

Discussion Guide for
THE REPUBLIC

Plato



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ABOUT THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE

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This discussion guide includes references to *The Republic of Plato: Second Edition* (Basic Books, 1991).

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ABOUT THE REPUBLIC

Plato's great influence as one of the founders of Western philosophy has been through his written dialogues, in which characters based on actual individuals discuss a wide range of philosophical problems. Plato himself does not appear in the dialogues; most feature Socrates (who left no writings) as the primary speaker, steering the discussion by posing questions and provoking his companions to examine their opinions and assumptions. Consequently, it is not clear to what extent the dialogues express Plato's own philosophy or that of Socrates and others. In any case, by dramatically depicting people engaging in philosophical inquiry, the dialogues offer a model for what Socrates advocates in Plato's *Apology* when he says that the unexamined life is not worth living.

Many of Plato's dialogues center on the search for sound knowledge of a familiar concept, as well as the more general question of how knowledge itself is acquired and the relation of knowledge to ethical behavior. The issue guiding Socrates and his interlocutors in *The Republic* is justice. They begin by discussing whether a just or unjust life is more advantageous. Although Socrates convinces the others that a just life *must* be the better one, none of those present are able to prove why. Socrates then recommends that they try to "build with words" the most just city, so that the character of justice in an individual may be more conspicuously seen.

The underlying assumption of Plato's opinions on justice is that the goodness of the individual is in some way equivalent to the goodness of a city. By the end, he has given one set of principles and one definition of justice that is meant to cover both. But where does Plato think justice comes from if both the city and the individual require the stabilizing presence of the other? Which is the progenitor of justice, and which the imitation?

As one of the earliest written examples of an idealized city, *The Republic* investigates the philosophical issues at the root of utopian visions. By implication, any utopian proposal that restricts society to certain patterns of behavior may contain the seeds of dystopian abuse. One of Plato's most famous modern critics was philosopher Karl Popper, who claimed that the city in the *The Republic* is a perfect blueprint for totalitarianism. This is a common criticism of Plato's work, due to the explicit use of censorship, resulting in a society that Popper calls "closed," that is, not open to continual growth and beneficial change. From this perspective, the city described in *The Republic* is stagnant and philosophy is no longer an instrument of change, but serves to sanction authority.

Plato's *Republic* demonstrates that there are numerous philosophical issues at stake in utopian constructions, including the role of philosophy itself. Although the practice of philosophy is central to the governance of Plato's city, analyses like Popper's strongly suggest that other factors influence whether such a proposal can result in a just society.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Does Plato think that freedom and justice are opposed?

1. Would Socrates consider the citizen of the just city to be free?
2. Are the citizens of the other regimes discussed in books eight and nine free?
3. Why does Socrates believe that people choose to be unjust and, therefore, unhappy?

4. Why does Socrates believe that “too much freedom seems to change into nothing but too much slavery, both for private man and city”? (242)

Are most citizens of the just city truly just, or only the guardians?

1. Does Socrates only consider the education of the future guardians, or the entire population as well?
2. Why does Socrates think the “noble lie” is necessary to persuade the citizens to accept their place in the city? (93)
3. Is the unjust man impelled by a desire for the wrong things, or does he desire the same things as the just man, only in luxurious excess?
4. Does Socrates think that one can be just in an improperly ordered society?

Does Socrates regard only the healthful city, not the luxurious one, as a just city?

1. Does Socrates distinguish between the healthy and the just?
2. Does Socrates think that the healthful city is possible in reality?
3. What does it mean that Socrates and Glaucon “again purged the city that a while ago [they] said was luxurious”? (78)
4. By the end of the book, has Socrates decided whether war “works evil or good”? (50)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Can an unjust society have a just ruler?
2. Do you agree with Socrates that a few wise and just people should rule a society?

3. Is there a natural hierarchy among human beings, such that some are cut out to deliberate and rule, while others do the manual labor?
4. Do mental health and happiness depend on conforming to the order of society and the will of its rulers?

ABOUT PLATO

Plato (ca. 428–348 BCE) belonged to one of the most distinguished families in Athens, with a long history of public service from the time of his ancestor, the eminent legislator Solon, and close connections to the ruler Pericles, who died the year before Plato was born. Under Pericles, democratic government reached its height in Athens, which became the leading Power of Greece and the center of an expanding empire. However, from 431 until 404 the rivalry and antagonism between Athens and Sparta drew the entire Greek world into the series of military conflicts known as the Peloponnesian War, resulting in the defeat of Athens and the collapse of its empire. Plato was raised during these turbulent years and had ambitions for a career in politics, while also cultivating an interest in philosophy under the influence of the philosopher Socrates and his followers.

But after witnessing the violent actions of the antidemocratic oligarchy that ruled Athens in 404-403 BCE as well as the trial and execution of Socrates in 399 BCE under the uneasy restored democracy, Plato abandoned his intention to enter politics. Reflecting on the reasons for political decisions, and initiating one of the major lines of thought in the Western intellectual tradition concerning the relation between philosophy and civil engagement, Plato wrote:

The written law and the customs were being corrupted at an astounding rate. The result was that I, who had at first been full of eagerness for a public career . . . finally saw clearly in regard to all states now existing that without exception their system of government is bad . . . accordingly the human race will not see

better days until either the stock of those who rightly and genuinely follow philosophy acquire political authority, or else the class who have political control be led by some dispensation of providence to become real philosophers.

After several years of extensive travel through Greece, Italy, and Egypt, Plato returned to Athens, where in 387 BCE he founded the Academy, an educational institution for research in philosophy, mathematics, and science. One of its most eminent students was the philosopher Aristotle, and the Academy widely influenced the civic life of Greece through the advice it provided to city-states on matters of practical legislation and jurisprudence. However, Plato's own attempt to intervene in the politics of Syracuse through educating the heir to the throne failed to create the philosopher-king that was his ideal. Plato presided over the Academy until his death, and it became a leading center of intellectual activity, lasting almost nine hundred years.

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