

# Some notes on Plato's Republic (actually on the Cliffs Notes thereof)

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[https://www.academia.edu/28366049/Epicu...e\\_Enlightenment](https://www.academia.edu/28366049/Epicu...e_Enlightenment)

The author of the article linked above is of the "absence of pain" persuasion, but otherwise I found the article of interest as a general overview of the titular subject. The only reason I'm posting it here, however, is because it aroused my curiosity regarding Plato's Republic, which has sat on my shelf unread for decades. We've discussed Plato's thoughts on pleasure as described in [Philebus](#) here on the forum, but this article pointed out other topics of divergence between Epicurus and Plato, particularly these two:

1) *"The purpose of the 37 volumes of his (Epicurus's) On Nature is to free us from the fear of death and therefore from the control of priests and from the internal fears of the religion that Plato and his followers had in mind."*

2) From the footnotes, regarding Plato's use of the noble lie: *"For a short and explicit statement of the 'noble lie', see Polybius: 'But the quality in which the Roman commonwealth is most distinctly superior is in my opinion the nature of their religious convictions. I believe that it is the very thing which among other peoples is an object of reproach, I mean superstition, which maintains the cohesion of the Roman State. These matters are clothed in such pomp and introduced to such an extent into their public and private life that nothing could exceed it, a fact which will surprise many. My own opinion at least is that they have adopted this course for the sake of the common people. It is a course which perhaps would not have been necessary had it been possible to form a state composed of wise men, but as every multitude is fickle, full of lawless desires, unreasoned passion, and violent anger, the multitude must be held in by invisible terrors and suchlike pageantry. For this reason I think, not that the ancients acted rashly and at haphazard in introducing among the people notions concerning the gods and beliefs in the terrors of hell, but that the moderns are most rash and foolish in banishing such beliefs.'"*

Could it be that Epicurus accepted the religious festivals in this civic sense? For those who hadn't the sense to accept his philosophy and to thereby act civilly, let there be myths? Just a thought.

What follows are just some notes on the Cliffs Notes of the Republic (which has also sat on my shelf for decades, unread; I chose to read it rather than subject myself to several hundred pages of dialectic). In the following, the text in italics is paraphrasing and/or quoting from the Cliffs Notes (1963 edition). In general, I think the contrast with the thinking of Epicurus is pretty obvious and doesn't need comment from me other than to say that my representation of Plato's

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thought is grossly oversimplified. Also, I haven't addressed the big topic of the actual state that Plato is proposing. In defense of his proposal (which to me is repugnant), I assume that he's thinking of a city-state of 30,000 people or so. However the nature of his state certainly gave Epicurus much fuel for his contemplation of justice as an antidote to Plato's idea.

#### The gods:

*In educating the future leaders, they must have proper ideas of the gods. The gods can't possibly do wrong if they are really gods, plus that would be a bad example. (Book II)*

#### One noble lie, fear of death:

*Future leaders must not be afraid of death in any way, for they must grow up to be brave enough to die for their country. Therefore they mustn't be told any frightening stories of the afterlife and the underworld. (Book II)*

#### Another noble lie, the afterlife:

*The chief rewards of living a just and good life come after death. To prove that the soul survives the body: each thing has its own particular evil, which is the only thing that can destroy it. The evil of the soul has previously been proven to be injustice. But injustice does not destroy the soul in the way that sickness destroys the body, so the soul cannot be destroyed by anything and must be immortal. (Book X) This is why I don't read dialectic.*

*The greatest rewards will come after the death of the body as the afterlife is described in the Myth of Er. Er is a brave soldier who died in battle, travels through the various realms of the afterlife, and returns to life to tell of what he has seen. This ranges from eternity in hell to rebirth in the form of one's choosing.*

#### Another noble lie, the Myth of the Metals:

*Justice is the most important virtue as it lies at the root of all other virtues. What makes a society just is that each citizen performs only the one role in life to which he is best suited. A state, as a person, is like a structure with particular parts. If the parts don't function well, the whole structure breaks down. (Book IV) This is the theory, not the lie.*

*Similar to a state, the mind of a person is made up of parts. The three parts of the mind are 1) reason, 2) emotion, 3) desire. These correspond to the three classes of the state: reason to rulers, emotions to auxiliaries, and desire to craftsmen. In a "well-ordered soul" the three parts must all perform their proper function, under the leadership of reason. (Book IV) More theory. I'm curious if the Canon of Epicurus is a direct response to this as well as to the theory of forms....*

*And now, the lie: The three classes of society must not meddle in each other's business. To prevent this they should be taught to believe in a "grand and noble lie," the Myth of the Metals, in which all citizens are created by the gods and some citizens have gold in their veins, some silver, some bronze and some iron. (Book III) These metals correspond to their place in society.*

### The Theory of Forms:

*A Form, or quality, is something that is common to a number of different things. It does not just exist in the things which share the quality, but has an eternal and independent existence of its own. The everyday things that we perceive are merely "images;" to get to the truth we must look beyond the "images" to the things that they represent. One who is able to do that is a true philosopher. (Book V)*

*There are four types of "objects": 1) Goodness, which is a Form, 2) the other Forms, 3) ordinary things, 4) shadows and images. The first two of these are objects of knowledge, the second two are objects of belief. This is then developed in the "Allegory of the Cave." (Book VI) So reality is belief, and belief is reality....*

*To be a philosopher one must grasp the nature of Reality. To do this one must understand the Forms, and to do this one must learn the science of arguing logically: dialectic. (Book VII) Could this partly explain the academic bias against EP?*

### Pleasure:

*There are three types of pleasure: 1) the pleasures of knowledge, the pleasures of success, 3) the pleasures of gain and satisfaction. Only the pleasures of the just man, the pleasures of knowledge, are real pleasures: all other pleasures are somehow unreal or "illusory." Some pleasures are not really and truly pleasant; they only seem to be by contrast with pain or uneasiness. For instance, if you are very hungry, then eating a piece of stale bread will seem to be a pleasure." (Book IX) This is part of a section describing the neutral state between pleasure and pain; it is specifically stated that the absence of pain is not pleasure and the absence of pleasure is not pain.*

*Most bodily pleasures are not truly pleasant, but the pleasures of knowledge are true pleasures. And the objects of knowledge are "real," the objects of desire are just "images." (Book IX)*

### Miscellany:

*The science of astronomy did not exist in the time of Plato. For the purposes of astronomy Plato didn't consider it necessary to observe the stars very carefully: he considered calculation more important than observation. (Book VII)*

When distilled, it's hard to believe this philosophy survived at all, let alone became dominant. It must come down to the power structure and the noble lie.