

Reading Notes: *Republic* Books I & II

Merlin CCC, February 2024

For our first session, we'll be looking at Books I and II of the *Republic*. As always, Plato has packed quite a lot into these pages, in a complex and multi-layered way. The notes and questions below are intended to call attention to some of these layers and interconnections, especially some of those which may not be immediately apparent. They're intended as a supplement to whatever questions, concerns, or connections arise in your own mind as you read and contemplate the text, and as a starting point for some of our conversations during the session together. There is, of course, a lot more that we could (and likely will!) discuss.

Book I

In many ways, Book I frames, anticipates, or foreshadows much of the overall plan of the entire *Republic*.

We find ourselves beginning with a religious festival, a theme which we'll encounter twice more within this week's reading: as Cephalus, still wearing the sacred wreath, departs make his sacrifices; and again in Book II, just before Glaucon labels Socrates' ideal city as a "city of pigs."

We also find that Socrates is, strictly speaking, the only speaker in the dialogue: he is relaying, to some unspecified listener(s), the events and conversations of the previous day. And he is doing so without what we (who are accustomed to photographs and video recordings) would consider to be "perfect precision": he skips over certain parts, lets us know that it didn't happen quite like that, etc. What should we make of this mode of narration? Keep this question in mind in subsequent books, as we encounter guidelines for narrative poetry, the telling of myth, and the production of representational artworks.

In various respects throughout this first book, we find accounts of the love (or the value) of money, and the love/value of honor. We might also see foreshadowed two other loves which will become more explicit as we proceed: the love of wisdom (literally, "philosophy"), and the love of spectacle (or in some translations, of "sights and sounds"). How are these in dialogue, or in tension, with one another? What genuine value does Socrates find in each and every one of them?

Already in book I, we find the conversation shifting freely between the level of the individual person, and that of the city or political community. While Socrates will explicitly claim this as his method in Book II, it begins here, mostly unremarked upon, by Thrasymachus. Let's be attentive to how and why these shifts occur, and what work they're doing in the dialogue.

Finally, Book I begins and ends with invocations of the Goddess Bendis. In what ways have we come full circle by the end of the book? In what ways have we not yet even fully "gone down," as Socrates says he did for the festival itself?

Relatedly, we should also pay attention to when and where Socrates and his interlocutors invoke other Gods, particularly Zeus (which some translators cover over, printing "by God" where the Greek consistently says "by Zeus"), but also other Gods and Goddesses, as well as places where someone or something is praised as "God-like" or "divine."

Book II

This book begins with Glaucon, and then Adeimantus, offering extended praise of injustice, and calumniating against justice. We probably don't to discuss this point-by-point: both because many of the arguments are still familiar, alive and well today, and because Socrates' reply to them will take the entire remainder of the dialogue. But it might be worth, as you read, making a list of the various elements/arguments, in order to "check off" Socrates' replies as we proceed.

At 372b–373a, Glaucon makes a critical move, pushing Socrates to shift from describing a healthy city (which Glaucon calls the "city of pigs") to the "city with a fever," i.e., one which is fundamentally unhealthy and out-of-balance. For nearly all of the remaining books of the *Republic*, the focus will be on this unhealthy, fevered city: how to palliate or manage that fever (while never fully managing to cure it), and what the consequences are when that fever finally grows out of control (in books VIII and IX). We should make sure to reflect on this shift, and as we read, keep in mind that ***from this point on, we are never reading about an "ideal" city, but always a diseased, unhealthy one.***

The last portion of this book begins a discussion which will continue into book III, regarding the education of those who will try to guard and protect the fevered city, with special focus on guidelines (Greek *typoi*, singular *typos*) for poetry and the recitation of myth. There's a lot to consider in these passages; here are a few small notes which might help with finding our way into the details:

When Socrates says that those who are going to hear the Homeric myths must first "sacrifice not only a pig, but some great and wonderful sacrifice," there are a lot of resonances in this language: first, to the pigs which were offered to the Gods during the initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries, but also, perhaps, to the "city of pigs" which has just been butchered in Glaucon's shift to the fevered city.

Whenever "allegory" is mentioned, the Greek term is *hyponoia*, literally, "deeper thought" or "understanding below the surface."

We should also note the fundamental concord/agreement between Socrates' account, the basic popular piety that characterized ancient Greek religion. This is clear from the style of Socrates' reasoning: we *begin* from the principle that "Each God is the best and most beautiful thing possible" (381c) and proceed from there.

We'll make a start at examining Socrates' guidelines for poetry here this week, and continue that discussion along with Socrates himself next time, in Book III.