

Plato's Republic

The Republic (Greek: Πολιτεία, Politeia; Latin: Res Publica) is a Socratic dialogue, written by Plato around **380 BC**, concerning justice (δικαιοσύνη), the order and character of the just city-state and the just man. It is Plato's Defense of Justice. In response to Thrasymachus, Glaucon, and Adeimantus, Socrates seeks to show that it is always in an individual's interest to be just, rather than unjust. Thus, one of the most pressing issues regarding the **Republic** is whether Socrates defends justice successfully or not.

Plato's Definition of Justice: After criticizing the conventional theories of **justice** presented differently by Cephalus, Polymarchus, Thrasymachus and Glaucon, **Plato** gives us his own theory of **justice** according to which, individually, **justice** is a 'human virtue' that makes a person self-consistent and good; socially.

Justice is a sort of specialization. It is simply the will to fulfill the duties of one's station and not to meddle with the duties of another station, and its habitation is, therefore, in the mind of every citizen who does his duties in his appointed place. It is the original principle, laid down at the foundation of the State, "that one man should practice one thing only and that the thing to which his nature was best adopted". True justice to Plato, therefore, consists in the principle of non-interference. The State has been considered by Plato as a perfect whole in which each individual which is its element, functions not for itself but for the health of the whole. Every element fulfils its appropriate function. Justice in the platonic state would, therefore, be like that harmony of relationship where the Planets are held together in the orderly movement. Plato was convinced that a society which is so organized is fit for survival. Where man are out of their natural places, there the co-ordination of parts is destroyed, the society disintegrates and dissolves. Justice, therefore, is the citizen sense of duties.

Justice is, for Plato, at once a part of human virtue and the bond, which joins man together in society. It is the identical quality that makes good and social. Justice is an order and duty of the parts of the soul, it is to the soul as health is to the body. Plato says that justice is not mere strength, but it is a harmonious strength. Justice is not the right of the stronger but the effective harmony of the whole. All moral conceptions revolve about the good of the whole-individual as well as social.

Justice according to Thrasymachus: In the first book of the Republic, **Thrasymachus** attacks Socrates' position that **justice** is an important good. He claims that 'injustice, if it is on a large enough scale, is stronger, freer, and more masterly than **justice**' (344c). ... **Justice** is nothing but the advantage of another (343c).

Important Terms

Aporia - *Aporia* is the Greek term for the state of helplessness—the inability to proceed—that ends all of Plato’s early dialogues. Through his pointed questioning, Socrates succeeds in showing that his interlocutors have no appropriate definition for the topic under consideration (be that topic piety, love, courage, justice, or whatever else), but nor is he able to supply one himself. In Book I of *The Republic* Socrates brings his friends to a state of aporia on the topic of justice, but then in the next nine books he manages to move beyond the aporia and give an actual answer to the question at hand.

Appetite - Appetite is the largest aspect of our tripartite soul. It is the seat of all our various desires for food, drink, sexual gratification, and other such pleasures. It contains both necessary desires, which should be indulged (such as the desire to eat enough to stay alive), unnecessary desires, which should be limited (such as the desire to eat a ten pound sirloin steak at every meal), and unlawful desires, which should be suppressed at all costs (such as the desire to eat one’s children). Though the appetite lusts after many things, Plato dubs it “money-loving,” since money is required for satisfying most of these desires. In a just man, the appetite is strictly controlled by reason and reason’s henchman, spirit.

Auxiliary - Plato divides his just society into three classes: the producers, the auxiliaries, and the guardians. The auxiliaries are the warriors, responsible for defending the city from invaders, and for keeping the peace at home. They must enforce the convictions of the guardians, and ensure that the producers obey.

Belief - Belief is the second lowest grade of cognitive activity. The object of belief is the visible realm rather than the intelligible realm. A man in a state of belief does not have any access to the Forms, but instead takes sensible particulars as the most real things.

Elenchus - *Elenchus* is the Greek term for Socrates’s method of questioning his interlocutors. In an *elenchus* he attempts to show that their own beliefs are contradictory, and thus to prove that they do not have knowledge about some topic about which they thought they had knowledge.

Empirical - When something is an empirical question, that means that the question can only be settled by going out into the world and investigating. The question, “What percentage of the population of the United States likes ice cream” is an example of an empirical question, which can only be answered through empirical investigation. The question “What is the square root of two,” on the other hand, is not an empirical question. In order to answer this question all you have to do is think about the mathematics involved; you do not have to investigate evidence in the world.

Epistemology - The branch of philosophy concerned with knowledge, belief, and thought. Epistemological questions include: What is knowledge? How do we form beliefs based on evidence? Can we know anything?

Form - According to Plato’s metaphysical theory, there is an aspect of reality beyond the one which we can see, an aspect of reality even more real than the one we see. This aspect of reality, the intelligible realm, is comprised of unchanging, eternal, absolute entities, which are called “Forms.” These absolute entities—such as Goodness, Beauty, Redness, Sourness, and so on—are the cause of all the objects we experience around us in the visible realm. An apple is red and

sweet, for instance, because it participates in the Form of Redness and the Form of Sweetness. A woman is beautiful because she participates in the Form of Beauty. Only the Forms can be objects of knowledge (that is, Forms are the only things we can know about).

Form of the Good - Among the Forms, one stands out as most important. This is the Form of the Good. Plato is unable to tell us exactly what the Form of The Good is, but he does tell us that it is the source of intelligibility and of our capacity to know, and also that it is responsible for bringing all of the other Forms into existence. He compares its role in the intelligible realm to the role of the sun in the visible realm. The Form of the Good is the ultimate object of knowledge; it is only once one grasps the Form of the Good that one reaches the highest grade of cognitive activity, understanding. Therefore, it is only after he grasps the Form of the Good that a philosopher-in-training becomes a philosopher-king.

Guardian - Plato divides his just society into three classes: the producers, the auxiliaries, and the guardians. The guardians are responsible for ruling the city. They are chosen from among the ranks of the auxiliaries, and are also known as philosopher-kings.

Hesiod - Hesiod was a famous Greek poet. His long poem *Works and Days* outlines the traditional Greek conception of virtue and justice.

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Imagination - Imagination is the lowest grade of cognitive activity. Someone in the state of imagination takes mere images and shadows as the most real things. Probably, this means that such a person derives his ideas about himself and the world from products of art, such as poetry in Plato's day and movies and television in our own. See also Belief, Thought, Understanding.

Instrumental reason - Instrumental reason is reason used to attain some end, by engaging in means-end analyses. These ends are dictated by a part of the soul such as appetite or spirit, or even reason itself.

Intelligible realm - Plato divides all of existence up into two parts: the visible realm and the intelligible realm. The intelligible realm cannot be sensed, but only grasped with the intellect. It consists of the Forms. Only the intelligible realm can be the object of knowledge.

Kallipolis - *Kallipolis* is the Greek term for Plato's just city.

Knowledge - According to Plato, knowledge can only pertain to eternal, unchanging truths. I can know, for instance that two plus two equals four, because this will also be the case. I cannot know, however, that Meno is beautiful. For this reason, only the intelligible realm, the realm of the Forms can be the object of knowledge. See also Opinion.

Lover of sights and sounds - "Lovers of sights and sounds" is Socrates's term for the pseudo-intellectuals who claim to have expertise regarding all that is beautiful, but who fail to recognize that there is such a thing as the Form of the Beautiful, which causes all beauty in the visible realm. Socrates is adamant that lovers of sights and sounds be distinguished from philosophers, who grasp the Forms, and thus have knowledge. Lovers of sights and sounds have no knowledge, only opinion.

Metaphysics - The branch of philosophy concerned with asking what there is in the world. The theory of Forms is a metaphysical theory, as is the theory of the tripartite soul.

Opinion - Since only eternal, unchanging truths can be the objects of knowledge, all other truths are relegated to opinion. Opinion is the highest form of certainty that we can hope for when it comes to the visible realm, the realm of sensible particulars.

Philosopher-king - The philosopher-king is the ruler of the kallipolis. Also called guardians, philosopher-kings are the only people who can grasp the Forms, and thus the only people who can claim actual knowledge. Since the philosopher-king yearns after truth above all else, he is also the most just man.

Pleonexia - A Greek term meaning “the desire to have more,” *pleonexia* refers to the yearning after money and power. In Book I, Thrasymachus presents the popular view that justice is nothing more than an unnatural restraint on our natural *pleonexia*.

Producers - Plato divides his just society into three classes: the producers, the auxiliaries, and the guardians. The producing class is the largest class of society; it is a catch-all group that includes all professions other than warrior and ruler. Framers and craftsmen are producers, as are merchants, doctors, artists, actors, lawyers, judges, and so forth. In a just society, the producers have no share in ruling, but merely obey what the rulers decree. They focus exclusively on producing whatever it is that they are best suited to produce (whether that be metal work, agriculture, shoes, or furniture).

Reason - Reason is one aspect of our tripartite soul. It lusts after truth and is the source of all of our philosophic desires. In the just man, the entire soul is ruled by reason, and strives to fulfill reason’s desires. See also Appetite, Spirit.

Sensible particular - Sensible particulars are the objects that we experience all around us—trees, flowers, chairs—any physical objects. They are “sensible” because we can sense them with our sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch; they are “particular,” because they are particular items that undergo change over time, rather than universal, unchanging ideas. According to Plato’s metaphysical picture, the visible realm is made up of sensible particulars. According to his epistemological picture, sensible particulars cannot be objects of knowledge but only of opinion.

Sophist - The Sophists were teachers-for-hire who educated the wealthy men of Athens in the fifth century B.C. Though they were a diverse group with diverse opinions, they tended to share a disregard for the notion of objective truth and knowledge. This disregard extended to the notion of objective moral truth, which means that they did not believe in such a things as “right” and “wrong.” One of the guiding motivations in all of Plato’s work was to prove the Sophists wrong: to show that there is such a thing as objective truth, and that we can have knowledge of this objective truth.

Specialization - The principle of specialization states that every man must fulfill the societal role to which nature best suits him, and should refrain from engaging in any other business. Those naturally suited to farm should farm, those naturally suited to heal should be doctors, those naturally suited to fight should be warriors, those naturally suited to be philosophers should rule, and so on. Plato believes that this simple rule is the guiding principle of society, and the source of political justice.

Spirit - Spirit is one aspect of our tripartite soul. It is the source of our honor-loving and victory-loving desires. Spirit is responsible for our feelings of anger and indignation. In a just soul, spirit acts as henchman to reason, ensuring that appetite adheres to reason's commands.

Thought - Thought is the second highest grade of cognitive activity. As with understanding, the objects of thought are the Forms of the intelligible realm. Unlike understanding, though, thought can only proceed with the crutches of images and hypotheses (i.e. unproven assumptions). See also Belief, Imagination, Understanding.

Tripartite soul - According to Plato, the human soul has three parts corresponding to the three classes of society in a just city. Individual justice consists in maintaining these three parts in the correct power relationships, with reason ruling, spirit aiding reason, and appetite obeying.

Understanding - Understanding is the highest grade of cognitive activity. Understanding involves the use of pure, abstract reason, and does not rely on the crutches of images and unproven assumptions. Understanding is only achieved once the Form of the Good is grasped. See also Belief, Imagination, Thought.

Visible realm - Plato divides existence up into two realms, the visible realm and the intelligible realm. The visible realm can be grasped with our senses. It is comprised of the world we see around us—the world of sensible particulars. The objects which comprise the visible realm are not as real as those which comprise the intelligible realm; in addition, they are not the proper objects of knowledge (i.e., we cannot “know” anything about them), but of opinion.

Justice as the Advantage of the Stronger

In Book I of *The Republic*, Thrasymachus sets up a challenge to justice. Thrasymachus is a Sophist, one of the teachers-for-hire who preached a creed of subjective morality to the wealthy sons of Athens. The Sophists did not believe in objective truth, including objective moral truth. They did not think, in other words, that anything was absolutely “right” or “wrong”; instead they viewed all actions as either advantageous or disadvantageous to the person performing them. If an action was advantageous then they thought you should engage in it, and if it was disadvantageous then they thought that you should refrain. Taking this belief to its logical conclusion, some of them went so far as to claim that law and morality are nothing but mere convention, and that one ought to try to get away with injustice and illegality whenever such action would be to one’s advantage. Plato meant to combat this attitude in *The Republic*.

Thrasymachus introduces the Sophist challenge by remarking that justice is nothing but the advantage of the stronger. He does not mean to define justice with this statement, but to debunk it. His claim proceeds from the basic Sophistic moral notion: that the norms considered just are nothing more than conventions which hamper those who adhere to them, and benefit those who flout them. Those who behave unjustly naturally gain power and become the rulers, the strong people in society. Justice is the advantage of the stronger because when stupid, weak people behave in accordance with justice, they are disadvantaged, and the strong (those who behave unjustly) are advantaged.

An alternate reading of Thrasymachus’s bold statement makes his claim seem slightly more subtle. According to this reading (put forward by C.D.C. Reeve), Thrasymachus is not merely making the usual assertion that the norms of justice are conventions; he claims further that these mores and norms are conventions that were put in place by the rulers (the “stronger”) for the purpose of promoting their own interests. Conceptions of justice, in this reading, are the products of propaganda and tools of oppressors.

Regardless of the interpretation we give to Thrasymachus’ statement, the challenge to Socrates is the same: he must prove that justice is something good and desirable, that it is more than convention, that it is connected to objective standards of morality, and that it is in our interest to adhere to it. His attempt to meet this challenge occupies the rest of *The Republic*.

The Principle of Specialization

Before he can prove that justice is a good thing, Plato must first state what justice is. Instead of defining justice as a set of behavioral norms (as the traditional Greek thinkers did) Plato identifies justice as structural: political justice resides in the structure of the city; individual

justice resides in the structure of the soul. The just structure of the city is summed up by the principle of specialization: each member of society must play the role for which his nature best suits him and not meddle in any other business. A man whose nature suits him to farming must farm and do nothing else; a man whose nature best suits him to building objects out of wood must be a carpenter and not bother with any other sort of work. Plato believes that this is the only way to ensure that each job is done as well as possible.

The principle of specialization keeps the farmer from carpentering, and the carpenter from farming. More important, it keeps both the farmer and the carpenter from becoming warriors and rulers. The principle of specialization separates society into three classes: the class of producers (including farmers, craftsmen, doctors, etc.), the class of warriors, and the class of rulers. Specialization ensures that these classes remain in a fixed relations of power and influence. Rulers control the city, establishing its laws and objectives. Warriors carry out the commands of rulers. Producers stay out of political affairs, only worrying themselves about the business of ruling insofar as they need to obey what the rulers say and the warriors enforce. A city set up in this way, Plato contends, is a just city.

The Tripartite Soul

Just as political justice consists in the structural relations among classes of society, Plato believes, individual justice consists in correct structural relations among parts of the soul. Paralleling the producers, warriors, and rulers in the city, Plato claims that each individual soul has three separate seats of desire and motivation: the appetitive part of our soul lusts after food, drink, sex, and so on (and after money most of all, since money is the means of satisfying the rest of these desires); the spirited part of the soul yearns for honor; the rational part of the soul desires truth and knowledge. In a just soul, these three parts stand in the correct power relations. The rational part must rule, the spirited part must enforce the rational part's convictions, and the appetitive part must obey.

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In the just soul, the desires of the rational, truth-loving part dictate the overall aims of the human being. All appetites and considerations of honor are put at the disposal of truth-loving goals. The just soul strives wholly toward truth. Plato identifies the philosopher (literally "truth lover") as the most just individual, and sets him up as ruler of the just city.

The Sun, the Line, the Cave

Explaining his idea of a philosopher-king, Plato appeals to three successive analogies to spell out the metaphysical and epistemological theories that account for the philosopher's irreplaceable role in politics. The analogy of the sun illuminates the notion of the Form of the Good, the

philosopher-king's ultimate object of desire. The line illustrates the four different grades of cognitive activity of which a human being is capable, the highest of which only the philosopher-kings ever reach. The allegory of the cave demonstrates the effects of education on the human soul, demonstrating how we move from one grade of cognitive activity to the next.

In the allegory of the cave, Plato asks us to imagine the following scenario: A group of people have lived in a deep cave since birth, never seeing any daylight at all. These people are bound in such a way that they cannot look to either side or behind them, but only straight ahead. Behind them is a fire, and behind the fire is a partial wall. On top of the wall are various statues, which are manipulated by another group of people, laying out of sight. Because of the fire, the statues cast shadows on the wall that the prisoners are facing. The prisoners watch the stories that these shadows play out, and because this is all they can ever see, they believe that these shadows are the most real things in the world. When they talk to one another about "men," "women," "trees," "horses," and so on, they refer only to these shadows.

Now he asks us to imagine that one of these prisoners is freed from his bonds, and is able to look at the fire and at the statues themselves. After initial pain and disbelief, he eventually realizes that all these things are more real than the shadows he has always believed to be the most real things; he grasps how the fire and the statues together caused the shadows, which are copies of the real things. He now takes the statues and fire as the most real things in the world.

Next this prisoner is dragged out of the cave into the world above. At first, he is so dazzled by the light in the open that he can only look at shadows, then he is able to look at reflections, then finally at the real objects—real trees, flowers, houses, and other physical objects. He sees that these are even more real than the statues were, and that those objects were only copies of these.

Finally, when the prisoner's eyes have fully adjusted to the brightness, he lifts his sights toward the heavens and looks at the sun. He understands that the sun is the cause of everything he sees around him—of the light, of his capacity for sight, of the existence of flowers, trees, and all other objects.

The stages the prisoner passes through in the allegory of the cave correspond to the various levels on the line. The line, first of all, is broken into two equal halves: the visible realm (which we can grasp with our senses) and the intelligible realm (which we can only grasp with the mind). When the prisoner is in the cave he is in the visible realm. When he ascends into the daylight, he enters the intelligible.

The lowest rung on the cognitive line is imagination. In the cave, this is represented as the prisoner whose feet and head are bound, so that he can only see shadows. What he takes to be the most real things are not real at all; they are shadows, mere images. These shadows are meant to represent images from art. A man who is stuck in the imagination stage of development takes his

truths from epic poetry and theater, or other fictions. He derives his conception of himself and his world from these art forms rather than from looking at the real world.

When the prisoner frees himself and looks at the statues he reaches the next stage in the line: belief. The statues are meant to correspond to the real objects of our sensation—real people, trees, flowers, and so on. The man in the cognitive stage of belief mistakenly takes these sensible particulars as the most real things.

When he ascends into the world above, though, he sees that there is something even more real: the Forms, of which the sensible particulars are imperfect copies. He is now at the stage of thought in his cognition. He can reason about Forms, but not in a purely abstract way. He uses images and unproven assumptions as crutches.

Finally, he turns his sights to the sun, which represents the ultimate Form, the Form of the Good. The Form of the Good is the cause of all other Forms, and is the source of all goodness, truth, and beauty in the world. It is the ultimate object of knowledge. Once the prisoner has grasped the Form of the Good, he has reached the highest stage of cognition: understanding. He no longer has any need for images or unproven assumptions to aid in his reasoning. By reaching the Form of the Good, he hits on the first principle of philosophy which explains everything without the need of any assumptions or images. He can now use this understanding derived from comprehending the Form of the Good to transform all his previous thought into understanding—he can understand all of the Forms. Only the philosopher can reach this stage, and that is why only he is fit to rule.

Plato is unable to provide direct detail about the Form of the Good, and instead illustrates his idea by comparing it to the sun. The Form of the Good is to the intelligible realm, he claims, as the sun is the visible realm. (In the metaphor, the fire in the cave represents the sun.) First of all, just as the sun provides light and visibility in the visible realm, the Form of the Good is the source of intelligibility. The sun makes sight possible, and, similarly, the Form of the Good is responsible for our capacity for knowledge. The sun causes things to come to be in the visible world; it regulates the seasons, makes flowers bloom, influences animals to give birth and so on. The Form of the Good is responsible for the existence of Forms, for their coming to be in the intelligible world.

Why It Pays to Be Just

One of Plato's objectives in *The Republic* was to show that justice is worthwhile—that just action is a good in itself, and that one ought to engage in just activity even when it doesn't seem to confer immediate advantage. Once he has completed his portrait of the most just man—the philosopher-king—he is in a position to fulfill this aim. In Book IX, Plato presents three arguments for the claim that it pays to be just. First, by sketching a psychological portrait of the tyrant, he attempts to prove that injustice takes such a wretched toll on a man's psyche that it

could not possibly be worth it (whereas a just soul is untroubled and calm). Next, he argues that, though each of the three main character types (money-loving, honor-loving, and truth-loving) have their own conceptions of pleasure and of the corresponding good life (each choosing his own life as the most pleasant sort), only the philosopher is in the position to judge since only he is capable of experiencing all three types of pleasure. Finally, he tries to demonstrate that only philosophical pleasure is really pleasure at all; all other pleasure is only cessation from pain.

In all likelihood, Plato did not consider any of these to be the primary source of justice's worth. Plato's goal was to prove that justice is worthwhile *independent* of the advantages it confers, so for him to argue that the worth of justice lies in the enormous pleasure it produces is beside his point. To say that we should be just because it will make our life more pleasant, after all, is just to say that we should be just because it is to our advantage to do so. Instead, we should expect to find him arguing that the worth of justice lies in some other source, preferably having something to do with objective goodness. This is why many philosophers, from Plato's student Aristotle down to modern scholar Richard Kraut, believe that Plato's real argument for the worth of justice takes place long before Book IX. They think, plausibly, that Plato locates the worth of justice in justice's connection to the Forms, which he holds to be the most good things in the world. Justice is worthwhile, on this interpretation, not because of any advantage it confers, but because it involves grasping the Form of the Good and imitating it. The just man tries to imitate the Forms by making his own soul as orderly and harmonious as the Forms themselves.