.

The list also contains a rough ordering of Plato's works. Such chronologies are a scholarly preoccupation intended to determine the development of a writer's thought by establishing the date of his writings, but that sometimes serve the reverse cause. Such a list, however, can be useful; in inviting comparison, for instance, of Plato's last work, the *Laws*, with the *Republic*. The Greek title of the *Republic* is *Politeia*, which literally means "Political Regime" or "Constitution" and signifies a conception of thought, while the *Laws* naturally contains a multitude of practically applicable laws. The latter dialogue explicitly refers to itself in comparison with the *Republic* as a "second sailing," that is to say, a second best or even least worst way. Both the speaker Socrates and the very word philosophy are missing from the *Laws*, which takes place during a long day's walk under the Cretan sun, just as the *Republic* goes on well through the night at a house in the port of Athens. The differences between the two dialogues is, crudely, that between theory and practice.

retelling plato

A second standard introductory effort is to convey some appreciation of the context and style of a work, and perhaps to lighten the labor of study by telling what is in it. It is an almost irresistible, though rather graceless, exercise to pull out from a text certain favorite frisky ideas and to hold them up to view by the scruff of the neck. For example, I have already mentioned that notorious notion, proposed by Socrates as his most rousing and disreputable idea near the center of the dialogue, which is that

"Until either philosophers become kings, or those now called kings and regents become genuine philosophers, so that political power and philosophy coincide, . . . there will be no end to evils." (473 c-d).

The limited legitimacy in citing this and its equally unheard-of complement, that only those can be trusted to govern who have an ardent desire not to do so (520 d), lies in displaying them as examples of the characteristic cast of all such Socratic "paradoxes": They strike one at first hearing as pretty bizarre, after some assimilation as fairly obvious, and in the