
This companion to Plato’s Republic aims to guide modern readers through Plato’s dialogue and to engage them with the ideas and arguments within it. Mitchell and Lucas stress the importance of ‘feeling the force’ of Plato’s arguments—even those deemed ‘outrageous, unfashionable, (and) politically incorrect’—by recognising their relevance to contemporary issues and considering how they might be defended against contemporary objections. The book’s early chapters focus on ‘making sense’ of the ancient text, with passages given in translation and in Greek, and the later chapters emphasise central themes within the work, viewed in contemporary terms. The main goal of the book is not to offer a new commentary on the Republic, but to present the dialogue as living philosophy. For this reason, the authors acknowledge that anachronisms will be unavoidable at times, and that interpretations given will not always be rigorously defended. The book is to serve primarily as a stimulus to critical thought and discussion of Plato’s work.

The authors succeed in a number of ways to facilitate a modern reading of the Republic. They provide an excellent overview of philosophic debates bearing directly or indirectly on those arguments they consider most important in the dialogue. The discussion of Thrasymachus’ account of justice in Book 1, for example, includes an outline of the dominant classicist interpretations of this account, followed by Mitchell and Lucas’s own alternative reading, which is, in turn, compared with elements of Marxist doctrine and contrasted with views expressed by both ancient (Cicero) and modern (Hobbes, Hume, and Hart) thinkers. The overall range of areas covered within discussions is far reaching, extending from morality, politics, education, art and religion, to science, mathematics, probability, logic and language. The connections drawn within these areas are of contemporary relevance, touching on pertinent issues including pluralism, censorship, education reform, the mass media, and forms of
justification and argument. Such connections help to illustrate how both the form and content of arguments in the dialogue owe, and lend, much to a wide and diverse range of subject areas.

With respect to considerations of form, there is a concern to register with the authors' discussion of the dramatic form of the Republic. In their Introduction, they indicate the importance of the dialogue form to Plato's philosophy, stating that 'Plato believed that philosophy could only be properly carried out in the form of a dialogue, when there was a meeting of minds' (vii). But later, in discussing the structure of the dialogue, they argue that, after Republic Book 1, 'no serious dialogue' takes place between Socrates and his like-minded interlocutors (16), with the former effectively 'carrying out a monologue' unopposed by the latter. This view about the 'dialogue' between Socrates and his compliant commentators in Books 2-10 certainly complies with the overriding view of commentators on the Republic, but is not uncontroversial. Philosophers such as Miller, Clay, Rutherford and Blondell have observed the infrequent but significant opposition of interlocutors to Socrates after Book 1 (eg at 372d, 432e, 449b-450a, 457d-e, 487a-d, 471c-472b), and others, such as Strauss and Reeve, have examined the importance of links between the dramatis personae and the character types distinguished in argument, within the dialogue. While Mitchell and Lucas assert the importance of the dialogical form to Plato's philosophy, they argue (without explanation) that it is largely inconsequential to the philosophy presented in the Republic, and they ignore the explanations others have provided for defending its importance. The authors acknowledge that their interpretations of the Republic will not be defended 'up to the hilt' (ix), but this general disclaimer does not provide them with a licence to present a controversial view as uncontroversial—especially when the view is regarded as centrally important to Plato's whole philosophy.

A similar problem arises with the authors' lengthy but superficial treatment of the issues of autonomy and self-concern. These issues are repeatedly addressed in the book (eg 23, 39, 134, 141, and 146), and are said to underlie the central argument of the Republic that morality is the best policy. Implicit in this argument, they say, is an 'appeal to
overcome one’s selfishness by identifying with the ideal society, thus transmuting the unlovely concern for self into selfless idealism in promoting the good of the community’ (23), an exchange said to result in a loss of autonomy and self (134, 146). Given the space and importance allocated to this topic in the book, it is troubling that the authors nowhere support their view that the self-benefit of egoism is mutually exclusive from the other-directed benefit of altruism, or refer to the debate surrounding this issue within the literature on Plato (eg in Irwin and Reeve).

Mitchell and Lucas acknowledge in their Introduction that their opinions are controversial (ix), but fail to indicate this when simply affirming many of these views. This tendency is in keeping with their practice of providing a just hearing to those aspects of the Republic they judge deserving (eg the examination of Thrasymachus’ account of justice), and condemning without trial those aspects they judge undeserving (eg the arguments in Book 10). This practice is not unavoidable in a book that aims to introduce readers to the Republic rather than give them a scholarly commentary on it. Indeed, when the aim of the book is to engage readers with the central questions and problems of the dialogue, it is necessary to avoid this practice, or, at least, to indicate when a major debate is being side-stepped or quashed.

In commenting on this book, Paul Woodruff affirms that ‘Lucas and Mitchell waste no time with Plato’s arguments when they are bad, and spare no effort in support of his arguments when they are good’. I would agree with this comment with the qualification that the authors waste no time with Plato’s arguments when they are deemed bad, and spare no effort in support of his arguments when they are deemed good. In the latter case only, Mitchell and Lucas succeed well in their aim of providing, and promoting, engagement with the Republic.

Mairead Costigan
University of Sydney