

Subject: THE REPUBLIC: Friday's Discussion Date:
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Dear Colleagues –

We read Books VII and X for Friday. In my class, I will emphasize two main "themes" in each of the two Books: in Book VII I will strongly emphasize the Allegory of the Cave, and put lesser emphasis on the more diffuse argument that follows, which exalts reason (specifically mathematics and "dialectic"). In Book X I will emphasize the "myth of Er," placing lesser emphasis on Plato's criticism of artists (as "imitators" of imitations).

The Cave Allegory is, for me, the core of the REPUBLIC, which itself is the core of WHGC (at least the fall semester). The excerpt from Donald Palmer's LOOKING AT PHILOSOPHY (the "cartoon; does an excellent job of making the points I would make (and with pictures!). I will not try to re-state all the main points here, but in class I will try to make absolutely sure that my students understand the allegory (education = emerging from the cave into the "real" world; philosopher = hero = enlightened one; the "world of shadows" a strange and awkward place for true philosopher; etc.). We can compare/contrast Plato's philosopher-leaders with previous leaders (Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Moses, Creon, Mencius' description of a "benevolent" king, and with figures to come such as Buddha, Jesus, etc.).

The rest of Book VII is more description of how to educate the Guardians-to-be, and it stresses mathematics and "dialectic," by which Plato apparently means "reasoned argument." To be honest, I am by this time getting a little bored with his endless description of the training of these folks.

What I find most interesting and discussable in this part of Book in is Plato's dismissal of sense-data as a path to knowing. Plato exalts mathematics (on p. 220: "calculation thrusts the soul upward, compelling it to consider pure number; as the nearest knowledge to "ultimate reality," i.e., the "Forms." On p. 221: "...the knowledge of which we speak concerns the eternal and not the temporal and transient." and then "Geometry has to do with unchanging reality."

When astronomy is considered, Plato dismisses actually LOOKING at the stars: "only the study of unseen reality can draw the soul upward. To anyone who tries to learn about sense objects, whether gazing above or squinting below, I would say he can never really learn because such things cannot be known" (p. 223) and later on the same page "These kinds of things can be comprehended not by sight but only by means of intellect and argument." Contrast this attitude with the modern, western "Seeing is believing."

We can see why Plato's thinking, for all its use of "reason" and "mathematics" did not further the advancement of "science" in any modern sense. We can also see how Plato's influence on Medieval thinking (and Church theology) helped shift the focus of attention AWAY from the physical world and TOWARD unworldly ideas such as "Heaven." Augustine, writing about 400 AD, when Rome was crumbling, reassured Christians that Rome did not matter: it was just an

"earthly" city, after all. What MATTERED was the "heavenly city" which could never be destroyed. And Christians, rather than focus on worldly matters (like working hard to understand the world, improve their lives and the lives of others, etc) should focus on "eternal" matters (like where they would spend the eternal after-life). I don't mean to "blame" Plato for the Medieval "dark ages," but his writings know if this vision of the afterlife is original with Plato (was there, for example, a well-known "Myth of Er," or is this a story Plato originates?), but the influence on and similarity with later Christian writers (including Dante) are interesting.

Hope some of this is useful.

Best regards,
Harry