

Further Reading after *Fireborne*: Plato's *Republic*

The revolutionary regime in *Fireborne* is inspired by the theoretical “Just City” imagined in Plato's *Republic*, a Greek dialogue from the 4th century B.C.E where Plato describes a conversation his teacher Socrates has with his friends in the forum. Their conversation covers a whole host of topics, but most importantly for this guide, it's about worldbuilding: Socrates and his buddies end up brainstorming the themes and set-up for a perfect society, almost as if they were planning a sci fi novel. The theme they want to explore is justice, but the worldbuilding they do for their imaginary city is *crazy*. Though they think they're planning a utopia, pretty soon it starts to sound more like a dystopian YA novel.

This reading guide will explain the framework of the *Republic*, then look at key elements that have a counterpart in *Fireborne*'s Guardians, metal-coded class structure, and artistic censorship, particularly of epic poetry. Specific passages in the *Republic* will be referred to in the footnotes for those interested in closer reading.

Set up (Books 1-2)

Socrates runs into some buddies on his way home to Athens and they start arguing about what is justice. A couple of different definitions are proposed but all of them are shot down by the pesky Socrates. Eventually someone gives up and points out that it's better to be unjust, anyway. The group of friends challenges Socrates to prove him wrong, and prove not only that it's better to be just – but that it's better to be just regardless of whether or not you get rewarded for it.

This prompts Socrates to introduce the analogy central to the *Republic*, comparing the human soul to a city. To study justice in the *soul*, Socrates decides, one must study justice in the *city* – so, he says, let's imagine a perfectly just city. That's when the moral philosophy transforms into political theory and the sci fi worldbuilding begins.¹

The Guardians

The first unusual element Socrates and his friends add to their imaginary city is *guardians*, who must be *spirited* warriors but also deeply *philosophical*. They should be trained from a young age, their education carefully monitored so that they excel physically and mentally, and they should be taught moderation in all things. They

¹ For the city-soul analogy, see 368d-e. (Stephanus reference numbers should work with most translations.)

shouldn't be allowed or desire private possessions or money. And – most revolutionary of all, as far as Socrates' friends are concerned – Socrates decides that women should be allowed to be guardians, too. As their training progresses, the most excellent of these guardians will be further culled and prepared, not only to defend their city, but to rule it. These ruler-guardians, who spurn worldly pleasures, love justice, and guide the City with their reason, are also called *philosopher kings*.²

A noted difference between Plato's guardian program and the one in *Fireborne* is that, while in both cases guardians forswear families, the *Republic* also assigns them sexual partners on a rotating basis in what seems to be a proto-eugenics program, authorizes them to copulate only on specific holidays, and has them raise all offspring in common.³

Myth of the Metals, Testing, and Propaganda

In order to ensure that the best and brightest become guardians, but no one else feels bad about the lot assigned to them in the city, Socrates argues that a mythology will have to be created to justify the class structure. They'll tell everybody that they're born with a different kind of metal inside them. Guardians have silver and gold inside them, craftsmen and farmers have iron or bronze, etc. Children are tested to see what kind of metal they have inside them, so that a gold child can be found in a bronze family, and vice versa – ensuring that ability always matches station. The details of this testing are never elaborated. Socrates refers to the useful propaganda about metals as a *noble lie*.⁴

Censorship of Art

From as early as book 2, Socrates zeroes in on the idea that art should be engineered to promote virtue in the City. Poetry that models unvirtuous behavior, or depicts bad people being rewarded, should be banned so that it doesn't corrupt its readers. But then he takes the argument one step further. *All* imitative poetry should be banned because, being imitative, it's a step removed from reality – in other words, lies. Socrates regretfully decides that the poets should be sent out of the City, even though he admits

² Guardians must be spirited and philosophical: 374e-376c.

Moderation: 402e-404.

No private property or money: 416d-417b.

Female guardians: 456a-457b

Ruler-guardians: 413c-414b.

Philosopher kings: 473d-e.

³ The really weird parts of the guardian program are all in Book 5.

Sexual communism: 457c-458b.

Eugenics program & holiday-sanctioned sex: 459a-460b.

All offspring raised in common: 460b-461e

⁴ Noble lie: 414c.

Myth of the metals: 414d-415d.

to have grown up loving Homer (and quotes it throughout the *Republic*). Poetry will be let back in as soon as someone can make a case that it's not only pleasurable but *beneficial*.⁵

As you might expect, these arguments for artistic censorship have long been some of the most controversial elements of the *Republic*. They tend not to sit well with artists or anyone who would argue that the job of art is, in some way, to depict truth, good and bad, rather than to instruct morality.⁶ There is also a certain mystery around Plato's level of seriousness about these arguments and his own feelings about art. On the one hand, legend has it that as a young man, Plato wanted to be a playwright until he met Socrates and burned all his plays. And yet, the way he chose to record his teacher's wisdom was as dialogues, itself an imitative art – and by the logic of the *Republic*, deserving to be banned.

Fictional adaptations of the *Republic*

Ironically, for its condemnation of the literary arts, the *Republic* has been inspiring fiction for centuries. Most recently, its influence can be seen in science fiction ranging from episodes of *Star Trek* to Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* the novels of Pierce Brown. Few of these concern themselves with how such a regime would come into being in the first place; a notable exception is Jo Walton's *The Just City*, which takes literally Socrates' suggestion of gathering a bunch of ten year olds on an island and starting from scratch.⁷ *Fireborne* makes a less literal interpretation, but is likewise concerned with what the first generation would make of such a regime shift.

⁵ Moral censorship of poetry: 377c-392b.
"Imitative art" defined: 392d-394c.
Poetry as removed from truth: 598b-c.
Expulsion of the poets: 398a-b; 606e-607c.
Defense of poetry called for: 607d.

⁶ A notable example of such a counterpoint can be found in Aristotle's *Poetics*, where Aristotle argues that poetry speaks to universal truths. Aristotle was Plato's student.

⁷ Starting from scratch with ten-year-olds: 541a.