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PLATO
REPUBLIC

Joe Sachs

PLATO

Republic

Translation, Glossary,
and Introductory Essay

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with an Afterword by John White

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CONTENTS

Introduction 1
The *Republic*..17
Book I (327A-354C)..17
Book II (357A-383C) 49
Book III (386A-417B) 77
Book IV (419A-445E) 112
Book V (449A-480A).. 122
Book VI (484A-511E) 179
Book VII (514A-541B)..210
Book VIII (543A-569C).. 240
Book IX (571A-592B) 269
Book X (595A-621D) 294
Afterword (*Imitation*, by John White)................................323
Glossary 347
Index 353

INTRODUCTION

If a large random group of people were asked to name an important work of philosophy, the answer given most often would probably be Plato's *Republic*. Why it merits such distinction is something fewer people might venture to say. Those whose acquaintance with the book is primarily second-hand, guided by a lecturer or by books about it, could be excused for being puzzled about its enduring power. It is said to be a portrait of an "ideal state," but one that no actual government has ever tried to put into practice, and it is said to contain a statement of a famous philosophic "theory," but one it would be hard to find anyone who believed in. What, then, makes it more than a strange relic of obsolete thinking? The answer is easily found by anyone who ignores the masses of learned explanations that surround the *Republic*, and simply plunges into reading it. There has rarely been a book that so successfully grabs a reader and stirs spirited responses.

A number of philosophers over the centuries have written dialogues. That means, in most cases, that they have written arguments and counterarguments, and put them in the mouths of imaginary speakers. Plato went about it the opposite way. He wrote imagined conversations among people whom, for the most part, he knew, and made those conversations rise to the level of philosophic discussion. Plato did not treat philosophy as something that could be delivered or presented or even imitated in a written work. He knew that there is no way to encounter philosophy except from the inside, and he wrote with the purpose of stimulating, provoking, and inspiring the experience of it. He himself had been strongly affected by listening to the conversations Socrates used to have in public, and he made Socrates the primary speaker in most of his dialogues. Even in those dialogues in which Socrates is not present, or says little, a Platonic dialogue is always an imitation of Socrates. Plato made the things he wrote as substitute encounters with Socrates: not depictions of such encounters for us to watch, but evocations of them for us to experience. So great can be the power of imitative fiction that Plato successfully sets in motion philosophic activity every time a reader gives him the slightest chance.

A chance to respond to Plato's imitation of Socrates does not depend on being favorably disposed to their words in advance, or even on approaching the dialogues with an open mind. Since the dialogues teach no doctrine, an antagonistic response is as effective as any other kind in making a reader a more active thinker. Within the *Republic*, Socrates is challenged in Book I by a hostile and angry opponent, and then again in Book II by two friendly but determined young men who think he hasn't given that opponent anything like an adequate answer. All three, and a few other characters who get hooked along the way, have one thing in common: they all put aside everything else they intended to do for many hours, and become absorbed in a conversation about philosophic topics and about philosophy itself. The only person present who is immune to it all is a very old man, intent on preparations for his death. The rest of the characters in the dialogue are a lot like us, a diverse array of people who pick up the *Republic*, and for one reason or another can't put it down.

The *Republic* depicts people with different interests and desires being brought together into a shared activity freely chosen by each; this is a reflection not only of our situation as readers of it, but also of its primary theme. The dramatic situation in a Platonic dialogue is never mere literary ornamentation for a set of arguments, but always in some way shows the reader the way to an answer to the question discussed in it. The question that sets in motion the whole discussion in the *Republic* is, what is justice? That question receives a succession of formal answers, but none of them reveals as much about what justice is as does the human interaction we witness. In the dialogue, one person pressures a second person into joining him and his friends to help them kill a little time, a third person leaves the gathering to pursue his own business, a fourth person tries to break up the discussion as soon as it begins to get somewhere, and a fifth and sixth person insist on imposing their concerns on the group, but with the adroit management of the situation by one of their number, they become a harmonious partnership in an extended activity that in some way satisfies them all. If we can say what makes the *Republic* possible as a living event, an understanding of what justice is cannot be far away.

The one adroit member of the group who manages to pull them all together is of course Socrates. The *Republic* is one of Plato's longest dialogues, and it is in some ways all Socrates. Every word of it is given to us through Socrates' narration, and no other dialogue is so packed with his opinions, his imagination, and his ways of looking at things. At the same time, though, no dialogue so emphatically presents a partnership in learning. Most dialogues of Plato resemble one or more aspects of Book I of the *Republic*, in which someone is brought to realize he understands less than he thought he did, someone else is provoked to anger, a few others begin to be curious, and the end comes with a question sharpened and unresolved. In the *Republic*, we are given three more books in which a couple of intelligent listeners initiate a dialogue about the original dialogue, and then six more books in which all those still present commit themselves to remain involved, and state a consensus about how the discussion should proceed. The beginning of Book V is presented as something

PLATO
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BOOK I

327A–328C Meeting of Socrates and Polemarchus
328C–331D Conversation of Socrates and Cephalus
331D–336A Conversation of Socrates and Polemarchus
336B–347A Conversation of Socrates and Thrasymachus
347A–348B Interlude between Socrates and Glaucon
348B–354C Resumed Conversation of Socrates and Thrasymachus

Note

The only speaker in the dialogue is Socrates. He begins recounting a conversation he had on the occasion of a foreign religious festival that took place just outside Athens. Between the day and night portions of the festivities, a group of young men latches on to Socrates, who could be expected to provide entertaining talk. Polemarchus takes the group to his house, where they meet his father Cephalus, a very old man preoccupied with making amends before his death for any injustices in his life. Socrates asks him what he understands justice to be, and begins to examine the implications of his answer, when Cephalus excuses himself to tend to the practical side of those concerns, leaving his son to discuss them. Before long, Thrasymachus explodes into the conversation. He is a traveling professional teacher, and his antipathy to Socrates might involve some feeling of rivalry, but he has a palpable disgust with any intelligent adult who can entertain the possibility that justice might be in his own interest. It is obvious to Thrasymachus that human life is a competition in which those who are more unjust succeed more, and those who are most unjust can achieve the ultimate in happiness by becoming tyrants. Socrates finds a starting point for an exchange between them in Thrasymachus's pride in his intelligence, and raises the question whether the just or the unjust have a greater resemblance to people skilled in practical arts. By the end of Book I, Thrasymachus has been compelled to back down from some of his certainties,

but nothing seems to have been resolved. But the conversation has stirred up questions in two of the younger men, Glaucon and Adeimantus, who happen to be brothers of Plato, and those questions will lead to an inquiry lasting for nine more books.

327A **Socrates:** I went down yesterday to Piraeus[1] with Glaucon, Ariston's son, to pray to the goddess, wanting at the same time also to see the way they were going to hold the festival, since they were now conducting it for the first time. The parade of the local residents seemed to me to be beautiful, while the one that the Thracians put B on looked no less appropriate. And having prayed and having seen, we went off toward the city. Spotting us from a distance then as we headed home, Polemarchus, Cephalus's son, ordered his slave to run and order us to wait for him. And grabbing me from behind by my cloak, the slave said "Polemarchus orders you to wait." And I turned around and asked him where the man himself was. "He's coming along from behind," he said. "Just wait." "Certainly we'll wait" said Glaucon.

C And a little later Polemarchus came, and also Adeimantus, Glaucon's brother, and Niceratus, Nicias's son, and some others, apparently from the parade.

Then Polemarchus said "Socrates, you folks seem to me to be heading toward the city as though you're going away."

"That's not bad seeming," I said.

"Do you see us," he said, "how many of us there are?"

"How could I not?"

"Then either get stronger than they are," he said, "or stay right here."

"But isn't something still left," I said, "that we persuade you that you ought to let us go?"

"And do you have the power," he said, "to persuade people who don't listen?"

"Not at all," said Glaucon.

"Then consider us people who aren't going to listen."

328A And Adeimantus said "Don't you know that there will be a torch race at nightfall on horses for the goddess?"

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1 The port of Athens, some distance from the main city, was called, then as now, *the* Piraeus. Socrates' omission of the article is unusual. Eva Brann (in *The Music of the Republic*, Paul Dry Books, 2004, pp. 117-118) argues that it suggests a journey to the Land Beyond, a place of the dead (or at least shades and shadows), an image that fits in with the descent conjured up by the dialogue's beginning. The port area was a place of commerce, where resident alien merchants like Cephalus (a native of Syracuse in Sicily) could live and where foreign religious practices could be imported. It was legendary in antiquity that Plato had lavished great care on the composition of this first sentence.

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Joe Sachs, known and respected for his excellent translations of Aristotle, deserves great praise for this new translation of Plato's *Republic*. Based on the latest definitive edition of the Greek text and guided by a sense that Greek in English need not read like an old, foreign tongue, Sachs' translation captures the flow of the conversation in an English that reads smoothly, even when the ideas expressed force one to pause and look again. Fluid, yet accurate, Sachs' translation allows the thoughtful reader deeper entry into this all-important book. The editorial guides and typographical signs to remind the reader of who has joined the argument most recently are all highly helpful and most welcome. I look forward to reading this with students.

Charles E. Butterworth
University of Maryland

Joe Sachs taught for thirty years at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. He has translated Aristotle's *Physics, Metaphysics* and *On the Soul* and, for the Focus Philosophical Library, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Poetics* as well as Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Republic*.

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