



The Routledge Guidebook to

PLATO'S REPUBLIC

Nickolas Pappas



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Nickolas Pappas



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The Routledge Guidebook to Plato's *Republic*

Plato, often cited as a founding father of Western philosophy, set out ideas in the *Republic* regarding the nature of justice, order, and the character of the just individual, that endure into the modern day. *The Routledge Guidebook to Plato's Republic* introduces the major themes in Plato's great book and acts as a companion for reading the work, examining:

- the context of Plato's work and the background to his writing
- each separate part of the text in relation to its goals, meanings and impact
- the reception the book received when first seen by the world
- the relevance of Plato's work to modern philosophy, its legacy and influence.

With further reading included throughout, this text follows Plato's original work closely, making it essential reading for all students of philosophy, and all those wishing to get to grips with this classic work.

Nickolas Pappas is Professor of Philosophy at the City College and Graduate Center of the City University of New York, where he regularly teaches courses on Plato's philosophy.

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AJG
October 2012

PREFACE

INTRODUCING PLATO

In the first place Plato needs no introduction because everyone knows his name; but also in another respect, because his dialogues make such an effort to present and explain themselves to their readers. Plato motivates the questions his characters examine, explains the terms they use, and sketches the connections among disparate issues. Indeed the most gentlemanly thing about this most gentlemanly of writers may be his willingness to introduce himself, without a trace of pompousness, to utter strangers. This is why readers can still enter into the dialogues eighty generations – close to thirty-five lifetimes – after Plato wrote them.

Even so most readers prefer to have a guide at hand when they approach Plato's works, especially one as large and difficult as the *Republic*. The dialogue form becomes an obstacle if you want to get an overview of the territory covered, to worry a single point in greater detail than the conversational setting allows, to isolate the premises of an argument and discover which ones are doing the work, or to find different ways of putting a single Platonic point and see what consequences follow from each restatement. The important issues in Plato's long dialogues appear and vanish: Plato

raises one point only to digress to another, or to attend to a detail of his argument. Eventually the originating issue comes up again, but transformed or disguised. The reader who feels lost among the turns of conversation may wish that Plato had also written a few pedestrian treatises covering the same ground as the dialogues, but more explicitly, and when it is necessary more tediously.

This book is designed as an accompaniment to Plato's *Republic* for the benefit of any reader who has sometimes felt confused by its brilliant liveliness. For the most part I have stayed close to Plato's own arrangement of his arguments. At each point I spell out his position, then stop to analyze, criticize, or expand on it. I depart from Plato's expository order only in discussing Books 5–7, which I go through once with an eye to the political theory, then again looking only at the metaphysics. Thus most of this book is an exposition of the text, with pauses for further discussion. Later chapters refer back to relevant earlier sections, to facilitate the task of putting together different treatments of a subject into a unified whole.

Toward the same purpose of keeping the dialogue as a whole in mind, I have identified what I consider fundamental premises or assumptions in the *Republic's* argument, and collected them in the book's appendix, both so that I can allude compactly to important Platonic claims, and so that the reader can see steps in the first books of the *Republic* as they function in the later books. Finally, Chapters 10–12 return to certain general issues that profit from being discussed with reference to the entire *Republic*. They are brief, as they had to be to keep this from becoming some other book, but as first approaches to the issues they show how one may review the whole dialogue.

In addition to bringing forward the *Republic's* overarching structure, I have emphasized the complexity of its relationship to ordinary thought. It is easy to fall into thinking of Plato as the philosopher of otherworldly ideals, in politics therefore utopian, in ethics a propagandist for a species of 'justice' that has nothing to do with anything people call justice in their ordinary lives. But the *Republic* takes great pains to keep its arguments intelligible to readers who are not trained philosophers, even when advocating a perspective of theoretical reason that would leave ordinary thinking

behind. This duality of purpose makes for a productive tension in the dialogue, clearly spotted when Book 1 moves from a behavioral definition of justice to an internal one, or when Book 4 tries to accommodate its psychological interpretation of virtue to the ordinary variety, or Book 5 distinguishes the philosopher from other putative lovers of knowledge. The tension between popular thinking and philosophical thought is most dramatic in the *Republic's* ambivalence about the nature of reason (especially in Book 9); but it is also at play in Socrates' repeated strategy of double arguments, in which he follows a theoretical justification for a view with one that the nonphilosopher can follow. While Plato certainly does reach conclusions that at points deny the worth of daily experience, those conclusions gain their power from his effort to motivate them from within daily experience.

In the interests of a smoother read, I have omitted the traditional references that would acknowledge the intellectual debts I have incurred in writing this book. Instead and more informally I close each chapter with a list of the books and articles that most informed its interpretations; I consider these the best places for the reader to go first in moving beyond what I have said. The book's bibliography likewise serves the two purposes of identifying the sources I have most relied on, and directing the reader's own further investigations.

Some sources are worth referring to more than once. This book was specially helped by Julia Annas's *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* and Nicholas White's *A Companion to Plato's Republic*. The reader who knows these excellent works will spot my extensive borrowings from them. In addition to these, the books on the *Republic* by Cross and Woosley, by Murphy, and by Nettleship guided my interpretations and presentations.

All quotations from the *Republic* come from Allan Bloom's translation. I depart from his usage in my discussion only in referring to 'reason,' as he often does not, and to Plato's 'Forms,' as he never does.

THE PRESENT BOOK

I have revised this book twice since first writing it twenty years ago. The second edition appeared in 2003, this version another

ten years later. The second edition made some change to each page, and larger changes to the chapters at the book's end, with new discussions of beauty, political paternalism, and the way the conception of reason evolves as one reads through the *Republic*.

The second edition also reflected further on the guardians' natures, emphasizing that with his comparison between the city's rulers and dogs, Plato draws on the fact that domestication produces animals you cannot call either exactly natural or exactly artificial. A city founded on convention or artifice alone is doomed to fail, as Thrasymachus argues, because its moral prescriptions contradict human nature. Dog breeding shows Plato a way to bridge the gap between natural processes and cultural values, so that instead of undoing a society the laws of nature can underwrite it.

This version has undergone much more alteration. Substantial portions are new, such as the comments on Gyges in Chapter 3, the philosophers' reluctance to rule (Chapter 6), degrees of understanding (Chapter 7), the painter's ranking below the maker, and the myth of Er (both Chapter 9). Much has been added to Chapter 10 on the *Republic's* ethics and politics. A new part of Chapter 5 reviews the current debate between deflationist and realist interpretations of Plato's theory of the soul.

This is not to mention the first chapter of the present book, three-fourths of which was written for this edition; or the last chapter, all new. These bookend chapters sketch out historical contexts for the *Republic* and its later reception. The result is a book that does at least two things better than its predecessors: situate the *Republic* in its time and in the subsequent intellectual history of the West; and spell out the main interpretive debates that surround the *Republic* today. I hope that readers who found the earlier editions clear and patient in their expositions continue to see those virtues in the present edition, together with its increased scholarly timeliness and historical responsibility.

MANY THANKS

I first learned Greek with William McCulloh; I first read the *Republic* under Cyrus Banning, and Plato systematically in the classrooms of Eugen Kullmann and Thomas Short. In graduate school I am

grateful to have studied ancient philosophy with Martha Nussbaum and Steven Strange. I hope that this book is a credit to my teacher Stanley Cavell, to whom I owe my deepest understanding of what a philosophical theory is, wants to be, and perhaps ought not be.

Among my peers I must include three by name: Kirk Fitzpatrick, Burt Hopkins, Brian Seitz. And I am particularly grateful to Michael Pakaluk for reading a long section of the first draft and helping me improve it.

I have now spent a quarter century teaching the *Republic*, to more good students than I could list. At Hollins College, Jennifer Norton and Caroline Smith made special contributions to this book. Some names from City College come to mind because their comments sent me back to my book to jot down ideas for changes: Shontanu Basu, Gloria Bragdon, Joseph Brown, Keegan Goodman, Amalia Rosenblum, Stephen Sykes. At the CUNY Graduate Center, I want to thank my students Brandon del Pozo, Mary Clare McKinley, and especially Daniel Mailick. I must also mention Professor Ruth Bevan of Yeshiva University, in New York, and her political science honors students.

Much of the time that I needed to complete this new edition was made possible by Dean Geraldine Murphy, who deserves special thanks – not just for this help, but for this on top of her many services to City College.

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Part I

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

