

Plato's Republic shocked the world. Do you agree?

The philosopher Plato lived from 488-348BC. He was Greek and an Athenian. Although he himself was of noble descent, in Athens, there was a democratic government. Plato himself despised democracy - it had been a mentor that had executed his mentor, Socrates. He describes it in the Republic as a 'great beast'.

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As he sees democratic society as being imperfect, 'it's an agreeable anarchic form of society, with plenty of variety, which treats all men as equal, whether they are equal or not'¹, Plato seeks to find a perfect society. This happens in the Republic - represented as a dialogue through Socrates (acting as Plato's mouthpiece) and others.

The Republic begins with a discussion whether it is better to be just, but appear unjust or be just, but appear just. This develops into a discussion on the nature of justice and whether it can be found in the big (the community), in order to be seen in the small (the individual).

Many themes are dealt with - the nature of justice, whether we do what 'is right' because we want to, or because we fear punishment. Issues such as whether all people are equal and who has the right to rule are also dealt with.

It is for these reasons and others that many thinkers and commentators point to the Republic as a book that shocked the world. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a noted essayist, once said 'Plato is philosophy and philosophy is Plato'², and later notes as a reason for the success of the Republic that 'His broad humanity transcends all sectional lines'³.

This is a key point for many of the advocates of the Republic. The Republic, it is argued, can be appreciated in all cultures and by all people. They would argue that all modern western philosophies are influenced in some way by the Republic.

Plato's political line, has managed to align itself with notions of nationalism, totalitarianism, militarism and hierarchy. He can be seen as simultaneously conservative and idealist.

¹(Republic 575c,3) ^{2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9}(Books that shook the world)

However, this is not strictly the case. A proportion of European philosophy 'contains vehement rejections of Plato' ⁴. Plato's beliefs are often in contrast to those of Empirical or materialist philosophers. Although the supporters of the Republic will go on to say that even those who do not agree with the works of Plato, are still reacting to him - or else that they are misinterpreting his meaning.

This view is in fact quite plausible. As aforementioned, the Republic is written in the form of a dialogue. The views of Plato are open to easy interpretation, as a result of the multiple characters used and the fluid, changing nature of thoughts expressed in the dialogue.

Many commentators have come to forward the idea it was Plato's intention to express his ideas only partially, with the full interpretation only open to a few.

However, most commentators argue that Platonic Philosophy cannot be fully appreciated if read, alone. It has to be engaged with - the Republic is a dialogue after all, 'Plato felt that philosophy was more a matter of an activity than one of absorbing or learning a static body of doctrine' ⁵.

Another feature pointing to the Republic, as being a book that shocked the world, is the vast amount of commentary, whether supportive or in disagreement, that it has received. It has been commented, that 'the history of readings of the book is itself an academic discipline' ⁶. This importance is shown further as 'for centuries it has been the one compulsory subject in the philosophy syllabus' ⁷.

Not all commentaries of the Republic are positive. Francis Bacon sees Plato's work as an example of 'premature and precipitate haste'. He goes on to say, 'The disputatious and sophistical kind of philosophy catches the understanding in a trap, but the other kind, the fantastic, high-blown, semi-poetic philosophy seduces it.' ⁸.

This is a criticism for Plato's seeming neglect of what can be considered the firm reality of the world, in favour of what Bacon and others may consider idealism. The essayist, Lord Macaulay furthers this by saying, 'if the tree which Socrates planted and Plato watered is to be judged by its flowers and leaves, it is the noblest of trees. But if we take the homely

¹ (Republic 575c, 3) ^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9} (Books that shook the world)

test of Bacon, if we judge of the tree by its fruits, our opinion of it may perhaps be less favourable.' ⁹.

Even though this is a less than favourable view on Plato, it does further the idea of the Republic shocking the world. The ideas expressed were too radical - even hundreds of years later.

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Further evidence of its endearing radicalism, can be seen as it was an inspiration for many reformers, such as the Victorian Benjamin Jowett, educators and visionaries; along with many politicians.

It is further shocking, from a modern perspective, as the Republic's descriptions of governments bear little resemblance to their modern counterparts. Many of these government types would seem more similar to dictatorships today. It would be unsuitable to use the Republic as a manual for good government in modern times - rather it needs to be read and appreciated in the context of Ancient Greek City-states.

It was just not the content of the Plato on its own, that shocked the world. In the writing the Republic, he has been seen by many as betraying his mentor Socrates. Socrates was a great liberal, however in the Republic, Plato advocates state control. It is in this sort of society, that Socrates may have been executed much more quickly than in the actual democratic one. Plato has turned the fictional Socrates of the Republic as a supporter of totalitarian Government.

It is shocking, this contrast to the earlier, perhaps more historically accurate, Socrates - who was the amiable and patient character, to the Socrates that we are presented with now. It is this Socrates, which we can take as being a likeness of Plato himself - a bitter, democracy-hating, Aristocrat.

Regardless of whether the argument is in praise of the Republic or in disapproval of it, there is no doubt that it deserves the argument. When the Republic was first written it was a radical text - it promoted a complete reformation of Society, it challenged the roles of society members and a redistribution of the balance of power. Today, the governments described are still so far away from their modern equivalent that they remain radical. The views on matters such as state-control and the restriction of personal liberty are still

¹(Republic 575c,3) ^{2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9}(Books that shook the world)

incredibly shocking today. It is for these reasons, that the Republic is a text which shook the world.

Bibliography

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Books that shook the world - Plato's Republic

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¹(Republic 575c,3) ^{2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9}(Books that shook the world)