

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

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Course Times: Tuesday/Thursday 10:45-12:15 (Groups A, B, G), Tuesday/Thursday 14:00-15:30 (Groups C, D, E), Tuesday/Friday (14:00-15:30) (Group F)

Course Description

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 dialogue opens with Socrates and his associates gathering at a wealthy 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. The *Republic* also includes an extended reflection on the virtues and vulnerabilities of democratic society. 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 text in its exchanges with other authors, genres and modes of thought. We will also focus on the relationship between justice and dialogue. In the first week, we will read Plato's *Apology of Socrates* as an introduction to the figure of Socrates. We will also read the first books of Homer's *Iliad*, Hesiod's *Works and Days*, the poems of Sappho, Aristophanes' *Clouds* and Euripides' *The Bacchae* to trace the important dialogues that the *Republic* opens with epic, didactic, lyric, comic 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. Throughout the course, we will aim to become thoughtful interlocutors with Plato's work and one another.

Course Readings

Required texts (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. Attending class without the relevant text, in a printed form, will negatively affect your participation grade.

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 .1 will be deduced 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.

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.

Assessment

In the first half, there will be a close-reading writing assignment. In this core course, our focus is upon our direct encounter with primary texts. Please avoid the use of secondary material in your writing. ChatGPT or other AI tools may not be used under any circumstances.

At the end of the semester, there will be a final exam. The exam will require you to write short essays in response to specific questions. You may use your books and hand-written notes during the exam. The use of electronic devices of all kinds is prohibited. If you have a disability accommodation that allows for extra time on exams, please be sure to inform your seminar leader beforehand.

Close-Reading Assignment deadline: Friday, Oct. 16th by 23:59

In-class Final Exam date: Wednesday, Dec. 16th, 14:00 – 15:30

Policy on late submissions

Extensions may be granted by the individual seminar leaders. Late work will be marked down one-third of a letter grade (e.g., from A- to B+) for every 24 hours it is late, down to a maximum grade of a C.

Grade Breakdown

Participation Grade: 30%

Close-Reading Assignment: 30%

Final Exam: 40%

Schedule

Week	Tuesday	Thursday/Friday (group F)
September 1, 3	Apology (Liberal Arts Plenum) 19:30-21:00	Apology
September 8, 10	Iliad 1	Iliad 2,3
September 15, 17	Republic I	Republic I
September 22, 24	Republic II	Works and Days
Sept. 29, Oct. 1	Republic II	Republic III
October 6, 8	Republic III	Poetry of Sappho
October 13, 15	Republic IV	Republic V
Fall Break		
October 27, 29	Republic V	The Seventh Letter Schuyler 19:30-21:00
November 3, 5	Republic VI	Republic VI
November 10, 12	Pericles' Funeral Oration / The Constitution of the Athenians	Republic VII
November 17, 19	Republic VII Geoff (Parthenon) 19:30-21:00	Clouds
November 24, 26	Republic VIII	Republic IX
December 1, 3	Republic X	The Bacchae Tracy 19:30-21:00
December 8, 10	The Bacchae	Republic X
December 14 – 18 Exam Week	No Class	No Class

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 Books 1-3 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?

The Poetry of 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, given that 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?

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?

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?

Pseudo-Xenophon's "The Constitution of the Athenians"

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 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 *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?

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?