

# IS101 Plato's *Republic* and Its Interlocutors

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Course Times: Tuesday 14:00-15:30, Thursday 14:00-15:30

## Course Description

Bard College Berlin's core curriculum begins with a semester-long engagement with Plato's *Republic* in dialogue with the main works and movements that shaped its cultural and intellectual context. The *Republic* offers a unique point of entry into the epochal philosophical, political, and literary achievements of fifth and fourth-century Athens. Through its depiction of Socrates in conversation, it draws us into a dialogue about ethical, political, aesthetic, and epistemic questions that are fundamental to human life. As an exemplar of radical questioning, both in Plato's time and beyond, the figure of Socrates will be a critical resource for our own engagements with the contemporary world. Rather than a series of separate treatises, the *Republic* addresses its themes as the subject of a single investigation that transcends disciplinary boundaries as we have come to conceive them. And while it may be said to contain a social contract theory, a theory of psychology, a theology, a critique of mimetic art, a theory of education, and a typology of political regimes, it is reducible to none of these. In its aspiration and scope, the *Republic* offers an illuminating starting point for the endeavour of liberal education.

In this course, we will be particularly attentive to Socratic questioning and the dialogic character of Plato's writing in its exchanges with other authors, genres and modes of thought. We will start with the Near Eastern poem *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which anticipates many of the themes we will encounter throughout the course. We will also read the *Republic* alongside Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, Homer's *Iliad*, Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen*, selections from Sappho, the architecture of the Parthenon, and Euripides' *The Bacchae*. Attending to the interlocutors with which the *Republic* is engaged, we will strive to better understand and evaluate its arguments and drama. Concluding this course, we will trace some more recent engagements with Socrates in politics, liberal education and civil rights movements by reading selections from M.K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

## Course Readings

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

*The Republic of Plato*, tr. Allan Bloom, Second or Third Edition (ISBN-13: 978-0-465-09408-0)

*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, tr. Andrew George, Second Edition 2020 (ISBN-13: 978-0-140-44919-8)

Course Reader (print version)

## Library and Book Purchase Policies

Students are expected to purchase the required books. A limited number of the required books are available on loan from the library. Students on financial aid have priority in requesting library books. All other readings will be in the course reader, which will be distributed in the library.

## 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 preparatory effort, this syllabus includes short summaries and study questions for the course readings.

### Attendance and participation

Regular attendance and active participation are 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 will result in failing the course. Consult the Student Handbook for regulations governing periods of illness or leaves of absence. All sessions marked as a plenum or lecture on the schedule will take place online. Since we will be using the Zoom application for online lectures, it is necessary to have this app. on your devices. During any online session, it is strongly encouraged to have your camera on. If you cannot attend class because of a COVID-19 related issue, an alternative will be made available. For the most up-to-date information on COVID-19 related policies, please refer to the "COVID-19 SAFETY" page on the BCB website.

### Use of electronics

To facilitate a focused and engaging seminar discussion the use of electronic devices during class time is not allowed, unless for disability accommodation. If you have a disability accommodation please inform your instructor at the beginning of the rotation.

### Writing assignments

Over the course of the term you will participate in two seminar groups, each led by a different seminar leader. In each of these "rotations" you will submit an essay. The deadlines for all writing assignments can be found under "essay deadlines."

**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 longer, trying to develop a more comprehensive account of a particular question or topic you will have encountered during the semester.

### Policy on 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.*

## Grade Breakdown

Participation Grade: 30% (15% for each rotation)

Midterm Essay (2000 words): 30%

Final Essay (3000 words): 40%

## Schedule

Week	Tuesday	Thursday	Writing Assignments
<b>Rotation 1</b> Aug. 31, Sept. 2	Liberal Arts Plenum: Apology of Socrates	Apology of Socrates	
Sept. 7, 9	The Epic of Gilgamesh (Tablet I-VII)	The Epic of Gilgamesh (Tablet VIII-XI)	
Sept. 14, 16	Republic 1	Republic 1	
Sept. 21, 23	Republic 2	Iliad, Book 1	
Sept. 28, 30	Republic 2	Republic 3	
Oct. 5, 7	Sappho	Republic 4	
Oct. 12, 14	Assemblywomen	Republic 5	<u>Midterm Essay due Saturday, Oct. 16, 23:59</u>
Fall Break (No classes)			
<b>Rotation 2</b> Oct. 26, 28	Republic 5	Republic 6	
Nov. 2, 4	Republic 6	Republic 7 Lecture (Tracy)	
Nov. 9, 11	Republic 7	Parthenon Lecture (Geoff)	
Nov. 16, 18	Republic 8	Republic 9	
Nov. 23, 25	The Bacchae Guest Lecture 20:00-21:30	The Bacchae	
Nov. 30, Dec. 2	Republic 10	Republic 10	
Dec. 7, 9	Guest Lecture (Hamza Yusuf) 19:30-21:00	Socratic Legacies (TBA)	
Dec. 13 - 17	Completion Week (No classes)		<u>Final Essay due Friday, Dec. 17, 23:59</u>

## Essay Deadlines

Midterm Essay: Sat. Oct. 16, 23:59.

Final Essay: Fri. Dec. 17, 23:59.

## Course Overview, with study questions

### *Apology of Socrates*

In the *Apology*, we hear Socrates directly addressing the charges against him, for which he was ultimately executed. In this text, concrete aspects of the tension between the city and philosophical life are embodied in the speech and ultimate fate of Socrates, making the *Apology* a crucial context for interpreting the *Republic*.

Study Questions:

- What does Socrates' statement that "the unexamined life is no kind of human life" (37e) say about the relation between philosophy and life?
- What attributes of Socrates' character can we gather from Plato's dramatic presentation of Socrates' behavior during the trial?
- In which ways does Socrates' questioning make for a better civic life?

### *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Originating in the Ancient Near East, this poem is the oldest known epic. Like the *Iliad*, it was originally recited and handed down as an oral tradition. It raises questions of the nature of gods, the relation of the individual to civic life, and perhaps most directly, the human condition as such. Its treatment of finitude and the quest for wisdom will resonate in many of the later texts we read.

Study Questions:

- How can the figure of Gilgamesh be seen to change in terms of his relation to his city?
- How does the epic treat the theme of death? How is this theme related to Gilgamesh's journey?
- Why is it significant that the epic begins and ends with reference to the walls of the city?

### *Republic 1*

Book 1 is a microcosm of the *Republic*. Through a series of radically different encounters – with the "arrest" of Socrates in the beginning, with an uncritical Cephalus, the first display of Socratic questioning with Cephalus' son Polemarchus, and the vehement debate with Thrasymachus – it introduces the themes that recur throughout the dialogue. 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 satisfactorily answer such questions.

Study Questions:

- Why does the *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 agitated? What, if anything, is wrong with the way Socrates refutes him?

### ***Iliad*, Book 1**

The works of Homer were a key element in the education and the cultural lives of the Greeks, and all the figures in Plato's *Republic* would have been very familiar with them. The works of Homer are often referred to in the *Republic* and we get an initial impression of some important figures and gods by looking at Book 1 of the *Iliad*.

Study Questions:

- Who are the main gods that are introduced here and what domains do they control?
- Who are Agamemnon and Achilles, and what is the nature of their conflict?
- What seems to be the overarching value in this society?

### ***Republic* 2**

*Republic* 2 has a lot to say about the relation of the human 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 of it.

Study Questions:

- Why are Glaucon and Adeimantus dissatisfied with the way the argument has gone so far?
- 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 apparently insist that poetry or storytelling must be censored?

### ***Republic* 3**

Book 3 begins with the regimen of 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 these guardians.

Study Questions:

- According to Socrates, what exactly is wrong with epic poetry?
- What is the purpose of the 'Noble Lie'? How can lying be permissible, let alone "noble"?
- At what moments in the dialogue do you think that Socrates is being ironic?

### **Sappho**

The *Republic* often focuses on epic and drama, however, lyric poetry is also important. As a poetic imitation, Plato's *Republic* is closer to lyric rather than dramatic performance, as Socrates is the only speaker. We will read one of the most famous ancient lyric poets Sappho as an interlocutor, as Plato was familiar with her works.

Study Questions:

- What is the view of a good and fulfilling human life that emerges from Sappho's poems?
- What role do gods and powerful emotional states play in this view?
- How are the themes of eros and poetry articulated and related?

### ***Republic* 4**

In Book 4 of the *Republic*, after addressing Adeimantus's objection that the guardians aren't being made very happy, Socrates leads Glaucon through questions about the composition of the soul. The question of justice is then further posed in terms of these elements.

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 the 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?

### ***Assemblywomen***

Reading Aristophanes' play alongside *Republic* 5 brings to light Plato's engagement with comic drama. It also anticipates the discussion of 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 the dissolution of all difference 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?

### ***Republic* 5**

The impending death of Socrates is referred to implicitly many times in the *Republic*. Indeed, the *Republic* may be said to open with the assembled group "arresting" Socrates. In Book 5 the arrest is restaged, this time over 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 is the conclusion reached at the end of *Republic* 4 dissatisfying? What is missing?
- Why do we find the images of state-managed eros in Book 5 so disturbing? What exactly is being suppressed or obscured?

### ***Republic* 6**

*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 child of the Good, bringing everything into being through its light; (2) a line, representing all things that can be known, cut in proportion to the different orders of knowledge.

Study Questions:

- In Socrates' image of the ship, what is the significance of the true pilot being called "a stargazer" (489a)?
- Early in Book 6, Socrates is defending the value of philosophy in light of its apparent uselessness. Is it persuading?
- What does the image of the Sun teach us about the Good?

### ***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 education. A crucial instance of philosophical poetry, the story of the cave depicts the effect of education as a "turning-around" 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 (drawn from the series 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 8, 27) as a foundation for nearly every element of its design, illustrates what *Republic 7* has to say about the need for education to involve apparent contradictions so as to propel the mind on the path of dialectic.

Study Questions:

- 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 apparent contradictions summon the intellect? What does this have to do with mathematics?
- How can the Parthenon be said to educate the Athenian citizenry?

### ***Republic 8***

Having passed through the thought experiment of the city-in-speech, Book 8 now charts the degeneration of the regimes of both city and soul into timocracy, oligarchy, democracy and, the very worst constitution – tyranny.

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?

### ***Republic 9***

Book 9 of the *Republic* is largely devoted to an account of the tyrannical man, who is characterized as fundamentally erotic. This description, however, seems also to apply to the philosopher. In an attempt to distinguish the two, Socrates turns to a deeper analysis of the nature of human desire.

Study Questions:

- What motivates the tyrannical man? Does he succeed in getting what he desires?
- Which, in Socrates' view, is the happiest life, and why? Do you agree?

### ***Euripides' The Bacchae***

In the final book of the *Republic*, Socrates seems to reassert that the tragic theatre has no place in a good city. Nevertheless, he suggests that tragedy may come back if it could offer an "apology" (i.e., an explanation that is an adequate defence) for itself. Euripides' final play, *The Bacchae*, is a meditation on the nature of tragic drama and its relation to the city. What is Euripides saying about tragedy? As you read the play, you might consider that (like Socrates) Euripides seems to have found himself rejected by Athens: he sent *The Bacchae* home to be performed from a self-imposed exile.

Study Questions:

- How does Pentheus understand the meaning of the "new" Dionysus cult? How does the play show that his understanding is mistaken?
- What is the significance of the recurring theme of overturning binary oppositions?
- Is there a sense of truth associated with the intoxication and/or destruction that Dionysus brings to those who encounter him in this play?
- What are the sources of the city's resistance to Dionysus (the god of wine and theatre)?
- Can *The Bacchae* be understood to adequately answer Socrates' charges against tragedy? Or does it instead seem to confirm them?

### ***Republic* 10**

Book 10 begins with a return to the question of poetic imitation which 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 depiction of what apparently 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* 6? What is wrong with imitation (*mimesis*) in Socrates' view?
- What in the end is the problem with poetry? How does this second account of poetry relate to the discussion in *Republic* 2-3?
- How are we to understand the "Myth of Er"? What might it mean that the *Republic*, which seems to display so much hostility to poetry and imitative art, ends in this fashion?

### **Socratic Legacies**

In 1908, M. K. Gandhi, while in South Africa, published a Gujarati translation of the *Apology* and an account of how he understood Socrates as an inspiration for his own work in non-violent struggle. In 1963 while imprisoned, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in which he also refers several times to Socrates as an example and inspiration for raising the question of justice.

Study Questions:

- What particular aspects of the *Apology* does Gandhi focus on in his account? Why might he choose these rather than others?
- Gandhi describes Socrates' actions as "Satyagraha" (holding to truth), how can this help us understand how Gandhi saw Socrates?
- Martin Luther King, Jr. describes Socrates as creating a "tension in the mind" of individuals to help them rise beyond darkness and fetters – what do you think King is referring to here?