

IS101 Plato's *Republic* and Its Interlocutors

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Guests: Geoff Lehman (BCB), David Kretz (The University of Chicago), Thomas Bartscherer (Bard College), Dylan Mattingly (Composer)

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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. *Republic* offers a unique point of entry into the epochal literary, philosophical, and political achievements of fifth and fourth century Athens. It depicts, and 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 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. 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*; Aristophanes' *Clouds*; selections from Sappho; Hesiod's *Works and Days*; selections from Parmenides; the architecture of the Parthenon and Euripides' *The Bacchae*. 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 informed and engaging interlocutors with Plato and with one another.

Course Readings

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

The Republic of Plato, tr. Allan Bloom (ISBN: 978-0465069347)

The Iliad of Homer, tr. Richmond Lattimore (ISBN: 978-0226470498)

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 seminars.

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 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. If you cannot attend class because of a COVID-19 related issue, an online alternative will be made available. Temporary remote participation will be made possible through an online section. Any further forms of remote participation that become necessary during the semester will be communicated via email. During any online session it is strongly encouraged to have your camera on.

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 and assessment

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 as well as one short writing exercise. 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 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 one short writing exercise per rotation, submitted to your seminar leader.

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

Seminar grade: 30% (15% for each rotation)

Midterm Essay (1500 words): 30%

Final Essay (1800 words): 40%

Schedule

Week	Tuesday Session	Thursday Session	Writing Assignments
Rotation 1 Sept. 1, 3	Iliad 1-6 (lecture David)	Iliad 7-10	L&T essay, with 300 word reflection, due to seminar leader Sat. Sept. 5, 23:59
Sept. 8, 10	Iliad 11-16	Iliad 17-20	Short Iliad Exercise due Sun. Sept. 13, 23:59
Sept. 15, 17	Iliad 21-24	Republic 1	
Sept. 22, 24	Republic 1	Republic 2	
Sept. 29, Oct.1	Hesiod	Republic 3	
Oct. 6, 8	Sappho	Republic 4	
Oct. 13, 15	Republic 5	Republic 5	Midterm Essay due Sat. Oct. 17, 23:59
Fall Break	no class	no class	
Rotation 2 Oct. 27, 29	Republic 6	Parmenides	
Nov. 3, 5	Republic 6	Parthenon (lecture Geoff)	Short Republic 6 Exercise due Sun. Nov. 8, 23:59
Nov. 10, 12	Republic 7 (lecture Tracy)	Republic 7	
Nov. 17, 19	Clouds	Clouds (lecture David K.)	
Nov. 24, 26	Republic 8	Republic 9	
Dec. 1, 3	The Bacchae	The Bacchae (lecture Thomas and Dylan)	
Dec. 8, 10	Republic 10	Republic 10	
Completion Week Dec. 14-18	no class	no class	Final Essay due Fri. Dec. 18, 23:59

Essay Deadlines

L&T Essay and 300-word reflection: Sat. Sept. 5, 23:59.

Iliad Short Exercise: Sun. Sept. 13, 23:59.

Midterm Essay: Sat. Oct. 17, 23:59.

Republic 6 Short Exercise: Sun. Nov. 8, 23:59.

Final Essay: Fri. Dec. 18, 23:59.

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 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' armour and weaponry, and perhaps especially the "Shield of Achilles"?
- Why does Homer's narration end as it does, with the return of Hektor'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' 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 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 worked up? What, if anything, is wrong with the way Socrates refutes him?

Republic 2

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 of it.

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 apparently insist that poetry or storytelling must be censored?

Hesiod's *Works and Days*

Like *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 one negotiating the tensions of philosophy and the polis. And his teaching is saturated with a kind of religiosity that Socrates finds problematic.

Study Questions:

- What is the view of a 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?
- How is Hesiod's image of the good life similar and yet very different from the heroic ideals of Homer's *Iliad*?

***Republic* 3**

Book 3 begins with the regime 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. Book 3 culminates in the famous Noble Lie that is composed from many elements taken from Hesiod.

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"?
- At what moments in the dialogue do you think that Socrates is being ironic?

Sappho

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. While there is no explicit theory 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:

- 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 *Republic*, after addressing Adeimantus's objection that the life of the guardians is not worth living, 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?

***Republic* 5**

The impending death of Socrates is referred to implicitly many times in *Republic*. Indeed, *Republic* may be said to open with the assembled group "arresting" Socrates. In book Five 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 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' two "ways" for seeking knowledge: being and non-being.

Study Questions:

- Early in book 6 Socrates is defending the value of philosophy in light of its apparent uselessness. Are you persuaded?
- 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?

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, finds numerous echoes in *Republic 6*.

Study Questions:

- What exactly are the "two ways" described in Parmenides' Proem? How can human beings attain true knowledge?
- If ultimate reality is a unity of being, what is the status of the erotic and philosophical incompleteness of human beings?
- How is Socrates' geometrical construction ("the divided line" [509d]) as an image of the proper order of education in cultivating a philosophic soul similar to—and different from—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 (drawn from the series 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 8, 27) 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:

- 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?

- How can the Parthenon be said to “educate” the Athenian citizenry?

Aristophanes’ *Clouds*

Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, which Socrates (in Plato’s *Apology*) points to as one of the most persuasive and damning critiques of his activity and way of life, presents a very different picture of philosophic education and its role in civic life: the more reason, especially verbal facility, is developed, the more depraved society becomes as it turns its back on traditional sources of authority, such as family and religion. In *Clouds*, we see the young, represented by Socrates-educated Pheidippides, not only disrespecting their fathers but posing a threat to Athenian laws and institutions.

Study Questions:

- What exactly is Aristophanes’ understanding and criticism of Socrates?
- Is his comic Socrates recognizable to us as the Socrates portrayed in *Republic*? What is similar or different?
- What kind of challenge, according to the play, does philosophical education pose to democracy and political life?

***Republic* 8**

Having passed through the thought experiment of the city-in-speech, Book 8 now charts the degeneration of the regimes of 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 there characterized as fundamentally erotic. This description, however, seems also to apply to the philosopher. In an attempt to distinguish the two, Socrates turns (in Book 9) to a deeper analysis of the nature of human desire. Does he succeed?

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 *Republic*, Socrates seems to re-propose that the tragic theatre has no place in a good city. Nevertheless, he suggests that tragedy might 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? 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 more seem to confirm them? 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?

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 vision 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 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?