

Plato's *Republic* Notes

Plato's *Republic*, Book I, sets the stage for the entire work by introducing the central question of **what justice is and why it is good.**

The opening scene in the Piraeus

The book begins with Socrates and his companion Glaucon on their way back to Athens from the Piraeus, the city's port. They are intercepted and persuaded to stay by Polemarchus and his friends, including the elderly Cephalus. The setting is significant, as the Piraeus represents the world of practical affairs, which Socrates is "descending" into, a symbol later elaborated in the "Allegory of the Cave."

Conventional definitions of justice are swept away

The conversation begins with Cephalus, an old and wealthy man, who offers a traditional definition of justice: **"paying one's debts and telling the truth."**

Socrates's refutation: Socrates exposes a flaw in this definition by providing a counterexample. He asks if it would be just to return a weapon to a friend who has gone mad. Cephalus agrees that it would not be, because it would cause harm. With his definition of justice undone, Cephalus excuses himself to attend to a sacrifice.

Polemarchus, Cephalus's son, then picks up the argument, citing the poet Simonides.

Polemarchus's definition: **He suggests that justice is "giving to each what is owed to them," which he interprets as "doing good to friends and harm to enemies."**

Socrates's refutation: Socrates raises several objections:

- People can be mistaken about who is their friend or enemy.
- Harming a person makes them worse, and harming people is not the function of a just person.

Socrates concludes that justice cannot involve harming anyone.

Thrasymachus (name means "bold battle," "war maker") abruptly breaks in with radical challenge. Notice he's angry at Socrates's **method** of merely questioning others without offering his own answer.

Plato the writer seems to be telling us something about the right and wrong ways to have a philosophical dialogue. Compare to *Euthyphro*. Notice that Thrasymachus wants to make speeches instead of doing dialectic.

Thrasymachus's definition of justice: **"justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger."** He argues that every ruling power establishes laws to serve its own interest and then defines those laws as "just."

Socrates's refutation: Socrates challenges this definition by pointing out that rulers can be mistaken about what is truly to their advantage. If the ruler makes an error and passes a law that is not to their advantage, is it still “just” to obey it? This forces Thrasymachus into a corner.

Thrasymachus revision: **He clarifies his position, asserting that a true ruler, by definition, never makes mistakes. A ruler is like an expert practitioner of a craft (e.g., a doctor), and a craftsman never errs in their craft.**

There's confusion about translation here: *techné* (art / skill) and *areté* (some ambiguity: virtue, excellence...but with moral goodness and beauty implied), and *dikaíosuné* (justice or “doing right,” there's less of a legal connotation. It can mean “observant to duty” which sounds like deontology. It also means wise and good). Similarly, *adikia* can mean both unjust and wrong. *Kakia* = strong opposite of *areté*. *Epistémé* means to have technical knowledge. *Psuché* = mind.

Socrates gives three counterarguments based on *techné*:

1. **The craft analogy:** Socrates argues that every craft, including the art of ruling, exists to benefit its weaker subjects, not the practitioner. For example, a doctor's purpose is to benefit the patient, not themselves. Therefore, a just ruler should govern for the benefit of the people they rule.
2. **Justice and wisdom:** Socrates suggests that injustice is a form of ignorance, while justice is a form of wisdom. He argues that the just man, like a wise mathematician, does not seek to outdo or compete with other just men, but the unjust man tries to outdo everyone. This suggests that the unjust person is ignorant of what is truly good.
3. **The function argument:** Socrates argues that everything has a function, and its virtue is what allows it to perform that function well. He posits that the soul has a function (life and rule), and its virtue is justice. An unjust soul, therefore, cannot function properly and is wretched, while a just soul is happy.

There's some discussion about payment for rulers. Good men don't want to lead.

Book I conclusion

Despite offering his own counterarguments, Socrates ends Book I by admitting that he has only succeeded in showing what justice is not, and why it is better than injustice. He acknowledges that he still doesn't know what justice is. This concludes the first part of the dialogue, which serves to destroy the conventional notions of justice and prepare the ground for a more substantial and complex investigation in the books that follow.

Is Thrasymachus a Straw Man?

Notice how Socrates keeps bringing up the theme of **care. Arguments must be earnest.**

Book Two

Opens with Glaucon and Adeimantus pressing Socrates to prove that justice is desirable for **its own sake (in itself)**, rather than merely for its consequences. Socrates responds by proposing to examine justice in a city first, believing it will be easier to find on a larger scale before applying the principles to an individual. This is a kind of deductive move in reasoning: general to specific.

This leads to the discussion of founding of a city in speech and an extensive discussion on the proper education of its rulers.

Plato's older brothers challenge Socrates

Glaucon begins the discussion by separating good things into three categories:

1. Good for its own sake (like harmless pleasures).
2. Good for its own sake and for its consequences (like health or knowledge). Socrates and his companions believe justice belongs in this category.
3. Good only for its consequences (like physical training or medicine, which can be unpleasant but lead to a good result). Most people, Glaucon argues, believe justice falls into this third, lesser category.

To prove his point, Glaucon makes the following arguments:

Justice as a social contract: He asserts that people agree to be just only because they are afraid of suffering injustice. By making laws, they enter into a compromise between the best-case scenario (doing injustice without consequence) and the worst-case scenario (suffering injustice without recourse).

This kind of thinking later becomes very influential during the early modern period, especially in England with Thomas More, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke. In Philosophy, Moral Philosophy deal with Politics.

The Ring of Gyges: Glaucon tells the story of a shepherd who finds a ring that makes him invisible. He uses his newfound power to seduce the queen, murder the king, and take over the kingdom. Glaucon claims that both a just and an unjust person would do the same if they had this power, proving that people only act justly out of fear of punishment.

The unjust man's superior life: He describes a perfectly unjust man who enjoys all the rewards of a good reputation while secretly indulging his desires. He contrasts this with a perfectly just man who is scorned and tortured but remains virtuous. Glaucon's portrayal suggests that the life of the unjust man is more pleasant and successful.

Adeimantus, Glaucon's brother, adds to the challenge by noting that parents and poets often praise **justice only for the rewards it brings** (ethical egoism, utilitarianism), such as money and good reputation. They present an incomplete picture, suggesting that the gods can be appeased with sacrifices and prayers, even by unjust people.

Building the ideal city

To answer this challenge, Socrates proposes to build a city from the ground up to see where justice and injustice first appear. He describes two versions of a city:

The “healthy” city: Socrates initially describes a modest city focused on meeting basic needs like food, housing, and clothing. Citizens specialize in one craft for efficiency. Glaucon scoffs at this simple way of life, calling it a “city of pigs.” **This is the civilization argument.**

The “luxurious” or “fevered” city: As a compromise, Socrates adds luxury goods, servants, artists, and other refinements. This expansion means the city will need more land and will be forced into war, thus requiring a new class of professional soldiers, or “guardians,” who need special education.

The education of the guardians

This new warrior class requires special training and moral education to be both fierce with enemies and gentle with fellow citizens, like a well-bred guard dog. This leads to a discussion of the proper education for the guardians, which Socrates insists must be carefully controlled:

Censorship of poetry: Socrates argues that the stories told to children, particularly the myths of Homer and Hesiod, must be heavily censored. He claims they often depict the gods as immoral, dishonest, and quarrelsome.

Theology in the city: To prevent children from being corrupted by bad examples, Socrates lays down two laws for storytelling:

- The gods must always be presented as good and as the cause of only good things.
- The gods cannot be shown as liars or shape-shifters, as this promotes deception and disrespect for the truth.

Book 3

Details the education of the city's future guardians and establishes the foundational “Noble Lie” (bad translation) that will unify the city's social structure. Socrates describes the strict censorship of poetry and music, outlines the guardians' physical and moral training, and introduces the **tripartite social hierarchy**.

Returning to education of the guardians, Socrates specifies the intellectual and physical training for the guardians, the warrior class that protects the city.

Censorship of literature: Socrates continues the censorship discussed at the end of Book 2, arguing that children's minds must be protected from potentially harmful narratives.

Elimination of fear: Stories portraying the afterlife as frightening or death as a terrible fate are banned to ensure the guardians are not cowardly and fear slavery more than death.

Exclusion of lamentation: Passages depicting gods or heroes weeping and mourning are removed so that guardians learn courage and self-control.

Regulation of divine portrayal: The gods must always be shown as truthful, benevolent, and without vice. Any myths portraying the gods as deceitful, capricious, or engaging in immoral acts are censored.

Restriction of poetic style: Socrates argues that imitation (mimesis) is dangerous for the guardians, as they should only be imitating virtuous and good behavior.

Simple narratives: Poetic forms involving complex imitation, such as drama where the poet adopts many different personas, are forbidden. This reinforces the principle of specialization, where each person performs only one job.

Regulation of music: Harmonies and rhythms are also regulated. Only simple, orderly, and moderate musical modes are allowed to foster temperance and courage.

Physical training: Guardians' physical training should be simple and aimed at preparing them for war, not for athletic competition. They must maintain a moderate diet and lifestyle, free from excess.

Medical standards: Socrates proposes that doctors should only treat those with simple, curable ailments. Those who are chronically ill or mentally incurable should not be treated, as they are of no use to the city.

The social structure and the Noble Lie

To maintain the social order, Socrates introduces the “Noble Lie,” or the “Myth of the Metals,” which is told to all citizens of the city.

Myth of the Earth: The myth states that all citizens were formed within the earth, making them all brothers. This instills a sense of loyalty to the city itself, which they should protect as their mother.

Myth of the Metals: The gods are said to have mixed a metal into each citizen's soul while they were being formed.

Gold: Those with gold in their souls are the best suited to be rulers.

Silver: Those with silver in their souls are suited to be auxiliaries, or soldiers.

Iron and Bronze: Those with iron and bronze in their souls are suited for farming and other crafts.

Meritocracy: The myth includes the rule that if a child is born with a different metal in their soul than their parents, they should be moved to the appropriate social class. This creates a system of meritocracy based on inborn nature, not heredity.

Guardians' conditions: The guardians are not permitted to own private property or handle gold or silver. They must live communally and be provided for by the city to prevent them from becoming corrupt and self-interested.

Book 4

Finishes with building the city and moves onto the individual

Education is everything. If we cannot see it now, it's because we don't live in the ideal state.

Gods' rites must be left up to Apollo and the Delphic Oracle

For individuals, there are four qualities: wisdom, courage, self-discipline, and justice

Wisdom: implies good judgment, and good judgment is a form of knowledge. While there are many kinds of knowledge in the state, wisdom and good judgment is the kind of knowledge guardians possess. They are the smallest class and have authority.

Courage: Courage is a kind of safe-keeping, and that is best expressed by the auxiliaries / military.

Self-discipline: This involves "being master of oneself." This means to be both master and servant in oneself. We have two qualities: a "better and worse" element in each personality.

The greatest number of desires is to be held in "women, and children, and slaves" and in "free men." The producing class will contain the most diverse desires because most of the people are there.

People in the state must agree to its order. Self-discipline must stretch out across the whole society, not just in small sectors.

At this point, Socrates doesn't say how we are to instill self-discipline to the producers.

He uses the hunting analogy.

1. Socrates attaches justice to the idea that each person must do the job for which they are best and "naturally" suited.
2. Justice also consists in minding your own business and not interfering with other people.

3. Perhaps justice is minding one's own business / "doing one's own thing" because it's the quality left over from wisdom, courage, and self-discipline. "Justice is keeping what is properly one's own and doing one's job." The just state will be one where businesspeople, military, and rulers each mind their own business.

Socrates now shifts to a comparison between the society and the individual.

There are three distinct qualities of the soul (psyche). Socrates is talking about general qualities and not giving a scientific analysis of psychology:

1. Motive of Reason: the faculty that calculates and decides
2. Motive of Desire or Appetite: bare physical instinct
3. Motive of Pugnacity or ambition, enterprise, indignation: often in conflict with unthinking impulses. ("heart versus head" perhaps "spirit")(in Plato: *thumos* / *thumoeides*; anger, indignation)

We might say today:

1. Conscience: having rational capacity of judgment and authority.
2. Passions: hunger, thirst, etc.
3. Self-regard or self-love

He gestures toward barbarians: "Thracians and Scythians," but their indignation / bravery is perhaps different than a "civilized" person with intellect and knowledge of commerce. Therefore, we need to understand if these are three distinct areas of the mind or not.

Analogy of a person waving arms.

Analogy of a top spinning.

Definition of opposites: inclination, disinclination

Explication of desire. Example: thirst

Definition of quantitative difference: greater/smaller

Past/future

Branches of knowledge:

Knowledge unqualified is simply knowledge of something learned. Specific knowledge is *of a certain thing*; i.e., *thirst for...*

Reason is the reflective element in mind opposing appetite.

Anger / indignation is different from desire as appetite. It is close to Reason in that it can be controlled by it, but if left alone it follows appetite.

This leads Socrates to qualify educated spirit as different from what children and animals have.

The just person will be just when they are like the just state: performing a proper function only when each part is performing its proper function.

Reason over spirit (emotions); cultivated by intellectual and physical training; in charge of appetite, preventing it from excess.

Examples of moral righteousness follow.

Justice is hinted at in the initial idea that each person has their own natural inclinations toward occupation, and they should stick to it.

Justice “is a principle of this kind; its real concern is not with external actions, but with a man’s inward self, his true concern and interest. The just man will not allow the three elements which make up his inward self to trespass on each other’s functions or interfere with each other,” but keep them in tune.

He then considers injustice as the opposite.

Analogy with health.

Socrates then says either monarchy or aristocracy is the best kind of rule.

Book 5: Women and the Family

One important aspect of this section is Socrates’ insistence that we not jump immediately to the practical implementation of this society, so let’s hold off on that tendency while also noting how quickly our minds move there. Why?

How does Socrates consider sexual difference? Does he have a concept of gender?

Plato suggests that **natural ability**, not biological sex, determines fitness for roles like ruling or soldiering. However, this equality is **functional rather than moral** — women are included because the city needs all available talent, not because of a commitment to individual rights (a concept foreign to ancient Greece).

Although he’s not the only philosopher to address the differences between the sexes or to suggest cognitive equality, his views are radical in the context of Athenian society at the time and Aristophanes, the playwright, made fun of him for it.

Book V begins in the middle of a discussion from Book IV about the virtues of the ideal city. Socrates has just outlined the four cardinal virtues — wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice — and how they appear in the city and the soul. But at this point, Polemarchus and Adeimantus interrupt him, demanding he return to some earlier, “half-said” ideas. Socrates agrees, though reluctantly, to discuss these three controversial proposals.

- Socrates argues that **the difference between men and women is not in kind but in degree**. While men are generally stronger, both sexes are capable of the same tasks, including those of the guardian class.
- He insists that if we want the best-ruled city, **both men and women must share equally in the roles of guardians**, undergoing the same education in music, gymnastics, and warfare.
- This is a **radical proposal** for ancient Greece, where women were excluded from public life.
- He counters objections by analogy: just because men and women are physically different doesn't mean they have different “natures” for ruling — just as bald and long-haired men can perform the same tasks.
- This is the first known argument in Western philosophy for **gender equality in education and politics**.

Abolishing the family

Socrates claims that **private families create divisions of interest** — “mine” and “yours” — which undermine the harmony of the city. To avoid this, guardians will **share women and children in common**. No one will know who their biological offspring are. **Mating festivals** will be arranged by the rulers, secretly using eugenic principles: the best men will mate with the best women to produce strong offspring.

Does the lying here contradict his earlier claims about justice? What do we do with the drawing lots issue?

Children:

The children will be **raised communally**, so that every guardian regards all children as their own. This system eliminates family-based loyalties and **makes the whole guardian class one big family**, devoted entirely to the city. He also proposes **myths and “noble lies”** to maintain this social structure — for example, that all guardians are siblings born from the same mother (the earth).

Obviously, fiction plays a necessary role in Plato's thought. **Socrates refers to “medicines” necessary for rulers to control the population.**

What is a myth?

What is ideology?

Socrates' most controversial claim: the Philosopher kings

Socrates introduces what he calls the “**third wave**” of paradoxical proposals — the most shocking of all. True justice in the city is only possible if those who rule are **philosophers**, because only they **love truth and possess knowledge of the Forms**, especially the **Form of the Good**.

He contrasts **philosophers**, who love wisdom and truth itself, with **lovers of sights and sounds**, who enjoy appearances but not reality. The philosopher's nature is marked by a love of truth, self-control, courage, and fairness. However, without the right education and environment, this nature can be corrupted — a foreshadowing of later discussions in Books VI–VII. The rest of the dialogue (Books VI and VII) will explore **what the philosopher knows and how he comes to know it** (the famous allegory of the cave appears there).

He moves on to concepts of possession: “The best state is the one in which as many people as possible use the words “mine” and “not mine” in the same sense of the same things.”

He then compares to democracy, where leaders are “rulers” instead of “masters” but says in his republic they will be “protectors and defenders” with common people being “providers” and not slaves. **He abolishes slavery and private property beyond their persons**. This reduces quarrels over money, children, and family. More particularly, **Greeks will not sell other Greeks into slavery**.

Violence and assault will decrease but when it arises people either duke it out or are reprimanded by elders.

Common education will occur across the sexes.

He moves on to the rules of war. Women and men serve and take their children to war but teach children to ride horses and flee if necessary. Deserters are relegated to producing class such as farmers and artisans. No plundering or robbing dead bodies on the battlefield.

He distinguishes between civil war and foreign war, aligning it **ethnocentrically** with Greek versus non-Greek.

Philosophical Themes

- **Unity and harmony:** The communal life of the guardians ensures that they think in terms of “ours” instead of “mine,” which Socrates sees as essential to justice.

- **Nature vs. convention:** Plato pushes back against traditional Greek conventions about gender, property, and family.
- **Ideal vs. reality:** Socrates acknowledges that these proposals will seem absurd, but insists that they represent what would happen **“if the city is to be perfectly good.”**
- **Philosophy and political power:** The key conclusion — that only those who truly know the good are fit to rule — sets up Plato’s theory of the philosopher-king.

The Philosopher King

We need to think about how Socrates is thinking about the Forms (eidos or idea)

Socrates says the Ideal is a pattern, and we shouldn’t confuse this with a private idea or concept. It’s not subjective.

In philosophy, this will become the analytical concept.

Socrates again distinguishes between theory and practice.

The Forms resemble the laws of nature as sought in natural science. A law is an **unseen intelligible principle, a unit underlying and unlimited multiplicity of similar phenomena”** (Desmond Lee, translator).

Aristotle tells us that Plato was influenced by Heraclitus to believe all sensible things are in flux.

Socrates is more interested in ethical conduct than explaining the natural universe.

However, mathematical propositions give us insight into the laws of the invisible world, accessible only through reason: Pythagorean theorem and Euclidean geometry are proven through reason, not simple measurement.

A form is a “pattern in itself”

Knowledge versus Belief (Doxa)

