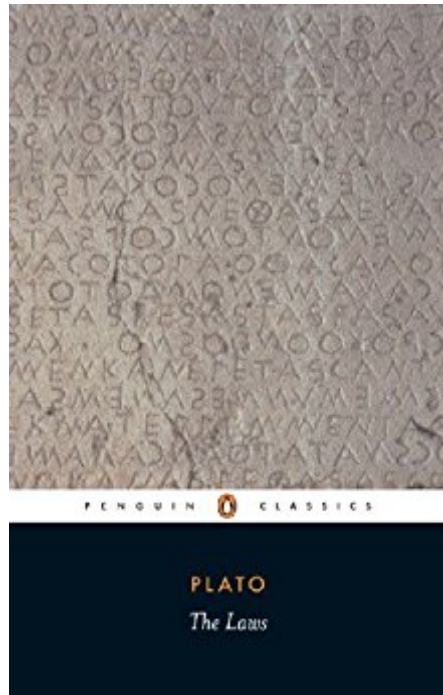


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The Laws (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

In the *Laws*, Plato describes in fascinating detail a comprehensive system of legislation in a small agricultural utopia he named Magnesia. His laws not only govern crime and punishment, but also form a code of conduct for all aspects of life in his ideal state - from education, sport and religion to sexual behaviour, marriage and drinking parties. Plato sets out a plan for the day-to-day rule of Magnesia, administered by citizens and elected officials, with supreme power held by a Council. Although Plato's views that citizens should act in complete obedience to the law have been read as totalitarian, the *Laws* nonetheless constitutes a highly impressive programme for the reform of society and provides a crucial insight into the mind of one of Classical Greece's foremost thinkers.

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Customer Reviews

Plato's "Republic" is used most often in college courses to illustrate Plato's thoughts on politics, but it does not seem to contain a serious political program. The characters in the "Republic" are mostly young men not yet entrusted with political responsibility who are, nevertheless, concerned with

justice and how a city would have to be composed in order to be fully just. That such a city could never, in fact, come about becomes less important than the questions of justice and soul that the discussion raises. Obviously (and by Plato's intention) the "Republic" does not present a practical political program. Students relying on this dialogue alone to get a sense of Plato's thoughts on the best regime may be led astray, especially if they are guided by a bad teacher (of which there are many in the universities). The best corrective to this is to read Pangle's translation of Plato's "Laws". In this dialogue an Athenian Stranger discusses various proposed laws with a Cretan who is shortly to assist in the founding of the new colony of Magnesia. The laws and regulations proposed by the Stranger are concessions to the way men are, rather than idealistic portraits of how they should be. The rule of philosopher-kings is not proposed, and the fact that all three interlocutors come from cities that at one time or another were at war with one another introduces a note of distrust and seriousness that is missing in the more playful "Republic"; this seriousness befits the discussion's more practical nature. Pangle's translation is literal and trustworthy where other translations take liberties with Plato's terminology, while the notes ameliorate the limitations of the translation form.

When one thinks of Plato and his ideas of politics, one naturally gravitates toward his best-known work, the Republic. In that book, Plato set up the ideal city-state, with classes born and bred to specific functions and roles in society, and a sense of philosophical outlook consistent across the board. However, such a society was unlikely to be brought out, in Plato's time and, as it turned out, in any other. Plato tried at different times to persuade rulers to become his envisioned philosopher-king; the last attempt was with a tyrant of Syracuse, who in the end imprisoned Plato rather than following his directions. Plato wrote this work, 'The Laws', as the last of his dialogues. Its difference from the Republic is immediately apparent in the absence of Socrates as a character - Plato at the end of his life has finally taken to working in his own right and not through a proxy. Just looking at the contents will show the breadth of this work - it involves practically every aspect of civil society: legislative bodies (and Plato has some scathing commentaries on some that he has known); education and its proper role and method (including even drinking parties as part of the educational process); ideas of monarchy, democracy, and the balance of power (some American constitutional ideas were generated from a reading (and occasional misreading) of this work); civil administration; arts and sciences; military and sports training; sexual conduct; economics; criminal law, torts, and judicial process; religion and theology; civil law, property and family law; Plato even argues for the need of a 'nocturnal council', one that delves not only into the practical aspects of the law, but also their philosophical bases.

I own the Penguin Classics Trevor J. Saunders edition and it is the only version of *The Laws* I have read. More appropriately named than 'The Republic', 'The Laws' is wholly and actually interested in the ideal State and how to run it. 'The Laws' illuminates many of the specifics lacking in 'The Republic', but is a distinct concept better described as a companion to 'The Republic' than a replacement or reformulation of it. I even noticed some interesting overlap with Confucian thought! 'The Laws' is hardly a dialogue at all and, as another reviewer put it, is more akin to a treatise on the ideal government and society. If you are interested in the specifics of Plato's utopia, then I highly recommend this work--if not this particular translation. While the translation read just fine, I was highly irritated by the translator butting his head in and making almost universally pointless and trite commentary in the prefaces to each 'book', that often had a dismissive and unjustifiably apologetic tone--as if he was ashamed to present us with Plato's ideas and words and unconfident that readers could navigate the work on their own. These 'summaries'/'explanations' belong in the back of the book, if anywhere. Saunders also makes excessive notes that simply refer to other notes, which will waste your time flipping to the back and interrupt your reading; I can only assume these have some value for referencing the work later, but they tend to make you distrust his other notes, which can be worthwhile--when he isn't griping about how difficult or confusing the Greek is... There are also an immense number of subheadings that are helpful for reference, but tended to disrupt a consecutive reading.

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