Plato’s Republic and Its Interlocutors

Course Coordinator: Michael Weinman
Seminar Leaders: Tracy Colony, David Hayes, and Michael Weinman
Guests: Ewa Atanassow, Claudia Baracchi (Università di Milano-Bicocca), Rob Boddice (Humboldt Universität), Michalis Sialaros (Birkbeck College, U. of London), Alessandro Stavru (Freie Universität), Aaron Tugendhaft (LMU München)
Times: Tuesday 9:00 – 10:30; 10:45 – 12:15
Thursday 13:30 – 15:00; 15:15 – 16:45

Course Description
Bard College Berlin’s core curriculum begins with a semester-long investigation of Plato’s Republic in its cultural, political, and intellectual context. This book offers a unique point of entry into the epochal literary, philosophical, cultural and political achievements of fifth and fourth century Athens, especially when viewed, as we will view it, in its relation to what came before it and what has followed in its wake right down to today. Republic depicts and draws us into a conversation about the kinds of values (ethical, political, aesthetic, religious, epistemic, and literary) at the heart both of our approach to liberal arts education and, simply, of human life. Rather than a series of separate treatises, the Republic treats these values as the subject of a single conversation 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 primer for logical demonstration, a theology, a critique of mimetic art, a theory of education, and a typology of political regimes, it is reducible to none of these, nor is this list exhaustive. Simply, this text, perhaps in a manner unlike any other written before or after, sets the agenda for just about any set of research questions that one might which to pursue today.

In this course we shall be particularly attentive to the dialogic character of Plato’s writing. Just as Socrates appears in conversation with his interlocutors, the Republic itself seems to be in conversation with other authors, works, genres and kinds of thought in and beyond the Greek tradition. Reading Plato’s work alongside Homer’s Iliad, The Epic of Gilgamesh, Hesiod’s Works and Days, Euripides’s Bacchae, Parmenides’s poem, Aristophanes’s Clouds, Herodotus’ Histories and Thucydides’ (so-called) History of the Peloponnesian War, and a selection from Euclid’s Elements, together with a lecture and seminar on the Parthenon and a visit to both the Pergamon altar and the Uruk exhibition at the Pergamon Museum, we will strive to better appreciate and evaluate the argument and drama of the Republic. As we read the Republic and attend to the conversations it has with its interlocutors, we aim to become informed and engaging interlocutors for Plato and for one another.
Course Readings

*The Republic of Plato*, tr. Alan Bloom
*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, tr. Andrew George
*Aristophanes, Clouds*, tr. West and West
*Euclid, Elements*, tr. Thomas L. Heath (ed. Dana Densmore)
*Euripides’s Bacchae*, tr. William Arrowsmith (ed. by Mark Griffith and Glenn Most)
*Herodotus, Histories*, tr. David Grene
*Hesiod, Works and Days*, tr. Stephanie Nelson
*Homer, Iliad*, tr. Stanley Lombardo
*Parmenides, Proem*, tr. A. H. Coxon
*Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War*, tr. Steven Lattimore

Class Preparation and Participation

Regular attendance is essential to the success of this course. Absences can only be excused if a medical note is submitted to the registrar’s office. Class preparation is also vital. Preparing for class means reading thoughtfully and engaging with the text; for instance, by thinking through the argument in a particular section of the text and taking notes while reading. Try to identify questions and problems 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 blurbs and study questions for the course readings. Do read and use them!

There will be an attendance sheet for each lecture to be signed up before each lecture begins. Late arrival counts as an absence. Lectures and seminars are considered separately in counting absences.

Written Assignments

During the first week of the course, you will meet with your instructor to discuss the final essay for L&T, and the expectations for writing assignments in the core course. You will also be required to hold conversations concerning your draft for the midterm essay and for the final essay. The draft of the midterm essay is due on October 16; the draft of the final essay on December 13. Your writing tutor will schedule the conversation about the essay draft. Participation in these sessions constitutes 5% of your course grade, assessed pass/fail.

Over the course of the term you will participate in two seminar groups, each led by a different seminar leader. Within each of these “rotations,” you will submit two substantial essays due at the end of weeks 3 and 7 (first rotation), and 10 and 15 (second rotation). The first and third essays (called “term essays”) respond to a thematic question, and should represent your understanding of the relevant part of the reading. The second “midterm” essay will cover a bit more ground. You’ll have a week to
complete the final essay, which should be closer to 15 pages long and convey your most sustained reflection on the course material.

**Grading**

Participation in writing sessions: 5%

Two term essays, each 5-7 pages in length, due September 21 and November 23: 20% (2x10%)

Midterm essay, 8-10 pages in length, draft due October 16, essay due October 26: 15%

Final essay, about 15 pages in length, draft due December 13, essay due December 20: 30%

Seminar grade: 30%
## Course Schedule at a glance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week Beginning</th>
<th>Tuesday Lecture 9.00 – 10.30</th>
<th>Tuesday Seminar 10.45 – 12.15</th>
<th>Thursday Lecture 13.30 – 15.00</th>
<th>Thursday Seminar 15.15 – 16.45</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sunday, 25 August</strong></td>
<td>Guided tour of the Uruk exhibit at the Pergamon Museum</td>
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<td><strong>2 Sept.</strong></td>
<td>Iliad 1-6</td>
<td>Iliad 1-6</td>
<td>Iliad 7-12</td>
<td>Iliad 7-12</td>
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<td><strong>9 Sept.</strong></td>
<td>Iliad 13-18</td>
<td>Iliad 13-18</td>
<td>Iliad 19-24</td>
<td>Iliad 19-24</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>16 Sept.</strong></td>
<td>Republic 1</td>
<td>Republic 1</td>
<td>Epic of Gilgamesh</td>
<td>Epic of Gilgamesh</td>
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**Language and Thinking portfolio due to seminar leader by Friday, 6 September**

| Term Essay 1 due: Saturday, 21 September, 23:59 |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| **30 Sept.** | Republic 2 | Republic 2 | Thurs., 3.10: No class, Federal Holiday |
| **7 Oct.** | No classes, School Holiday |

**Midterm Essay due: Saturday, 26 October, 23:59**

(draft due Wednesday, 16 October: direct submission to Writing Tutor)

| **18 Nov.** | Parthenon | Parthenon | Pergamon Altar (Saturday, 23 Nov.) | Pergamon Altar (Saturday, 23 Nov.) |

**Term Essay 2 due: Saturday, 23 November, 23:59**

| **25 Nov.** | Republic 8 | Republic 8 | Thucydides, "HPW" 1 (entire) | Thucydides, "HPW" 1 (entire) |
| **2 Dec.** | Thucydides, “HPW” 2.34-65; 3.2-50, 70-84 | Thucydides, “HPW” 2.34-65; 3.2-50, 70-84 | Republic 9 | Republic 9 |
| **9 Dec.** | Thucydides, “HPW” 5.84-116, 6.1-31, 7.80-87 | Thucydides, “HPW” 5.84-116, 6.1-31, 7.80-87 | Republic 10 and Iliad 24 | Republic 10 and Iliad 24 |
| **16 Dec.** | Republic 10 and Course Conclusion | Republic 10 and Course Conclusion | Final Essay due: Friday, 20 December, 23:59 (draft due Friday, 13 December: direct submission to Writing Tutor) |
Course Overview, with study questions

Homer’s Iliad and Republic 1

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. We begin the course by discussing the Homeric view of the universe and the place of human beings and institutions in it. 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’s 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 the role of the gods and the afterlife? is there wisdom in poetry? what is justice?), as well as the reasons we fail to satisfactorily answer such questions.

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’ armor 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?
* Why does 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 the persons championing them, i.e., between character and argument?
* Why is Thrasymachus so worked up? What, if anything, is wrong with how Socrates refutes him?

Republic 2, The Epic of Gilgamesh, and Herodotus’s Histories

Sunday, 16 August: Visit to the "Uruk: 5000 Jahre Megacity" exhibit in Pergamon Museum

In the wake of Homer’s account of the paradigmatic hero Achilles, and his status vis-à-vis gods and men, we turn to what Republic 2 says about the human relation to the divine and the role of poetic tradition in shaping our ethical views, we begin to outline the differences between the Homeric image of the good life and Plato’s reworking (and proposed censorship) of it. We shall consider this response to the poetic tradition together with a close reading of the surviving fragments of the great Sumerian epic Gilgamesh, composed about 1500 years before Homer, whose themes (including the semi-divine but ultimately human nature of the central hero, that hero’s special bond with another warrior, and the power of wrath and the need for reconciliation) strongly resonate with the later epic. Our encounter with both will be informed by the first book of Herodotus’ Histories, and substantial selections of its second and third books, where the first great author of Greek pose examines the roots not only of the war between the Persians and the Greeks, but also of cultural difference as such.

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 similar, and what different, in what Glaucon wishes us to learn from the narration of the “Ring of Gyges” fable in contrast to what we learn in Herodotus’ telling?
* How do the limits imposed on Gilgamesh by his humanity seem similar to those Achilles experiences? In what ways do they differ?
* What is wrong with the portrayal of Homeric gods and heroes, according to Socrates? And why does he insist that poetry or storytelling must be censored?

**Republic 3 and 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 a public “guardian.” And in Hesiod’s myth of the metals (unlike Socrates’ “noble lie”) we are all irredeemably “iron.” Hesiod’s teaching is also saturated with a kind of religiosity that Socrates finds problematic. Through the readings for this week we’ll explore Hesiod’s vision of a virtuous life and Socrates’ critique of that vision, as well as the Socratic account of the role that imitation and lying play in education.

**Study Questions:**
* What is the view of good and fulfilling human life that emerges from Hesiod’s poem? What role do the gods play in this view?
* What is the significance of the ‘Five Ages’ myth (106-201) for Hesiod’s account of a just man?
* 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”?

**Republic 4 and Euripides’ *Bacchae***

In Book 4 of the *Republic*, after addressing Adeimantus’s objection that the life of the guardians is not worth living, Socrates leads Glaucon toward a precise view of the divided nature of the human soul, and the guiding role of reason. In so doing, the two of them come to a shared understanding of how the soul can be one, how this is the very meaning of justice, and why this is the only life worth living. Exploring at once god, man, woman, society, and the poet’s own tragic art, Euripides’s *Bacchae* (staged posthumously in 404) appears to question precisely the kind of rationalistic view of the soul that, at the end of book 4, Socrates seems to hold as established.

**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?
* Why does Socrates believe that he and the others “probably hit upon an origin and model for justice” (443c)? Does that model confirm that justice in the city is like justice in the soul?
* Is Pentheus a tragic hero? Does the *Bacchae* articulate a clear moral vision?

**Republic 5 and Aristophanes’ *Clouds***

The *Republic* may be said to open with the assembled group “arresting” Socrates in “tragic” fashion. Book five seems to restage the seizure as comedy as the dangers of philosophy—with which we need to grapple, if we are to fully understand the meaning and effects of Socratic education—come to the fore. As in Aristophanes’s *Clouds*, which Socrates points to (in Plato’s *Apology*) as one of the most persuasive and damning critiques of his activity and way of life, so too the comic drama of Republic 5 is permeated with the challenges philosophy poses for familial ties. For Socrates, this takes the form of three radical proposals that entail the dissolution of the private family, while in *Clouds*, we see the
young, educated by Socrates and men like him, disrespecting and finally even abusing their fathers. Both political fantasies raise fundamental questions about familial life in a political community: to what extent are children and parents "parts" of the city? Can the demands of family life and political life brought into harmony with one another? What role does philosophy play in this adjudication, and is it ultimately constructive or destructive?

Study Questions:
* Why is the conclusion reached at the end of Republic 4 dissatisfying? What is missing?
* What exactly is the problem that calls for Socrates's radical solutions? Are these solutions adequate, why or why not?
* 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?

Republic 6 and Parmenides’ Proem

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 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, and at the end of which, or just beyond the end of which, one arrives at a vision of that sun. Both images owe much to Parmenides, who earlier described truth as the only light in a world of confusion and darkness, and two “ways” that a human being can follow in 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?
* 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” as described in the Proem?

Republic 7 and Parthenon, featuring Euclid and the Pergamon Museum

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. Drawing on a selection from Euclid’s Elements – a textbook of Greek mathematics, collected a few generations after Plato – 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.

This comparative study includes a visit to the Pergamon Museum on Saturday, 23 November.

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?

How can the Parthenon be said to “educate” the Athenian citizenry? In what ways do the “problems” posed by the building “summon the intellect”?

1. Republic 8 and 9 Thucydides’ [so-called] History of the Peloponnesian War

Having scaled the summits of the city-in-speech, the only way seems to be down. Book 8 charts the degeneration of the best regime of city and soul into timocracy (love of honor), oligarchy, democracy (!) and, finally, the very worst constitution – tyranny. 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 true guardian or philosopher. In an attempt to distinguish the two, Socrates turns to a deeper analysis of the nature of human desire. Does he succeed?

We trace Socrates’s account of this degeneration alongside Thucydides’s history of the degeneration of Athens from the “golden age” of Pericles to the thirty tyrants, installed after the city’s final defeat by the Spartan alliance in 404 BC. Our first reading will address how different Thucydides’ view of what it means to “record events” is from what we saw in Herodotus. Our second reading focuses on the figure of Pericles, the very embodiment of Athenian glory and power, and the events that sowed the seeds of Athens’ fall. Our final reading from Thucydides’s History focuses on the events leading up to, and then resulting from, the Athenians’ disastrous decision to conquer Sicily while still engaged with Sparta. Interestingly, Thucydides attributes this decision to the same faculty that Socrates emphasizes in discussing the tyrannical soul: eros (desire).

Study Questions:

* Why do cities and souls degenerate? Is Socrates’ account of regime change simply a story of decay?
* Which of the regimes discussed in Book 8 is most hospitable to philosophy? Why?
* What, according to Thucydides, is the relationship between an individual’s capacity for moral action and the broader social and political framework? What was unique about this relationship in the case of Athens in the fifth century BCE?
* Does Thucydides’s depiction of Athens’ mindset before and during the Sicilian expedition corroborate Socrates’s account of the tyrannical soul growing out of the democratic soul? Why or why not?
* 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?

2. Republic 10 and Homer’s Iliad 24

Now that the study of the soul is complete, Socrates says, he and his interlocutors are in a better position to understand what is wrong with poetry as exemplified by Homer. Starting with an analogy between poetry and painting, Socrates launches a second critique of poetic imitation, leading to the conclusion that Homer and tragedy are to be expelled from the city. This second indictment of poetry paves the way for discussing the rewards of justice that take up the rest of the book. Socrates closes the conversation that is the Republic with a mythical vision of what 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 5-6? What is wrong with imitation (mimesis) in Socrates’ view?
* Is the argument that Homer simply imitates images of goodness persuasive? How does this second account of poetry relate to the discussion in books 2-3?
* How seriously should we take the Myth of Er? Having begun with a critique of Homeric poetry, book ten closes with an example of Socratic poetry. What’s up with that?