

IS101 Plato's Republic and Its Interlocutors

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Times: Tue/Thu 14:00 – 15:30

Course Description

Bard College Berlin's core curriculum begins with a semester-long engagement with Plato's *Republic* in dialog with the main works and movements that shaped its cultural and intellectual context. *Republic* offers a unique point of entry into the epochal literary, philosophical, and political achievements of fifth and fourth century Athens. It draws us into a conversation about ethical, political, aesthetic, religious, epistemic, and literary questions that are fundamental to human life. Rather than a series of separate treatises, *Republic* treats these questions as the subject of a single investigation that transcends the boundaries of time, place, or discipline. And while it may be said to contain a "social contract" theory, a theory of psychology, a theology, a critique of art, a theory of education, and a typology of political regimes, it is reducible to none of these. This book, perhaps in a manner unlike any other written before or after, offers an illuminating starting point for any set of inquiries one might wish to pursue today.

In this course we shall be particularly attentive to the dialogic character of Plato's writing and to its exchanges with other authors, works, genres and modes of thought. We read *Republic* alongside Homer's *Iliad*, Hesiod's *Works and Days*, selections from Sappho, Aristophanes' *Assembly Women*, selections from Parmenides; the architecture of the Parthenon, Euripides' *Bacchae*. We shall also explore *Republic's* resonance with - and critique of - avant-garde theater. Attending to the interlocutors, with which *Republic* is engaged, we will strive to better understand and evaluate its arguments and drama. Reading and discussing the dialogue together, we aim to become engaging interlocutors for Plato and for one another.

Course Readings

Required books (you must have your own copy of the specific edition with this ISBN)

- * *The Republic of Plato*, tr. Alan Bloom (ISBN: 978-0465069347)
- * Course Reader (print edition)
- * Homer, *Iliad*, tr. Stanley Lombardo / Robert Fagles (available from the library)

Library and Book Purchase Policies

Students are expected to purchase the required books. Students on financial aid can request to loan required books from the library. All other readings will be in the course reader.

Requirements

Class preparation

Preparing for class means reading thoughtfully and engaging with the text, for instance, by thinking through the argument of a particular section and taking notes while reading. Try to formulate and address questions in advance: Why do the characters argue as they do? If you don't like an interlocutor's answer to Socrates, how would *you* answer? And how would you explain and justify that answer to others in conversation around the seminar table? To aid your preparation, this syllabus includes short blurbs and study questions for the course readings. Do read and use them!

Attendance and participation

Regular attendance and active participation is essential to the success of this course. Missing more than two 90-minute sessions in a semester will significantly reduce your participation grade. Late arrival or leaving during class time will count as an absence. Missing more than 30% of all sessions would mean failing the course. Consult the Student Handbook for regulations governing periods of illness or leaves of absence.

Use of Electronics

To facilitate a focused and engaging seminar discussion, the use of electronic devices during class time is only allowed for disability accommodation. Using electronics in class will reduce your seminar grade. If you have a disability accommodation please inform your instructor at the beginning of the rotation.

Writing Assignments and Assessment

Over the course of the term you will participate in **two** seminar groups, each led by a different instructor. In each of these "rotations" you will submit an essay as well as one short writing exercise. The deadlines for all writing assignments are listed below.

Essays: The Midterm essay responds to a thematic question and should represent your understanding of one aspect of the course reading. The Final essay is expected to be more ambitious and somewhat longer, trying to develop a more comprehensive account of a particular question or topic you will have encountered during the semester.

Writing Exercises: You will also prepare two short writing exercises (one in each rotation). The writing exercises focus on specific skills of close reading.

Late Submission of Papers

Please note the following policy from the Student Handbook on the submission of essays: *essays that are up to 24 hours late will be downgraded one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline and cannot receive a grade of higher than C. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment.*

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the staunchest regard for academic integrity and expects good academic practice from students in their studies. Failing to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section III Academic Misconduct.

Grade Breakdown

Seminar grade: 30% (15% per rotation); Writing exercises (750 words): 20% (10% per rotation)
Midterm Essay (1500 words): 20%; Final Essay (2000 words): 30%

Schedule

semester week	Tuesday session 14-15:30	Thursday session 14-15:30	writing assignments
1. Sep 2-6	Iliad 1-6 Lecture hall	Iliad 7-12	L&T essay + 300-word reflection, due Sat, 7 Sept, 23:59
2. Sep 9-13	Iliad 13-18	Iliad 19-24	Iliad Exercise due Sun, Sept 15, 23:59
3. Sep 16-20	Republic 1	Republic 1	
4. Sep 23-27	Republic 2	Hesiod	
5. Sep 30 – 4	Hesiod (DH) Lecture hall	HOLIDAY	
6. Oct 7-11	Republic 3	Sappho	
7. Oct 14-18	Republic 4	Republic 5	Midterm Essay due Sat, Oct 19, 23:59
8. Oct 21-25	Assembly Women	Republic 5	
Oct 28 - Nov 1	FALL BREAK		
9. Nov 4 – 8	Republic 6	Parmenides	
10. Nov 11-15	Republic 6	Parthenon (GL) Lecture hall	
11. Nov 18-22	Republic 7	Republic 7 (TC) Lecture hall	Rep 7 Exercise due Sun, Nov 24, 23:59
12. Nov 25- 29	Republic 8	Republic 9	Nov. 28 @ 19:30, SPECIAL EVENT <i>What is Democracy?</i> (2018)
13. Dec 2-6	Bacchae	Dionysus in 69 (AT+HS) Lecture hall @19:30	
14. Dec 9-13	Republic 10 (FG)	Republic 10	
15. Dec 16-20	Final Essay due: Wednesday, 18 December, 23:59		

Deadlines

L&T Essay + 300-word reflection: Saturday, 7 September

Iliad Exercise: Sunday, 15 September

Midterm Essay: Saturday, 19 October

Republic 7 Exercise: Sunday, 24 November

Final Essay: Wed, 18 December

Course Overview, with study questions

Homer's *Iliad*

Homer's *Iliad* was the cornerstone of ancient Greek education. Much of the conversation in Plato's *Republic* presents itself as a critique of Homer, and of the cosmic vision and heroic ideals depicted in the *Iliad*. In our two-week long engagement with the epic, we prepare the way into *Republic* by discussing Homer's view of the universe and the place of human beings and institutions in it.

Study Questions:

- * Does Achilles have a definition of justice? If so, what would it sound like?
- * What motivates Homeric heroes to die in battle? How unique is Achilles in this respect?
- * Why does Homer devote so much attention to the material nature of objects like warriors' armor and weaponry, and perhaps especially the "Shield of Achilles"?
- * Why does Homer's narration end as it does, with the return of Hector's body and its burial?

Republic 1

Book 1 is a microcosm of the *Republic*. Through a series of radically different encounters –the "arrest" of Socrates in the beginning; the folk-wisdom of Cephalus; the first display of Socratic questioning with Cephalus's son Polemarchus; and the vehement debate with Thrasymachus, itself a whole of different parts – it introduces the themes that stay with the dialogue throughout. These different encounters also teach us that paying attention to what participants *say* and *do* is crucial for understanding both the questions they raise (how does the philosopher relate to the city? what is justice? what is the role of the gods and the afterlife? who is a true friend? is there wisdom in poetry?), as well as the reasons we fail to answer such questions in a satisfactory way.

Study Questions:

- * Why does *Republic* open as it does?
- * How does the question of justice arise in *Republic* 1? Can you see a connection between the particular definitions of justice and their champions, i.e., between character and argument?
- * Why is Thrasymachus so worked up? What, if anything, is wrong with the way Socrates refutes him?

Republic 2 and Hesiod's *Works and Days*

Republic 2 has a lot to say about the human relation to the divine and the role of poetic tradition in shaping our ethical views. In examining these claims, we begin to outline the differences between the Homeric image of the good life and Plato's reworking (and proposed censorship) of it. Like the *Republic*, the *Works and Days* is about education and justice. Presented as a lesson to his unjust brother, Hesiod's work is curiously similar to Plato's: Glaucon and Adeimantus were Plato's brothers. But there are important differences as well: Hesiod's instruction is for a private farmer, not a public "guardian." And his teaching is saturated with a kind of religiosity that Socrates finds problematic.

Study Questions:

- * Why are Glaucon and Adeimantus dissatisfied with the way the argument has gone? What do their particular dissatisfactions tell us about each of their characters?
- * What is wrong with the portrayal of Homeric gods and heroes, according to Socrates? And why does he insist that poetry or storytelling must be censored?
- * What is the view of good and fulfilling human life that emerges from Hesiod's poem? What is the significance of the 'Five Ages' myth (106-201) for Hesiod's account of a just man?

Republic 3 and Sappho

Book 3 elaborates on the education for the guardians of the city-in-speech. Foregrounding the role of music and gymnastics, Socrates critiques the works of Homer and Hesiod as unsuitable for the education of a just guardian, even while drawing on Hesiod in the famous Noble Lie. Focusing on epic and drama, *Republic* seems to ignore lyric poetry. Yet not without reason we bring in Sappho, one of the most famous ancient lyric poets, as an interlocutor to *Republic* 2 and 3. While there is no explicit account of lyric poetry in the *Republic*, it may be that "dithyramb" means "lyric" in the most relevant passage of *Republic* (394b-c). Also as a poetic imitation Plato's *Republic* is closer to lyric rather than dramatic performance, as Socrates is the only speaker.

Study Questions:

- * According to Socrates, what exactly is wrong with Hesiod's poetry? Does Socrates' critique of Hesiod differ from his critique of Homer?
- * What is the purpose of the Noble Lie? How can lying be permissible, let alone "noble"? How does it differ from Hesiod's myth?
- * How does lyric poetry differ from the epic of Homer and Hesiod?
- * What is the view of good and fulfilling human life that emerges from Sappho's poems? What role do gods and powerful emotional states play in this view?

Republic 4 and 5

In Book 4 of the *Republic*, after addressing Adeimantus's objection that the life of the guardians is not happy, Socrates leads Glaucon toward a precise view of the divided nature of the human soul, and the guiding role of reason. In so doing, the two of them come to a shared understanding of how the soul can be one, how this is the very meaning of justice, and why this is the only life worth living. The impending death of Socrates is referred to implicitly many times in the dialogue. Indeed, *Republic* may be said to open with the assembled group "arresting" Socrates in "tragic" fashion. In book Five the arrest is restaged this time as comedy as the group "forces" the neglected issue of women and children. In response, Socrates introduces three radical proposals that entail the dissolution of the private family. In the course of justifying them, the promises and dangers of philosophy—with which we need to grapple, if we are to fully understand Socratic education—come to the fore.

Study Questions:

- * Why does Adeimantus believe that the guardians will not be happy? Is happiness relevant to the problem of justice?
- * Why is Leontius so angry with himself about looking at corpses (440a-c)? What do we learn from this internal conflict?
- * Is justice in the city like justice in the soul? Why or why not?
- * Why is the conclusion reached at the end of *Republic* 4 dissatisfying? What is missing?
- * What exactly is the problem that calls for Socrates's radical solutions in Book 5? Are these solutions adequate?

Book 5 and *Assembly Women*

Socrates' radical proposals owe a great deal to Athens' greatest comic poet Aristophanes. *Assembly Women* explores, with the characteristic means of comedy, the abolition of private property, dissolution of the family, and a rule of the wise that Plato's Socrates insists are indispensable for a just society. Reading the play side by side with *Republic* brings to the fore both the comic features of Socrates' teaching, and its critique of comedy. It anticipates the contest between poetry and philosophy in *Republic* 10.

Study Questions:

- * Who is Praxagora and what are the problems with Athens, which she proposes to resolve?
- * Praxagora promises to turn the city into "one great dwelling house for all." Does she succeed?
- * Is radical equality possible? Is it desirable? How is erotic love relevant to the problem of justice?
- * What kind of challenge, according to the play, does philosophical radicalism pose to political life? And why, in Socrates' view, is comedy inimical to philosophy?

***Republic* 6 and Parmenides**

Republic 6 begins with the paradox that philosophy, useless as it may seem, is truly the most useful practice for life in the city. This tension is then resolved, or perhaps only deepened, through two intertwined images: (1) the sun as the good, bringing all into being through its light; (2) a line, representing all things that can be known, cut according to the proportion that holds between each of the kinds of things the soul can come to know. Both images owe much to Parmenides. Parmenides' Proem, which describes truth as the only light in a world of confusion and darkness, and reveals two "ways" that a human being can follow in seeking knowledge, being and non-being, finds numerous echoes in *Republic* 6.

Study Questions:

- * Early in book 6 Socrates defends the value of philosophy in light of its apparent uselessness. Are you persuaded?
- * What exactly are the "two ways" described in Parmenides' Proem? How can human beings attain true knowledge?
- * What is the sun? Socrates presents it as the cause of all that is, or can be, and all that is known, or can be known. But is it, itself, a thing that is? Can it be known?
- * How does Socrates' geometrical construction ("the divided line" [509d]) as an image of the proper order of education in cultivating a philosophic soul compare to Parmenides' "two ways"?

***Republic* 7 and the Parthenon**

Book 7 opens with the most celebrated of all Platonic images: the allegory of the cave that culminates the discussion about philosophic education. A crucial instance of philosophical poetry, the story of the cave depicts the effect of education as a "turning-around" (*periagogē*, in Latin = "conversion") of souls that is both liberating and potentially dangerous. The Parthenon, Greece's most famous architectural landmark, dominated the Athenian civic landscape during Plato's lifetime. With the help of BCB faculty member Geoff Lehman, we shall discuss how the building's architectural and artistic features, especially its use of various small whole number ratios as a foundation for nearly every element of its design, illustrate what *Republic* 7 has to say about the need for education to involve "problems" so as to propel the mind on the path of dialectic.

Study Questions:

- * How does the Parthenon "educate"? What kind of education does it represent?
- * What are the political dimensions of the allegory of the cave? Why is philosophical education potentially dangerous, and how does Socrates propose to deal with these dangers?
- * What do Socrates' references to eyesight and fire say about the character of the individual soul?
- * (Why) Do "problems" "summon the intellect"? What does this have to do with mathematics?

Republic 8 and Republic 9

Having scaled the summits of the city-in-speech, the only way seems to be down. Book 8 charts the degeneration of the best regime of city and soul into timocracy, oligarchy, democracy (!) and, finally, the very worst constitution – tyranny. Book 9 of the *Republic* is largely devoted to an account of the tyrannical man, who is there characterized as fundamentally erotic. This description, however, seems also to apply to the true guardian or philosopher. Turning (in Book 9) to a deeper analysis of the nature of human desire, Socrates tries to distinguish the philosopher from the tyrant. Does he succeed?

Study Questions:

- * Why do cities and souls degenerate? Is regime change simply a story of decay for Socrates?
- * Which of the regimes discussed in Book 8 is most hospitable to philosophy? Why?
- * What motivates the tyrannical man? Does he succeed in getting what he desires?
- * Which, in Socrates' view, is the happiest life, and why? Are you persuaded?

Euripides, *Bacchae* and *Dionysus in 69*

Written in exile, Euripides' last play, the *Bacchae*, is a meditation on the nature of tragic drama and its relation to the city. What is Euripides saying about tragedy? What are the sources of the city's resistance to Dionysus (the god of wine and theater)? Does the *Bacchae* answer Socrates' charges against tragedy, or does it seem to confirm them? After discussing the play we'll watch a modern adaptation: The theatre performance *Dionysus in 69* directed by Richard Schechner is a radical interpretation of the *Bacchae* in the context of the counterculture of the 1960s. It challenged traditional notions of theatre by deconstructing Euripides' text, mixing it with improvisation, and involving the spectators in a communal experience. It is considered a groundbreaking moment in the history of avant-garde theatre and performance art.

Study Questions:

- * How does Pentheus understand the meaning of the "new" Dionysus cult? Is his understanding mistaken, if so in what way?
- * What is the significance of Pentheus' cross-dressing (especially if we keep in mind that female characters were played by male actors on the Greek stage)?
- * Where do your sympathies lie? Do they change over the course of the play?
- * How does this play help illuminate Socrates' claim that tragic art is a terrible temptation for "the best of us?"

Republic 10

Book 10 begins with the exclusion of tragedy from the city that Socrates demands as necessary for justice to arise in the city. A second critique of poetic imitation paves the way for discussing the rewards of justice that take up the rest of the book. Socrates then closes the conversation that is the *Republic* with a mythical vision of what awaits the soul after death, showing how the powers of philosophy and the role of choice fit into the wider workings of the cosmos. In this final book, philosophy is conveyed in the medium of poetry to offer a vision of human life as an erotic transcendence toward the good.

Study Questions:

- * What is the purpose of the analogy between poetry and painting and how does it relate to the epistemology of Republic 5-6? What is wrong with imitation (*mimesis*) in Socrates' view?
- * What in the end is the problem with Homeric poetry? How does this second account of poetry relate to the discussion in books 2-3?
- * How are we to understand the "Myth of Er"? What might it mean that *Republic*, which seems to display so much hostility to poetry and imitative art, ends in this fashion?