

Class Eleven - The Republic (end of book five, and book six)

Philosophical Perspectives - Ryan Simonelli

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1 A Renewed Call for the Justification of the Value of Knowledge

- **Knowledge and the Good:** We have been concerned with the question of the *value* of knowledge, the relationship between *knowledge* and *the good*.
- **Socrates's Philosophical Pursuit:** We have considered the idea that knowledge itself is an *intrinsic good*, spelled out by Socrates in terms of the idea that pursuing philosophical knowledge of truths underlying appearances is the best way to live one's life since it is the only way to adequately prepare oneself for death.
- **The Counterpoint Presented in *Oedipus Rex*:** In Sophocle's *Oedipus Rex*, we have seen a case in which knowledge of the truth underlying the appearances is *self-destructive*.
 - Of course, the specific knowledge that "underlied the appearances" in Oedipus's case was not of exactly the same type as the knowledge with which Plato is principally concerned. But we can see the play as allegorically challenging the idea that knowledge of what underlies the appearances need be an intrinsic good, that perhaps there can be cases in which it is better for oneself remain within the realm of the appearances.
- **The Turn to the Practical:** In addition to considering the value of wisdom in terms of its good for *oneself*, must we also consider its value *for others*, whether one has a *duty* to one's fellow citizens or one's city to acquire and share wisdom, understanding, or knowledge.
 - Of course, this sort of value of knowledge is also at play in Oedipus, in that one of the things driving Oedipus towards truth is not just his own curiosity but the sake of the city which is in a plague.
 - * Part of the tragedy of Oedipus seems to result from a *conflict* of the necessity of *obtaining* knowledge *for the sake of others* and the necessity of *forgoing* knowledge *for one's own sake*.
 - We haven't considered the way in which understanding might be valuable in this sense yet in the course.
 - One of the main themes of what we'll read in this upcoming half of the course, in both Plato and Aristotle (though in quite different ways), is that there can't be this kind of disunity. There's essentially a *harmony* between the good for oneself of philosophical understanding and the good for others.
- **A Basic Question:** What is the *practical value* of theoretical (and, specifically, philosophical) knowledge? What is the interpersonal and societal good of philosophical knowledge, and how, practically speaking, should this good be cultivated?

2 Context of and in the *Republic*

- **The Republic:**
 - Belongs, with *Phaedo*, to Plato's middle period.
 - Contains Plato's most sustained investigation into the nature of justice and politics, as well as important discussions of the soul, the forms, and philosophy itself.

- One of Plato's longest dialogues and widely regarded as one of if not the most important of all the Platonic dialogues.
- The political philosophy in the *Republic* marks a stark divergence from the political philosophy expressed in Plato's Socratic dialogues such as *Crito*.
 - * In particular, Plato is much more critical of democracy than Socrates.
- **Where We're Jumping In:**
 - The books that preceded where we are jumping in have largely focused on the nature of justice, the political structure of a just society, and the analogy between the structure of a just society and that of a healthy soul. We are now considering the question of who should rule.
 - The main characters at this point in the book are:
 - * Socrates
 - * Glaucon and Adeimantus - two of Plato's (half) brothers.
 - We will see the same basic ideas developed to the ones we discussed earlier in the context of the *Phaedo*, about the forms and the philosopher as having knowledge of them, but here they're specifically arising with respect to the practical benefits of such knowledge and how this knowledge can and should be cultivated.
 - The arguments in the specific part of the *Republic* we're reading are all driven by powerful *analogies* or *allegories*.
 - * **An Observation:** For a philosopher who eschews the visible realm, Plato sure is keen to provide some vivid imagery for describing the invisible.

3 An Immodest Proposal (473c-480a)

- **The Philosopher Kings:** At the end of book five, Socrates says that "Until philosophers rule as kings [. . .] cities will have no rest from evils"
- **Opinion vs. Knowledge:** Socrates distinguishes the domains of *opinion* from the domain of *knowledge*.
 - This further elaborates the distinction we saw in the *Phaedo* between the *visible* realm, of the changing and sensible, and the *invisible* realm of the unchanging and intelligible.
 - Socrates articulates opinions as belonging to the ever-changing realm of *becoming*, which lies in between non-being and being, whereas knowledge belongs to the unchanging realm of true *being*, which does not at all partake in non-being.
- Philosophers possess knowledge rather than mere opinion, and it is on that basis that they alone are qualified to rule.

4 Explaining Away the Initial Implausibility of the Proposal (487c-497a)

- **The Opening Question:** No one wants philosophers to run the city. At least according to the general opinion of people the majority of philosophers are "cranks" and "useless to the city."
- **Plato's Ship Analogy:** Consider a ship in which the shipowner (who also doesn't know how to steer a ship) is overthrown by the sailors.
 - The sailors who are good at persuading or overtaking the shipowner from the helm of the ship are called "captains" or "navigators," even though they know nothing about actually captaining a ship.
 - The very idea of what true captainhood actually amounts to—paying attention to the seasons, the winds, etc.—simply doesn't exist in the minds of the sailors.
 - Isn't it plausible that someone who *does* possess the qualities of a genuine captain "will be called a real stargazer, a babblers, a good-for-nothing" (488e)?

- **Discussion Question:** Bracketing the question of whether philosophers should rule, how does Plato's characterization of the politicians as the one who are good at taking the helm rather than actually navigating the ship strike us today?
- **True Philosophers are Rare:** A true philosopher requires a rare combination of two things:
 - **Natural Giftedness:** There are a number of virtues (e.g. "courage, high-mindedness, ease in learning, and a good memory," (490d)), required for a true philosopher that only a few possess as the total package.
 - **Proper Education:** Even those who have the total package of natural gifts are not guaranteed to be true philosophers; they must also be educated properly.
 - * **The Sophists:** Those who have the natural giftedness but are improperly educated.
 - * **The Platonic Conception of Ideology:** Consider a beast who has various preferences and person who knows these preferences and all what it enjoys "good" and what angers it "bad." The sophist is like such a person, where the beast is the opinions of the masses.
- **What the True Philosopher Knows:** The form of the good! But what, exactly, is that?
 - We've talked about the forms in general, but we haven't yet considered the highest of all the forms: *the form of the good?*

5 The Analogy of the Sun

- **The Sun:** Some facts:
 - Sight and the eyes (which have the capacity for sight) are not themselves sufficient for seeing.
 - One needs a third thing in makes the visible things capable of being seen. That's *light*, casted by *the sun*.
 - Not only does the sun make visible things actually visible, but it's also responsible for their very existence, the source of growth and nourishment.
 - The sun *enables* sight (making the visible things capable of being seen, and, indeed, making them be at all) and it can also be *seen* by sight.
 - So, it is a visible thing, but a very special visible thing: that in virtue of which the other visible things are visible and, indeed, are at all.
- **The Good:** Analogous to the Sun in the following ways:
 - Understanding and the soul (which has the capacity for understanding) is not itself sufficient for understanding.
 - One also needs a third things which makes the intellegible things capable fo being understood. That's *the good*.
 - Not only does thoe good make intellegible things actually intellegible, but it's also responsible for their very existence.
 - The good *enables* understanding (making intelligible things capable of being known) it it can also be *understood* by the intellect.
 - So, it is an intellegible thing (a form), but a very special intelligible thing: that in virtue of which the other forms are intellegible, and, indeed, are at all.

6 The Divided Line

