

Subject: The Republic: Wednesday's Discussion  
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Dear Colleagues -

This is "my" week to lead Monday afternoon's prep session for Wednesday's and Friday's discussion of Plato's REPUBLIC. There are some very helpful materials in the faculty WHGC guide, one of which (the "cartoon" version of the cave allegory) I will probably hand out to you at Monday's meeting. There are also many web sites that are relevant. What follows is a walk-through some of the material that I think will support discussion.

WEDNESDAY'S reading is Book IV and then some additional material: the syllabus says Book VI, but I am not sure that is correct. I am going to recommend some slightly different portions: see below.

BOOK IV is where Plato finally reaches his "definition" of justice, both in the city and in the individual. There are many interesting points of discussion along the way. On p. 118 he argues that both WEALTH and POVERTY are equally bad. Do you think he is convincing?

On the same page, he begins to argue about why his "Just" city will always defeat in "Unjust" city in warfare. He continues to describe the educational system. Note that on p. 120 he says that the guardians "must not permit any innovation in gymnastics, music, or poetry that might undermine the established order." So much for rock & roll, much less punk or rap.

Notice his "four virtues" on page 123: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. Compare with Mencius' "four hearts!"

He then expands on each: wisdom on p. 124, seems to be "Good counsel...a sort of skill or proficiency, something generated from knowledge and not from ignorance." And the most important kind of knowledge is (of course) the "art of guardianship practiced by the city's rulers..." These are, of course, Plato's "Guardians" whose education and training occupies so much of his attention.

Courage on p. 125, appears to be "the strength to hold fast to the proper convictions about what is worth fearing and what is not."

Temperance on p. 126, is "the ordering or controlling of certain pleasures or desires." And then: "... the mass of diverse appetites, pleasures, and pain is to be found chiefly among children, women, slaves, and the many so-called freemen from the lower classes. But the simple and temperate desires governed by reason, good sense, and true opinion are to be found only in the few, those who are the best born and the best educated." I will invite students to comment on this.

Finally justice (the most important, obviously) on p. 128. Plato states that “justice sustains and perfects the other three; justice is the ultimate cause and condition of their existence.” In other words: JUSTICE IS SIMPLY THE CORRECT ORDERING AND FUNCTIONING OF THE OTHER THREE VIRTUES.

On p. 130 he states explicitly that his city will be “Just” when each of the three classes of citizens possess its necessary virtue: the Workers (artisan, craftsman, merchant, laborer) must be TEMPERATE, the Warriors must be COURAGEOUS, and the Guardians must be WISE. This will, then, establish JUSTICE in the CITY.

Then on page 133 he begins to argue that each individual soul ALSO consists of three parts: Reason) Spirit, and Passion (or emotions). He will argue) then, that in the JUST MAN) Reason plays the part of the Guardians of the city, Spirit plays the part of the Warrior) and Passion plays the part of the workers. JUSTICE in the individual, then, consists of the rule of REASON) which is assisted by the SPIRIT to keep the PASSIONS under control. Thus, Socrates arrives at his definition of a JUST MAN. This argument takes up most of the remainder of Book IV.

At this point a general observation: Contrast this with what MOSES would probably say. Moses is concerned with LAW, which is to say, outward behavior. The TORAH is not so much concerned with how you FEEL about obeying God’s law, just that you DO obey it. There are clear rewards and punishments for doing or not doing this. Plato, on page 137, says clearly “The reality is that justice is not a matter of external behavior but the way a man privately and truly governs his inner self.”

It seems to me that Jesus of Nazareth was probably at odds with the Jewish power structure exactly for the reason that he sided with the Platonic view. He preached that obedience to religious law was less important than the internal state of one’s soul. One should “love thy neighbor,” not just refrain from doing him harm. One must avoid “lusting” after a woman, not merely avoid adultery. I have my own suspicions (based on no evidence whatsoever, except that Jesus lived in a Hellenistic world, and Plato’s writings were surely widely available even in the Roman province of Syria) that Jesus himself might have been exposed to Plato’s thinking on this. In any case, it seems clear to me that Christianity evolved as a synthesis of Hebraic and Platonic thinking. I don’t know if my students will be interested in discussing this, but I sure am!

And more: I don’t know how many students would be familiar with Freud) but it is pretty clear to me that Passion = ill) Reason = EGO, Spirit = SUPEREGO. And, of course, Freud is not even the second thinker to organize the human psyche into three parts: consider the traditional goal of education to improve the “body, mind and spirit” of its recipients! Consider the orthodox Christian division of God into the trinity: God (Reason?), Holy Spirit (Spirit, I assume) and Son (passion? At least he supposedly had a physical body...). Students might see some other connections.

Alfred North Whitehead is quoted (I’ll have to paraphrase because I lack the source at home where I am writing this) that the “safest” characterization of the entire history of Western thought is as “a series of footnotes to Plato.” I agree with him. Jesus’ “kingdom of God” seems awfully similar to Plato’s “world of Forms” to be seen in Book VII, and so forth.

The first 10 or so pages of Book V addresses explicitly the role of WOMEN in 'Plato's ideal city, and it is really fascinating - and should be for our students (especially our WOMEN students). I don't know (of course, there are lots of things I don't know) of anywhere else in ancient writing that flat-out takes on this question. And Plato's stance is truly revolutionary. He argues (on p. 142) "...that the birth and education of women will be governed by the same guidelines we prescribed for men."

Plato is not a believer in "equality" of the two sexes. On p. 146 he says clearly that there are no "important" human endeavors in which men do not excel women. (He discounts "weaving and baking cakes and boiling vegetables.) NEVERTHELESS, he admits that there are occasional rare women who are "more skilled than many men," and these will "have the rightful opportunity to share in every task." He further argues that such exceptional women (along with the exceptional males) should be given exactly the same "Prep for Guardianship" education that he has previously described, even to exercising naked in the gymnasium.

He then goes on to advocate a "communal" existence for the guardians (p. 148): all the male guardians will be married to all the female guardians, and children born to these parents will be raised by the whole community of guardians - no parent will know which child is "his/hers," and likewise no child will know his/her biological parents (see pp. 152-153). This description of the sex lives and child-rearing practices among the Guardians is likely to raise very strong emotional objections from students.

Best regards,  
Harry

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