

**Plato Study Guide**  
LART602  
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Class #5, 2/13/12

Readings:

Plato: *Republic*, Book V.473b-480a, Book VI.504d-VII.535a, Book VIII.545c-547c<sup>1</sup> [*RAGP* 507-514, 534-560, 569-571]

Plato: *Parmenides*, 130a-132b<sup>2</sup> [*RAGP* 645-647] – *recommended*

Burkert: “Philosophical Religion” pp. 321-329, 332-337

Classical Greek Sculpture<sup>3</sup>

General Notes

- Plato is an idealist, indeed one of our intellectual tradition’s foremost exponents of rational idealism. His theory of *forms* is one of the great achievements in the Western intellectual world. This theory asserts that reality is ideal, and thus eternal and unchanging. Moreover, the theory asserts that ideal reality is rational, in form, so that it is graspable by the human, rational intellect.
- Our readings focus on some of the central passages in the *Republic* propounding the theory of forms. These passages are thus abstract, but Plato is generous with helpful analogies, illustrations, and metaphors.
- While ultimate reality, for Plato, consists in ideal forms, Plato also recognizes the existence of a material order, though the exact ontological status of that order is not made clear by him. The material order is a world of change, a world of “becoming”, as he puts it, where becoming occupies a middle ground between being and non-being. Just what this means, exactly, is difficult to say.
- The general argument of Plato’s *Republic* is an argument about justice – morality, in general, that is. Plato seeks to demonstrate that there are moral truths and that the best human life is the moral life. Along the way, he elaborates a theory of knowledge and reality supporting his ethical theory. These remarks on knowledge and reality are our primary target, in these readings.
- In the dialogue, *Parmenides*, Plato raises difficult questions for his own theory of forms.
- For further information, see my notes on Plato, on the course web-page.
- Our Burkert passage continues his account of the development of theology, culminating in the unification of reality, rational order, and goodness.
- Some examples of classical Greek sculpture help to illustrate Plato’s idealism.

Some Questions

1. As you work your way through Plato, you should be asking yourself, in what sense, if any, is Plato’s world a rationally ordered realm? In what sense, if any, is it not?
2. Given the status of the forms as ultimate reality, what are we to make of the material world? Is it a rational order, or not? Is it real, or not?
3. What do you think of the proposition that true reality is ideal, unchanging, eternal – a system of ideas? (You might compare this proposition with your understanding of the laws of nature.)

### **Republic Book V.473-480a**

In this section, we find first an important statement of Plato's theory of forms (473c-476d), and then his argument to show that only those knowing the forms (i.e., only philosophers) have knowledge of the truth (476d-480a). I recommend focusing on the former. Some key passages in the former are these:

473c-d: only philosophers should rule in a perfect state.

475b: the philosopher loves all wisdom. Note that this is the origin of our term, philosopher – one who loves wisdom.

475e and following: Ask yourself, and try to determine, what is it, exactly, that philosophers love, in their love of wisdom? What is the object of that love?

476b: the so-called lovers of sights and sounds fail to perceive the true nature of what they see/hear.

476c: the lovers of sights and sounds live as in a dream, failing to recognize mere appearance as such, mistaking them for the real.

476c-d: philosophers "see" both the true natures of things and their mere appearances in sense.

476d: Knowledge is of ideal, intellectual forms; the faculty perceiving only sensory appearance is a faculty of mere "opinion".

The argument in 476b-480a involves a three-way distinction among knowledge, opinion, and ignorance and the objects of each of these, or what each is "set over," namely, being, becoming, and nothing, respectively. That is, knowledge is of what is and ignorance is of what is not; what is is being, and what is not is nothing. "Opinion" is that state midway between true knowledge and complete ignorance. Plato reasons that its object, too, must be something midway between what is and what is not. This turns out to be the changing world that we perceive in sense, a world that in some sense is and in some sense is not.

### **Book VI.504d-VII.535a**

In this section of the *Republic*, we find several helpful metaphors for Plato's theory of reality, including the Sun analogy and the Cave allegory which will be our focus. Also helpful is the Line metaphor, though we'll focus less on that. The remainder of the section involves Plato's discussion of the Philosopher-Kings, i.e., the educational requirements enabling them to understand the forms. Some key passages:

505a-506a: Plato introduces the form of the good. Knowledge of this form is essential to knowing how to act properly, how to do the right thing, how to be virtuous. It is our highest object of knowledge.

505b-c, 506b-d: Socrates professes not to know what is the form of the good. In other words, neither does Plato.

507b-509b: The Sun Analogy – Plato's most complete characterization of the nature of the good. The good is fundamental to, the source of all being and of all knowledge as well. The analogy is this: Just as the sun creates the light that makes it possible for us to see that which is visible, so the good creates an intellectual "light" that makes it possible for us to understand that which is intelligible. In other words, we understand what a thing is by reference to the good. And further, just as the sun is the source of all that exists on our planet, in a sense, so too is the good the source of all that exists in the intellectual realm – i.e., it is the source of the forms themselves.

509d-511e: The Line. The line is another analogy by means of which Plato seeks to explain the relationship between the forms and the rest of reality.

514a-519b: The Cave Allegory. Perhaps the most famous image in Western ideas, the Cave represents the relationship between sense perception and truth. It distinguishes several levels of reality and our knowledge of them, culminating in the form of the good.  
521c-535a: The Education of the Philosopher-Kings. Note the opposition throughout of being and becoming – the reality of the forms on the one hand and the ambiguous reality of the material order. Note the role of dialectics as the pursuit of truth by rational argumentation alone: the forms are not open to sense, only the intellect.

### **Book VIII.545c-547c**

In this passage, we find an important remark by Plato concerning the relationship between the sensory world and the ideal realm of forms. Throughout the *Republic*, Plato describes the ideal city or *kallipolis* in order to model his theory of justice. In the ideal city, the wise would rule; they would have perfect knowledge of the form of the good, of justice, etc. Part of the organization of the *kallipolis* would be a program of eugenics, intended to ensure that every segment of society was best suited to its task. Note, then, at 546b-e the crucial source of error leading the inevitable decline of the *kallipolis*: because the philosopher-kings cannot be certain, by sense, of the implementation of their ideal plans, those plans are destined to fail.

### ***Parmenides* 130a-132b – recommended**

This challenging passage contains two arguments that Plato mounts against his own theory of forms. In addition to their particular substance, consider the significance of Plato's raising these difficulties for his own system.

### **Burkert, pp. 321-329, 332-337**

Read Burkert for a continuation of his overview of the development of theology under Plato. Plato's unification of reality, truth, and the good helps to provide the intellectual framework inherited by Christianity. Think about the extent to which we can understand our world as one in which order, reality, and goodness are *identical*.

### **Classical Greek Sculpture**

For some images representative of the style, see the link from our course web-page: [http://faculty.winthrop.edu/oakesm/LART602/Classical\\_Sculpture.html](http://faculty.winthrop.edu/oakesm/LART602/Classical_Sculpture.html). This form of art was prominent during Plato's youth, gradually giving way to a more realist form of art. Consider the extent to which this art-work constitutes a visual representation of some of Plato's ideas. In particular, consider the faces of the figures and their forms: to what extent are these idealized, if any?

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<sup>1</sup> Plato's *Republic* may be found here:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0168>

<sup>2</sup> Plato's *Parmenides* may be found here:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0174%3Atext%3D Parm.%3Apage%3D130>

<sup>3</sup> For some representative images, see here:

[http://faculty.winthrop.edu/oakesm/LART602/Classical\\_Sculpture.html](http://faculty.winthrop.edu/oakesm/LART602/Classical_Sculpture.html)