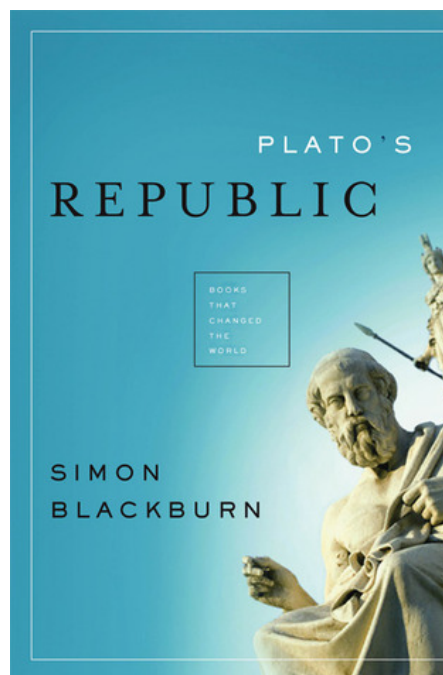




Plato's Republic

Simon Blackburn

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Plato is perhaps the most significant philosopher who has ever lived and *The Republic*, composed in Athens in about 375 BC, is widely regarded as his most famous dialogue. Its discussion of the perfect city — and the perfect mind — laid the foundations for Western culture and, for over two thousand years, has been the cornerstone of Western philosophy. As the distinguished Cambridge professor Simon Blackburn points out, it has probably sustained more commentary, and been subject to more radical and impassioned disagreement, than almost any other of the great founding texts of the modern world. In *Plato's Republic*, Blackburn explains the judicial, moral and political ideas in the Republic with dazzling insight and clarity. Blackburn also examines *Republic's* remarkable influence and unquestioned staying power, and shows why, from St. Augustine to twentieth century philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Henri Bergson, Western thought is still conditioned by this most important, and contemporary, of books.

Plato's Republic Details

Date : Published June 10th 2007 by Atlantic Monthly Press (first published 2006)

ISBN : 9780871139573

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Format : Hardcover 192 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Nonfiction, Classics, History, Politics, Criticism, Law, Political Science, Literature, Academic

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From Reader Review Plato's Republic for online ebook

Gareth says

Blackburn is a very readable philosopher - not a common thing. This book is very enjoyable and Blackburn does a great job of picking out the main points of interest in Plato's masterpiece and discussing them in an intelligent and easy style. However, it seems fair to say, he isn't particularly sympathetic to Plato, and this occasionally leads him into uncharitable readings, I think (e.g. the accusation that Plato denied the possibility of social mobility in his ideal society). Also, the book is less historically informative than other books in this series (e.g. Janet Browne's excellent book on Darwin's Origin of Species). However, highly recommended.

Charlie says

hmmmmm.....

Having just read the Republic I read this hoping to gain a clearer but deeper understanding of the it. I rarely read secondary texts and went in with fairly high expectations, thinking that clarifying and expanding was kind of the point of secondary texts.

But this book seemed to be aimed at doing two other things: it seemed to want to point out how wrong Plato's conception of just about everything is, and also to offer a lighter alternative for people that didn't want to read the Republic itself. Not only do I think that these two approaches seem to be at odds with each other, but I urge anyone who is interested in the Republic to at least read the sun, divided line and cave bits of the Republic: they are well written, short, really bloody famous and give a very good meditation on the nature of a priori truths and their relation to epistemology.

A lot of the time I felt that Blackburn was reluctant to get into the very philosophical parts of Plato, preferring a lot of the time to modernise the arguments and then deal with these modern versions. I also felt at times that Blackburn was lazily dismissive of Plato appealing to a supposedly enlightened common sense to a degree that was at times Moorian. However there is an over arching thesis to this book that I think is quite impressive in which he points out the inconsistency of - again modern - Platonists. In one example he shows how at times Platonists will play down a lot of the dodgy political theories by defending that they are only their to represent their ethical counter parts, but it could hardly be expected that we should read the Republic with no political message at all.

overall I think Blackburn spends too much time pointing out obvious bad arguments in the and doesn't spend enough time playing with the much more tricky but much more thought provoking truths at the heart of the Republic.

Incidentally the translator's introduction by Desmond Lee in the Penguin edition managed to achieve a great deal of what I was hoping Blackburn would, and also I think gives a much more two sided, fair handling of the beardy old sage and his charming barmy book.

James says

While I have read and discussed many of the dialogues of Plato, some of them multiple times, I continue to

explore differing presentations and critiques of his ideas. Simon Blackburn's short study of Plato's Republic is an excellent place to review one of Plato's most famous dialogues and learn from him. He presents The Republic in a topical manner with sixteen chapters that range from a discussion of custom and convention to a brief essay on "The Farewell Myth". The latter, the Myth of Er from Book X, was a text used prominently in a memorial service for one of my teachers at the University of Chicago more than two decades ago. Its power is demonstrated in the vivid memory of not only my own reading but the memory of that memorial. With emphasis on both the best known passages like "The Ring of Gyges" and the "Myth of the Cave", but also less well-known sections of the ten books that comprise The Republic, Simon Blackburn makes a thorough overview in this small, 161 page, book. With the addition of valuable suggestions for further reading this is both a good starting point for those unfamiliar with Plato or an excellent review for old hands in the reading and study of this founding father of Philosophy.

Molly says

Audio!

So... I couldn't get through this. I don't know if it's because it wasn't actually The Republic, but a guy talking about Plato's Republic, or because it was just not a good driving book. Snooze-alert.

It's probably well-written- there are some good turns of phrase ("what is religion but fossilized philosophy?") and the makings of good analysis, but just not for me.

Xan Shadowflutter says

A Classic. Leave it to Plato to take something to an extreme. But with Plato it's the discussion that's rewarding and provocative, and not the answer, which with Plato is sometimes left to the reader to figure out. It is interesting that Plato believes women are the intellectual equal to men, while Aristotle would prefer they were barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen (if they had kitchens back then).

Dave Redford says

Some very useful insights, but felt the author could be a little too harsh at times, interpreting Plato too much at face value and from a strictly materialistic point of view, in the manner of Bertrand Russell. There were some mistakes in my view too, such as Blackburn's assertion that Plato proposed a caste system. This would imply that there was no movement within the tripartite system from one class to another, whereas Plato specifically says that bronze or silver-souled parents could give birth to a gold-souled child. Likewise, gold-souled parents could give birth to silver or bronze-souled children. In any case, Blackburn falls too readily for the idea that Plato is putting forward a blueprint for a utopian society, rather than provoking the reader into thinking for himself / herself.

Thomas says

Blackburn is up front about his distaste for The Republic, so the editors of this series are the ones to blame

for asking him to write it. It isn't so much a "biography" as a collection of critical opinions, all of which are justified to some extent but leave the reader wondering what the point of such a collection can be. There are some interesting historical tidbits scattered throughout the book, but overall not much enlightenment. On the positive side, Blackburn is an amusing writer and doesn't take himself too seriously.

C. Varn says

The Republic is an fascinating and enigmatic book--in many ways, its influence of "Western" philosophy is almost strange given its esoteric calculations, anti-democratic sentiment, obvious theological assumptions, and a mathematical logic that is purely geometric being applied to political and social ideas. Blackburn goes through the various arguments around the book both represented within the dialogues themselves as in the later reception of parts of the Republic in European and North American culture. Blackburn gives three solid interpretations of the allegory of the cave, talks about some of the flaws in Socrates' dialectic reasoning, and some interesting interpretations of Plato's moral framework.

Blackburn is not overly academic and shows his biases; however, for a deep insight into either the Republic or its reception history, I think you have to dig deeper than Blackburn does. An enjoyable book that serves its function, but only as a taste.

Nikki McGee says

One of the most readable and accessible introductions to Plato I have read in a long time. Whilst Blackburn is a Plato critic I think that he is a fair one and he is open about his stance from the beginning of the book. His use of modern day examples makes Plato come alive and seem particularly relevant to today. I have found in the past that commentaries on Plato make you feel relieved that you do not have to read the original, in this case I feel inspired to return to the original texts.

I have recommended this to some of my A Level students, particularly the chapters on the cave and belief and knowledge which are particularly easy to read.

Nick says

I found this work on Plato's most renowned dialogue a very good analysis of The Republic. Simon Blackburn, a Professor of philosophy at the University of Cambridge, walked me through the 10 chapters, moving boldly, pointing out aspects of essence and succeeding to keep my interest fully alive. I am not terribly fond of intricate philosophy myself, so - aside from his analysis/insights - I appreciated his style (direct) and clarity.

Andy Green says

Overall disappointed with the book - it did help me better see the structure of Plato's Republic, but the book seemed quickly put together (the vibe was kind of: "I'm a famous current philosopher so they asked me to write a book on the Republic, and I didn't really want to, but I went ahead and did it because they're paying

me."). His heart didn't seem to be in it.

Also, the frequent put-downs of George Bush and American "neo-conservatives" were an unnecessary distraction.

The introduction was the best part.

Leanna Pohevitz says

It was a decent interpretation but relied heavily on the author's personal views. It makes me want to read the Republic again, just to see if now with Simon Blackburn's thoughts in mind I will feel differently about the work as a whole.

David says

Meh. I have no idea why the Atlantic Monthly Press would publish this. He starts out by saying he wasn't really enthusiastic about the project, then over the next 150 pages he does nothing to convince me otherwise. I picked this up because the title followed Jack Miles' excellent God: A Biography, but aside from a few pages in Chapter 11, this didn't really deliver.

Trevor says

I bumped into a friend at Readings in Carlton a week or so ago and she was holding this – there was a stack of them on their cheap table and my mate George had read it when it came out and had recommended it, so I picked it up to read on the tram ride home. At the time I was planning to do my final English assignment on something to do with Plato's Cave and so it made sense to grab this. The book was okay, but not as good as I had hoped.

I have mixed feelings about Plato, particularly the Plato who wrote this particular little book that changed the world. He believes in castes and distrusts democracy. He doesn't like artists (particularly poets) and would have them escorted away from the ideal society. He believes that rulers should lie to their subjects (their subjects being a bit daft and better off being treated like children) and he anticipated all of the 'life rejecting' (as Nietzsche would have it) aspects of Christianity by about 300 years.

On the other hand, he does cover a hell of a lot of ground in the Republic and some of the ideas here are remarkably powerful. The central idea is that knowledge and the good are the same thing. This is an idea that has a very strong appeal and despite the reticence this author has in accepting it (and I have to admit that I have as well) it is a bit like Keats' – "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" – that is all / Ye know on Earth and all Ye need to know'. – Even though we actually know this isn't all we need to know, it is hard not to be attracted to a world in which this would be all we need to know.

It is a very long time since I read the Republic. In fact, it is probably 15-20 years. I have misremembered a lot of it. I had thought that the Allegory of the Cave was in the last book, when in fact it is closer to the middle. I mention this because I thought (and have told people) that I struggled all the way through the book when I read it and wanted to give up, but was rewarded by finally getting to read the Cave – when, in fact, this memory is completely wrong (despite how clear it has been). I'm always surprised when my memory plays tricks like this on me – it is a very uncomfortable feeling.

There is a lot of the Republic that makes no sense at all – all the strange calculations, for instance, about how much better a Philosopher King is when compared to a Dictator (that would be 729 times better, according to Plato) and his calculations on to how long the ideal society could be expected to last – I can't remember how long this would be, but yonks. I remember while I was reading it thinking all this was terribly strange so I was glad to read this book telling me the author also found the calculations completely incomprehensible.

The points made about democracy are a bit disturbing. Plato and I would not agree on this at all, as I do think democracy is the best political system on offer and that what we need is more democracy, not less. However, I do see the point that democracy can mean appealing to the basest instincts of people. There is a disturbing quote on this point: "A world in which democratic leaders like to spend their energy on facelifts, cosmetics and suntans while simultaneously mourning for lost respect would have held no surprises for Plato." Hmm - Silvio Berlusconi, anyone?

This book gives three interpretations of the Cave Allegory: a religious, poetic and scientific interpretation. These are interesting in themselves and show how Plato's cave is a bit like a mirror, where people can look in and see pretty much themselves reflected back at them. To me the allegory has always been about education. The first line of book seven directs the reader's attention to the idea of education, although in reading it again recently I was also surprised at how vague this reference was too. What I've always found striking is how alienating and painful Plato feels education can be. Plato makes this point repeatedly in his description of the journey both out of the cave and back into the cave. It is a journey of pain, alienation and finally death. That one must always return after education to the world one has left is also a remarkably potent idea that Plato makes very plain.

Why is this important? To me I think people tend to think education is always and in all circumstances a positive boon for those receiving an education. I think it is important to note that sometimes having the scales lifted from one's eyes makes others see us quite differently too. When I was teaching adult literacy a number of years ago I read that many people who finally learnt to read found that they ended up no longer married. Their partners suddenly felt that they had no further role in the relationship. I have also heard of people who stopped attending classes so as to avoid just such an outcome. I have also been told that women starting a degree later in life tend to end up separated at some stage over the time it takes to gain their degree. Education changes lives, but sometimes we have no idea just what changes will be wrought.

If I had more time I would read all of Plato's dialogues – and one day I am determined to – Socrates is a great hero of mine, even if he says some remarkably silly things at times. This was an interesting little book, although not really what I was expecting.

G. Branden says

I enjoyed Simon Blackburn's approach here, which was primarily a critical review of *Republic* as a work of philosophy and secondarily a historical review of the uses to which Plato's most notorious monument has

been put. Notably, Blackburn regards himself in the front matter as an inauspicious choice to write the title, as he is not a specialist in Plato nor in history. He is, however, a working philosopher of some accomplishment, and while some of Plato's prescriptions get a bit esoteric, the questions he explores do not, and occupy philosophers to this day. Consequently Blackburn is well-trained and equipped to grapple with them.

It's been over 20 years since I've wrestled with Plato*, with what seemed like most of a semester dedicated to the Republic in particular, and I found Blackburn's book far easier to chew than its subject. Much of this fact arises no doubt from his unabashed friendliness to science and (vaguely) Left politics. But it is also the case that humans have made some progress over the past 2000 years in pondering the issues that Plato worked so hard to dispose of.

As an idealist, most importantly in the metaphysical and epistemological senses, Plato joins his fellows in being reluctant to admit that any work remains after him to be done. Despite his confidence in the immortality of the soul and the ability of that soul to see things as they truly are in the world of Forms when it rejoins that empyreal realm, Plato seemed to be in an awful hurry to suggest himself a prototypical philosopher-king, one sufficiently virtuous to have no need of the elaborate social scaffolding he otherwise regarded as mandatory to product such people.

Ultimately, and with humility, Blackburn lets Plato off the hook, perhaps because he sees the value of philosophy, like science as resting in its method and process rather than in its findings.

Unlike, perhaps, the poor, we will always have Polemarchus and Cephalon alongside us on our perpetual slog to the City, and we will always be beset by Thrasymachus, who interrupts our journey to ask, while smacking gum or fiddling with a switch blade, why he shouldn't just kill us here an now.

Blackburn's interpretation of Plato's project is one of patient tolerance for the unreflective, and eternal hostility to the aggressor, and be it part shadow and part substance, he in the end finds Plato's doggedness worthy of emulation, even if the grumpy old man's improvisatory skills were, ultimately, lacking.

* "What you do in your own time, Padre, is written on the wall in the vestry."
