

European College of Liberal Arts

Syllabus for AY/BA1 Core Course, Fall 2010

Seminar leaders: Ewa Atanassow, Sarah Burges-Watson, Tracy Colony, Michael Weinman

Guests: David Hayes (ECLA) Glenn Most (SNS), Ryszard Legutko (UJ), David McNeil (U Essex), Simon Trepanier (U Edinburgh), Thomas Bartscherer (Bard College), Julia Valeva (BAS)

PLATO'S *REPUBLIC* AND ITS INTERLOCUTORS

Mon 10:45-12, 13:30-15; **Wed** 9-10:30, 10:45-12:15; **Thu** 13:30-15

The focus of this class is Plato's *Republic*. The *Republic* depicts and draws us into a conversation about the kinds of values (ethical, political, aesthetic, religious, epistemic, and literary) at the heart of ECLA's approach to education, and at the heart of human life simply. It engages with these values in the form of a single conversation, rather than separating them out into the subjects of several treatises. Written long before academic disciplines were established, the *Republic* looks from a modern perspective to be radically multidisciplinary. It may be said to contain a "social contract" theory, a theory of psychology, a theology, a critique of mimetic art, a theory of education, and a classification of political regimes, but it is reducible to none of these, nor is that list exhaustive.

It is an unusual feature of this class that we read and discuss additional texts inbetween sections of the *Republic*. 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 the Greek tradition. Reading Plato's work alongside Homer's *Iliad*, Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Aristophanes' *Clouds*, Euripides' *Hecuba*, and Xenophon's *Hiero*, we strive to better appreciate and evaluate the arguments and drama of the *Republic*.

We will also be attempting to have our own conversation with the *Republic* in this course. We will be reading the text in its entirety, in the spirit of serious and open inquiry, resisting both the temptation to treat Plato's work with uncritical reverence and the opposite temptation to dismiss it as antiquated or of merely historical interest. We will be particularly attentive to the dialogic character of Plato's writing. In the *Republic*, Socrates narrates a conversation that takes place in a specific dramatic context. He talks to specific characters with their own concerns, hopes, and fears. They express, for example, the hope that justice is somehow its own reward, that it is good for the person who is just—and the corresponding fear that by being just one may help others but not oneself, thus missing out on the things that are truly good in life. Understanding how these issues arise and are dealt with in the context of the *Republic* may help us to see how they resemble, or differ from, our own present-day concerns. In engaging with the *Republic* as it engages with its interlocutors, we shall aim to become informed interlocutors for Plato and for each other.

Course Readings:

The Republic of Plato, tr. Alan Bloom
Homer, *Iliad*, tr. Stanley Lombardo
Hesiod, *Works and Days*, tr. Stephanie Nelson
Sophocles, *Antigone*, tr. Grene and Lattimore
Aristophanes, *Clouds*, tr. West and West
Euripides, *Hecuba*, tr. Membke and Reckford
Xenophon, *Hiero*, tr. Robin H. Waterfield

Class Preparation and Participation:

Regular attendance is essential to the success of this course. So is class preparation. **More than just reading through the assigned pages, preparing for class means reading thoughtfully and trying to engage with the text.** An example of such an engagement would be to think through the argument in a particular section of the *Republic*, trying to figure out its rationale or to imagine an alternative. Why do the characters argue as they do? And what is the place of this given argument in the larger architecture of the dialogue? 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?

There will be an attendance sheet for each lecture. Arrive early enough to sign the sheet before each lecture begins. Late arrival counts as an absence. According to college regulations, over 15% unexcused absences will result in academic probation. Lectures, seminars, and special sessions are all separate "classes" for the purposes of counting absences.

Written Assignments:

Over the course of this term you will participate in three seminar groups, led by a different seminar leader. Within each segment of the term (weeks 1-3, weeks 4-7, and weeks 8-11) you will be assigned one essay, preceded by the submission of a short response paper. The aim of the short paper is to deepen your thinking about a particular piece of text, and to practice expressing yourself in formal writing. The more substantial **essays due at the end of weeks 3 and 7** will respond to a thematic question about the reading, and should represent a culmination of your thinking about the issues discussed in that "segment." The **final paper due in week 11** will constitute your most sustained reflection on the course material, and will thus be somewhat greater in length. **All papers will be due at 23:59 on the particular Saturday.**

Grading:

Short response papers (x3): 10% total
Regular papers (x2): 40% total
Final paper: 25%
Seminar grade: 25%

Below is the week-by-week schedule. Unless specified otherwise, the Thursday seminars we be devoted to continuing the discussion and deepening our reflection on the readings for the week.

Week 1: *Republic* 1 and Homer's *Iliad* 1, 9

Mon Oct. 4: Republic 1 (Plenary session)

Wed Oct. 6: Republic 1, guest lecture by Glenn Most (Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa)

Thu seminar: Iliad 1, 9

Book 1 is a microcosm of the *Republic*. Through a series of radically different encounters—the “arrest” of Socrates, with which the dialogue begins; the folk-wisdom of Cephalus, yielding to a first display of Socratic questioning with Cephalus’s son Polemarchus; the vehement, sometimes vitriolic, debate with Thrasymachus, itself a whole of different parts—we find here many of the themes that stay with the dialogue throughout. These encounters also teach us that paying attention to what participants of the conversation say and do is of crucial importance to understanding 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?—, and arriving at an “aporetic” (literally “lacking a way through”) ending, fail to answer. In the last session for this week we make our first foray into the Homeric world of gods and heroes.

Study Questions:

What do you make of the dialogue’s beginning: why does it open as it does?

How and why does the question of justice arise? What are the sources for the various definitions of justice discussed in the book? Can you see a connection between a particular definition of justice and the person championing it, i.e., between character and argument?

Why is Thrasymachus so worked up? What if anything is wrong with his argument? Is he defeated at the end or not?

Does Achilles have a definition of justice? If so, what does it sound like?

Week 2: *Iliad* 14, 18, 21, 22 and *Republic* 2

Mon Oct. 11: Iliad 14, 18, 20, 22 (SBW)

Wed Oct. 13: Republic 2, guest lecture by Ryszard Legutko (Jagiellonian University, Krakow)

Homer's *Iliad* was the cornerstone of ancient Greek education. Much of the conversation in Plato's *Republic* presents itself as a revision of Homer, and of the vision of the cosmos and the heroic ideals depicted in the *Iliad*. We begin this week by discussing the Homeric view of the universe, and the place of human beings and institutions in it. Juxtaposing Homer's account of the paradigmatic hero Achilles, and his status vis-à-vis gods and men, with what *Republic 2* says about the human relation to the divine, and the role of poetic tradition in shaping our conception of what makes a worthy human life, we begin to outline the differences between the Homeric image of the good life, and Plato's reinterpretation of it.

Study Questions:

What motivates Homeric heroes to give their lives in battle? How unique is Achilles with respect to these choices?

What, in your view, distinguishes the Homeric gods from the mortal sphere and how do they relate to mortals?

Why are Glaucon and Adeimantus dissatisfied with the way the argument has gone? What does each of their particular dissatisfaction tell us about each of their character?

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?

Is Socrates' critique, as some interpreters have argued, irreligious? Or would such a term, as others argue, be inappropriate in this context?

Week 3: Hesiod's Works and Days and Republic 3

Mon Oct. 18: Works and Days, guest lecture by David Hayes (ECLA)

Wed Oct. 20: Republic 3 (TC)

Like the *Republic*, the *Works and Days* is about education and justice. Most obviously, Hesiod's poem is presented as a kind of lesson to his unjust brother. In this, there is a curious point of contact with the *Republic*. Glaucon and Adeimantus were Plato's brothers. But the educational content and form of the *Works and Days* seems to differ profoundly from that of Plato's work. Hesiod's instruction is for a private farmer, not a "guardian." In Hesiod's myth of the metals (unlike Socrates' "noble lie") all of us are now irredeemably "iron." Hesiod's teaching is also saturated with a kind of religiosity that Socrates finds problematic. Through the readings for this week we shall explore Hesiod's vision of a good life and Socrates' critique and reworking of that vision.

Study Questions:

What is the view of virtuous and fulfilling human life that emerges from Hesiod's poem? What role do the gods play in this view?

How does Hesiod define justice? And what is the significance of the 'Five Ages' myth (106-201) for Hesiod's account of a just man?

In light of the argument of Republic 3, 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? In the context of the whole discussion about the education of the guardians, how can lying be permissible, let alone salutary or "noble"?

Week 4: "Orphism" and *Republic* 4

Mon Oct. 25: Special session: Orpheus and "Orphism" (SBW)

Wed Oct. 27: Republic 4 (MW)

Monday special session: Orpheus and "Orphism"

Following the critique of poetry begun in book 2, book 3 includes a discussion of the kind of music to be admitted in the ideal city. In this context Socrates states that music "rhythm and harmony most of all insinuate themselves into the inmost part of the soul and most vigorously lay hold of it" (401d). So too, in book 7, harmonics occupies the highest rung of the philosopher's educational ladder.

For the Greeks, the power of music is embodied by the mythical figure Orpheus, who was also known as the founder of "mysteries" and possessor of secret knowledge about the soul's destiny. In *Republic* 2, Adeimantus mentions poetry "by" Orpheus as an influential source of wrong-headed ideas about the afterlife and in book 10, Orpheus makes a fairly ignominious entry in the Myth of Er.

In the first part of this session, we will take a synoptic tour of Orphic texts and consider some points of intersection with the *Republic*; in the second, we will explore Orpheus' combination of *mousike* and mysteries and consider some of the reasons for Plato's profound ambivalence towards this mythical figure and the constellation of ideas which he represents.

The readings for this session will be distributed at the lecture on October 20th.

In Book 4 of the *Republic*, after addressing Adeimantus's critique 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, or what we mean when we say "I am of two minds about this," or "I am so angry with myself about that." 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.

Study Questions:

Is Adeimantus wrong to believe that the guardians will not be happy? Is happiness a relevant issue to discuss when investigating justice?

Why is Leontius so angry with himself for looking at the corpses (440a-c)? What part of him is getting angry, exactly, and to which part of him exactly is the anger addressed? What do we learn about desires and the soul 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?

Week 5: *Republic 5* and Sophocles' *Antigone*

Mon Nov. 1: Special session: Orpheus and “Orphism” (SBW)

Wed Nov. 3: Republic 5, guest lecture by David McNeil (University of Essex)

Book 5 marks a new beginning: once more the assembled group “arrests” Socrates and “forces” him to take up the neglected issue of women and children. In response, Socrates introduces three radical proposals, including the guardians' possession of wives and children in common, that entail the dissolution of the private family. The city's rulers are to regulate all aspects of the guardians' sexual relations and child rearing for the good of the city as a whole. The proposed family arrangements for the guardians, and the ensuing discussion, raise questions that are at the heart of Sophocles' *Antigone*: To what extent are human beings “parts” of the city? Are “human being” and “citizen” one and the same? If somehow different, can they be brought into harmony with one another?

Study Questions:

Why is the conclusion reached at the end of book four dissatisfactory?

What exactly is the problem that calls for Socrates's radical solutions? Are these solutions adequate, why or why not?

What motivates Antigone's commitment to bury her brother? Why is her fate a tragedy?

What, in light of Sophocles' *Antigone*, is the proper relation between one's obligation to one's family and the duties to the larger community? Can these be neatly distinguished? What is the role of religion in outlining these obligations?

Week 6: *Republic 6* and the Presocratics

Mon Nov. 8: Republic 6 (MW)

Wed Nov. 10: TBA

Thu special session: guest lecture by Simon Trepanier (University of Edinburgh)

Book 6 of the Republic begins with the claim that justice will arise only when those with philosophic souls rule the city, and from there turns to examine the paradox that philosophy, which might seem useless for life in the city, is truly the most useful practice for the city to develop in its promising youth. 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 the knowability of 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.

Study Questions:

Early in book 6 Socrates is defending the importance 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?

Why does Socrates choose a geometrical construction ("the divided line" [509d]) as an image of the proper order of education in cultivating a philosophic soul?

How does abstraction, and mathematics in particular, help to turn the soul towards the true, the good, and the beautiful?

Thursday special session: **Philosophers and the Divided Line**

In the first part of his lecture Professor Trepanier will discuss book 6's function within the larger excursus of books 5 to 7 and within the *Republic* as a whole, and then set out, but not necessarily answer, some of the problems of interpretations found in Book 6. In the second, he will try to contextualize Plato's own thought by relating 1) his picture of the philosopher and 2) the image of the divided line to earlier debates about knowledge and the place of 'Mind' in nature. In particular, we will consider links to Parmenides, Anaxagoras and Democritus.

The readings for this session will be distributed in week 4.

Week 7: *Republic* 7 and Aristophanes' *Clouds*

Mon Nov. 15: Republic 7 (TC)

Wed Nov. 17: Aristophanes' *Clouds* (EA)

This week we reach the culmination of the discussion about philosophic education, depicted through one of the most celebrated images in all of Plato's work: the allegory of the cave. The story of the cave portrays the effect of this education as a "turning-around" of souls (*periagogē*, in Latin = "conversion"). In Book 7 we will revisit the soul-city analogy and get a closer understanding of philosophy's transformative effect on the individual soul, which is both liberating and potentially dangerous.

The dangers of philosophy come to the fore in the trial that brings to an end Socrates' life. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates points to Aristophanes as one of his most persuasive critics and to the *Clouds* as a damning critique of his activity and way of life – an accusation we need to grapple with, if we are to fully understand the meaning and effects of Socratic education.

Study Questions:

How should we understand the political dimension of the allegory of the cave?

What do Socrates' references to eyesight and fire say about the character of the individual soul?

What examples of Socratic irony are to be found in this book? Is it ironic to speak of the soul as having a nature?

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?

Week 8: *Republic* 8 and Euripides' *Hecuba*

Mon Nov. 22: Republic 8 (MW)

Wed Nov. 24: Euripides' *Hecuba* (SBW)

Having scaled the golden summits of the ideal city with the education of the Philosopher Kings in book seven, the only way seems to be down...through a sequence of baser metals. Book eight charts the degeneration of the ideal constitution of city and soul into *timocracy* (love of honor), oligarchy, democracy (!) and, finally, the kind of constitution generally acknowledged by the Greeks to be the very worst—tyranny.

As we assess the critique of constitutions, and Socrates' account of the causes of the city's and soul's decline, we will read Euripides' *Hecuba*, a tragic exploration of how, in the face of extreme grief and disillusionment, a noble character exacts a barbaric form of justice as every civilized institution in which she has put faith fails her in the moral anarchy of war.

Study Questions:

Why, according to Socrates, do cities and souls degenerate? Is his account of regime change simply a story of decay, or is there something more complex going on?

Which of the regimes discussed in this book is most hospitable to philosophy? Why?

Can we sympathize with Hecuba's successful attempt to take justice into her own hands? Why or why not?

How does Euripides' drama draw the lines between civilization and barbarism?

What is the relationship between an individual's capacity for moral action and the broader social and political framework?

Week 9: *Republic 9* and Xenophon's *Hiero*

Mon Nov. 29: Republic 9, guest lecture by Thomas Bartscherer (Bard College)

Wed Dec. 1: Xenophon's *Hiero*

Special session: Film screening "The Conformist"

After considering the tyrannical city at the close of Book 8, Socrates and Glaukon turn in to a discussion of psychic tyranny and come to the conclusion that love itself [*auto ho erôs*] is the "leader" in the soul of the tyrant. This is particularly striking when we recall that eros has likewise emerged as the distinguishing trait of the true guardian or philosopher. The balance of book 9 is an evaluative comparison of the life of the philosopher and the tyrant, a task that becomes both more urgent and more difficult once eros has been posited as the ruling desire in the souls of both characters.

Xenophon's *Hiero* records a conversation between Simonides the poet (cited in Republic 1) and the eponymous tyrant of Syracuse. As in Republic 9, the conversation in the *Hiero* centers on the relationship between power, knowledge and pleasure, and on the question whether the tyrant's life can be called good and superior in happiness. Written by an associate of Socrates in dialogue form, and defending a doctrine ostensibly similar to that of the *Republic*, *Hiero* offers a kind of mirror that will help us reflect more deeply on the nature and purpose of Plato's work.

Study Questions:

What motivates the tyrannical man? Does he succeed in getting what he desires?

How does Socrates define necessary and unnecessary pleasures? What is the purpose of this distinction?

Which, in Socrates' view, is the happiest life, and why? Do you agree?

In what ways, according to the poet Simonides, is the tyrant's life more pleasurable or blessed than that of private citizens?

What are the tyrant Hiero's counterarguments? Do find them persuasive, why or why not?

Week 10: *Iliad* 24 and *Republic* 10

Mon Dec. 6: Republic 10 (SBW)

Wed Dec. 8: Republic 10 (TC)

Thu special session: Guest seminar by Julia Valeva (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences)

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 imitative poetry, and tragedy in particular. Starting from an analogy with painting, Socrates launches a second critique of tragic poetry, claiming that it indulges the part of the soul that is in conflict with reason. If we surrender too much to the seductive pleasure of lamentation, we become less able to act rationally and overcome grief when it occurs in our own lives. These and other considerations lead Socrates to the radical conclusion (still left open for refutation) that most of what we would recognize as literary culture would be banned from the ideal city.

This second indictment of poetry paves the way for discussing the external rewards of justice that take up the rest of the book. After enumerating the rewards and punishments for justice and injustice in this life and the next, Socrates closes the conversation that is the *Republic* with a mythical vision of what awaits the soul after death and how human justice fits into the wider workings of the cosmos.

Study Questions:

What is the purpose of the analogy between poetry and painting? How does it relate to the epistemology of Republic 5-6? What is wrong with imitation (*mimesis*) in Socrates' view, and can his account of imitation be defended?

How persuasive is the argument that Homer simply imitates images of goodness? How does this account of poetry relate to the discussion in books 2-3?

Why does Socrates bring back the question of the rewards for justice which, Glaucon demanded, should be omitted from the defense of justice?

What are we to make of the Myth of Er? Looks like, having begun with a critique of Homeric poetry, book ten closes with an example of Socratic poetry. What's up with that?

Thursday special session:

Plato and the Great Awakening of Art from Archaic to Classical Antiquity

Plato witnessed the peak of Classical painting as expressed in the mastery of linear perspective, mixing of pigments, and shading. In the *Republic* this increase of illusionistic effects is presented as problematic and potentially subversive for both city and individual. To better understand the critique of mimesis in Plato's *Republic*, in this seminar we shall consider the radical transformation in Greek art from 6th to the first half of the 4th century BC. In a lecture followed by a museum tour we shall trace the step-by-step development of Greek style, from the Archaic conceptual forms to the victory of naturalism in Classical art. We'll discuss Archaic art on the basis of the statues of kuroi and korai (male and female youths) and blackfigure vase painting, and follow the progress of the illusionistic modeling through pivotal examples from the Severe and Classical styles. Red-figure vase painting and written sources will help us get a better sense of Plato had in mind when discussing "mimesis" in Late Classical painting.