

## Syllabus for Autumn 2009 AY/BA Core Course The *Republic* and Its Interlocutors

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### INTRODUCTION:

The focus of this class is Plato's *Republic*—or, in Greek, *Politeia*: “Regime” or “Civil Society”—also the word Aristotle (Plato's student) uses in the *Politics* to designate the good kind of democracy. 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—which might in turn be separated out into the curricula of several academic departments. Although the *Republic* 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 taxonomy of political regimes, it is reducible to none of these, and the list itself is not exhaustive.

It is an unusual feature of this class that we read and discuss other texts in-between 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, and kinds of thought in the Greek tradition. Reading Homer's *Iliad*, Hesiod's *Works and Days* and *Theogony*, poems of Sappho, Aristophanes' *Clouds*, and Sophocles' *Antigone*, we seek to better appreciate and evaluate the arguments and the actions taking place in the *Republic*, and to develop our capacities to be informed interlocutors for Plato and for each other. We conclude with Plato's *Phaedrus* in order to compare its treatments of Eros, the nature of the soul, moderation, and reason with those of the *Republic*. We also expect the reflections on the art of writing at the end of the *Phaedrus* to help us better understand Plato's dialogues simply.

In terms of educational philosophy, the starting point for this class is the belief that the most rewarding way to study the *Republic* or another Platonic dialogue is to read it closely in its entirety in a spirit of serious and open inquiry. We do not take the point of view that because we are born later than Plato we are automatically wiser. In positive terms, we stress the dialogic character of Plato's writing: that his Socrates appears in a specific dramatic context, talking to specific characters with specific concerns, hopes, and fears. At least some of these hopes and fears may be ours as well. For example, the hope that justice or morality is somehow its own reward, that it is good for the person who is just—and the corresponding fear that by being just we help others but not ourselves and miss out on the things that are truly good in life; or, we may fear that by being just or moral we would be living our lives according to what one particular society, the society in which we happened to be raised, only thought was just or moral.

## WEEK 1: THE *ILLIAD*

We begin with the *Iliad* because much of Plato's *Republic* presents itself as a revision of Homer, and because Homer's epic poetry constituted the cornerstone of an ancient Greek's education:

My father was anxious to see me develop into a good man . . . and as a means to this end he compelled me to memorize all of Homer; and so even now I can repeat the whole *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by heart (Xenophon, *Symposium*, 3.5).

Towards the end of the *Republic*, Homer is treated as a terribly appealing danger to the "best of us" (605c). Socrates seems to argue that there is no worse mistake for a human being than to take tragedy as a model for one's life, and that Homer was "first among tragic writers" (607a). The whole of the *Republic* might possibly be conceived as an attempt to provide some alternative to Homer. Before turning to the *Republic*, we therefore take some time to appreciate the power of Homer's *Iliad* by itself. What is it that one learns, exactly, from the *Iliad*?

## WEEK 2: *REPUBLIC* BOOK 1

The first book of the *Republic* introduces many of the themes that stay with the dialogue throughout: the relation of the philosopher to the city, eros, the gods and the afterlife, the questionable wisdom of poetry, and of course, justice. At the same time, the book seems unusual in regard to the rest of the dialogue because it ends "aporetically," i.e., with a declaration of a failure to find the answer to the fundamental question being asked.

## WEEK 3: *REPUBLIC* BOOK 2, HESIOD'S *WORKS AND DAYS*

Book two begins with the speeches of Glaucon and Adeimantus, the two brothers who become Socrates' chief interlocutors for the rest of the dialogue. How does Glaucon's presentation of social and political reality differ from Thrasymachus'? What exactly does his famous "Ring of Gyges" story demonstrate? What does Adeimantus' speech against justice add to Glaucon's?

Much of the discussion in Books two and three concerns what is true and what is false, and what one should and should not say, about the gods and their role in human life. This is a significant critique of Homer and Hesiod, who, in the view of the Greek historian Herodotus, "created for the Greeks their theogony; it is they who gave to the gods the special names for their descent from their ancestors and divided among them their honors, their arts, and their shapes" (Herodotus, *The History*, 2.53). For this reason, we direct our attention to one of the sources of Greek religious thought.

At roughly 800 lines, Hesiod's poem is much smaller than either the *Iliad* (whose epic dialect it shares) or the *Republic*. Hesiod's subject, the world of the farm, also seems much more modest than the construction of "Kallipolis," or the last war of the age of heroes. This may be misleading. One classicist explains:

As, on this kind of small farm, human beings live lives largely unmediated by the institutions established to soften our struggle with the cosmos, this farm, as a microcosm, provides a clue to our relation to the macrocosm that we most often call God (Stephanie Nelson).

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 the *Republic*. Hesiod's education 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 religiosity in the "non-rational" sense. In a passage Adeimantus might have cited when he made his accusation against the poets, Hesiod ties the question of justice to the necessity and the difficulty involved in knowing the will of Zeus:

Nor would I myself  
now be just among men, nor want my son to be just,  
since justice is an evil where go things go for justice –  
but I don't expect, yet, that wise Zeus will bring that to pass.  
(270-3)

Much of the *Works and Days* seems alien to us—more alien than the *Iliad*, probably. On the other hand, many contemporary thinkers would feel that the *Works and Days* supplies something the *Republic* lacks: attention to the educational importance of the world of Nature:

The world of non-human nature is one grand coherent semiotic system, full of divinely engineered signs and indications which human beings need to read aright if they are to perform successfully the endless toil which the gods have imposed upon them. The stars that rise and set, the animals that call out or behave in some striking way, are all conveyors of specific messages, characters in the book of nature; Hesiod's mission is to teach us to read them (Glenn Most).

## WEEK 4: HESIOD'S *WORKS AND DAYS*, *REPUBLIC* BOOK 3

In this section of the *Republic*, Socrates and his interlocutors turn from the city to the soul and what "justice" would mean from this point of view. This section also contains a dramatic interruption; the assembled group "forces" Socrates to take up the issue of women and children in the Kallipolis. Socrates confronts in succession what he calls the "three waves," each of which threatens to overwhelm and defeat the project. These three waves are: 1) that women can be guardians, 2) that women and children should be held in common, and 3) that philosophers should be kings. In defense against this last wave, the philosophers are eventually described as the erotic lovers of the truth.

This discussion will culminate in the claim that Beauty itself is real and much more important than actual individual beautiful things.

Perhaps surprising to us is the emphasis on the proper "musical education." Because "rhythm and mode penetrate more deeply into the inner soul than anything else does" (401d), poetry needs to be controlled by the city. The "most enjoyable" poets are dangerous (397d), and therefore need to be banished. The wisdom of Homer is reduced to that of a dietician (404c).

## WEEK 5: SAPPHO, *REPUBLIC* BOOK 4

In both ancient and modern times, Sappho's poetry itself has been considered to be extraordinarily beautiful. In the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C., vases, coins, and bronze statues were produced to commemorate her. A possibly apocryphal story reports that one day Solon, the Athenian law-giver, heard his nephew singing one of Sappho's songs. When his nephew had finished, Solon asked to be taught the song, so that he might "learn it and die." For many reasons, the poems of Sappho make for an excellent comparison with the *Republic* at the junction of Books 3 and 4. The erotic love of the beautiful is *the* major theme of Sappho's poems (or what remains of them). However, while the education of the guardians involves an assault upon their private erotic attachments, Sappho's poems seem to concern and to celebrate private, intensely felt erotic attachments. The original context of these poems has been much-debated. Some scholars believe that the poems had a sort of didactic purpose. In fact, it has been speculated that Sappho was the headmistress of a kind of semi-international school for girls, and that her poems comprised the core of the school's curriculum (a curriculum that also included "cult, deportment and dress" (Anne Pippin Burnett)):

Sappho performed for her girls in order to amuse them ('These things I sing among my friends to bring them joy', 60V), but she also sang as a means of teaching pupils who were expected to imitate her songs. Hymns, epithalamia and other pieces of occasional poetry served as models for performances that would be required of them presently, and even the love lyrics were didactic, since they taught the girls to know their own emotions and to objectify them in song (Anne Pippin Burnett).

Other scholars consider these kinds of claims to be entirely fanciful. Does the close attention to Sappho's poetry justify the following claim?

If you accept the honeyed Muse, in song or poetry, pleasure and pain will be twin kings in your city in place of established custom and the thing which has always been generally accepted as best—reason (607a).

## WEEK 6: *REPUBLIC* BOOK 5, *ANTIGONE*

In Book five of the *Republic* Socrates introduces his radical proposal for the guardians' possession of wives and children in common. This entails 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. This implicitly raises a question the *Antigone* also concerns itself with: To what extent are human beings "parts" of the city? Are "human being" and "citizen" the same? If somehow different, are they in harmony with one another? Sophocles' *Antigone* puts these two in tragic collision, while at the same time raising questions

about the proper relation of "human being" and "citizen", family and state, one's duties to one's own (family, parents and siblings) vs. duties to the larger community (which includes one's future spouse and yet unborn children).

## WEEK 7: *REPUBLIC* BOOKS 6 & 7

Book six of the *Republic* describes the relation of the philosopher to the city. Through several images, cities (perhaps especially democratic ones) are portrayed as antagonistic to the philosophical life. Socrates describes how the individuals who are most suited for the best education are ruined by the city, and ruin cities in their turn by becoming tyrants (495b).

We also consider the increasingly abstract treatment of education in the dialogue and the call to increased abstraction within education. How does abstraction, and mathematics in particular, help to turn souls in the right direction (cf., 514c-d)? Why does Socrates believe that mathematical experience (geometry in particular) is the right tool for turning the soul towards the perception of the relation of the true, the good, and the beautiful? Next, we consider Socrates' surprising claim that the philosophers should rule, and two famous images of the nature of true education: the "divided line" and the allegory of the cave. The allegory of the cave is Socrates' most famous image of "the effect of education—or the lack of it—on our nature" (514a). True education, he claims, involves not the implanting of knowledge or the development of skills, but a "turning-around" of souls (*periagogē*, in Latin = "conversion").

## WEEK 8: ARISTOPHANES' *CLOUDS*, *REPUBLIC* BOOK 8

In the *Apology*, Socrates says that he has little chance of persuading the jury of his innocence—not because his current accusers are so persuasive, but because of his "old accusers", one of whom "happens to be a comic poet." While the members of the jury were still children, says Socrates, the old accusers portrayed a Socrates who is "a thinker on the things aloft, who has investigated all things under the earth, and who makes the weaker speech the stronger" (18b-d). This is unmistakably the Socrates of the *Clouds*, and therefore it seems that Socrates is claiming that the comedian Aristophanes is responsible for his death. Having considered Socrates' treatment of the relation of philosophers to their cities and having heard his claim that philosophers should rule, we should be in a position to consider this attack on Socrates. What exactly is Aristophanes' understanding and criticism of Socrates? Is his comic Socrates recognizable to us as the Socrates portrayed in the *Republic*?

Most of the *Republic* concerns the construction of Kallipolis and its guardians through education. In book eight, Socrates considers how this city, and the other possible regimes and their corresponding souls, become corrupted and destroyed. Of special interest to us is his portrait of democracy and democratic man.

## WEEK 9: *REPUBLIC* BOOKS 9 & 10

Book nine completes the portrait of the tyrant. The life of the tyrant and the life of the philosopher are compared—with the surprisingly specific result that the philosopher's life is 729 times more pleasurable than the tyrant's. How should we understand this? And why does the *Republic*—a book apparently devoted to establishing the rule of reason in cities and souls—end with a myth? And why does it end with this particular myth? What are the implications of this for the best education as Socrates understands it? Have the original challenges of Glaucon and Adeimantus been answered? Has justice been successfully defended?

## WEEK 10: PLATO'S *PHAEDRUS*

The *Phaedrus* is Socrates' dramatic educational encounter, outside the gates of the city, a young man in love with speeches. In this dialogue, the question of the place of Eros in human life is taken up without a political context. Some questions to consider include: What is the "love of speeches?" Should we love speeches moderately? The speech of Lysias claims that favors ought to be granted to the non-lover rather than the lover. Is this a "rational" approach to love? As one of the young men present (though silent) during the conversation that is the *Republic*, could Lysias have learned such an attitude from Socrates? Or what could he have gotten wrong? Is the image of the tripartite soul presented in Socrates' "Palinode" essentially the same as image he presents in the *Republic*? Through Socrates' reflections on the art of writing, how does Plato help us understand his own dialogues?