

## The Main Topics of Plato's *Republic*

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### Abstract

In the traditional interpretation, *The Republic* is a continuation of the discussions in *Gorgias*, according to which virtue and polis laws are tricks invented by a mass of weak people to capture the lust for power of the best individuals, few in number but naturally inclined to leads. The theses of Calicles of *Gorgias* resemble the ideas set forth by Trasymachus in Book I of *The Republic*. The central political theses expressed by Socrates in *The Republic* are: the best rulers are wise, the best rulers rule for the benefit of those led and not for their sake, it is very unlikely

that a city will have the best rulers because there is a chasm between the values of most people and the values of the wise, the greatest harm to a city is civil strife for who should rule, harmony between citizens as to who should rule, and harmony requires the city to cultivate virtue and the rule of law.

**Keywords:** Plato, Republic

### **The Main Topics of Plato's *Republic***

In the traditional interpretation, the *Republic* is a continuation of the discussions in *Gorgias*, according to which virtue and polis laws are a trick invented by a mass of weak people to capture the lust for power of the best individuals, few in number but naturally inclined to lead. (Plato 1864, 482c–86). The theses of Calicles from *Gorgias* resemble the ideas set forth by Trasymachus in Book I of the *Republic* (Plato and Vegetti 2007, vol. 2, p 202).

From Eric Brown's point of view, the central political theses expressed by Socrates in the *Republic* are: the best rulers are wise, the best rulers govern for the benefit of those led and not for their sake, it is very unlikely that a city will have the best rulers because there is a gap between the values of most people and the values of the wise, the greatest harm to a city is the civil strife for who should lead, the harmony between citizens about who should rule, and the harmony requires for the city to cultivate virtue and the rule of law (Brown 2017).

In terms of content, the *Republic* can be divided into several parts (Plato and Vegetti 2007, 17–18):

#### **Justice and righteousness (Book I)**

If justice is more convenient than injustice (Plato and Jowett 1991, 331d). Thrasymachus makes three statements that favor injustice over justice as a way of life: rulers rule only in their own self-interest, injustice is more profitable than justice, and the unrighteous man has a better life

than the righteous. Socrates contradicts this, arguing that the function of the soul is to direct human life, and therefore the soul must have an excellence in the absence of which it cannot perform its function well (Plato and Jowett 1991, 350d4-5); and since justice is the excellence of the soul, "the just soul is the one which lives well; and the man who lives well is *eudaimon*, the man who does not live well is not; therefore it is the just man who has a better life, not the unjust man." (Cross, Woozley, and Plat6 1964)

Sean McAleer develops five arguments against Thrasymachus' definition: 1) the argument of error (the possibility that leaders make mistakes in drafting laws): leaders are stronger than those led, justice is (obeying) commands, leaders sometimes make mistakes and do not command what is to their advantage, so justice is not (always) the advantage of the strongest; 2) craft argument (craftsmen always seek to help their subjects first): crafts seek to help those they own, all components of a ship are weaker than the ship as a whole, so all crafts seek to help the weakest not the strongest; 3) the argument of the one who wants more (the unjust person who wants more than anyone else and does not recognize any moral constraint in fact contradicts the conclusion held by Thrasymachus); 4) the common goal argument (not even a criminal gang can achieve its goals unless some kind of justice regulates group relations): if x allows successful joint action and y prevents this then x is stronger than y, justice allows and injustice hinders successful joint action, so justice is stronger than injustice); and 5) the argument of function (a righteous person is happy and an unjust person is unhappy): the virtue of a thing allows its function to be fulfilled well, life is a function of the soul, justice is a virtue of the soul, injustice a vice, so the righteous man lives well; the unrighteous person lives badly, in addition, happiness means living well and unhappiness means living badly, so the right person is happy and the unjust person is unhappy. (McAleer 2020)

Polemarch considers that justice is to benefit friends and harm enemies (Plato and Jowett 1991, 331c-e). Socrates refutes this view because it would appear that justice can be useful in time of war but not in time of peace. Thrasymachus states that justice is the profit of the strongest (Plato and Jowett 1991, 338c). Socrates counter-argues with a syllogism (Plato and Jowett 1991, 339a-e). Finally, Socrates demonstrates that since life is a function of the soul and virtue of the soul is justice, the latter is the only guarantee of a happy life (Plato and Jowett 1991, 346b-47). At the end of Book I, Socrates acknowledges that they have not clarified what justice is (Plato and Jowett 1991, 354b-c), although its usefulness has been recognized and it has been acknowledged that it must be a virtue.

In Book II, the debate on justice continues, with Socrates directing the discussion towards justice in the city: "first in cities searching for what it is; then thusly we could examine also in some individual, examining the likeness of the bigger in the idea of the littler" (Plato and Jowett 1991, 368e – 369a). This type of justice is evaluated up to Book V, arguing with a series of myths and "noble lies." Justice is the cause of the existence of the three virtues (temperance, wisdom, and courage). Regarding the "noble lie", Plato accepts falsity if it refers to "morally admirable" aspects (Smith 2009).

Book IX discusses whether it is better to be righteous than unjust. The government should be left to the philosophers, who are the most just, and therefore the least corrupt.

### **The Ideal State (Books II-III)**

Glaucon divides the goods into three parts: desirable for himself, desirable for himself and for the benefits they bring, and desirable only for the benefits they bring. Socrates places justice in the second category. Later, Socrates is asked to prove that justice is more advantageous than injustice (Plato and Jowett 1991, 367b-c), which is put in difficulty. He begins to sketch the birth

of a polis from a small village inhabited by peasants and artisans, which he later extended by introducing workers and soldiers (Plato and Jowett 1991, 372e–75). Socrates shows that in the evolution from the first polis to the second, a progressive physical and moral degeneration takes place. Thus arises the idea of an ideal and perfect state, in which citizens are required to do the only task assigned to them by the state, dividing them into three social classes: craftsmen, guards, and rulers or philosophers (the only ones capable of governing the state with moderate wisdom). Belonging to one of the classes is done during education when it is determined what is best for the individual to do.

Plato thus constructs an ideal state in which there is a theoretically perfect justice, defined as Kallipolis, divided, like the tripartite division of the soul of the individual man (Plato and Jowett 1991, 439a–41), into three social classes: gold (rulers-philosophers), silver (warriors), bronze (workers). Thus, compared to the current contractual theories of the modern state, Plato's state has a natural origin. If all practitioners of the various trades exchanged tools with each other, this would do no harm to the city (Plato and Jowett 1991, 434a). If workers, guardians, and rulers did the same thing between different classes, on the other hand, they would destroy the city (Plato and Jowett 1991, 434a–b).

C. D. C. Reeve considers several types of freedom that can exist in a state: individual freedom implies the idea that everyone does what we want, and a state is free insofar as it limits individual freedom only to guarantee equal freedom to all its members; instrumental freedom, to do what we want, but which seems insufficient for true freedom or autonomy; and the deliberative freedom to have and satisfy those desires that we would choose to have if we were aware of our actions. In this sense, the *Republic* is an attempt to design a city whose members enjoy as much real happiness as possible and as much real freedom as possible (Plato and Reeve 2004).

D. B. Futter states that Plato's *Republic* allows for a dialectic of the city centered on an interpretation of justice as geometric equality: the first city assigns social roles, the second city disrupts the geometric pattern to allow desires for greatness and self-knowledge, and "the third city re-establishing the geometrical pattern by means of poetic catharsis, a noble lie, and the placement of an armed camp" (Futter 2018). In search of the definition of justice, the characters of the dialogue develop three defective communities: a city for pigs (the human being is vulnerable and deprived of many things (Plato and Jowett 1991, 369b5-7), a city with a fever, a luxurious, abundant city (Plato and Jowett 1991, 372a5-c1)) and a city with an armed camp (soldiers become guardians who suppress the fever of the luxury city by censorship (Plato and Jowett 1991, 415e1-2; 399e). The myth of metals is a useful lie, which symbolizes deep social truths. The noble lie forms the boundary between the city with fever and the purified city of the armed camp.

Plato's ideal state, Kallipolis, is a utopia, based on the fragile assumption that the ideal leader is a true philosopher. Socrates, in Book VI, however, considers this idea plausible (Castelnérac 2011).

### **The city-soul analogy. Harmony of the parties (Books IV-V)**

Plato anticipated the idea that a human society is in a sense an organic thing, with its own laws of growth and decay. Socrates defines the virtues that the state must possess: wisdom (typical of rulers), courage (specific to guardians), temperance, and justice (defined as order and harmony between different parts of the state). In Book IV, Socrates is asked if the guardians can still be happy because of the restrictions imposed. He replies that happiness for the guardian lies precisely in the fulfillment of his duty.

Socrates argues that we cannot consistently explain certain cases of psychological conflict unless we assume that the soul has at least two parts according to the principle of non-opposition:

the same thing at the same time” (Plato and Jowett 1991, 436b8–9). His arguments explain the akrasia (weakness of will) (Brown 2017). The soul is divided into rational, irascible and concupiscible, and justice exists only when the three parts are in harmony. Thus, Socrates then concludes that the tyrant is the most unhappy man.

Julia Annas considers that Plato's main idea in the *Republic* was to make an analogy between the city-state and the individual soul (Annas 1981). Norbert Blössner (Ferrari 2007, chap. 13; pp. 345–385) supports this thesis by talking about an analysis of the functioning and moral improvement of the individual soul. Christopher Rowe believes that the argument in Books II-IV that virtues are distinguished in terms of the tripartition of the soul is rhetorical, designed only to confirm Glaucon, but he does not intend to be literally correct (Smith 2009).

### **Form Theory (Metaphor of the Line and the Myth of the Cave, Books VI-VII)**

Plato considers that Forms offer solutions to metaphysical and epistemological problems caused by elenchus and flow, being intelligible objects above the influence of flow, with stable meanings or references. Forms provide the basis for the definitions of the virtues that Socratic ethics needs. (Plato and Reeve 2004) To argue his theory of knowledge, Plato uses two of the best-known images: the metaphor of the line and the myth of the cave.

The metaphor of the line, in the second half of Book VI:

"Now take a line which has been cut into two unequal parts, and divide each of them again in the same proportion, and suppose the two main divisions to answer, one to the visible and the other to the intelligible." (Plato and Jowett 1991, bk. VI, 509d-510a)

The four unequal parts correspond to the four planes of knowledge. At the lowest level of knowledge are the opinions (doxa), which are not real, but just mere appearances, shadows. True knowledge is that which goes to real objects whose sensitive objects are only imitations. Only intelligible knowledge, that is, conceptual knowledge, ensures true and universal knowledge; the

opinion based on the two lower stages of knowledge comes to confuse the truth with its image (Adorno 2008, 95–97).

For better clarification, the myth of the cave is used at the beginning of Book VII: chained from birth are people who cannot see the entrance; behind them burns a fire and, between the fire and the entrance to the cave, passes a road with a wall that acts as a screen; along the way many people carry various objects on their shoulders, the shadows of which are projected on the bottom of the cave. For the prisoners, the shadows they see are reality. But if one of them were released and forced out of the cave, he would initially be amazed at the light and feel pain; however, he would gradually get used to it, he could see the reflections of the waters, then the real objects, the stars and finally the sun (the Good). Returning to the cave, he will have to get his eyes used to the darkness again, and his companions would laugh at him if he tried to tell them what he saw (Plato and Jowett 1991, 514a–20). Good can be thought of as the form of Forms, or the structuring of the world as a whole.

In this way Plato means that the sensitive reality of imagination and conjecture is comparable to the shadows that prisoners see projected on the wall, while the "real" (Forms) exists somewhere outside of time and space, which is nothing but "the idea" (*εἶδος*) (Silverman 2003). The cognitive process of the prisoner in the cave is also described as a difficult and gradual ascent, according to the metaphor of the line: first the opinion, identified in the faded shadows, then the objects that are part of the sensitive world, then the reflections, identifiable with mathematics, until the idea of Good that illuminates all the others (in myth, it is the sun). Plato asserts the primacy of the Good over other ideas by comparing it with the sun:

"Just as in the visible sphere sunlight and sight can be considered exactly like the sun, but it is not right to believe that they are the sun, so in this other sphere it is right to believe that science and truth are both like good, but they would it would be wrong to believe that one or the



other of them is good: the condition of good is worthy of even greater honor.” (Plato and Vegetti 2007, 509a)

The science of good is the first science necessary not only for those who must govern a state, but for anyone who deals with a particular science, because it is the science of truth that unites and supports all other sciences. The form of good is like a self-illuminated object that can help knowledge become intelligible, like reasoning or logic. But the allegory of the sun is also about reality and its nature:

"The sun, I think you would say, not only gives visible things the power to be seen, but also ensures their appearance, growth and nourishment - although it itself will not be... Therefore, you should also say that not only do the objects of knowledge owe their knowledge of the good, but also their existence and being are due to it; although good is not being, but something still beyond being, superior to it in rank and power.” (Plato and Vegetti 2007, 509b)

Thus, in the analogy of the sun, the form of good is a paradigm of rational order that allows the philosopher to determine what is good, helping other types of expertise (Plato and Vegetti 2007, 369b) (Plato and Reeve 2004).

David K. O'Connor draws an analogy between the shadows of Plato's cave and the shadows of Homer's world, rejected by Nicholas D Smith (Smith 2009) because the shadows of Plato's cave, unlike those of Homer, are not dead things, or reminiscent of them after death.

### **Family and State (Books VIII-IX)**

Discussions in the Republic mention five regimes that tend to degrade in succession: aristocracy (ideal state), timocracy, oligarchy (plutocracy), democracy, and tyranny (despotism). From the aristocracy (led by the wise philosophers) to the timocracy through civil war, the leadership being taken over by those who love power and honor. But the temptations of wealth allow the emergence of the oligarchy, with the polarization between the rich (those who lead) and the poor, with an emphasis on property. Democracy emerges from the conflicts between social classes, when the poor revolt and take power. But in this context, demagogues also appear, who

will deceive the people, eventually coming to power. Excessive freedoms give rise to three distinct social classes: the ruling class, the elites, and the common people. Tensions between the poor and the elite make the plebs give more power to the leaders who, due to the inherent corruption, end up leading by tyranny.

Plato criticizes democracy because its inevitable result is demagoguery. Oligarchy corrupts society through the importance given to money and arbitrary decisions, resulting in a disappearance of ethical values. Tyranny is the inevitable result of democratic degeneration (Plato and Jowett 1991, bk. VIII, 560c). Leaders must not have private property, nor children, in order to be interested only in the good of the state. Women will be in common, just like men, and couples will be determined by magistrates so that better and better bloodlines are generated.

Socrates clarifies the role of art, considering it an imitation of the sensible world, which in itself is an imitation of the world of ideas. Plato condemns figurative art forms, and theatrical performances (especially tragedy), as the emotional charge of such performances could have a negative influence and corrupt action on citizens.

Richard Lewis Nettleship states that Plato supported communism in several parts of the Republic "as supplementary machinery to give effect to and reinforce that spirit which education is to create" (Nettleship 1958). Harvey Yunis states that " Plato went so far as to encourage his readers to reject society's inherited norms entirely (regarding such basic matters as marriage, family life, private property, and religious belief) and to accept in their stead norms that were derived from an idiosyncratic, idealist vision of reality and articulated by an autocratic philosopher", a statement rejected by Nicholas D Smith (Smith 2009).

## Myth of Er (Book X)

Through the myth of Er, (Plato and Jowett 1991, bk. X) Plato intends to argue in favor of the immortality of the soul and metempsychosis, and to show the role of chance, freedom and necessity in human life. A soldier who died in battle has been resurrected, and says that in the afterlife, the bodies in which he reincarnates are randomly assigned. Souls will quench their thirst with the waters of the Lethe River, but those who have done it improperly will forget their former lives, while philosophers, who, guided by reason, have not drunk, will keep their memories, only slightly attenuated, of the world of Ideas, to which they can refer later to expand their knowledge.

For Stephen Halliwell, Er's myth "can fruitfully be thought of as inviting a "cyclical" reading in conjunction with the preceding dialogue, a reading that forms the hermeneutic parallel to the existential cycle of life and death pictured in Er's account," claiming that we should consider the myth as a "philosophical recomposition, not an outright rejection, of poetry", a story of the soul both after death and before death (Smith 2009).

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