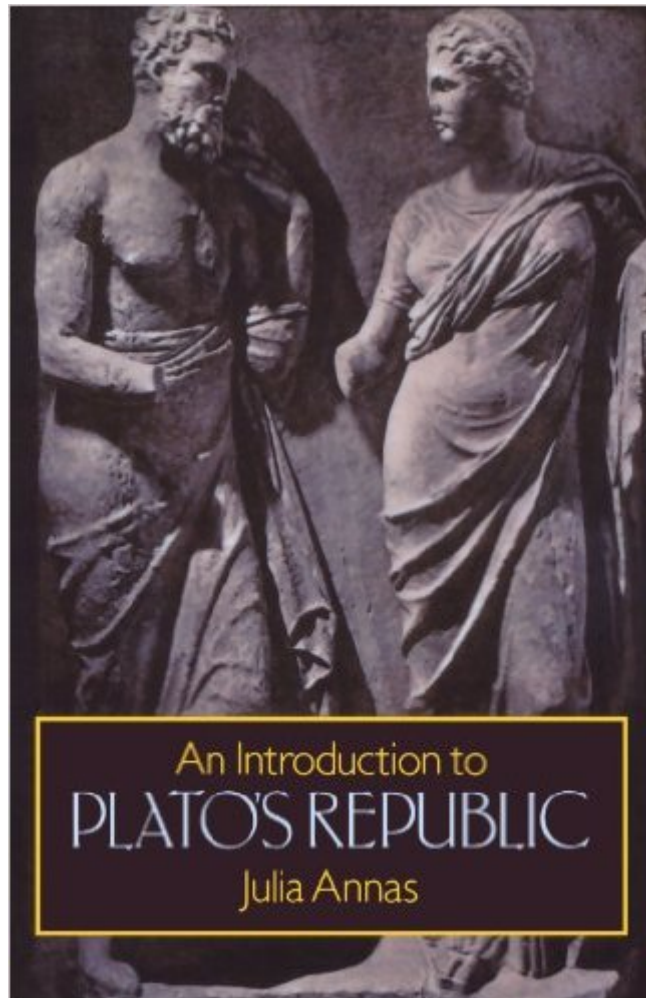


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An Introduction To Plato's Republic



Synopsis

This interpretive introduction provides unique insight into Plato's Republic. Stressing Plato's desire to stimulate philosophical thinking in his readers, Julia Annas here demonstrates the coherence of his main moral argument on the nature of justice, and expounds related concepts of education, human motivation, knowledge and understanding. In a clear systematic fashion, this book shows that modern moral philosophy still has much to learn from Plato's attempt to move the focus from questions of what acts the just person ought to perform to the more profound questions of what sort of person the just person ought to be.

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Customer Reviews

In topics such as philosophy, you certainly want to achieve a kind of clarity that makes it accessible to both old and new readers. I purchased this book for a class called History of Philosophy in which we dove in into Plato's idea of a Republic. This book rarely provides the exact readings but it does mostly offer the translations necessary in order to make sense of it all. This book provides the context in which the Republic should be understood, in an essay format which I found appropriate. It was extremely helpful especially in decoding these texts of the past, but with Annas' translations it proved to be an effective avenue. The diction and the phrasing of the words were direct and straightforward, which are two giant pillars in the explanation of philosophy.

This book grew out of Annas' experience of teaching Plato's Republic to students in a course that's

all about evaluating Plato's arguments for their philosophical merit. She aims for this goal so single-mindedly as to deprive herself from providing to her audience any further profits a book on Plato's Republic may provide - profits such as, fuel the reader's sheer enjoyment of reading Plato, or learn at a more accurate level what Plato's views were. For instance, this book makes a case for Plato being a misogynist (women-hater) and favoring dictatorship of the (almost) worst kind. Unless you happen to favor those views yourself, this won't add much to making Plato an enjoyable read for you. What's worse, however, is that the book doesn't actually spend sufficient time arguing for those interpretations, let alone addressing countervailing ones. And on that level it achieves the very opposite of what it set out to do, namely make people engage critically with a set text. You see, the idea might have been to make people read Annas so as to engage with Plato critically. The problem however is that people who aren't critically minded to begin with won't start to become so simply by being told - a point Plato's Socrates was fully aware of but this book (apparently) isn't. Rather, what I repeatedly find in student essays on the Republic is that they swallow Annas's claims, enjoy the short lived pleasure of scoring cheap points in the game called "acing your exam essay", without ever engaging critically with either Annas or (for that matter) Plato. To see what a vast difference an author can make to encourage readers to engage with his book critically, have a look at Burnyeat's "Theaetetus", a fine work on many levels, and an outstanding example of what writing on Plato can be without being mindless praise. Personally I'm glad there are more rewarding books to recommend to students of Plato's Republic these days, and if you're interested at all, I suggest you have a look at the multi-authored "Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic" (2007) and "Blackwell Guide to Plato's Republic" (2006). [Beginning of Dec 2013 edit] Having recently worked on Republic Book X, and its discussion of *poiesis*, I must say Annas' book has not aged well. Her chapter on the material shows all the usual faults that run through the book as a whole. Lack of engaging the primary text in favour of attending to personal axes to grind, focus on secondary literature (such as it is) with a narrow Anglophone focus on all but the most recent scholarship, and on the whole a tone that is offensively condescending to Plato ("hopelessly bad arguments", p. 344). The first and third of these really make for a poor reading experience overall. Take Annas' claim (p.335) that book X does not relate that well to books I-IX, that book X "itself appears gratuitous and clumsy, and is full of oddities", from which she concludes (!) that "Plato failed as a literary artist". I'm sorry, but I have a hard time to see how anyone can uphold such a view twenty years on. More recent work on book X by Myles Burnyeat (Tanner Lectures 1999, available for free online), Verity Harte (Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, 2010), or the aforementioned 2007 Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic show rather unkindly how Annas' work has passed over many nuances of book X to arrive at the

slamming verdict she does. Her chapter on book X is rife with misreadings or - as in the omission of female guardians - omissions (e.g. the whole psychology-audience, of which Burnyeat and Harte make so much in their analyses, is simply passed by). But it's those misreadings and omissions that make it often possible for Annas to attribute certain philosophical positions ('errors') to Plato at all. This is why, I feel, whatever philosophical insights one takes away from Annas have precious little to do with Plato. In saying this, I don't mean to slam Annas as an author. Indeed, I value her books on Hellenistic Ethics (Oxford 1994) and on the Middle Platonists (2000) very highly, because she allows herself much more time with the primary texts, and shows what amazing insights can be gleaned if one engages the full secondary literature beyond Anglophone binders (such as her discussion of French scholarship on the Stoics). Annas herself has set these standards in subsequent work. Measured against such standards her 1980s work on Plato simply falls short. Unless other readers have concrete points to the contrary, I uphold my view that people wanting to understand Plato's Republic will 'better look elsewhere'. [end of Dec 2013 edit]

This book is profoundly flawed. The author is oblivious to the implications of her admitted license. For instance, she uses the term 'moral' while admitting that it comes from a tradition post-dating Plato ('Introduction' p.11) and uses it to smear across distinctions Plato himself found necessary. Professor Annas refuses to deal with the core concepts, as core concepts specific to Plato's time and place, and substitutes them playfully with her own modern day conceits. I quote: "I shall use 'morality' for the area of practical reasoning carried on by an agent which is concerned with the best way for a person to live." Why does she need to do this? If one was to say 'the best way to live' as Plato himself does, is that not sufficient? Does the reader/student really need a professor to explain that Plato really means 'morality'? Baffling is why so much time is spent on non-Platonic terminology. To continually butcher 'The Republic' with these artificial terms, such as 'moral', 'values', 'society', and 'state' is to assume 'we' know more than 'they' did. This is a historical prejudice, and it does an injustice to the unsuspecting reader/student. Moreover, Professor Annas seems to be obtuse to the dramatic quality of the dialogue. An educated reader of this book cannot help but think this when the author stumbles across (454d-e) of 'The Republic' - quoting Socrates "the male begets, the female gives birth." Professor Annas then evaluates the statement, "This is an admirable argument as far as it goes; for Plato has removed any possibility of treating women as inferior as a class...but the argument suffers from being too generally stated" ('Plato's State', ch.7, p. 182 bottom). The author goes on to give her opinion on why it is too general - i.e. her considered views on the merits of a gender equality argument - which is fine and worth reading on its own

terms, if it was offered as such, but it is not offered as such. This is supposed to be a book on 'Plato's Republic', thus the title. Ask yourself- is that true? Is the only difference between men and women that men mount, or begat, and women bear, or give birth? That is what Plato and Socrates are asking? If the author of a commentary on 'The Republic' does not take that question seriously, and goes on to sum up her interpretation on the dramatic episode as: "Plato is confused." (p. 184), how can a reader take it seriously?

What is wonderful about this study by Julia Annas is the personal tone of her writing; her profound knowledge of ancient Greek philosophy and Plato is constantly confronted with her own views as a modern philosopher of our times, at times she admires Plato and at others she is shocked by his extremism. The only other study written this clearly is Nicholas White's "A Companion to Plato's Republic." The only thing I miss is a discussion of the literary, theatrical aspect of the text, the question being: are all of Socrates' views in the Republic really Plato's own? Is not Socrates a mask, an actor for Plato? Julia Annas automatically ascribes Socrates' views to Plato in her study. But this is of course an option that is possible, although not shared by all scholars.

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