

## Chapter 6: Plato's Republic – It's relevance to Freemasonry

Earlier when I explained how I had accidentally come across highlighted sections of *Republic* that related directly to Masonic ritual, the one thing that immediately became evident to me, was that it appeared), that our ritual was a masterful condensation of the principal theme of Plato's *Republic*.

So what *is* the principal theme of Republic? What is its premise? *Republic* proposes that in order for you and me to lead a happy and fulfilling life, we need to lead lives that are intrinsically moral. That's it.

The Greek term that Plato uses for *moral* is *dikaiosune*.

Early translators of *Republic* such as Jowett, Rieu and Grube translated *dikaiosune* as "justice". Modern translators such as Waterfield and Reeve acknowledge that the Greek word is closer in meaning to "ethical rightness" or more specifically, "morality".

The point made in *Republic* is that morality is defined as an alignment of our thinking, our feeling and our behaviour. Specifically - when what we *think* when what we *feel* and what we *do* are not in conflict with each other but are in perfect harmony and concord, it is in those express moments of our lives that we come closest to our goal of assimilating our lives into God.

So the first thing that we need to note is this – *Republic* is a detailed study of the concept of morality and the classic definition of Freemasonry is always given as "a peculiar *system* of morality". The peculiarity is not the *type* of morality but the *system* or *method* by which morality is taught. Within Freemasonry, our system of morality is taught through a process called - *ritual*.

Having understood this general premise, the logical question to put is this - how do we actually go about training ourselves to become moral?

The body of *Republic* supplies the answer to this question. Happily, it does it in a way that you and I (as Freemasons) will have no difficulty in understanding. The reason for this is that everything - within our ritual supports it.

Let me emphasise this point – *everything* – supports it.

Plato recommends that philosopher-kings need to undergo a course of education that has as its principal aim the training of the mind to achieve two distinct aims. The first is to *think clearly* while the second is to act in a way that is in concord with the Greek principle of *excellence*. The Greek word for excellence is *arête* and traditionally it is translated into English as the word that we commonly recognise as *virtue*.

The first course in a philosopher-king's education that Plato proposed – (namely that of training the mind to think clearly), was a course of subjects that we are familiar with. We refer to this course of subjects as the liberal arts and sciences.

The second course in a philosopher-king's education – (the one dealing with training the mind to act in alignment with the principle of excellence), he broke down into four distinct fields. These fields are: *Prudence*, *Temperance*, *Fortitude* and *Justice*. We will discuss these separately but for the

Republic is not a piece of political theory, but an allegory of the individual human spirit.

*W.K.C. Guthrie, quoted by Robin Waterfield in, Introduction to his translation of Republic, pg xvii.*

Plato's purpose in Republic then is to provide a kind of unified-field theory in which all the elements which make human life good, are tied together in a vision of eternal unity, orderliness and stability... His purpose was to get his readers to change their lives, to undertake the pursuit of assimilation to God.

*Robin Waterfield in Introduction to his translation of Republic, pg xxi.*

## The Influence of Plato's Republic on Freemasonry and Masonic Ritual.

time being, we can define these terms in more modern language by referring to them as *common-sense* (instead of Prudence), *life balance* (instead of Temperance), *calm thinking* (instead of Fortitude) and *acting in ways that are appropriate to the situation* (instead of Justice).

While elements of these principles may have existed in some form before Plato, Plato has the distinction of being the first person in western culture to synthesise them into a structured, coherent and logical whole.

At this early point in our examination, (for the sake of simplicity alone), I will reduce the whole of our Ritual to say that it is a distillation of the principles of *Republic* – namely that our Ritual is a *distinctive system of teaching morality* that uses as its framework, two primary studies – those of the *Liberal Arts and Sciences* as well as the *Four Cardinal Virtues*. Its purpose in doing so is to develop in a Freemasonic candidate the *intellectual* and *character attributes* required of a philosopher-king.

At its most basic level, this is a very convenient point at which to begin so we will begin our discussion by uncovering the basic link between Plato's concept of the philosopher-king and the Worshipful Master of our lodge.