IS101. Plato’s Republic and Its Interlocutors

Seminar Leaders: Tracy Colony, James Harker, David Hayes, Michael Weinman
Course Coordinator: Michael Weinman
Course Times: Tuesday 10:45 – 12:15; Thursday 9:00 – 10:30
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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 Homer’s Iliad; Herodotus’ Histories; Hesiod’s Works and Days; selections from Sappho; Euripides’s Bacchae; Aristophanes’s Clouds; Parmenides’s poem; and a selection from book I of Aristotle’s Rhetoric. Our reading is extended, on the determination of your seminar leader, to one or more of: The Epic of Gilgamesh; selections from Gorgias; and Plato’s Apology. In this way, we will strive to better appreciate and evaluate the argument and drama of Republic. Reading the dialogue 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
Required Textbooks (you must have your own copy of the specific edition with this ISBN!)
Aristophanes, Clouds, tr. West and West, Four Texts on Socrates (ISBN: 978-0801485749)
Euripides, Bacchae, Griffith & Most, Euripides: Complete Greek Tragedies (ISBN: 978-0226308982)
Homer, Iliad, tr. Stanley Lombardo (ISBN: 978-0872203525)
Course Reader (print edition)
Elective readings (see schedule for dates) [you may or may not read any of the following]
*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, tr. Andrew George; *Plato, Apology*, tr. West and West; Gorgias, selections

**Library and Book Purchase Policies**
Students are expected to purchase the required textbooks. A limited number of textbooks are available on loan from the library, first for those who cannot afford to purchase the textbooks and second for those who do not wish to own the textbooks. All other readings will in the course reader.

**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 result in a reduction of the course grade by up to one grade step (e.g., B+ to B). There will be an attendance sheet for any session held in the lecture hall to be signed up before the session begins. Late arrival counts as an absence.

**Writing Assignments and Assessment**
Over the course of the term you will participate in three seminar groups, each led by a different seminar leader. In each of these “rotations” you will submit 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 is expected to be somewhat more ambitious and a bit longer. For the first and third of these essay submissions, you will receive feedback from your seminar leader following initial submission of the essay. Subsequently, you will subject a second version of the essay for assessment by your seminar leader. In the first rotation you will first submit a timed “90-minute” essay assignment a week before the first term essay is due. In the third rotation, you first submit a draft of the final essay and, following upon receipt of your seminar leader’s feedback, submit the complete final essay.

**Writing Exercises:** You will also prepare one short writing exercise per rotation, submitted to your seminar leader. The writing exercises 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 (500 words): 15% (5% each)
Term Essays (1200 words each): 35% (17.5% each)
Final Essay (1500 words): 20%
Seminar grade: 30% (10% each Rotation)

**Schedule**

Highlighted sessions are joint sessions in the Lecture Hall

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week Beginning</th>
<th>Tuesday 9.00 – 10.30</th>
<th>Thursday 10.45 – 12.15</th>
<th>Writing Assignment</th>
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<tr>
<td>31 Aug.</td>
<td>Iliad 1-6 (Plenum)</td>
<td>Iliad 7-12</td>
<td>L&amp;T essay, with 300-word summary, due to seminar leader Thursday, 4 September</td>
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<td>7 Sept.</td>
<td>Iliad 13-18</td>
<td>Iliad 19-24</td>
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<td>14 Sept.</td>
<td>Republic 1 (DH)</td>
<td>Republic 1</td>
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(Feedback from Seminar Leaders between 25 September and 2 October)

| 28 Sept.       | Republic 2           | Hesiod, Works & Days  | Term Essay 1 due: Saturday, 3 October, 23:59 |
| 5 Oct.         | Republic 3           | Sappho, selections    | Writing Exercise 2 due Thursday, 15 October |
| 12 Oct.        | Aristophanes, Clouds (EA) | Elective Day 1       | Term Essay 2 due: Friday, 6 November |
| 19 Oct.        | No classes, Semester Break |                    |                    |
| 26 Oct.        | Republic 4           | Euripides, Bacchae    |                    |
| 2 Nov.         | Republic 5 (JH)     | Elective Day 2        | Term Essay 2 due: Friday, 6 November |
| 9 Nov.         | Republic 6           | Parmenides, Proem     |                    |
| 16 Nov.        | Republic 7           | Republic 7            |                    |
| 23 Nov.        | Parthenon (GL)      | Elective Day 3        | Writing Exercise 3 due Thursday, 26 November |
| 30 Nov.        | Republic 8           | Aristotle, Rhetoric I | Final Essay draft due: Thursday, 10 December |
| 7 Dec.         | Republic 9           | Republic 10 (Plenum)  | Final Essay due: Friday 18 December 23:59 |

(Feedback from Seminar Leaders between 10 and 17 December)

14 Dec.        | Final Essay due: Friday 18 December 23:59 |
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, 3 September

90-minute essay (begun in class on Tuesday, 23 September): Thursday, 24 September

Essay 1 (ca. 1200 words): Saturday, 3 October

Writing Exercise 2 (ca. 500 words): Thursday, 15 October

Essay 2 (ca. 1200 words): Friday, 6 November

Writing Exercise 3 (ca. 500 words): Thursday, 26 November

Final Essay draft (ca. 1000 words): Thursday, 10 December

Final Essay: Friday, 18 December

Course Overview, with study questions

1. 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 two-week long engagement with the epic, we prepare the way into 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’ 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?

2. Republic 1 and Herodotus, History

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. Our encounter with Republic’s unsatisfying opening conversation will be informed by the first book of Herodotus’ History, 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 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?
* What is similar, and what different, in what Glaucon wishes us to learn from the narration of the “Ring of Gyges” fable (early in Book 2) in contrast to what we learn in Herodotus’ telling?
3. Republic 2 and Hesiod’s Works and Days

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. 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: Glaucun 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.” In Hesiod’s myth of the metals (unlike the “noble lie”) we are all “iron.” Hesiod’s teaching is saturated with a kind of religiosity that Socrates finds problematic. We explore Hesiod’s vision and Socrates’ critique, and the Socratic account of the role of imitation and lying in education.

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 wrong with the portrayal of Homeric gods and heroes, according to Socrates? And why does he insist that poetry or storytelling must be censored?
* 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?

4. Republic 3 and Sappho

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:
* 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. Aristophanes’ Clouds and Elective Day 1

With the help of BCB faculty member Ewa Atanassow, we will see how 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, 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. Paired with Clouds is our first elective day. In this session, depending on your seminar leader’s decision, you will either hold a seminar conversation to follow upon our Plenary session on the Clouds or you will read one of the works described under “elective readings” below.

Study Question:
* 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?

6. 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 Glaucun 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 the grounds and indeed the very possibility of Bocor’s proposal of a life lived in accordance with the rule of reason articulated in Book 4.

**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?

**7. Republic 5 and Elective Day 2**
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. Paired with book 5 is our second elective day. In this session, depending on your seminar leader’s decision, you will either hold a seminar conversation to follow upon our Plenary session or you will read one of the works described under “elective readings” below.

**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 in Book 5? Are these solutions adequate? Why or why not?

**8. 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?

**9. Republic 7 and the 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” (periagōγê, 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. With the help of BCB faculty member Geoff Lehman, 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?
* (Why) Do “problems” “summon the intellect”? What does this have to do with mathematics?
* How can the Parthenon be said to “educate” the Athenian citizenry?

10. Republic 8 and Elective Day 3
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. Paired with book 8 is our final elective day. In this session, depending on your seminar leader’s decision, you will either hold a seminar conversation to follow upon our earlier Plenary session on the Parthenon, or you will read one of the works described under “elective readings” below.

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?

11. Republic 9 and Aristotle, Rhetoric I
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, 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?

12. Republic 10
Book 10 begins with 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:
* 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?

**Elective readings (in three sessions held in weeks 7, 9, and 12, you will read one or more of these)**

1. **Gorgias, selections.** Selections from the extant works of the Sophist Gorgias of Leontini help us to understand how both the debate with Thrasymachus about justice and virtue (who famously studied with Gorgias) and the dialectical argument about the natural inferiority of women to men are centrally concerned with human conventions.
   * Gorgias’s arguments are transparently contradictory. What, then, do they have in common?

2. **The Epic of Gilgamesh.** Plato’s encounter with Homer (especially in Books 2 and 3) is enriched with a close reading of the surviving fragments of the great Sumerian poem 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.
   * How do the limits imposed on Gilgamesh by his humanity seem similar to those Achilles experiences? In what ways do they differ?

3. **Plato, Apology.** 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.
   * 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?