

Reading Guide for Plato, *The Republic of Plato* / translated by Benjamin Jowett.¹

Read: Verses 506d-518d (from Book VI and Book VII).

Core question:

What is more/less real?

About *The Republic*:

The Republic is a famous work of Plato (c. 428 BC – c. 348 BC),² an ancient Greek philosopher. The book comprises of (fictional) dialogues between Socrates, Plato's teacher and the protagonist in this book, and various Athenians as well as foreigners.

At the time the book was written, in around 380 BC, Athens was a democracy, and its power was slowly declining due to the Peloponnesian war with Sparta. There was a group of rhetoric teachers then, called the Sophists, who held the belief that there were no objective moral truths and morality. With its focus on the discussion of justice, *Republic* may be seen as a response to such moral skepticism. Politics also plays a major part in the book. As the discussion unfolds, personal justice is linked to justice in the city, and there are descriptions on how cities would fare as they were ruled by different types of rulers. Through the lips of Socrates, Plato presented his case for the ideal city state, the *kallipolis*, which was a completely just and virtuous city ruled by philosophers. He attempted to define individual justice through defining political justice in an imaginary perfect city. He then went on to claim that such city was possible, as long as its rulers become philosophers (or vice versa).

So what would philosophers be like, and what would produce them? Socrates portrayed philosophers as knowledgeable and virtuous, and they know “the idea of good” (or “the form of the good”). Education is essential to make them suitable rulers of the ideal city. In such portrayal, Plato addresses various issues including knowledge, education and reality. For instant, The Allegory of the Cave may be seen as an illustration on education. The untutored people are like prisoners, ignorant of the ideal world. As they are educated, they come closer to the truth. They see that what are apparent to the senses, like the shadows, are not the truth itself. Even when they return to the cave, they would see things as they are, not as they appear to be. Such people are those Socrates deems worthy as rulers, as they have “experience of truth” and see better than the other people.

¹ Source: Project Gutenberg <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/55201/55201-h/55201-h.htm>

² <http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/Biographies/Plato.html>

Outline of *The Republic*:

Below is an outline of *The Republic* by Bertrand Russell (source: *Wikipedia*)

Book I-V: the Utopia portion, portraying the ideal community, starting from an attempt to define justice;

Book VI-VII: since philosophers are seen as the ideal rulers of such community, this part of the text concentrates on defining precisely what a philosopher is;

Book VIII-X: discusses several practical forms of government, their pros and cons.

About this text:

This text consists of two parts, one is the last few verses from Book VI (verses 506d-511e) and the other the first few verses from Book VII (verses 512a-518d). In the first part, Plato laid out his worldview. There are the sphere of the visible and the sphere of the intellectual. In the visible sphere, the sun illuminates visible things and gives the eye the power to see. Likewise, in the sphere of the intellectual, the idea of good illuminates intelligible things and gives the soul the power to reason. Plato then introduced the four faculties of the soul, namely, reason, understanding, faith, perception of shadows.

The second part begins with the famous Allegory of the Cave, followed by Plato's view on education. In this part, one can see that Plato believed the world revealed by our senses is not the ideal world but only a replica. Education is the journey of the soul going from the sphere of the visible to that of the intellectual. The last thing the soul would see is the idea of good. Plato believed that everyone is capable of learning. Education is not about imparting new knowledge but to help students see knowledge which they have already had the power to see.

Outline of the text:

Excerpt from Book VI

1: Introduction

2-3: The discussion should start with the child of the good.

4-6: Every kind of things have their essence, i.e. idea (or form).

7-26: What the idea of good is:

7: Visible things vs. intelligible things.

8: Sight is for seeing.

9-13: Perceptions other than sight do not need the third nature.

14-15: The eyes need light as the third nature to see.

16-22: The sun emits light, which gives the eye the power to see.

23-26: The relation between the sun, the eye and visible things is the same as that

between the idea of good, the soul and intelligible things.

27-30: More about the idea of good.

31-44: The four faculties of the soul (reason, understanding, faith, perception of shadows) and how to acquire the highest: reason.

Excerpt from Book VII

45-46: Setting of the cave.

47-51: How the prisoners see the shadows.

52-57: The journey of a freed prisoner from the cave to the outside.

58-59: The freed prisoner reflected on his past.

60-61: The freed prisoner went back to the cave.

62: A summary of the allegory of the cave.

63-65: The man who has been to the upper world (the sphere of the intellectual).

66-67: The nature of education.

Study Questions (Answers can be found at the end of this section.)

(Para. 1-3: Introduction and + discussion should start with the child of the good.)

1. Which is NOT the reason why Socrates begins with the child of the good instead of the parent?

- (a) They have just discussed other virtues.
- (b) The child is very similar to the parent.
- (c) Socrates fears that discussing the nature of the good is a too great task.
- (d) Socrates is afraid of being ridiculed if he fails to discuss the good.

(Para. 4-6: Every kind of things have their essence.)

2. What meaning of “absolute” can be found in these paragraphs?

- (a) Extremity.
- (b) Essence.
- (c) Constancy.
- (d) Applicability.

(Para. 7-8: Visible things, intelligible things and sight.)

3. According to Socrates, What can be seen but not known?

- (a) Beauty.
- (b) Good.
- (c) Books.
- (d) Justice.

(Para. 9-13: Perceptions other than sight do not need the third nature)

4. According to Socrates, what does the ear hear when a dog is barking?

- (a) The sound of the barking dog.
- (b) The barking dog.
- (c) Both the sound and the dog.
- (d) The ear hears nothing until the dog is seen.

(Para. 14-15: The eyes need light as the third nature to see.)

5. What is the third nature for hearing? Why?

- (a) Sound. The first two natures are the ear and the thing that makes sound.
- (b) Sound. The first two natures are the eye and the ear.
- (c) Light. Only light can be a third nature.
- (d) Nothing. There is no third nature for hearing.

(Para. 16-22: The sun emits light, which gives the eye the power to see.)

6. Which describes sun INCORRECTLY?

- (a) A deity.
- (b) Both sight and the eye are from the sun.
- (c) The author of sight.
- (d) It is not the sight.

(Para. 23-26: The relation between the sun, the eye and visible things is the same as that between the idea/form of good, the soul and intelligible things.)

7. Who is the child of the good?

- (a) Intelligence.
- (b) Ideas/forms.
- (c) The sun.
- (d) Light.

8. The sun, light and the eye can be compared with

- (a) the idea of good, intelligence and the soul, respectively.
- (b) the soul, intelligence and the idea of good, respectively.
- (c) intelligence, the idea of good and the soul, respectively.
- (d) the idea of good, the soul and intelligence, respectively.

(Para. 27-30: More about the idea of good.)

9. Which of the following statements is CORRECT?

- (a) The sun is the same as light and sight.
- (b) The good is the same as science and truth.
- (c) The sun is the author of being and essence of intelligible things.
- (d) The good far exceeds the being and essence of intelligible things.

(Para. 31-44: The four faculties of the soul (reason, understanding, faith, perception of shadows) and how to acquire the highest: reason.)

10. The two ruling powers are the idea of good and _____

- (a) the soul.
- (b) the sun.
- (c) light.
- (d) knowledge.

11. Which subject best describes what happens in the lower subdivision of the sphere of the intellectual?

- (a) Physics.
- (b) Philosophy.
- (c) Optics.
- (d) Geometry.

12. Which belongs to the higher subdivision of the sphere of the intellectual?

- (a) The first principle.
- (b) Geometrical figures.
- (c) Hypotheses.
- (d) Visible objects.

(Para. 45-51: Setting of the cave and the prisoners)

13. What do the prisoners take the shadows of the vessels, statues and figures?

- (a) True reality.
- (b) Virtual reality.
- (c) Animal world.
- (d) Celestial world.

(Para. 52-57: The journey of a freed prisoner from the cave to the outside.)

14. Arrange the order of the things the prisoner sees after he is released and leaves the cave.

- I. Shadows
- II. Real objects of the shadows
- III. Stars
- IV. Sun

(a) IV, III, II, I. (b) II, III, IV, I. (c) III, IV, I, II. (d) I, II, III, IV.

(Para. 58-59: The freed prisoner reflected on his past.)

15. Why does the author say he (the prisoner) would “endure anything, rather than think as they do and live after their manner?”

- (a) He deserves more honours and prizes
- (b) He does not want to leave the cave again
- (c) He does not want to live in the cave like prisoners again
- (d) Being dragged by force is a painful experience

(Para. 60-62: The freed prisoner went back to the cave.)

16. How do the other prisoners respond when the freed prisoner comes back to the cave?

- (a) They say that the upward journey has ruined the freed prisoner’s eyes.
- (b) They admire the freed prisoner very much.
- (c) They are jealous of the freed prisoner’s experience in upward journey.
- (d) They bring the freed prisoner back to the outside of the cave.

(Para. 62: A summary of the allegory of the cave.)

17. Match the following items which show the link between the allegory and the real life:

Allegory

- (A1) The prison-house •
- (A2) The light of the fire •
- (A3) Upward journey •
- (A4) Seeing things above the cave •

Real life

- (R1) The sun
- (R2) The world of sight
- (R3) Reaching the intellectual world
- (R4) The ascent of the soul

(Para. 63-65: The man who has been to the upper world (the sphere of the intellectual))

18. Is this statement True or False? “The people who have seen the intellectual world are willing to descend to human affairs.”

(Para. 66-67: The nature of education)

19. Which best describes education?

- (a) Reminiscence.
- (b) Competition with peers.
- (c) Acquiring new knowledge.
- (d) Imparting knowledge.

Answers:

1.a	6.b	11.d	16.a
2.b	7.c	12.a	17. A1-R2; A2-R1; A3-R4; A4-R3.
3.c	8.a	13.a	18.False
4.a	9.d	14.d	19.a
5.d	10.b	15.c	

Think about it...

- ✧ Are you enlightened?
- ✧ Can science inspire people to turn around and see the truth? Can a scientist (e.g. Einstein) see the intellectual world?

— End —