Bard College Berlin
A LIBERAL ARTS UNIVERSITY

IS101 Plato's *Republic* and Its Interlocutors

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Course Times: Tuesday, Thursday 10:45-12:15 (Group A); Tuesday, Thursday 14:00-15:30 (Groups B-F)

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. Rather than a series of separate treatises, the *Republic* addresses its themes as the subject of a dynamic and open 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. Moreover, as an exemplar of open and critical inquiry, both in Plato's time and beyond, the figure of Socrates is a vital resource for our own engagements with the contemporary world.

In this course, we will be particularly attentive to the dialogic character of Plato's writing in its exchanges with other authors, genres and modes of thought. In the first week we read Plato's *Apology of Socrates* as an introduction to the figure of Socrates. We next devote 5 sessions to reading Homer's *Iliad* which is a constant point of reference in the *Republic*. We will also read Sophocles' *Antigone* and Aristophanes' *Clouds* and the lyric poetry of Sappho to trace the equally important dialogues that the *Republic* opens with tragedy, comedy and lyric poetry. Attending to the interlocutors with which the *Republic* is engaged, we will strive to better understand and evaluate its own poetics and arguments.

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)
Iliad, tr. Stanley Lombardo (ISBN: 978-0872203525)
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 in hybrid or online formats. Information regarding these sessions will be communicated in advance. 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 related issue, an alternative will be made available. For the most up-to-date information on covid related policies, please refer to the covid information 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 Session	Thursday Session	Writing Assignments
First Rotation Aug. 30, Sept. 1	Apology Liberal Arts Plenum: 19:30-21:00	Apology	
Sept. 6, 8	Iliad 1-6	Iliad 7-10	
Sept. 13, 15	Iliad 11-16	Iliad 17-20	
Sept. 20, 22	Iliad 21-24	Republic I	
Sept. 27, 29	Republic I	Republic II	
Oct. 4, 6	Antigone	Antigone Lecture (Tracy): 19:30-21:00	
Oct. 11, 13	Republic III	Sappho	Midterm Essay due Saturday, Oct. 15, 23:59
Second Rotation Oct. 18, 20	Republic IV	Republic IV	
	Fall Break (No Classes)		
Nov. 1, 3	Republic V	Republic V	
Nov. 8, 10	Republic VI	Republic VI	
Nov. 15, 17	Republic VII	Republic VII Lecture (Tracy): 19:30-21:00	
Nov. 22, 24	Clouds	Republic VIII	
Nov. 29, Dec. 1	Republic IX	Republic X	
Dec. 6, 8	Guest Lecture (Glenn Most): 19:30-21:00	Republic X	
Dec. 12-16	Completion Week (No classes)		Final Essay due Friday, Dec. 16, 23:59

Essay Deadlines

Midterm Essay: Sat. Oct. 15, 23:59.
Final Essay: Fri. Dec. 16, 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?

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 the *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 Hector's body and its burial?

Republic I

Book I 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 exchange 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* I? 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?

Republic II

Republic II 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?

Sophocles' *Antigone*

The *Republic* will often refer to tragedy and its complex relation with philosophy. In the time during which Plato wrote the *Republic* tragic theater was a central aspect of Athenian cultural and political life. Reading this particular tragedy gives us insight into many themes that run throughout the *Republic* such as: the meaning of justice, the scope of political power, the role of the gods, the relation of the individual and the family to the city, the figure of the tyrant, and many more.

Study Questions:

- What is the basis of the conflict between Antigone and Creon?
- What sense of justice does Antigone invoke?
- Both Antigone and Socrates were executed by their cities. Can a common aspect be seen in their deaths? In what ways can the conflict they open vis-à-vis their polis also be seen as different?

Republic III

Book III 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 IV

In Book IV of the *Republic*, after addressing Adeimantus' 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?

Republic V

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 V the arrest is restaged, this time over the neglected issue of women and children. In response, Socrates discusses three radical proposals that include a dissolution of the private family. In the course of justifying them, the implications and dangers of the city-in-speech come to the fore.

Study Questions:

- Why is the conclusion reached at the end of *Republic* IV dissatisfying? What is missing?
- Why do we find the images of state-managed eros in Book V so disturbing? What exactly is being supressed or obscured?

Republic VI

Republic VI 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 VI, 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 VII

Book VII 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.

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?

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 the *Republic*? What is similar or different?
- What kind of challenge, according to the play, does philosophical education pose to democracy and political life?

Republic VIII

Having passed through the thought experiment of the city-in-speech, Book VIII 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 VIII is most hospitable to philosophy? Why?

Republic IX

Book IX 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?

Republic X

Book X 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* VI? 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 discussions in *Republic* II and III?
- 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?