

# Plato's Republic: An Introduction

## Preface to the Korean Edition

Plato's *Republic* is one of the earliest books of western philosophy that has survived into the modern world, and yet it remains one of the greatest works of western philosophy and it is still one of most widely read. It deals with a wide range of issues in politics, ethics, metaphysics and theory of knowledge, logic, aesthetics and philosophy of art. On every one of these topics it has profound and thought provoking things to say. It is one of the best introductions to philosophy ever written in all these areas, and still widely used as such in educational institutions throughout the western world.

The present book has the form of an introductory commentary on Plato's great work. It goes through the *Republic*, book by book, explaining the ideas in each, putting them in the context of contemporary views, and discussing their significance and validity.

It is remarkable that a work written more than 2000 years ago can continue to engage with contemporary concerns in this way. This is particularly surprising with regard to its political ideas. These were formulated in the context of a very different sort of society in a very different world. The very terms that Plato uses are sometimes hard to translate into contemporary language (as I explain in the book). And yet it is in the area of politics that the book has been most controversial and most widely discussed in recent times.

In the *Republic*, Plato describes and defends a utopian society in which he recommends the most radical measures to create harmony and stability. He abolishes private property and the family, and imposes an austere and communal way of life amongst the rulers. Plato's utopian society was frequently seen as a forerunner of Soviet style communism. A number of influential writers compared it to the 'actually existing' communist societies which existed in the USSR and Eastern Europe. Plato's work has thus become entangled in contemporary debates between socialism and free market liberalism and individualism.

Inevitably, the pressures of these cold war arguments have distorted the accounts that are given of Plato's philosophy. With the ending of Soviet communism, the character of contemporary political debate has changed dramatically. Free market capitalism is now the predominant and almost unchallenged system throughout the world. But whether it should remain so is not so certain. It is evident that there are enormous problems in the world for which it seems to have no solution: widespread poverty, disease, ignorance side by side with luxury and excess, the uncontrolled destruction of the environment, etc.. Many people are convinced that a better way is possible. This is where Plato comes in and is still relevant. For he is, and remains, one of the most penetrating and powerful critics of the free market philosophy. With a clarity that has rarely been equalled he presents and defends a communitarian view of society that still offers the main alternative to liberal individualism, and provides the philosophical basis for some of the central ideas of socialism.

In this book I explain and defend Plato's ideas in the context of these contemporary controversies. The appearance of this Korean translation – the first into another language – is proof of the remarkably wide and continuing relevance of Plato's ideas.

It is now almost ten years since the book was first written. I do not think that much yet needs changing. However, the book was written in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Soviet communism. In that context, I felt the need to emphasise the continuing relevance of `socialist' themes in Plato's thought. If I was writing it today, I would perhaps give greater emphasis than I do to what I believe to be a serious deficiency in Plato's thought when viewed from a modern perspective: his fear of the development of the individuality, subjectivity and freedom that come with modernity. It is a challenge for us now to re-establish a sense of community while at the same preserving the liberty and individuality that have developed in the modern world. Still, after all this time, no one presents these issues better than Plato.

Sean Sayers

Canterbury

February 2008