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## VOICES OF REASON

**Simon Blackburn**

Fanciful, meandering and often disturbing, it has been subject to more impassioned disagreement than almost any other such work. Simon Blackburn on Plato's *Republic*.

If any books change the world, *Republic* has a good claim to first place. It is commonly regarded as the culminating achievement of Plato as a philosopher and writer, brilliantly poised between the questioning and inconclusive earlier dialogues and the less compelling cosmological speculations and doubts of the later ones. Over

the centuries it has probably sustained more commentary, and been subject to more radical and impassioned disagreement, than almost any other of the great founding texts of the modern world. Indeed, the history of readings of the book is itself an academic discipline, with specialist chapters on almost every episode in the story of religion and literature for the past 2,000 years and more. To take only the major English poets, there are entire books on Platonism and Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Shelley and Coleridge, to name but a few, and there are many others on whole movements and times: Plato and Christianity, Plato and the Renaissance, Plato and the Victorians, Plato and the Nazis, Plato and us. The story of Plato's direct influence on philosophy is another study in itself, one peppered with names such as Philo Judaeus, Macrobius, Porphyry, Pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena, as well as the better-known Plotinus, Augustine or Dante. Sometimes the Plato in question is the author of other texts, notably the inspirational dialogue *Symposium* and the theologically ambitious *Timaeus*. But *Republic* is seldom far away.

Anyone who stays very long in the vast silent mausoleums lined with works about Plato and his influence runs the risk of suffocating. Anyone writing on this topic must be conscious of an enormous and disapproving audience, dizzying ranks of ghosts overseeing and criticising omissions and simplifications. Many of these ghosts belong to the most brilliant linguists, scholars, philosophers, theologians and historians of their day. They do not take kindly to the garden to which they devoted their lives being trampled over by outsiders and infidels. And *Republic* is the shrine at the very centre of the sanctuary, since for centuries it has been the one compulsory subject in the philosophy syllabus, so these same scholars will have been educated with it as the centrepiece and inspiration.

Plato wrote his philosophy in dialogues, a form that requires different voices, and the ebb and flow of argument. It was already noted in antiquity that the Socrates who is the hero of these dialogues, and Plato himself, are shifting figures, readily admitting different interpretations: "It is well known that Socrates was in the habit of concealing his knowledge, or his beliefs; and Plato approved of the habit," said Saint Augustine. One way of taking this is that Plato, and presumably Socrates, really did have doctrines to teach, but that for some irritating reason they preferred to unveil them only partially, one bit at a time, in a kind of intellectual striptease. This line has occasionally been taken by weak-minded commentators in love with the idea of hidden, esoteric mysteries penetrated only by initiates, among whom they are pleased to

imagine themselves.

The right way of interpreting Augustine's remark is that Plato felt philosophy was more a matter of an activity than of absorbing a static body of doctrine. It is a question of process, not product. Socrates remains the great educator, and those who came to him would be listeners and interrogators, participants in conversation, and would have to throw themselves into the labyrinths of thought. Passive reception of the word would count for nothing—this was one of the mistakes made by Plato's opponents, the sophists, who charged fees for imparting what they sold as practical wisdom (one might think of the witless piles of "wisdom" and "self-help" literature that now choke bookshops). At the end of Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, Socrates makes a speech despising reading philosophy as a poor second to doing it. Many people have made the same point subsequently. Schopenhauer describes reading as a mere surrogate for thinking for yourself, and in turn quotes the German polymath Goethe: "What you have inherited from your forefathers, you must first win for yourself if you are to possess it." Robert Louis Stevenson argued that literature is but the shadow of good talk. "Talk is fluid, tentative, continually in further search and progress; while written words remain fixed, become idols even to the writer, found wooden dogmatisms, and preserve flies of obvious error in the amber of the truth."

The insistence on engagement chimes with Plato's adoption of the dialogue form, in which different voices get a hearing, and it is the twists and turns of the processes of argument rather than any set conclusion that help us to expand our minds as we read. Philosophy, in this view, is about discovering things in dialogue and argument ("dialectically"); anything read later could at best be a reminder of the understanding achieved in this process.

This dramatic conception of what Plato is about makes him harder to criticise. One can reject a conclusion, but it is much harder to reject a process of imaginative expansion, and if we take the link with drama seriously, it might seem as silly as "rejecting" *King Lear* or *Hamlet*. In fact, the parallel does not cut off criticism, but encourages it. In the course of Plato's dramas, theses do get stated and defended, arguments are made, and people are persuaded. Sometimes the drama comes to an end with an apparent conclusion. And in all these cases it is appropriate to ask whether the theses, arguments and conclusions are in fact acceptable. Doing this is doing no more than taking part in the drama or entering the dialectical arena, the very activity that Socrates and Plato commend.

But Plato and his *Republic* have their detractors. In Raphael's painting *The School of Athens*, Plato and Aristotle together hold centre-stage, but while Aristotle points to the Earth, Plato points upwards to the Heavens. Coleridge made the same contrast, saying that everyone was born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian, meaning that Plato is otherworldly, a dealer in abstractions, while Aristotle is the plain empirical man who faces things as they are in the world as we find it. Coleridge continued: "I don't think it possible that anyone born an Aristotelian can become a Platonist, and I am sure no born Platonist can ever change into an Aristotelian."

Much of *Republic* can be read as Plato Lite. These parts can be read regardless of our attitude to the heavy-duty metaphysics of the central chapters, notably the part that everyone remembers, the Myth of the Cave. On its best interpretation, it is far from suggesting an airy-fairy, visionary picture of divine raptures and illuminations. In fact, we can tame it, and see it as no more than a sensible plea for just the kind of understanding of the actual world that science and mathematics offer us two millennia later. Perhaps Plato has been horribly betrayed by Platonists—not an uncommon fate for a great philosopher.

But there are other, less doctrinal reasons why the sovereignty of *Republic* ought to be surprising. The work is long, sprawling and meandering. Far from holding water, its arguments range from ordinarily leaky to leaky in that zany way which leaves some interpreters unable to recognise them as ever intended to hold water at all. Its apparent theory of human nature is fanciful, and might seem inconsistent. Its apparent political implications are mainly disagreeable, and often appalling. In so far as Plato has a legacy in politics, it includes theocracy or rule by priests, militarism, nationalism, hierarchy, illiberalism, totalitarianism and complete disdain of the economic structures of society, born in his case of privileged slave-ownership. In *Republic* he managed to attach himself both to the most static conservatism and to the most wild-eyed utopianism. On top of all that, the book's theory of knowledge is a disaster. Its attempt to do what it seemingly sets out to do—which is to show that the moral individual, and only the moral individual, is happy—is largely a sequence of conjuring tricks.

More insidiously, to the extent that there is now an aesthetic tone associated with Plato, it is not one to which we easily succumb, unless we have absorbed too much of it to escape. Plato's high summer, in England at least, lay in the golden glow of the late Victorian and Edwardian age—the vaguely homoerotic, vaguely religious, emotionally arrested, leisured, class-conscious world of

playing fields, expensive schools and lazy universities, the world of Walter Pater, or EM Forster, of half-forgotten belletrists and aesthetes like John Addington Symonds or Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, or golden boy-poets like Rupert Brooke. This is not the world around us. It is not quite a world of slave-ownership, but capitalism throws up its own drones.

An equally shocking thing about it in some people's eyes is that, in writing *Republic*, Plato utterly betrayed his teacher Socrates. Socrates is the first and greatest liberal hero and martyr to freedom in thought and speech. For writers like John Stuart Mill and George Grote—practical, liberal, utilitarian thinkers—this was the real Socrates, the eternal spirit of reflection, criticism and potentially of opposition to the state itself. But in *Republic* he is an out-and-out dogmatist, rather than the open-minded, patient, questioning spirit his admirers love. He is shown as the spokesman for a repressive, authoritarian, static, hierarchical society in which everything up to and including sexual relations and birth control is regulated by the political classes, who deliberately use lies for the purpose. He presents a social system in which the liberal Socrates would have been executed much more promptly than he was by the Athenian democracy. In *Republic* the liberal Socrates has become the spokesman for a dictatorship. In presenting this figure Plato even betrayed his own calling, being once a poet, who now calls for the poets to be banned.

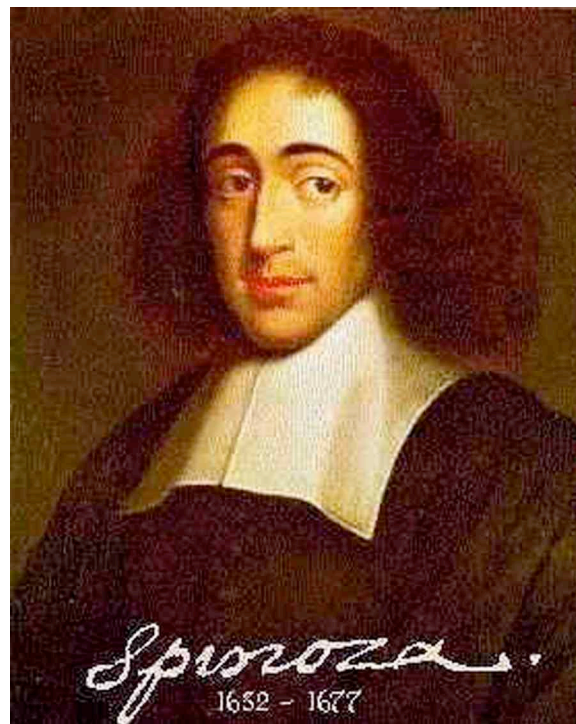
A work may have many defects yet be forgiven if the author comes through as a creature of sweetness and light, just as Plato's literary creation, the Socrates of the earlier dialogues, does. But there is not much help here. True, there must have been enough sweetness and light in Plato to create the figure of the heroic, liberal Socrates in the first place. But if that figure evaporates, as it does in *Republic*, there is not much else to go into the balance. We know very little about Plato, and what there is to know is not generally appealing. If he is put in historical context, we may find an archetypal grumpy old man, a disenchanting aristocrat, hating the Athenian democracy, convinced that the wrong people are in charge, with a deep fear of democracy itself, constantly sneering at artisans, farmers and indeed all productive labour, deeply contemptuous of any workers' ambition for education, and finally manifesting a hankering after the appalling military despotism of Sparta.

But as so often with Plato, there is a complication to that picture, nicely brought out in Nietzsche's reaction to the fact that, on Plato's deathbed, he turned out to have been reading the comic writer Aristophanes: "There is nothing that has caused me to medi-

tate more on Plato's secrecy and sphinx-like nature, than the happily preserved petit fait that under the pillow of his deathbed there was found no Bible, nor anything Egyptian, Pythagorean, or Platonic—but a book of Aristophanes. How could even Plato have endured life—a Greek life which he repudiated—without an Aristophanes?”

We are told that Jesus wept, but not that he ever laughed. With Plato, as with Socrates, laughter is often nearer than it seems. This is a good sign. Perhaps the grumpy old man was not quite so grumpy after all. But this does not really matter, for it is the concrete, enduring book that concerns us, not its shadowy and departed author. And it is a good dictum that while many books are wrongly forgotten, no book is wrongly remembered. So we need to work harder to come to terms with the unquestioned staying power of *Republic*. We need to understand something of the hold this book has had and continues to have on the imagination of readers. 📖

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## A VIEW OF THE TRUTH: SPINOZA'S FAITH IN REASON

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

Thursday marked the 350th anniversary of the excommunication of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza from the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam in which he had been raised.

The Spinoza anniversary didn't get a lot of attention. But it's one worth remembering—in large measure because Spinoza's life and thought have the power to illuminate the kind of events that at the moment seem so intractable.

The exact reasons for the excommunication of the 23-year-old Spinoza remain murky, but the reasons he came to be vilified throughout all of Europe are not. Spinoza argued that no group or religion could rightly claim infallible knowledge of the creator's partiality to its beliefs and ways. After the excommunication, he spent the rest of his life—he died in 1677 at the age of 44—studying the varieties of religious intolerance. The conclusions he drew are still of dismaying relevance.

The Jews who banished Spinoza had themselves been victims of intolerance, refugees from the Spanish-Portuguese Inquisition. The Jews on the Iberian Peninsula had been forced to convert to Christianity at the end of the 15th century. In the intervening century, they had been kept under the vigilant gaze of the Inquisitors, who suspected the “New Christians” of carrying the rejection of Christ in their very blood. It can be argued that the Iberian Inquisition was Europe's first experiment in racialist ideology.

Spinoza's reaction to the religious intolerance he saw around him was to try to think his way out of all sectarian thinking. He understood the powerful tendency in each of us toward developing a view of the truth that favors the circumstances into which we happened to have been born. Self-aggrandizement can be the invisible scaffolding of religion, politics or ideology.

Against this tendency we have no defense but the relentless application of reason. Reason must stand guard against the self-serving false entailments that creep into our thinking, inducing us to believe that we are more cosmically important than we truly are, that

we have had bestowed upon us—whether Jew or Christian or Muslim—a privileged position in the narrative of the world’s unfolding. Spinoza’s system is a long argument for a conclusion as radical in our day as it was in his: that to the extent that we are rational, we each partake in exactly the same identity.

Spinoza’s faith in reason as our only hope and redemption is the core of his system, and its consequences reach out in many directions, including the political. Each of us has been endowed with reason, and it is our right, as well as our responsibility, to exercise it. Ceding this faculty to others, to the authorities of either the church or the state, is neither a rational nor an ethical option.

Which is why, for Spinoza, democracy was the most superior form of government. The state, in helping each person to preserve his life and well-being, can legitimately demand sacrifices from us, but it can never relieve us of our responsibility to strive to justify our beliefs in the light of evidence.

It is for this reason that he argued that a government that impedes the development of the sciences subverts the grounds for state legitimacy, which is to provide us physical safety so that we can realize our full potential. And this, too, is why he argued against the influence of clerics in government. Statecraft infused with religion is intrinsically unstable, since it must insist on its version of the truth against all others.

Spinoza’s attempt to deduce everything from first principles—that is, without reliance on empirical observation—can strike us today as impractical, and yet his project of radical rationality had concrete consequences. His writings, banned by greater Christian Europe, but continuously read and discussed, played a role in the audacious experiment in rational government that gave birth to the United States.


The Declaration of Independence, that document first drafted by Thomas Jefferson, softly echoes Spinoza. John Locke, Spinoza’s contemporary, is a more obvious influence on Jefferson than Spinoza was. But Locke had himself been influenced by Spinoza’s ideas on tolerance, freedom and democracy.

If we can hear Locke’s influence in the phrase “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” we can also catch the sound of Spinoza addressing us in Jefferson’s appeal to the “laws of nature and of nature’s God.” This is the language of Spinoza’s universalist religion,



which makes no reference to revelation, but rather to ethical truths that can be discovered through human reason.

Spinoza had argued that our capacity for reason is what makes each of us a thing of inestimable worth. That each individual is worthy of ethical consideration is itself a discoverable law of nature, obviating the appeal to divine revelation. An idea that had caused outrage when Spinoza first proposed it, adding fire to the denunciation of him as a godless immoralist, had found its way into the minds of men who set out to create a government the likes of which had never before been seen.

Spinoza's dream of making us susceptible to the voice of reason might seem hopelessly quixotic now, with religion-infested politics on the march. But imagine how much more impossible a dream it would have seemed on that day 350 years ago. And imagine, too, how much even sorer our sorry world would have been without it. 

*Rebecca Newberger Goldstein is the author, most recently, of [Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity](#).*

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