

Reading Notes: *Republic* Books III & IV

Merlin CCC, March 2024

For our second session, we'll be looking at Books III and IV of the *Republic*. As always, Plato has packed quite a lot into these pages, in a complex and multi-layered way. The notes and questions below are intended to call attention to some of these layers and interconnections, and as a starting point for your own reading and contemplation of the text. There is, of course, a lot more to discuss. Please bring your own concerns, questions, etc., to the conversation!

Book III

Throughout this book, we find an extended analogy between the doctor/physician and the statesman. Among the many places where this appears:

- This includes the extended analysis of physical training as a kind of care for the physical body, in contrast to care for a person's soul.
- Early in the book, we see the judicious use of falsehoods or lies compared to a drug, which is to be used only by the doctor, but not by an ordinary person. Here (and throughout) the Greek term for the "private citizen" is *idiotēs*, from which we get our English word "idiot." The original sense, though, was not stupidity (as in the English word), but rather, being so caught up in one's own private, individual world as to not really be part of the common world we all share.
- Much later (407e) we see Asklepios (perhaps with the Latin spelling "Asclepius"), the divine physician, described as a statesman.
- Near the end of the book, we'll find Socrates contrasting the work of a doctor with that of a judge: Because the doctor treats bodies, it's good for him to be someone who has a lot of personal experience with being unwell in his own body. Whereas the judge, who treats the soul, should *not* have extensive personal experience with being unwell in his own soul. What are we to make of this claim, and the argument for it?

After the discussion of the *contents* of myth and story, Socrates shifts to a discussion of their *form*. Here, the key theme is imitation (or Greek *mimēsis*, from which we get the English adjective "mimetic"): What things should we appropriately imitate, versus simply knowing about them without imitation?

In this context, we'll again see the "do one thing" rule: We can't imitate many things as well as just imitating one. Note here Socrates' ongoing concern for the **unity** of the individual, and for the unity of the city. In doing so, we might also remember—as we discussed last week—that all of these poetic and dramatic arts were sacred to Dionysos, the God who himself was violently torn into pieces by the Titans, and needed to reconstitute himself ("constitution" again!), with the help of Zeus and Athena.

At 403b, we find another major shift in topic. Having completed his discussion of *mousikē*, the poetic and dramatic arts, Socrates moves on to physical training. I've mentioned some of this above; we might also note the very interesting discussion of chronic illness. At an explicit level, Socrates is appealing to the "do one thing" principle, with the suggestion that it's not anyone's "thing" to spend his days being sick. At an implicit level, we're invited to ask how

this applies to the city, which as we learned in book II, is itself chronically ill, with a raging fever just below the surface. We'll get another call-back to this in book IV, pages 425e–426b.

Book IV

Book IV is mostly occupied by finding the four “cardinal virtues” of wisdom, courage, moderation/temperance, and justice, both in the city and in the individual human person. This is a fairly standard list of virtues, and so Plato seems comfortable assuming it as a starting point, without having to argue for the list as such.

Let's note the *account* or definition that's given of each, as well as the *procedure* by which each of them is found. In particular, did we start from the city and go to the individual, or vice versa, or something altogether more complicated?

Another critical part of this book is the extended argument that each individual has multiple parts within him- or herself. This is foreshadowed at 431a, where Socrates suggests that “in the soul of that very person, there is a better part and a worse one.” It's also been suggested by the quotation from Homer's *Odyssey* all the way back at the beginning of book III (390d): “He struck his breast and spoke to his heart: ‘Endure my heart!’”

The argument for there being multiple parts of the soul really begins in earnest, though, at 436b, where Socrates states a version of the law of non-contradiction: “The same thing will not be willing to do or undergo opposites in the same part of itself, in relation to the same thing, at the same time.” On the basis of this principle, when faced with a pair of opposites within a single person, Socrates will distinguish between different parts of that person.

We should also note that this argument gives us a *minimum*, but not a maximum, for the number of parts; at 443d, Socrates explicitly qualifies his position by adding “he binds together those parts *and any others there may be in between*.”