

IS101 Plato's *Republic* and Its Interlocutors: Democracy and Education in Ancient Greece

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Course Times: Tuesday, Thursday 14:00-15:30, (Seminar Group G Tuesday, Friday 14:00-15:30)

Course Description

What is the best way to educate democratic citizens? And how do we decide what kind of education is right for ourselves and those around us? These questions are at the heart of current debates about the future of democratic societies and the university's place within them. According to some, higher education should impart useful knowledge and skills that prepare people for successful careers; others insist that the university's role is to educate self-directing human beings who strive to make society more just. And some argue that learning to think is its own good. Though flaring up anew, this debate is as old as democracy itself. Bard College Berlin's core curriculum begins with a semester-long reflection on the relationship between democracy and education through a sustained engagement with Plato's *Republic*. The book opens with Socrates and his associates gathering at a rich immigrant's house in Athens' cosmopolitan port the Piraeus. The interlocutors participate in a night-long conversation about the nature of justice and whether it is worth striving to live a just life. What did Socrates—Plato's teacher and a paradigmatic educator who was sentenced to death by a democratic jury—teach his young companions? What might we learn from him?

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 will also read the first book of Homer's *Iliad*, the lyric poetry of Sappho, Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen* and Sophocles' *Antigone* to trace the important dialogues that the *Republic* opens with epic, lyric, comedy and tragic poetry. Attending to the interlocutors with which the *Republic* is engaged, we will strive to better understand and evaluate its own poetics and arguments. Across these exchanges and throughout the *Republic* our readings will be guided by focus on the closely related themes of democracy and education.

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: 978-0465069347 / 978-0465094080)

Course Reader (print version)

Library and Book Purchase Policies

Students are expected to purchase their own copies of the *Republic*. A limited number of these 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 reduce your grade. For each absence beyond the two allowed .14 will be deducted from your grade. Late arrival or leaving during class time will count as an absence. Missing more than 30% of all sessions can 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.

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. 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/Friday (Group G)	Writing Assignment
<u>First Rotation</u> September 3, 5	Apology (Liberal Arts Plenum)	Apology	
September 10, 12	Iliad	Republic I	
September 17, 19	Republic I	Republic II	
September 24, 26	Hesiod	Republic II	
October 1, 3	Republic III	Holiday Thurs. Oct. 3	
October 8, 10	Sappho	Republic IV	
October 15, 17	Republic V	Assemblywomen	Midterm Essay due Saturday, Oct. 19, 23:59
Fall Break			
<u>Second Rotation</u> October 29, October 31	Republic V	Republic VI	
November 5, 7	Republic VI	Republic VII	
November 12, 14	Thucydides/Parthenon (Lecture: Geoff Lehman) Groups E, F, G,	Thucydides/Parthenon (Lecture: Geoff Lehman) Groups A, B, C, D	
November 19, 21	Republic VII (Lecture: Tracy)	Republic VIII	
November 26, 28	Republic VIII (Lecture: Jackie Murray)	Pseudo-Xenophon	
December 3, 5	Republic IX	Antigone	
December 10, 12	Republic X	Republic X	
December 16 – 20 Completion Week	No Class	No Class	Final Essay due Friday, Dec. 20, 23:59

Essay Deadlines

Midterm Essay: Saturday Oct. 19 23:59

Final Essay: Friday Dec. 20 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

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. Homer is 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 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?

Hesiod's Works and Days

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 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?
- Does Hesiod's image of the good life still have relevance for our contemporary world?

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 for 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 suppressed or obscured?

Aristophanes’ Assemblywomen

Reading Aristophanes’ play alongside *Republic V* brings to light Plato’s engagement with comic drama. It also anticipates the discussion of poetry and philosophy in *Republic X*.

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 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?

Thucydides' Pericles' Funeral Oration

Taken from Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, this text is a recreation of the speech Pericles gave at the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War (BCE 431-404). Here we see Athens praised as an open, democratic and liberal city.

Study Questions:

- What characteristics of civic life in Athens is this speech praising?
- What is the relation between education and democracy in this speech?

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?

Pseudo-Xenophon

The origins, author and date of this text are unknown. Most likely it is from the latter half of the 5th century BCE. It was preserved among the writings of the historian Xenophon. The author is usually referred to as the 'Old Oligarch'. The author is very critical of Athenian democracy but also shares invaluable insights into its everyday workings.

Study Questions:

- Why is the author so critical of Athenian democracy? What reasons does he give?
- The author also claims that democracy works for the Athenians. Why does he think this?
- What details about Athenian civic life can we gather from this text and how do they shed light on Athenian democracy?

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?

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 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?