

WHGC Discussion Questions/Topics
The Republic - Book I (26-52), Book II (53-81), Book IV (116-39)

1. From a discussion of old age and what it feels like to be old, Plato moves on to a consideration of justice by way of an examination of the ideal city and its relationship to the individual. Are these various topics thematically linked in any way?

I remember the poet Sophocles in particular. I was there when someone asked him about sex and whether he could still make love to a woman. "Hush," said he. "I am happy to have left all that behind. I feel as though I have been liberated from a savage and relentless slave master." (Book I, 27)

It appears to me that temperance is the ordering or controlling of certain pleasures and desires. This is what is implied when one says that a man is master of himself. [...]

Then we concluded that the temperate man is one in whom the three elements [bravery, intellectual effort, and bodily appetite] are in harmony. There are no quarrels among the parts because there is agreement among them that the rational element should govern the whole. (Book IV, 136)

2. How does Plato finally define justice? How does he view the concept of external justice in relation to the individual?

The reality is that justice is not a matter of external behavior but the way a man privately and truly governs his [or her] inner self. The just man does not permit the various parts of his soul to interfere with one another or usurp each other's function. ... He is his own master and his own law. He has become a mend to himself. He will have brought into time the three parts of his soul: high, middle, and low, like the three major notes of a musical scale, and all the intervals between. (Book IV, 137)

SOUL	CITY
high (reason)	ruling class (guardians)
middle (spirit, courage, anger)	Artisans Cobblers Farmers
low (bodily appetite)	Merchants Army Carpenters
INNER ORDER	EXTERNAL ORDER

3. How would contemporary society react to Plato's ideal city, which is founded on the basic principle that "production ... will be more abundant and the products more easily produced and of better quality if each does the work nature has equipped him to do." (Book II, 66)

4. To what extent can what Plato wrote in The Republic be viewed as a reaction to the writings of Homer? What negative consequences does Plato ascribe to these writings? How does he propose to solve the problem? Do you agree with the measures he proposes?

The battles of the gods in Homer's verse have no place in our city, whether they purport to be allegories or not. Young minds are not able to discriminate between what is allegorical and what is literal. At that age, whatever their minds absorb is likely to become fixed and unalterable. (Book II, 75)

We must not permit mothers under the influence of poets [writers of fables and children's stories?] to frighten their children with wrong versions of myths that say certain gods [bogy man?] masquerade as strangers from strange lands and haunt the night. (Book II, 79)

The good we receive we must attribute to god alone; for the causes of evil we must look elsewhere. (Book II, 76)

5. How would Plato answer the question that he posed early on, when he quoted the Greek poet Pindar as saying:

Which way to climb a loftier tower. RE
where all my life shall be safe?
By justice, or by unjust deceits? (Book II, 60)

Why is it, in Plato's view, advantageous or imperative to follow the way of justice? Do you agree with him?

6. React to the statement below, indicating why you think it should or should not apply to our society.

My rules serve for nothing but board and lodging with no additional pay. They can't travel abroad or give presents to pretty girls or spend money on any of those things that other people, who assume they are having a good time, take for granted. (Book IV, 116)

7. Although Plato set out to write a treatise about a democratic form of government (republic), there is evidence of tyranny, which calls to mind dictatorial practices we might associate with rulers such as Hitler. What example comes to mind? (See Book IV, pg. 120)