

# **"The Republic" (first English edition 1763) by Plato: A Canonical Book:**

Curated by Stephen A Batman Essay created Sunday, April 06, 2025

## **Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition**

**Plato, The Republic of Plato. In Ten Books. Translated from the Greek by H. Spens. With a Preliminary Discourse Concerning the Philosophy of the Ancients by the Translator, 1763**

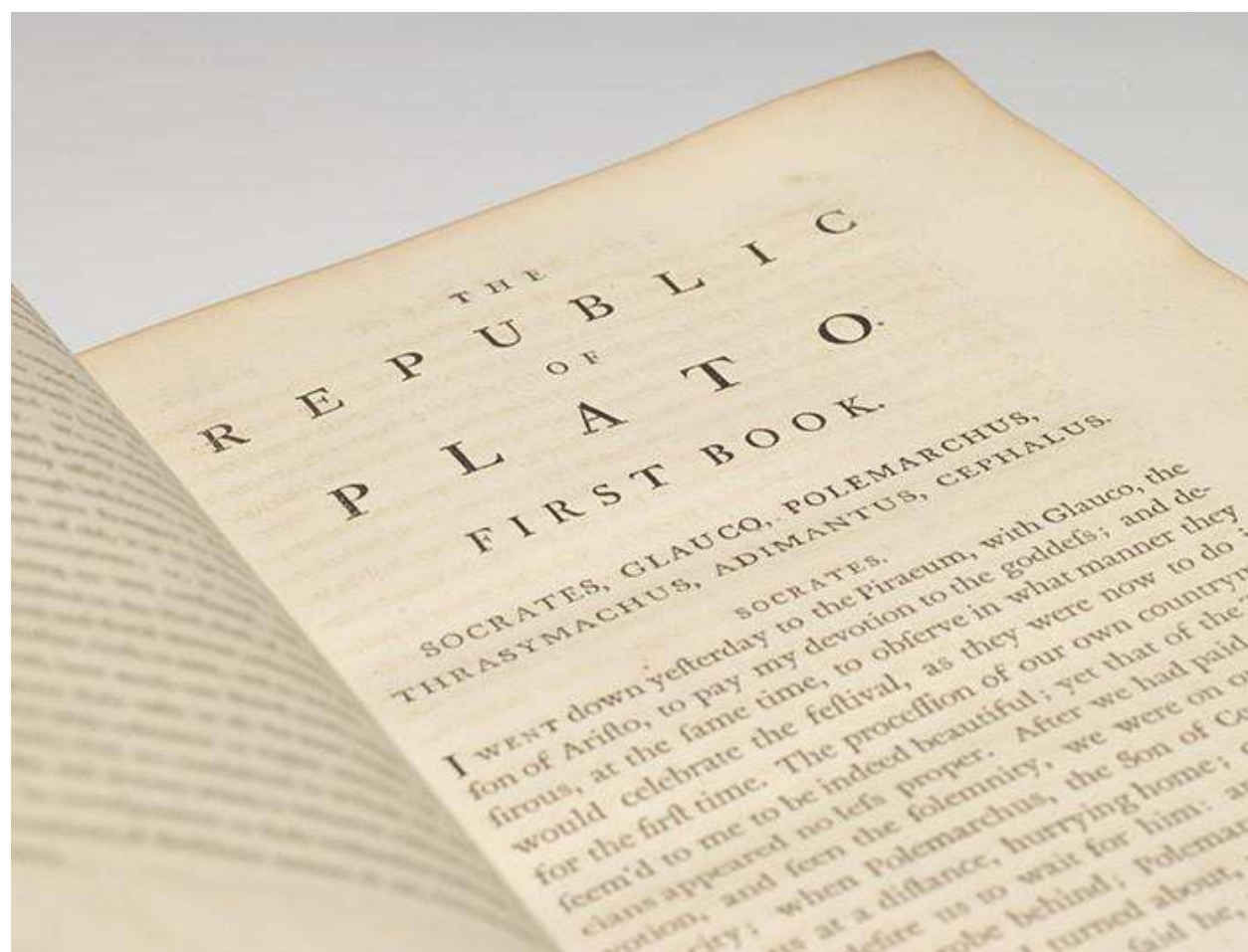


THE  
REPUBLIC  
OF  
PLATO.  
IN TEN BOOKS.

TRANSLATED FROM THE GREEK BY  
H. SPENS, D.D.

WITH A PRELIMINARY DISCOURSE CONCERNING THE PHILO-  
SOPHY OF THE ANCIENTS BY THE TRANSLATOR.

GLASGOW:  
PRINTED BY ROBERT AND ANDREW FOULIS  
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**"AMONG THE TRUE HIGH POINTS OF MAN'S EFFORTS TO BRING REASON AND DIGNITY TO HIS WORLD": LARGE-PAPER FIRST EDITION IN ENGLISH OF PLATO'S *REPUBLIC***

*First edition in English of the greatest of Plato's dialogues, printed at the Foulis Press, one of a scant number of large-paper copies published by Glasgow's renowned Foulis brothers, desirable in contemporary binding.*

*The Republic*, Plato's extended dialogue on justice and the nature of the ideal state, is a cornerstone of Western philosophy and politics, including the allegory of the cave in Book VII, one of the most powerful descriptions of the human condition in all of literature. "Of all Plato's works, this is perhaps the most important and widely read. Ranging from a discussion of the 'Good' to an examination of the nature of the State, it remains among the true high points of man's efforts to bring reason and dignity to his world" (Jenkins 404).

"The *Republic*" is a very famous dialogue, built up from a minor one, which survives as its first book, to a huge set piece. Its setting and its characters are full of political meaning. Its arguments are tantalizing and its fables fascinating. It takes place in a house in the port of Athens a year before Plato was born. After a fierce argument about might and right in Book I... [Plato] settles down for a long, continuous discussion of the good man and the just city. His utopia is alarming, and his metaphysics are intoxicating. It is all an essay in how the state might be governed and man as a citizen governed by the vision of goodness and truth" (Levi, 348).

This, the first edition in English, is "a very faithful translation... containing not only a general epitome of the Republic of Plato, but an accurate delineation of the characters, manners, and philosophy of the ancient Greeks" (Lowndes, 1878). "That Plato should be the first of all the ancient philosophers to be translated and broadcast by the printing press was inevitable. Plato's central conception of a universe of ideas, Perfect Types, of which material objects are imperfect forms, and his ethical code based on action according to human nature, developed by education, which represents the authority of the State, fitted in as well with the philosophical, religious and political thought of western Europe in the 15th century, striving to free itself from the shackles of scholasticism, as it did with those of the Byzantine Greeks, by whom Plato was re-popularized in the western world... the dialogues are pervaded by two dominant impulses: a love of truth and a passion for human improvement" (PMM 27).

"The Republic is the model for all ideal commonwealths, e.g. More's Utopia [and] Bacon's New Atlantis" (Harris, 115). "The preface alone is worth the purchase of the book to a curious reader" (Brueggemann, 154). The Foulis brothers were known for books "plainly printed with no extraneous ornament and soon established a reputation for their carefully edited editions of Greek and Latin classics" (Glaister, 182). Bound with advertisement leaf at rear. Moss II:450.

PLATO. *The Republic of Plato*. In *Ten Books*. Translated from the Greek by H. Spens. With a Preliminary Discourse Concerning the Philosophy of the Ancients by the Translator. Glasgow: Robert and Andrew Foulis, 1763. Thick quarto, contemporary full brown calf rebaked with original spine laid down, raised bands, red Morocco spine label. Housed in a custom cloth slipcase.

Text clean, expert restoration to extremities. A desirable large-paper first edition in contemporary calf.

## Introduction

Plato's "Republic," first translated into English in 1763 by H. Spens, stands as one of the most influential philosophical works in Western civilization. Originally written around 375 BCE in Ancient Greece, this Socratic dialogue explores fundamental questions about justice, governance, and the ideal state. The work emerged during a tumultuous period in Athenian history, following the devastating Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE) and the subsequent political instability that included the brief but brutal rule of the Thirty Tyrants and the execution of Socrates in 399 BCE. These events profoundly shaped Plato's political thought and his skepticism toward democracy[3][8].

The first English translation appeared during the Enlightenment era, a time of intellectual ferment when political philosophers were actively debating the foundations of just governance. Published by Robert and Andrew Foulis in Glasgow, this translation marked a significant moment in the transmission of classical thought to the English-speaking world, particularly as it coincided with the political developments that would eventually lead to the American Revolution[1][11]. The Foulis brothers were renowned printers of classical works, and their edition of "The Republic" was "much sought after as admirable specimens of typography"[1].

This timing is particularly significant as it made Plato's ideas accessible to the Founding Fathers and other political thinkers of the era who were grappling with questions about the ideal form of government. While Enlightenment thinkers were predominantly influenced by Lockean empiricism, Plato's work provided a contrasting perspective that emphasized the role of philosopher-kings and the dangers of unchecked democracy[4].

## The Author

Plato (c. 428-348 BCE) was born into an aristocratic Athenian family during the Golden Age of Athens. His early life was marked by privilege and political connections—his maternal relatives included prominent figures in Athenian politics. However, the course of his life and thought was dramatically altered by two key events: the Peloponnesian War, which ended Athens' democratic golden age, and his relationship with Socrates, who became his mentor and the central character in most of his dialogues[2][3].

The execution of Socrates in 399 BCE on charges of corrupting the youth and impiety had a profound impact on Plato. This event, coupled with the political turmoil of post-war Athens, led him to reject a career in politics and instead devote himself to philosophy. He founded the Academy in Athens around 387 BCE, which became the first institution of higher learning in the Western world and continued to operate for nearly nine centuries[2].

Unlike his mentor Socrates, who wrote nothing, Plato produced a substantial body of work, with "The Republic" standing as his most comprehensive and influential dialogue. In this and other middle-period dialogues, Plato moves beyond merely reporting Socratic questioning to developing his own positive philosophical views, including his famous theory of Forms—the idea that abstract, non-physical forms (or ideas) represent the most accurate reality[2].

Plato's aristocratic background significantly influenced his political philosophy. Having witnessed what he perceived as the failures of Athenian democracy—particularly its susceptibility to demagogues and mob rule—he developed a political theory that emphasized rule by the wise and virtuous rather than by the masses. This perspective is central to "The Republic," where he argues for governance by philosopher-kings who possess true knowledge of justice and the good[8].

## **Why this is a Canonical Book**

"The Republic" must be included in the canon of books containing major ideas that reflect elements of America's politics, governance, economics, and culture for several compelling reasons. First, despite its seemingly anti-democratic stance, Plato's work has profoundly influenced American political thought, particularly through its emphasis on the importance of education, virtue, and the pursuit of justice in governance. The Founding Fathers, while embracing democratic principles, were also concerned with creating a system that would prevent the excesses of pure democracy that Plato warned against[4].

Second, Plato's concept of a "natural aristocracy" based on merit rather than birth or wealth resonated with American political thinkers like John Adams, who argued for a bicameral legislature that would balance popular representation with governance by the most capable. Adams explicitly cited Plato in his "Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America" (1786-87) when making his case for a republic led by natural aristocrats[4][15].

Third, the American constitutional system, with its checks and balances, can be seen as addressing Plato's concerns about democracy while rejecting his solution of philosopher-kings. The Founders created a system that aimed to harness the wisdom of the educated elite while remaining accountable to the people—a compromise between Platonic ideals and democratic principles[4].

Fourth, Plato's emphasis on education as the foundation of a just society has profoundly influenced American educational philosophy. His belief that education should cultivate wisdom, virtue, and critical thinking rather than merely technical skills continues to shape debates about the purpose of education in America[10][5].

Finally, "The Republic" provides a crucial counterpoint to the Lockean liberalism that dominates American political thought. By engaging with Plato's critique of democracy and individualism,

Americans can better understand the tensions and trade-offs inherent in their own political system. This dialectical relationship makes "The Republic" essential reading for anyone seeking to comprehend the philosophical foundations of American governance[4][10].

## Five Timeless Quotes

1. "The judge should not be young; he should have learned to know evil, not from his own soul, but from late and long observation of the nature of evil in others: knowledge should be his guide, not personal experience."[12]

This quote speaks to the enduring question of what qualifies someone for leadership and judgment. In our current political climate, where experience is sometimes devalued in favor of outsider status, Plato reminds us of the importance of wisdom gained through observation and study. This perspective challenges us to consider whether effective governance requires leaders who have developed a deep understanding of human nature and society through sustained engagement and reflection, rather than merely personal charisma or claims to authenticity[10].

2. "When the citizens of a society can see and hear their leaders, then that society should be seen as one."[12]

In an era of increasing political polarization and media fragmentation, this quote highlights the importance of transparency and communication between leaders and citizens. It suggests that a healthy political community requires not just formal democratic procedures but also genuine connection and visibility between the governors and the governed. This speaks to contemporary concerns about political alienation and the need for leaders who can effectively communicate with and represent diverse constituencies[10].

3. "Everything that deceives may be said to enchant."[12]

This observation remains profoundly relevant in our "post-truth" era, where misinformation and emotional appeals often overshadow factual discourse. Plato warns us about the seductive power of falsehood and reminds us to be vigilant against being enchanted by deceptive rhetoric. This quote challenges us to cultivate critical thinking and to distinguish between what is merely appealing and what is true—a crucial skill in navigating contemporary media and political landscapes[10].

4. "Attention to health is a great obstacle to the practice of virtue and improvement in [life]."[12]

While seemingly counterintuitive, this quote invites us to reflect on how excessive focus on physical well-being might distract from moral and intellectual development. In our wellness-obsessed culture, Plato's perspective offers a valuable counterpoint, suggesting that we should

balance care for the body with cultivation of the mind and soul. This speaks to contemporary debates about the proper aims of education and personal development[12].

5. "The important thing is not speaking one's own mind, but finding a way to have one's own mind." [12]

This quote (from Allan Bloom's commentary on "The Republic") captures a central Platonic insight about the relationship between individual thought and social discourse. In an age of social media echo chambers and partisan polarization, it reminds us that true intellectual independence requires more than merely expressing opinions—it demands the harder work of developing a coherent worldview through critical engagement with diverse perspectives. This challenges contemporary assumptions about free expression and encourages a deeper understanding of intellectual freedom[12].

## **Five Major Ideas**

### **1. The Tripartite Soul and the Just Individual**

Plato's conception of the human soul as having three parts—reason, spirit, and appetite—provides a framework for understanding both individual psychology and political organization. According to Plato, a just person is one whose rational part governs the spirited and appetitive parts, creating harmony and balance. This idea remains relevant for understanding human motivation and moral development. It suggests that justice is not merely a social arrangement but a psychological state in which reason governs passion and desire. This perspective challenges contemporary individualism by suggesting that true freedom comes not from indulging every desire but from rational self-governance[3][13].

### **2. The Philosopher-King and Enlightened Leadership**

Perhaps the most famous concept from "The Republic" is the philosopher-king—the idea that the ideal ruler is one who loves wisdom and understands the Form of the Good. While this notion seems at odds with democratic principles, it raises important questions about the qualifications for leadership and the relationship between knowledge and power. In contemporary terms, it challenges us to consider whether effective governance requires specialized knowledge and ethical wisdom, not just popular support. This idea resonates with ongoing debates about expertise in governance and the role of education in preparing citizens for leadership[2][3][13].

### **3. The Allegory of the Cave and Education**

Plato's allegory of the cave—in which prisoners mistake shadows for reality until one escapes to see the true world—offers a powerful metaphor for education as liberation from ignorance. This concept remains central to educational philosophy, suggesting that true education involves challenging preconceptions and expanding perspectives rather than merely transmitting



information. The allegory also highlights the difficulties faced by those who attempt to share new knowledge with those still "in the cave," speaking to contemporary challenges in public discourse and the resistance often faced by those who challenge conventional wisdom[5].

#### **4. The Critique of Democracy and Political Degeneration**

Plato's analysis of how governments degenerate—from aristocracy to timocracy to oligarchy to democracy to tyranny—provides a framework for understanding political change and the vulnerabilities of different systems. His critique of democracy as potentially leading to mob rule and eventually tyranny offers a cautionary perspective on the dangers of unchecked populism. While Americans generally embrace democratic principles, Plato's analysis invites critical reflection on how to prevent democracy's potential excesses and maintain a balance between popular sovereignty and wise governance[3][8].

#### **5. The Theory of Forms and the Pursuit of Truth**

Underlying much of "The Republic" is Plato's theory of Forms—the idea that abstract, unchanging Forms (like Justice, Beauty, and the Good) represent a higher reality than the physical world. This metaphysical theory has profound implications for epistemology, suggesting that true knowledge involves understanding these eternal Forms rather than merely observing physical phenomena. While this metaphysical framework may seem distant from contemporary concerns, it raises enduring questions about the nature of truth, the limits of empirical knowledge, and the possibility of objective moral standards—questions that remain relevant in our relativistic age[2][13].

### **Three Major Controversies**

#### **1. The Critique of Democracy and Elitism**

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of "The Republic" from an American perspective is its explicit critique of democracy and advocacy for rule by philosopher-kings. Plato argues that democracy is inherently unstable because it gives equal voice to the unwise and the wise alike, potentially leading to rule by demagogues and eventually tyranny. This view directly challenges the fundamental American commitment to democratic governance and equality of political rights. Critics argue that Plato's elitism reflects his aristocratic bias and fails to recognize the wisdom that can emerge from collective deliberation. The tension between Platonic elitism and democratic principles continues to animate debates about the proper balance between expertise and popular sovereignty in governance[3][8][14].

Some critics, particularly those from the political left, view Plato's philosophy as "an aristocratic attack on democracy" that emerged from his class position as an aristocrat threatened by Athens'

democratic experiment. According to this critique, Plato's idealization of philosopher-kings represents a self-serving justification for rule by elites like himself, rather than a genuine search for justice[8].

## **2. Communal Living and Family Arrangements**

Plato's proposal that the guardian class should hold women and children in common, eliminating private family units in favor of communal child-rearing, has provoked strong objections from various perspectives. Aristotle was among the first to criticize this arrangement, arguing that people are more motivated to care for what belongs to them privately than what is held in common. From a contemporary perspective, this aspect of Plato's ideal state seems to undermine individual rights and family autonomy, values deeply embedded in American culture. Some critics characterize this proposal as authoritarian paternalism or even "full scale communism," though others suggest "communalism" as a more accurate term[14].

The controversy extends to Plato's eugenic proposals for controlled mating among the guardian class, which many find morally repugnant from a modern perspective. These aspects of "The Republic" highlight the tension between collective welfare and individual rights that continues to shape political debates[14].

## **3. Censorship and Restrictions on Art**

Plato's advocacy for strict censorship of poetry, music, and other arts in his ideal state has generated significant controversy, particularly in a culture that values freedom of expression. He argues that many forms of art appeal to the emotional rather than the rational part of the soul and can therefore corrupt citizens by presenting false or harmful images of gods and heroes. This position seems fundamentally at odds with the American commitment to free speech and artistic expression. Critics argue that Plato's approach to art reflects an authoritarian impulse to control thought and stifles the creative expression that many see as essential to human flourishing[13][14].

Some commentators note the irony that Plato, himself a brilliant literary stylist, would ban most poetry from his ideal state. This controversy highlights enduring questions about the relationship between art, truth, and moral education that continue to animate debates about media influence and cultural values[14].

## **In Closing**

Civic-minded Americans should read "The Republic" not because it provides a blueprint for American governance—indeed, many of its specific proposals run counter to core American values—but because engaging with Plato's challenging perspective can deepen our understanding of our own political principles and their limitations. By confronting Plato's

critique of democracy, Americans can better articulate why they value democratic governance while also recognizing the legitimate concerns about its potential weaknesses[10].

Reading "The Republic" encourages critical reflection on fundamental questions that remain central to American civic life: What constitutes justice? What qualifications should we seek in our leaders? How should we balance individual freedom with the common good? What is the purpose of education in a democratic society? By wrestling with Plato's answers to these questions, even when we ultimately reject them, we clarify our own thinking and develop a more nuanced understanding of the philosophical foundations of American governance[10][15].

Moreover, "The Republic" offers valuable insights that transcend its anti-democratic elements. Its emphasis on the importance of virtue in leadership, its recognition that political structures reflect and shape human psychology, and its insistence that governance should aim at the genuine good rather than merely satisfying desires—all these perspectives can enrich American political discourse. In an era of increasing polarization and declining civic engagement, Plato's focus on the moral dimensions of politics provides a valuable corrective to purely procedural or interest-based conceptions of democracy[10][15].

Finally, as a foundational text in Western philosophy, "The Republic" has shaped the intellectual tradition from which American political thought emerged. Even when American thinkers have defined themselves against Plato's elitism, they have done so in conversation with his ideas. Understanding this intellectual heritage helps Americans situate their own political values within a broader historical context and recognize the ongoing dialogue between democratic principles and philosophical critiques that has shaped Western political thought. In this sense, reading "The Republic" is not just an intellectual exercise but an act of civic engagement with the philosophical traditions that continue to inform American democracy[4][10].

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