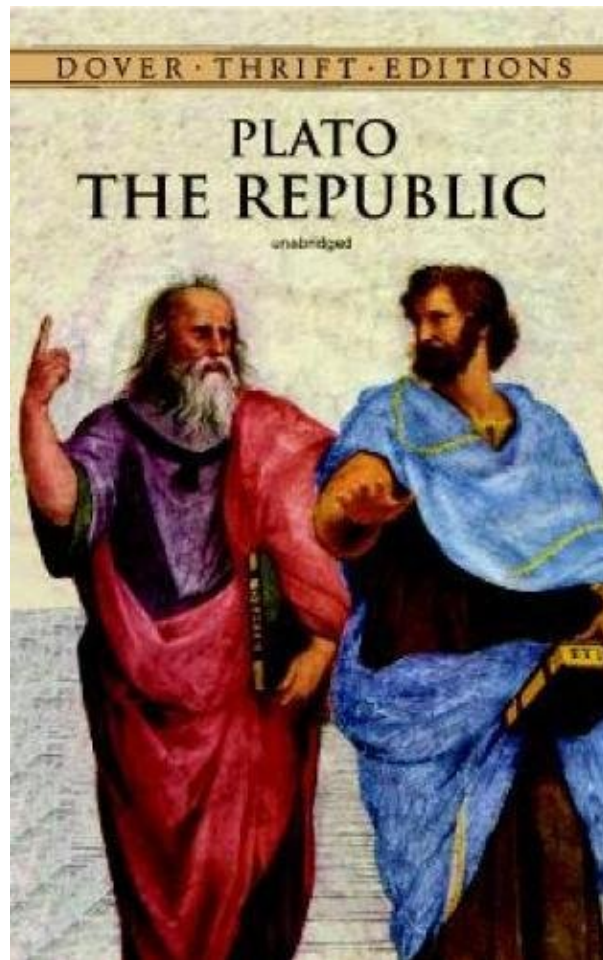


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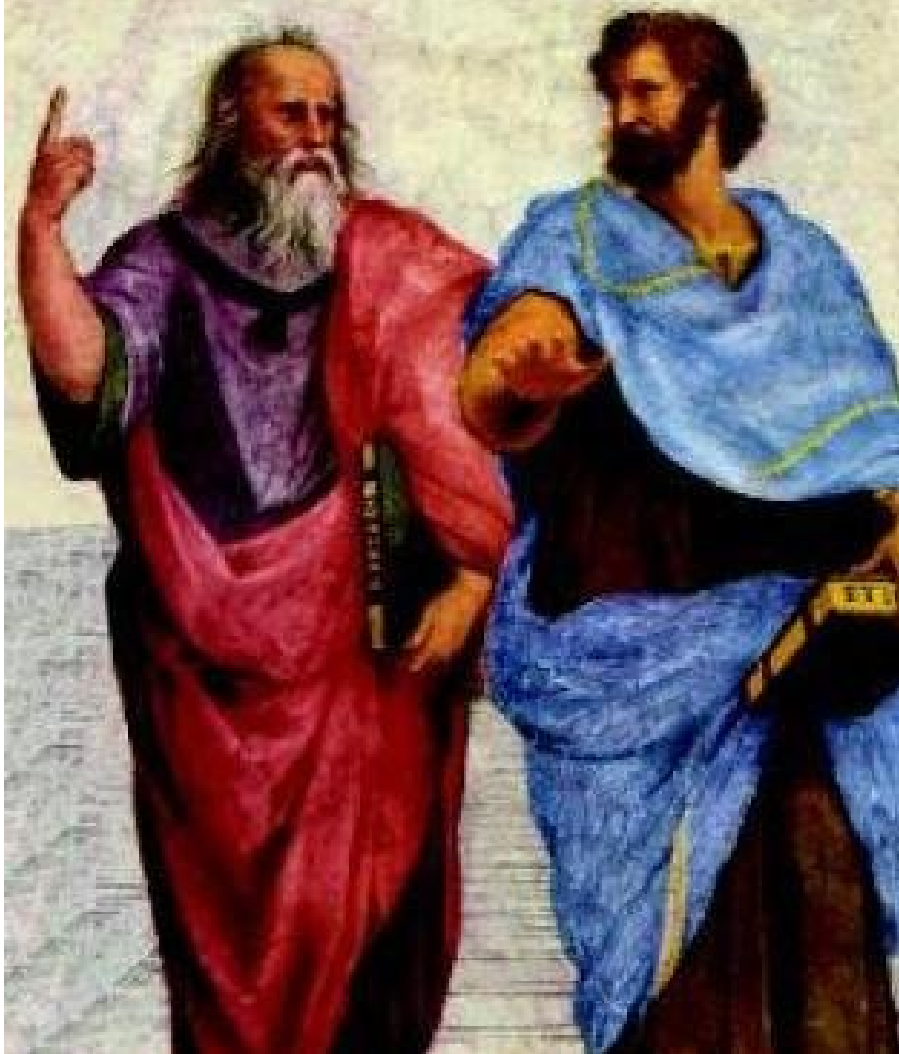
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Far from perfect, but still very good.

By Mr. S. Koller

This is a review of Christopher Rowe's new (2012) translation of Plato's masterpiece, the *Republic* (ISBN 0141442433). It is not a review of Plato's *Republic* as such, but solely of the merits and demerits of Rowe's translation.

I've never quite trusted Rowe as an exegete of Plato, as he's got too much of his own personal agenda intrude on his analysis. His joint book with Terry Penner on the *Lysis*, for instance, falls far short of giving us an unbiased, expansive, authoritative commentary on the dialogue, especially when compared to more sober competitors like Michael Bordt's in the *Göttingen Plato*.

But as a translator, Rowe has proven time and again that he's singularly scrupulous, and attentive to technical detail where it matters. His renderings of Plato's *Politicus* (*Statesman*) and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the latter published with Sarah Broadie, are probably the most authoritative around.

The same can be said for this newest of his translational efforts. In general, translations of the Republic usually err on the side of either trying too heavily to recreate the literary qualities of the original, or miss out so much of that detail because they try to be super exact on technicalities, that in either case the English falls far short of giving us a good understanding of Plato's Greek. The solution, so far, is to read Plato's Republic with (at least) two translations side by side. For instance, on the literal I've found Desmond Lee's quite good, and on the literary, Tom Griffith's stands out. Among the older ones, Paul Shorey's is particularly good on the literary side. Others, like Cornford, Waterfield, or Grube (even when revised under Reeve) can be safely avoided, for having the translators' hobby horses intrude on and mar the main text.

It's a bit hard to place Rowe on this spectrum from the literary to the literal, because he's consistently improved the situation on both sides of the spectrum - and I can think of no higher praise.

For one, Rowe has certainly outdone the rest of field by giving a more lively rendition of the flow of the dialogue, by paying more attention to the flow of the individual characters' speech. Although his translation follows the new Oxford Classical Text by Slings (2003), the punctuation is often Rowe's own and, I feel, often the superior choice. The dialogue becomes a lot more lively, and we get greater accuracy.

At the same time, Rowe's translation comes with seven hundred footnotes, and these are meticulously researched and show him on top of the current scholarly game. His translation is probably the first to unequivocally get the tricky lines in 596a correct. Mistranslations of these lines have encouraged generations of interpreters to saddle Plato with the view that one can posit a (Platonic) Form for each general term, no matter how gerrymandered. That rendering is simply false, and Rowe's note explains why. (He credits David Sedley with the point, and while Sedley's arguments are a welcome addition to the literature on this point, I wish Rowe had also mentioned Burnyeat's, on p. 298 with 298n.4 in Gail Fine's anthology 'Plato 2'.)

This increased accuracy also pervades a lot else in the translation, and I for one am grateful for it. Particularly the connecting particles, so important to the Greek flow of arguments, are given their due.

At times, however, Rowe falls short. A Platonic dialogue proceeds, usually, with (alternating) dominant speakers eliciting agreement or disagreement on particular points from their interlocutors. A great deal of text, therefore, is taken up by Plato expressing how the interlocutors express themselves on that point. Not just a 'yes' or 'no' - or the occasional, 'I don't understand, please repeat the question/point' - is in order. STRENGTH of (dis)agreement is just as important, for the respective next steps in an argument to go through. Plato's interlocutors signal their at times cautious dis/agreement on a point, with the occasional 'Perhaps...?' or the vehement 'In now way!'. The questions put to them, however, at times signal how strong the main speaker expects his dialogue partner to agree with him - with how many points just made, and how strongly. Thus at 479e5-6 we have the exchange 'ê ouch houtôs; - houtô.' Which means, 'Or is it not in (exactly) this way? - [No,] it is in exactly this way.' Which comes after five lines of contentious arguing. In Rowe, we get 'Right? - Right.' which is at once too casual and uncommittal.

Other passages show similar lapses in attention to detail. Plato's discussion of artefacts in book X has plagued commentators forever, because it's unclear why or how Plato can correlate human artefacts to (allegedly) timeless Forms. While Rowe's notes are characteristically informative of what's going on in these passages, and warn readers of the potential inconsistencies on artefact Forms, his translation looks rather unsure, tendentious even.

Plato's discussion of artefacts, especially of furnitures, centres on the term *skeuê*, which has a broad and a narrow meaning. On the narrow one, *σκευή* means furnishing, specifically 'equipment, attire, apparel' (LSJ s.v.). In Republic, book X, translators like Lee (1974) and Griffith (2000) render *σκευή*, not as furnishing,

but as furniture, given that Plato illustrates the term by the examples of a table and a couch.

On the broader meaning, conveyed by the cognate adjective *σκευαστός*, the term conveys the entire class of things 'prepared by art, artificial' (LSV s.v.), and is opposed to natural things, things produced by and in nature (*φύσει*), in Republic 510a and 515c.

Plato's discussion moves from the narrow usage (in 596b1, b5) to the broader one (596c6). Traditionally, translators convey this by translating the first use as 'furniture' (e.g. Lee and Griffith) and then go to 'artifice'.

Rowe, however, is less clear. He begins with the fully generic translation of *skeuê* as 'product(s)' for 596b, picking up the term from his equally tendentious translation of *μιμήσις* in 595c8 as 'imitation' (brackets mine to indicate his additions), and at 596c Rowe changes gear to render *skeuê* as 'manufactured items'. No attendant note is given, and readers are left to wonder, as they have for generations, what explains this sudden change of pace.

I'm not sure Rowe's approach is superior or inferior to Lee's and Griffith's, but it indicates to me abundantly that one can't rely on his translation without comparing it to others. I doubt he would disagree. At the same time, his earlier efforts on *Statesman* and *Nicomachean Ethics* have, in my opinion, done just that - become so authoritative that one can reliably work on their basis alone.

For those reasons, I'd heavily recommend customers interested in Plato's masterpiece to purchase Rowe's translation. It's clearly superior to many competitors out there. At the same time, Rowe will supplement, but not supplant, earlier efforts, particularly those of Lee and Griffith.

As far as the publisher is concerned, Penguin can be congratulated for sponsoring a new translation so soon after revising Lee's twice in the past ten years, under the careful leadership of Melissa Lane and Rachana Kamtekar.

At the same time, something is lost in the transition. I can't speak for Lane's, but Kamtekar's version of Lee offered helpful diagrams and illustrations in notes and appendices. Undergraduates, not to mention lay readers, find a lot of Plato's text hardgoing without the occasional image to explain how things 'hang together'. Plato's simile of the Line in book V, for one, is incredibly densely presented, as is the 'Spindle of Necessity' in Book VIII. Kamtekar's edition had helpful illustrations on such points, and retained Lee's wonderful introductions to sub-sections of the main text, which set the scene and pre-empted some of the more current misunderstandings that twentieth and twenty first century readers are prone to. This is now replaced by Rowe's own (3-page) synopsis of the dialogue, which is frankly a poor man's substitute for Lee.

For reasons beyond me, Penguin decided to kill this material. Rowe's notes and appendices are entirely devoid of imagery.

And, while we are at it, Rowe's reading list is, if anything, twice as short as Kamtekar's, and no longer comes into neatly categorized themes of the Republic. Writings on aesthetics had to suffer in particular. While I'm glad to see Verity Harte's and Myles Burnyeat's efforts recognized in this area, Alexander Nehamas' older - and equally good if not superior - offerings have been chopped off. The same is true for a great many other essays and books that, I feel, deserves mention to a first time audience coming to Plato. Rowe sees fit to mention Julia Annas' work on Plato. As I said in my review of her 'Introduction', this reputation is frankly undeserved and compares very poorly against recent alternatives, most of them omitted by Rowe.

In the end, then, the book is a mixed result of the very variety I've come to expect from Rowe. Top notch

translation, but a tad tendentious when it comes to the work of other scholars. Still, I'm very happy with the purchase, and would recommend it warmly to others.

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