SYLLABUS
CRN: 26110/26145
M W 1400-1550, 101 LIB

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COURSE DESCRIPTION
This course is an advanced seminar devoted to a careful reading and discussion of Plato's Republic.

The Republic is a great book simply because it has given rise to so many varied, controversial and significant interpretations over the last 2500 years. Yet, nevertheless, one still has the sense that this book has yet to be exhausted, that it still harbors unexplored possibilities for philosophical inquiry. It is one of the most read and discussed dialogues written by Plato. At the same time, Platonic philosophy or “Platonism” represents more than an example of philosophical work within the Western tradition. Nietzsche, Heidegger, Whitehead and Derrida, among many others, have claimed that our tradition remains inescapably defined by Platonism. This means that before we are able to begin reading Plato's text we already find ourselves indebted to a legacy that goes back Plato and Platonism. We find that the linguistic and conceptual resources we inevitably rely upon have their beginnings in this historical legacy. For example, even if we do not simply accept the givenness of the Platonic distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, we still remain at a loss in our attempts to proceed without some recourse to this basic distinction, perhaps even most of all in our attempts to critique this distinction itself. This is to say that our metaphysical prejudices, as they appear to emerge from Western philosophy and Platonism, find themselves insidiously reinscribed in our very attempts to delimit or critically assess them.

But the point here is not simply that we cannot hope to isolate our thinking from history. Instead, the difficulty that arises here has to do with how the legacy of Platonism bears upon the reading of Plato's dialogues themselves and the Republic in particular. If the possibilities we have for interpretation and understanding inevitably proceed on the basis of a Platonism, this suggests that the meaning of Plato's text appears to have been decided for us from the outset. If an interpretation of the Platonic dialogues, including the Republic itself, cannot proceed except on the basis of a tradition that traces itself back to a Platonic beginning, how are we to give Plato a fair reading? The difficulty, in other words, is not just that we do not know how to understand or read Plato, but rather that we already have such a presumed understanding right out of the gates, that we already find it too easy to read and understand Plato. And it is just the clarity and ease of this given understanding that obstructs an original access to the text.

While the search for the one “correct” interpretation of the Republic will be set aside in this course, this does not mean that any interpretation is as good as the next. A good interpretation should take into account in a coherent way as many aspects of the text as possible. It should avoid claims that rely on extremely reductive approaches and that therefore disregard textual moments in order to appear compelling. As much as possible we want to make explicit to ourselves what interpretive prejudices we are bringing to the text, precisely because in this way it might be possible for the text itself to challenge and transform these prejudices as they inform our reading.
While this course is devoted to reading, discussing and interpreting only one Platonic text, this also gives us the opportunity to consider more generally how our assumptions about philosophical reading inform our possible interpretation of Plato as a whole. In particular, we will take seriously the dialogical form of the text and consider what interpretive challenges this presents. This will result in a reading of Plato that accounts for more than simply the argumentation one finds presented within the dialogue. We will resist, for example, viewing any philosophical viewpoint put forward by Socrates (or anyone else) as the position that represents Plato's philosophy or something like “Platonism.” Often the question at issue is not only what is being claimed in a particular passage but, beyond this, how are these claims made in a way that appears to disregard fundamental questions opened up by the dialogue itself. This will also allow us to resist the temptation to view the Republic as the presentation of something like Plato’s “political theory.” We will resist the assumption that this dialogue puts forward a political program in order to consider how it raises a question about the limits of the political as such. And in this way, by resisting the assumption that the dialogue must be read programmatically, we will confront another instance of “hermeneutic circularity” in our reading of Plato: how can the “political” be assumed as a concept in advance when we are reading a text that articulates the very possibility of that concept? (Consider here that the title of the dialogue in Greek is ΠΟΛΙΤΕΙΑ (Politeia), and that one the basic questions of the text concerns the very meaning and possibility of the “political” as such.) Moreover, how does the question of what justice is, as it is left unresolved and as it raises still more difficult questions, compel us to think about the limits of philosophical inquiry and dialogical exchange?

Along with the dialogical character of the text, we will consider its dramatic and mythic dimensions as equally relevant to how this text might speak to us, or be disclosive. In this way, word (logos and dialogue), deed (ergon) and story (mythos) will each be taken as irreducible dimensions of the text that come to inform each other and complicate our experience of reading. The actions of a character within the dialogue can help us to interpret, for example, what that character says. The comedic, playful and ironic aspects of the dialogue should also be allowed to become interpretively relevant in this way. And the mythic horizon that frames the entire dialogue will lead us to ask about the importance of images and narrative within conceptual determination. While a knowledge of Ancient Greek is not expected, we will frequently consult the text in its original language as we proceed with our reading.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

- Participation in class discussion.
- Undergraduates (Phil 421) will be asked to write two papers, 6-8 pages in length, double-spaced. The first paper will be due February 8; the second will be due at the end of the term, on March 16. Topics will be assigned for these papers approximately one week before the papers are due.
- Graduate students will be asked to write one paper, 15-20 pages in length, double spaced, due at the end of term. This paper either should focus on a Platonic dialogue other than the Republic or work with a theme or question as it arises in the Republic itself.

**REQUIRED TEXT**

*Plato Republic.* Trans. Allan Bloom. (Basic Books)

Allan Bloom's translation of Plato's *Republic* may be purchased at “Black Sun Books” (2455 Hilyard, 484-3777), just south of 24th and Hilyard, behind Sundance Grocery, near Taste of India.
As the course proceeds I will also post selected secondary material on Canvas as recommended supplemental reading.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RECOMMENDED SOURCES

EXPLANATION OF GRADING STANDARDS

A = Excellent. No mistakes, well-written, and distinctive in some way.
B = Good. No significant mistakes, well-written, but not distinctive in any way.
C = Okay. Some errors, but a basic grasp of the material.
D = Poor. Several errors. A tenuous grasp of the material.
F = Failing. Problematic on all fronts indicating either not real grasp of the material or a complete lack of effort.

DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS
If you have a documented disability and anticipate needing accommodations in this course please make arrangements to meet with me within the first two weeks of the course. Please request a letter from Disability Services verifying your disability and stating your needed accommodations.

LEARNING OUTCOMES
- To be able to read with care a Platonic dialogue while attending to its philosophical complexity.
• To gain a familiarity with the leading traditions of interpretation of a book that has been at the center of political and philosophical discussion for centuries.
• To be able to interrogate the limits of Western philosophical thought at an advanced level by examining a text that is both formative and interruptive of this tradition.
• To be aware of the limits of translation when dealing with classical Greek philosophical texts.
• To be able to critically assess the prevailing model of political programs and projects as these rely on the implementation of idealized visions of human political life.
• To be able to articulate a basic understanding of human excellence or virtue (such as “justice”) and of the difficulty of developing such an articulation.
• To become aware of the role of mythic, poetic and narratival horizons as these inform the presentation of arguments and conceptual determinations.