

Plato's Republic: An Introduction

Preface to the Greek edition

It is remarkable that Plato's *Republic* continues to speak to contemporary issues and problems even though it was written over 2000 years ago. The present book was written 15 years ago with that in mind. The world then had just lived through the collapse of Soviet and eastern European communism and the end of the Cold War. Capitalism and liberal democracy were triumphant. They were being claimed to be the highest stage of social development, the 'end of history'.

These hubristic claims for capitalism were swiftly followed by their nemesis. We now live in very different times. Not only have Russia and Eastern Europe rapidly been beset by unemployment, poverty and serious economic problems, the whole capitalist system has been engulfed by a deep financial crisis and by recession and unemployment on an unprecedented scale, from which it is still suffering with no end in sight.

There could not be a more dramatic demonstration of the dysfunctional character of the capitalist system. And yet the ideas of free market capitalism and the political and economic policies which got us here remain largely uncriticised and unchallenged.

This is where Plato comes in. The forces of commerce and the market which predominate in modern society were only just beginning to develop in Plato's time. However, he was remarkably sensitive to them and aware of the dangers that they posed. With a clarity and rigour that have rarely been equalled, he gives an analysis of the moral and social effects of these developments, and presents an alternative vision of how society could be.

These themes in Plato's social philosophy are more relevant than ever today in Western countries that have been going through crisis and recession, and particularly in Greece where these evils have been felt very acutely. Plato provides a trenchant and powerful critique of the social and moral effects of the pursuit of economic wealth as an end in itself; and he develops a vision of a better form of society that has important affinities with more recent social and political ideas, and which continues to be relevant and inspiring for modern readers.

Of course, there is also a deeply conservative side to Plato's social and political philosophy. I do not ignore this. However, it has been so strongly emphasised by other recent commentators that I have gone out of my way to bring out some of the progressive aspects of his thought.

The *Republic* is not only a work of social and moral theory, it covers many other topics as well. Indeed, it deals with all the main areas of philosophy, and it has profound and important things to say about all of them. I cover the entire range of these in this book. I hope it will help to introduce a new generation of readers to one of the most profound, illuminating and thought-provoking works in the whole canon of world literature and show its relevance to contemporary issues and debates.

I am very grateful to Christos Kefalis for translating the book into Greek and thus making it available to a new audience in the land of its origin.

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