

AN INTRODUCTION
TO
PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

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vi *Preface*

of character, and in appreciating the form of a Platonic dialogue and the implications for the way it should be read. I have been helped a great deal, in matters both of content and of style, by comments on an earlier draft by Jonathan Barnes and John Ackrill, and by discussion of various issues with Charles Kahn. I should mention also Terry Irwin's book *Plato's Moral Theory*, with much of whose work on the *Republic* I found myself in enthusiastic agreement and which made my own ideas much clearer as a result of working through his argument. I am pleased also to find much agreement with Nicholas White's book *A Companion to Plato's Republic*, a book which, with a rather different format and emphasis, puts similar stress on the coherence of the main moral argument. I am indebted also for helpful discussions of various points to John Cooper, Alexander Nehamas, Anthony Long, and Martha Nussbaum. And there is, finally, an enormous debt to all the pupils I have taught over the years, who have, in their essays and tutorials, raised the questions that needed answers.

The book originates in lectures given in Oxford, and took its present form in the summer of 1979, when the first version was written in a pine cabin overlooking Lake Rosseau in Ontario, where my father-in-law's books were written some years ago. I am grateful to my husband's family for being so patient with an impatient writer. And I am most grateful to my husband, David Owen, for his loving support with the book as with all else. The book is dedicated to him with gratitude, and with love.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The *Republic* is Plato's best-known work, and there are ways in which it is too famous for its own good. It gives us systematic answers to a whole range of questions about morality, politics, knowledge, and metaphysics, and the book is written in a way designed to sweep the reader along and give a general grasp of the way Plato sees all these questions as hanging together. So our reaction to it, at least on first reading, is likely to be oversimplified; we may feel inclined to accept or reject it as a whole, rather than coming to grips with particular arguments.

But the *Republic*, though written with single-minded intensity, is a work of great complexity. And this is the best reason for studying it in detail. For when we do, we find, with pleasure and profit, that it is a work of great subtlety. Plato is writing a manifesto, but he is too good a philosopher not to raise important and difficult philosophical issues in the process, and sometimes to develop a point at the expense of his declared aims. The *Republic* is in fact a work in which a grandiose plan covers a number of struggles and tensions.

The richness of the book can be seen from the very different interpretations that it has produced. Plato has been seen as a revolutionary, a conservative; a fascist, a communist; a fiercely practical reformer and an ineffective dreamer. Some of these interpretations are more fanciful than others, but they all have *some* footing in the text. A book which gives rise to such extreme disagreements over what it is saying is not a simple and easily comprehended book, however much Plato's own style of writing may try to persuade us that it is.

Our first response is likely to be simple; it is also likely to be hostile. We are almost all going to find many of Plato's views