

Reading Notes: *Republic* Books IX & X

Merlin CCC, April 2024

Our final session will look at the last two books of Plato's dialogue, and hopefully will also include time for overall reflection on the *Republic* as a whole. Given everything that we've been saying about the importance of unity, and the philosopher's ability to see the whole constitution *as* a unified whole, it seems especially relevant that we step back, and try to consider the dialogue itself in the same terms.

Book IX

Book IX begins with Socrates' description of the tyrannical person, thus completing the gallery of rogues that occupied all of book VIII. By doing so, he can offer us three arguments in answer to the question that was raised back at the outset of the conversation with Glaucon: Even without any external rewards or recognition — even with the very opposite of these — why is it better for a person to live according to justice rather than injustice?

Note especially the short summary at 576a: "Someone with a tyrannical nature lives his whole life without being friends with anyone, always a master to one man or a slave to another, and never getting a taste of either freedom or friendship." For the ancients (and perhaps ourselves as well?), friendship was always seen as a relationship between equals.

Here, we also see the topic of slavery coming to a head. As we noted at the end of the last session, Socrates suggests that some degree of slavery is present in each of the defective constitutions, but the issue becomes increasingly intense as we descend lower and lower in the rankings. Thus (579c) the tyrant "tries to rule others when he can't even control himself. He's just like an exhausted body without any self-control...", which in turn means that (579d) "a real tyrant is really a slave, compelled to engage in the worst kind of fawning, slavery, and pandering to the worst kind of people."

In this way, Socrates brings us to the conclusion of the first argument on behalf of justice: the misery of the tyrannical man, who is ultimately enslaved to such a degree that he's unable to rule even himself, let alone others.

The second argument is based on the theory of the three-part soul that was introduced back in book IV, and which formed the basis for distinguishing the various constitutions in book VIII. As Socrates reminds us, each part has its corresponding pleasures/loves: at 581a-b, we find two words for each part (thus a total of six) all beginning with *philo-* "love of" (on the pattern of *philosophia*, love of wisdom). This argument turns on the question: Who is most competent to judge between all these loves, and between their associated pleasures? (Spoiler: the soul ruled by reason. But *why so?*)

Note the contrast of this argument — according to which the person of the best constitution has experience of all the lower pleasures — with the argument about the physician and the judge at the end of book III, where a good judge should *not* have extensive personal experience of injustice (i.e., of being unjust in his own life). What should we make of this contrast?

Finally, the third argument begins with the invocation of Zeus the Savior at 583b. This argument centers on the stability of the philosophic pleasures, in contrast with the fleeting and transitory nature of the others. Socrates' mention that "the third libation is for the Savior" is

proverbial; it literally describes Hellenic religious practice (literally pouring libations of wine for the Gods), while Plato and his successors frequently use it to describe the third in a trio arguments, suggesting that in a sense, the argument is a libation. Here, he invokes Zeus as savior in the ancient sense of that term: one who preserves us, keeping us safe through various challenges and difficulties. The words “safety” and “savior” ultimately share a common root.

Finally, we should look very closely at the concluding exchange of this book (592a-b). Here, Socrates suggests the impossibility of the guardians’ city ever coming to be in the world around us; instead, there is rather “a paradigm of it in heaven.” This indicates why we needed all the epistemic theory in books VI-VII: so that we understand what it means to turn ourselves toward a paradigm and be oriented by it.

This exchange may also reinforce the reading of book VIII that we’ve been developing, in the sense that each of the city constitutions (and not only the best one) serves as a paradigm on which individual people model their own inner constitutions, whether by conscious choice, or by unconsciously being shaped by the values and priorities of the community around them. What Socrates is proposing, then, is that we might be able — albeit only with great care and difficulty — to shape ourselves *not* according to the embodied city we happen to be born into, which is inevitably (to whatever degree) corrupt and corrupting, but instead according to the paradigmatic city, of which we can become citizens even now. Indeed, as a paradigm rather than a material presence, in the sense of “paradigm” unfolded through the images of the Cave and the Line, it is eternally present and available to us.

Book X

The exchange which ended book IX also provides the springboard to book X, in at least two ways. First, the issue of “imitating a paradigm” triggers the fresh conversation about imitative (or “mimetic”) arts and poetry which opens book X. And second, it gets us ready for the Myth of Er which concludes the book, according to which the souls who are about to be reborn are required to choose the paradigm according to which their next life will be structured. (In some translations, this is rendered as “model”; the Greek term is *paradeigma*.)

On the first issue, note Socrates’s mention (595b) of “the loving respect (*philia*) I’ve had for Homer since I was a child.” This gets exactly to the point: what kind of loves should a well-ordered education be placing in impressionable children?

As we pivot to the concluding myth, we see a number of links backward and forward to other parts of the dialogue, including:

- the “true runners ... who get to the end of the race and are crowned” (613e), recalling the elderly Cephalus with his sacred crown in book I
- Glaucon’s suggestion that such an account will be “among the things most pleasant to hear” (614a-b), looking back to both the value and the limitations of hearing pleasant recitations, earlier in this book and before.
- “The inevitable punishment for some mistake in a former life” (613a), where “inevitable” is in Greek the adjective form of “Necessity” (*Ananke*), whom we’ll encounter again, along with her daughters, the Moirai (“Fates”) in just a few pages.