

Reading Notes: *Republic* Books V & VI

Merlin CCC, March 2024

For our third session, we'll be looking at Books V and VI of the *Republic*. Here, Socrates and his interlocutors loop back around to revisit several issues in greater precision and detail: notably, the status of women in the guardians' city, and the specific qualifications of the rulers. This sets us up for one of the most challenging topics we've encountered so far, when Socrates' companions ask him to explain knowledge itself, and especially, the knowledge of the good. This final topic will begin in the last ten or so pages of book VI, and continue into book VII, so if it seems like things have not yet been fully resolved or explained in the reading for this session... that's because they haven't!

As always, given how much material there is in Plato's text, these notes are highly selective. Please bring your own concerns, questions, etc., to the conversation!

Book V

Near the beginning of book V (450e–451b), as he tells Glaucon that his encouragement is backfiring, Socrates gives us a bit of an outline for what's coming in the rest of the dialogue: His initial hesitation, "if I could be sure that I was speaking with knowledge" gestures toward the complex question of what "having knowledge" even means, at the end of book VI and the start of book VII. His concern that "if I slip, I'll drag all my friends down with me" looks ahead to book VIII, where we examine how even small mistakes on the part of the guardians can lead to disaster, not only for the city, but for the individuals who are raised there. And his invocation of Adrasteia looks ahead to the end of book X.

The first major theme in this book concerns the treatment of the guardians. We'll have much to explore in the obvious issue of the (relative) equality of men and women, at least insofar as Socrates' arguments in the preceding books compel him to open all occupations in the city to both.

But we should also note his treatment of *the entire class* of guardians, men and women alike. At the very outset (451d, etc.), Socrates not only describes our guardians as "watchdogs," but argues by analogy, starting from how we treat domestic animals, and using this to justify our treatment of these human beings. A few pages later (459a, and following) he'll go even farther, explicitly talking about "breeding" the guardians along the lines of pedigree hunting dogs or birds. There's a lot that we should stop and consider here. We might start by reflecting on the sharp contrast between the way these citizens are losing their autonomy, in service to the city but not, it seems, to themselves, and compare this with the "city of pigs" from book II. We might also ask to what extent, if at all, any of the elements of Socrates' proposal might in fact be good for the guardians themselves (and not just for the city).

As the discussion proceeds, Socrates hints at the epistemic topics (i.e., the theory of knowledge) that will dominate the end of book VI: At 452e, he notes that "it's foolish to take seriously any standard of what is fine and beautiful, other than the good," thereby implicitly raising the question of what "the good" itself even is. And at 454a, he invites us to "divine according to forms;" that is, the basic shapes or ways that things are or that they appear.

As a general method, at 462a, Socrates instructs us to first identify the good, and then to determine whether the proposed course of action fits with that good. Here, the good he has in mind seems to be something like “binding the city together as one, rather than tearing it apart and becoming many.” It’s no coincidence that this is preceded by an invocation of Apollo (via his priestess, the Pythia), whose name literally means “not many”.

This theme of one and many will recur frequently in what follows, including at 476a, with the mention of the forms (i.e., shapes, kinds, etc.) of the just and the unjust, the good and the bad, etc.: “each of them is itself one, but because they manifest themselves everywhere, in association with actions, bodies, and each other [i.e., in association with *other forms*], each of them appears to be many.” This contrast between being and appearing (or seeming) parallels the distinction between the lover of wisdom, who *knows*, and the lover of sights and sounds, who *opines* (i.e., who has opinion rather than knowledge). Here and throughout, “opinion” seems to have a fairly precise sense: not just “whatever someone thinks”, as in the modern usage, but something like “how things present themselves in a shifting, incomplete, sensory way, how they appear,” but where those appearances lack the stable permanence that Socrates is hoping to find. This instability is key.

Finally, a few small notes on Socrates’ discussion of “the Greek race” or “the Hellenes” (469b–471b), who are contrasted with the foreigners or barbarians (Greek *barbaroi*, 470c, etc.). In the first place, the “barbarians” are merely anyone who is not Greek, but without any negative judgment of those peoples: in Plato’s day, most Greeks would consider the Egyptians and the Persians, both of whom would be numbered among the “barbarians,” to be in many respects more advanced and venerable than the Greeks themselves.

Second, we should look closely at Plato’s definition of who counts as “Greek” or a “Hellene” (470e). This is not a matter of blood or ancestry in our modern sense, but rather, as Socrates says here, “those who share the same holy things.” This is a criterion that certainly divides different peoples from one another, but which is not quite innate or unchangeable, insofar as by adopting those “holy things,” anyone could in principle thereby satisfy the criterion and be counted among the Greeks. And this is not merely an abstract possibility: throughout the history of Greek antiquity, we find numerous examples of people born among the barbarians who come to be known as Greeks/Hellenes, precisely through such adoption.

Book VI

Book VI begins with an extensive discussion of who the philosopher is, what his/her character is like, and the ways in which the constitution under which a philosophically-inclined person is raised will determine the expression of that character, whether for great good, or for great evil, to some significant degree. For all the rest of us—both insofar as we might not meet all the requirements that Socrates lays out, and insofar as we don’t live under an ideal constitution—this exposition offers a paradigm: a vision of the ideal, toward which we can aim in the lives we actually have, even if it’s never fully attainable. This notion of “paradigm” itself recurs frequently in the conversation (e.g., 472c (in book V), 484c, and frequently after that).

As Socrates describes the philosophical person (484e–487a), note the details of what he’s doing: he shows that such a person must have all four of the cardinal virtues that we met back

in book IV (wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance), as well as various other virtues/excellences besides these.

As the conversation proceeds, Socrates will note (496a-c) that only in a few exceptional cases, where circumstances prevent someone from being pulled away by the concerns of the mob, will a qualified person actually persist in living a philosophical life. What does this look like? It's "a quiet life, taking shelter under a little stone wall" from which the philosopher can (at death) "depart with good hope, blameless and content" (496d-e). This may, in itself, give us a clue to the value of philosophy and of the virtues (including justice), thereby contributing to Socrates' solution to the original question of the dialogue: Why should justice be better than injustice? Hold it in mind, as we consider this "departure" from the present life in book X.

A little later (500d), we find another classic definition of the philosopher: "the philosopher, by consorting with what is ordered and divine ... himself becomes as divine and ordered as is possible for a human being."

Finally, in the last ten or so pages of book VI, we take up the issue of knowledge—and especially, knowledge of the good—in a head-on way. A lot of this will be more easily addressed in conversation and dialogue together, but here are some small starting points:

At 506c, Socrates' injunction that "opinions without knowledge are shameful and ugly things."

At 507b, the organizing principle for what Socrates is after: a single form ("shape") of each beautiful, good, etc., thing. This recalls what, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates describes as the "safe answer" to the question of why the many beautiful things are called by a common name: it's because of beauty, in which they all participate. And likewise for what is tall, what is just, etc.

Take some time to sit with the image of the Sun that Socrates offers to us. What is this analogy teaching, and what limits does it impose? To what extent is the Sun itself a visible object, bearing in mind (as the news has been reminding us) the dangers of looking directly at the Sun, even when it's eclipsed?