

The Question of Justice in Plato's Republic

Education is difficult and rare. The AAI seminar on Plato's *Republic*, a small group studying and discussing the Question of Justice in a spirit of friendship, is more in keeping with the Socratic view that true education is not a pouring of knowledge into empty minds, but rather a "turning around" of the mind and soul to see for itself. Plato wrote in dialogues because true education is a dialogue. Instead of deducing justice from laws, we discover it from seeing how beliefs arise and operate in particular characters and souls. One must understand, for example, what sort of person is making the argument, what passions and hopes are driving him, and what the relationship is between his argument and himself (or his view of himself). Socrates has come down to us not only as the first moral and political philosopher, but also as the first psychologist. The inquiry into justice is an inquiry by and into the human soul.

We were very fortunate to have this summer a bright and lively group of students who were not afraid to reflect on their opinions about justice and God, and how they hold up against such seemingly formidable opponents of justice and piety as Thrasymachus or the Athenian envoys in the Melian Dialogue—those who brazenly claim that might makes right. The atmosphere of friendship and trust makes it possible to consider such disturbing views: perhaps one lives as a prisoner in a cave, by what turn out to be only shadows of artifacts. The spirit of free and hopeful inquiry is the way out of the cave of indoctrination and politics into the light of nature. Education is liberation.

Manuel Lopez '89

Participating in the weekly seminar "The Question of Justice in Plato's *Republic*" has been a wonderful opportunity to become more familiar with the foundational text of Western philosophy, and perhaps its most fundamental problem—justice. The seminar is perfectly suited to studying these questions: being that it is such a small group, its intimacy is highly conducive to fleshing out even the most complicated ideas in the text. Mr. Lopez and Dr. Petranovich deftly guide participants through Plato's complex arguments, but just enough to allow us students to begin the laborious task of slowly extricating ourselves from the Cave. Additionally, the mixed format creates the best forum for discussing philosophy: after an hour in the classroom giving the text a deep treatment, we move to a dining establishment in Harvard Square to continue the discussion.

Like a symposium of old, we create fraternity over a delicious meal, accompanied by an unbroken conversation on justice in the Republic, and in our own world. The two-tiered design provides the best of both worlds: in the classroom, we blush like Thrasymachus in simply trying to grasp Plato's intricate logic, while at the dinner table we embrace our own opinions on justice and make a stand for them against others. The seminar is the ideal way to go to the root of these questions—philosophy is best engaged in among friends, which is a state of being that the small nature of the class encourages. Whether one has no experience with Plato or is extremely familiar with him, I would highly recommend this seminar. The questions that lie at the heart of the Republic are eternal and nigh unanswerable, making this class just as necessary, and just as enjoyable.

Loren Brown '23

Book VIII in the great drama of Plato's *Republic* presents the reader with cycles of change in regimes. Cycles themselves appear to be changing, and therefore something untrue and incongruous with true justice. However, by taking the form of a typical, recurring sequence, these cycles mimic human nature, and are therefore unchanging. Political regime as cyclical is something that is unchanging, and reveals something not merely about justice, but also about human nature.

In Socrates' image of the tripartite soul, eros, the fundamental source of instincts, compulsions, and desires, causes all humans to yearn for undying happiness. From this perspective, human beings seek to gain, which should not be seen as something inherently corrupt. However, as many humans find, this instinctual yearning for undying happiness cannot be satisfied or fulfilled by anything temporal.

This innate insatiability in humans causes regime itself to be unstable and cyclical, since regime can no more than anything else truly and fully satisfy human wants. This is not an anarchist argument; rather, it is an explanation for why

humans still ought to seek the best regime. According to Plato, the best regime is the philosophical one, which still holds to the concept of gain, albeit in its highest form. If there is anyone who is satisfied, it is the philosopher, who has mastery over and can reason through eros, the source of his most integral desires.

In this way, the Question of Justice Seminar seemed to investigate more the nature of humans and the individual soul rather than the nature of justice as a broad concept.

Alexandra Rider, Hillsdale College '22

Is law supposed to be made for the interest of the ruler or the ruled? What is the nature of injustice, and is it done intentionally or out of ignorance? What justifies the laws of a regime? Who should rule, a single man, a powerful few, or the many poor? What ideas about the gods and goodness should art and poetry impart to the impressionable young? How should the soul and the regime order itself? Should the regime dictate what happens in the family? And why set the exploration of such questions in the form of a philosophical dialogue? These and many other questions arise dramatically in *The Republic*, the book we discussed in our seminar under the guidance of Manuel and Danilo.

I loved the insights and energy that everyone brought to the discussions, and the fact that some were experienced in philosophical discussion, others adept at applying contemporary political parallels, made the seminar sparkling and interesting. Manuel sent us stimulating analysis and questions ahead of discussions, so the discussion never lacked direction or substance. And Manuel never came across as a “teacher” who merely condescended to listen to his students, waiting for the right moment to spill all that he knew; we had authentic Socratic discussions. To borrow Keats: The experience was truly an adventure and a discovery of Plato’s amazing domain with fellow travelers. And each night’s discussion was continued in true Socratic spirit, in the fashion of Plato’s *Symposium*, at dinner with good talk and good food!

Blake Chen '25

Looking back at my time at the Abigail Adams Institute, I am reminded of the kindness I was continuously shown each week. From the start everyone was extremely welcoming. Both professors and students made sure to help out in ways extending beyond deep analysis of Plato. As an incoming freshman, this seminar has been daunting, since I have not been in an environment similar to AAI before. Yet it has been rewarding for this very reason, because in the midst of my confusion I have grown intellectually. I have learned the importance of diligently listening, which has improved my ability to ask questions. Through the observation of the professors I have become better acquainted with the note-taking process along with reflection. Because of the fast-paced nature of the sessions, I often do not write much down in the moment, but rather reflect on the car ride home.

The harsh reality of this is that much of my reflection has not amounted to results in terms of answering what justice is. I have inched nearer to truth and have bolstered my own understanding of the concept of justice. The dinner portion, although less formal in speech, was very informative because we would extend our talks beyond Plato. This presented me with a good opportunity to foster relationships with everyone. I thought the food was excellent and liked how we tried a variety of different cultures’ foods: as we immersed ourselves in unique cultures both through physical food and through intellectual food our taste palettes grew extensively.

Temidayo Lukan, Boston College '25

Initially I did not know what approaching the Question of Justice in a seminar setting would be like, since I have only studied it in solitary settings, but the Abigail Adams Institute and Professor Manuel Lopez did not disappoint. The questions asked and the subsequent discussions were deeper than I could have ever imagined and dealt with the core issues with which the nation (and perhaps the entire Western world) is grappling. People often assume that everyone is looking for the same common good, but what happens when, upon examination, this isn’t the case? What is the good and what is justice? I do not believe that Plato has proposed a concrete answer, as he often leaves his readers at an aporia, but he leads the readers, no matter what era they might live in, to re-examine simplified definitions of right and wrong.

The additional readings that were provided (such as the Melian Dialogue) and the sheer breadth of historical, linguistic and philosophical context that Manuel commanded with respect to Plato were indispensable to the seminar. I especially appreciated the focus on Thrasymachus and the Cycle of Regimes, since they have their parallels with modern contexts. If there were another class assessing another text of Plato's-or even a more tangential topic-I would definitely recommend attending. This recommendation applies even to people who are no longer in school, including individuals such as myself who work in professional settings such as engineering.

Felix Yang, Cornell University '19