Plato’s Republic and Its Interlocutors

Seminar Leaders: Tracy Colony, James Harker, David Hayes, Michael Weinman
Course Coordinator: Michael Weinman
Course Times: Tue 9:00 - 12:15, Thu 10:45 - 12:15 & 13:30 - 15:00
Email address (Course Coordinator): m.weinman@berlin.bard.edu

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 text—in conversation with what we here figure as its “interlocutors,” the main works and movements with which it is in dialogue—offers a unique point of entry into the epochal literary, philosophical, cultural and political achievements of fifth and fourth century Athens. Republic depicts and draws us into a discussion of the kinds of values (ethical, political, aesthetic, religious, epistemic, and literary) at the heart of Bard College Berlin's approach to education, and fundamental to human life itself. Rather than a series of separate treatises, Republic treats these values as the subject of a single investigation that transcends disciplinary boundaries as we have come to conceive of them. And while it may be said to contain a “social contract” theory, a theory of psychology, a theory of demonstration, a theology, a critique of mimetic art, a theory of education, or a typology of political regimes among other proposals, it is reducible to none of these. Simply, this text, perhaps in a manner unlike any other written before or after, sets the agenda for any set of research questions that 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 kinds of thought. We read Republic alongside a series of classic works: Homer’s Iliad; Hesiod’s Works and Days; selections from Sappho; selections from Gorgias and Aristotle’s Rhetoric; Euripides’s Bacchae; Parmenides’s poem; Aristophanes’s Clouds, paired with Plato’s Apology; Herodotus’ Histories and Pericles’ Funeral Oration as reported by Thucydides; and a selection from Euclid’s Elements paired an analysis of the Parthenon. In this way, we will strive to better appreciate and evaluate the argument and drama of the Republic. As we read Republic together, attending to the conversations in which it is engaged 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
Plato, Apology, tr. West and West
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
Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, tr. Steven Lattimore

Course Reader: (selections from) Gorgias, Sappho, Parmenides, Euclid, Aristotle
Library and Book Purchase Policies
Course books for this core course are provided by the college. A course reader will also be provided, containing the shorter selections we read over the semester.

Requirements
Class preparation
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 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!

Attendance
Attendance at ALL classes is expected, as regular attendance is essential to the success of this course. More than two absences (that is absences from two sessions of 90 minutes) in a semester will significantly affect the grade for the course. 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.

Writing Assignments and Assessment
Over the course of the term you will participate in three seminar groups, each lead by a different seminar leader. Within each of these rotations you will submit two versions of an essay as well as one short writing exercise. The deadlines for all writing assignments can be found under “essay deadlines.”

Essays: The essays in the first two rotations (called “term essays”) respond to a thematic question and should represent your understanding of the relevant part of the course reading. The essay in the third rotation will cover a bit more ground and be a good deal longer and should convey your most sustained reflection on the course material. For each essay, you are required to meet with a writing tutor after you submit the first version of the essay. After the conversation with the writing tutor, you will subject a second version of the essay for assessment by your seminar leader. In the first rotation you will first submit a “90-minute” essay that you will begin in class; in the second rotation you will simply complete the essay, submit it, have the conversation with the writing tutor, and then submit the revision of the essay; in the third rotation, you submit a 1500-2000 word draft of the final essay, have the conversation with the writing tutor, and thereafter submit the complete version of the final essay.

Writing Exercises: In addition to essays you will prepare one short writing exercise per rotation, to be submitted to your seminar leader. The writing exercises (1-2 pages) will focus on specific skills for academic writing.

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
- Writing exercises (300-500 words): 9% (3% each)
- Term Essays (1500 words): 30% (15% each)
- Final Essay (2750 words): 25%
- Seminar grade: 30% (10% each Rotation)
- Writing Tutor Conference Participation: 6% (2% Each)

### Schedule

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<tr>
<th>Week Beginning</th>
<th>Tuesday Lecture 9.00 – 10.30</th>
<th>Tuesday Seminar 10.45 – 12.15</th>
<th>Thursday Lecture 10.45 – 12.15</th>
<th>Thursday Seminar 13.30-15.00</th>
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<td>1 Sept.</td>
<td>Epic of Gilgamesh</td>
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<td>Iliad 1-6</td>
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<td><strong>L&amp;T essay, with 300-word summary, due to seminar leader Thursday, 4 September</strong></td>
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<td>8 Sept.</td>
<td>Iliad 7-12</td>
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<td>Iliad 13-18</td>
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<td>15 Sept.</td>
<td>Iliad 19-24</td>
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<td>Republic 1</td>
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<td>22 Sept.</td>
<td>Writing Workshop: Argument</td>
<td>Republic 1</td>
<td>Gorgias, selections</td>
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<td><strong>“90-minute essay” due Thursday, 25 September</strong></td>
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<td>(Meetings with Writing Tutors between 25 September and 4 October)</td>
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<td><strong>Term Essay 1 due: Saturday, 4 October, 23:59</strong></td>
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<td>13 Oct.</td>
<td>Republic 3</td>
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<td>Sappho, selections</td>
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<td><strong>Short Writing Assignment 2 due Thursday, 16 October</strong></td>
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<td>20 Oct.</td>
<td>No classes, Semester Break</td>
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<td>27 Oct.</td>
<td>Republic 4</td>
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<td>Aristophasenes, Clouds</td>
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<td>3 Nov.</td>
<td>Republic 5</td>
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<td>Plato, Apology</td>
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<td><strong>Term Essay 2 due: Friday, 7 November</strong></td>
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<td>(Meetings with Writing Tutors between 7 and 15 November)</td>
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<td>10 Nov.</td>
<td>Republic 6</td>
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<td>Parmenides, Proem</td>
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<td><strong>Term Essay 2 Revision due: Saturday, 15 November, 23:59</strong></td>
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<td>17 Nov.</td>
<td>Republic 7</td>
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<td>Republic 7, Euclid, Elements</td>
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<td><strong>Short Writing Assignment 3 due Thursday, 27 November</strong></td>
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<td>8 Dec.</td>
<td>Euripides, Baccabae</td>
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### Essay Deadlines (when not otherwise specified, to be uploaded to Drive)
- L&T Essay and 300-word summary **(to your first rotation seminar leader)**: Thursday, 4 September
90-minute essay (begun in class on Tuesday, 23 September): Thursday, 25 September
Term Essay 1: Saturday, 4 October
Short Writing Assignment 2: Thursday, 16 October
Term Essay 2: Friday, 7 November
Term Essay 2, revision: Saturday, 15 November
Short Writing Assignment 3: Thursday, 27 November
(1500-2000 word-long) Final Essay Draft: Friday, 12 December
Final Essay: Friday, 19 December
Course Overview, with study questions

1. *The Epic of Gilgamesh and 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*. We approach Plato’s encounter with Homer through a close reading of the surviving fragments of the great Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh*, first told 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. In this way, we prepare the way into Plato’s masterpiece by discussing the Homeric 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’ 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?
* How do the limits imposed on Gilgamesh by his humanity seem similar to those Achilles experiences? In what ways do they differ?

2. *Republic 1 and Gorgias, selections*

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. In order to help us make sense of in particular, we will look at the extant works of the Sophist Gorgias of Leontini. This will help us to see the debate with Thrasymachus (who famously studied with Gorgias) as centrally concerned with human conventions.

**Study Questions:**

* 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 their champions, i.e., between character and argument?
* Why is Thrasymachus so worked up? What, if anything, is wrong with how Socrates refutes him?
* Gorgias’s arguments are transparently contradictory. What, then, do they have in common?

3. *Republic 2, and Herodotus’s Histories*

*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 (and proposed censorship) of it. 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 prose examines not just the roots of enmity 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?
* 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?

4. Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, *Republic* 3 and Sappho
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. We bring Sappho in as an interlocutor with Book 3 because, while the omission of an explicit theory of lyric poetry in the *Republic* (and likewise in Aristotle’s *Poetics*) is notable and puzzling, it may be that “dithyramb” means “lyric” in the most relevant passage of *Republic* (394b-c). But there is another reason: once we recall that the *Republic* itself is an imitation by Plato of a lyric rather than dramatic performance, as Socrates is the only speaker, this “neglect” of lyric seems far from a blind spot.

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”?
* What exactly is the content of Sappho’s thesis in the first stanza of poem 16? Compare this thesis to Socrates’ view of the relation of beauty and love in Book 3 of *Republic*.

5. *Republic* 4 and Aristophanes’ *Clouds*
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. 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, the playwright seems to have a very different sense of the role of reason in public life; the more reason, especially verbal facility, is developed, the more depraved society becomes as it turn its back on traditional sources of authority, like religion and the older generations.

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?
6. Republic 5 and Apology

The impending death of Socrates is referred to implicitly many times in the Republic. Indeed, Republic may be said to open with the assembled group “arresting” Socrates in “tragic” fashion. Book five seems to restage this 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. In the Apology, we hear Socrates directly addressing the charges against him, for which he was ultimately executed, making clear that philosophy's provocations are not (only) comedy. In this text concrete aspects of the tension between the city and the philosophical life are embodied in the speech and ultimate fate of Socrates, making the Apology a crucial context for interpreting the Republic.

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?
* How can the depictions of the philosopher and the nature of philosophy that we have seen in the Republic be also identified in the Apology?

7. 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?

8. Republic 7, Euclid’s Elements and 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. 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.

**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?
* (Why) Do “problems” “summon the intellect”? What does this have to do with mathematics?

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 (in Book 9) to a deeper analysis of the nature of human desire. Does he succeed? We trace Socrates’s account of this degeneration alongside Aristotle’s account of the work of public speech in shaping the character both of each individual’s soul and of the political community in which those individuals live. Like Plato, Aristotle sees a strong correlation between the variations in the inclinations of individual’s souls and those in the political communities in which individuals are reared.

**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?
* Why, in *Rhetoric* Book 1 and elsewhere, does Aristotle consistently present topics in threesomes?
* 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?

10. Euripides, *Bacchae* and *Republic* 10
Exploring at once god, man, woman, society, and the poet’s own tragic art, Euripides’s *Bacchae* (staged posthumously in 404) appears to question the grounds and indeed the very possibility of the exclusion of tragedy from the city that Socrates demands as necessary for justice to arise in the city in a second critique 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 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:**
* Is Pentheus a tragic hero? Does the *Bacchae* articulate a clear moral vision?
* 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 are we to understand the “Myth of Er”? What might it mean that Republic, which at least seems to display so much hostility to imitative art, ends in this fashion?