Reading Notes: *Republic* Books VII & VIII

Merlin CCC, April 2024

For our fourth session, we'll be tackling books VII and VIII of the *Republic*. The two main themes that we should make sure to cover are the "Allegory of the Cave" at the start of book VII, and the discussion of the inferior types of constitution that spans all of book VIII. 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 VII

Book VII opens with the third of a trio of striking images. At the end of book VI, we encountered the images of the Sun, and the Divided Line. Now we find the famous Allegory of the Cave. After he presents that allegory, (at 517b) Socrates is explicit that this image fits together with the previous two.

With that in mind, let's focus our reading and discussion for this book on fitting the three images together. You might begin by taking last session's handout on the Divided Line, and mapping the narrative of the Cave onto it. In order to get everything to fit, we'll need not only the four sections of the line itself, but also the account of the Sun that came before that in book VI. In book VI, Socrates observed that the Sun is the cause of visible things in two ways: accounting both for their being visible, and for their simply existing (or "being") at all. These visible things are two sections on the left-hand side of our handout on the divided line; we might draw in the Sun as being "above" this portion of the line. Socrates then went on to say that the Sun is the "offspring of the Good", where that Good stands in a relation to intelligible things (the right-hand divisions of the line) in the same way that the Sun stands in relation to visible things (on the left).

With all those pieces in place, we should be able to start fitting the Cave image together with these earlier two images.

Having done that, let's think about what this trio of images expresses, on various different levels. How can we understand these images as describing our passage through a human life, or even as describing different modes of thought (or of encountering the cosmos) that might be simultaneous?

Finally, remember that these "allegories" are, in Greek, *eikones* or images — and that this is Plato's term for all the things that we encounter in the smallest subdivision of the Divided Line.

Book VIII

Book VIII returns to the issue that was raised in the opening lines of book V: what is the nature of all the other sorts of constitution (both of cities, and of individual persons)? This is slowly bringing us back to the opening question of the *Republic*: by looking at justice and injustice in each of these constitutions, we should be able to give an argument for why it's better for an individual person to be just rather than unjust. Since this is, in some sense, the direct follow-up to book IV, you might want to review the end of book IV, to recall Socrates' presentation of the three parts of the city and the soul, and the four cardinal virtues that relate to these.

All told, Plato presents us with a ranked sequence of five different constitutions (or six, if we include the constitution of the original "city of pigs" from the first half of book II). As Socrates presents these, they are explicitly connected to the three divisions of the individual soul and of the classes in the city, as presented in book IV. These are:

0. The city of pigs. (What, we should ask, is the analogue of this in the individual person?) In book VIII, this gets only a passing reference, at 543c-d.
1. Aristocracy: the rule of the intellect, the reasoning part. This is the constitution we've been examining since the middle of book II, and have now completed.
2. Timocracy: the rule of the spirited, honor-loving part.
3. Oligarchy: the rule of the appetitive part.
4. Democracy: the rule of no one part in particular, precisely because it's the rule of all. In Plato's day, most of the public offices in a democracy were chosen by lot (i.e., by random drawing), and so Plato sees democracy is being unable/unwilling to stay the course on any particular priorities over the long term.
5. Tyranny. In a sense, this one is perhaps the hardest to define, which is why Plato spends the most time on it. He'll explain the tyrannical city at the end of book VIII, and discuss the tyrannical soul/person at the opening of book IX.

I'd like to suggest that as Plato describes the transitions from one constitution to the next, each transition can be attributed to the failure of one of the four cardinal virtues, which he defined back in book IV. Please do look back at those passages, to recall exactly how the virtues were defined. With those definitions in mind, we might see the argument of book VIII as follows:

- Aristocracy to timocracy: failure of wisdom.
- Timocracy to oligarchy: failure of courage.
- Oligarchy to democracy: failure of temperance/moderation.
- Democracy to tyranny: failure of justice (in the sense that justice for Plato is about assigning each part its proper, well-fitting role, whereas democracy refuses even to admit that different parts, or different people, have *any different roles at all*. The earlier constitutions all assigned distinct roles to distinct parts, however well or poorly they did in the details of those assignments. Democracy, in Plato's telling, refuses to even consider making such assignments.)

One more big interpretive question for this book: What is the relationship between Plato's accounts of cities, and his accounts of individuals? Are they merely parallel, such that one of them could be an analogy for the other? Or are they more deeply intertwined than that, such that the city in which we live doesn't just offer an analogy for our individual character, but actually shapes and determines our individual character (and/or vice versa)? How we answer these questions will have implications for the overall plan of the *Republic* as a whole.

Finally, note how Socrates includes some mention of slavery in each of the four worst constitutions (making all of them, at least in some sense, unlike the aristocratic constitution): At 547b, the new timocrats are said to enslave the other citizens, while at 553c-d, the oligarchic person enslaves his own rational and spirited parts. The other two cases are clearly apparent.