

Revising for Plato's Republic (115 / 130) – some suggestions

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This guide contains some ideas and suggestions that may help you prepare for the Plato's *Republic* exam. You obviously don't need to do everything I suggest; I've written it from my point of view as a list of things I'd try and do were I to take the exam now.

§1. *A note about exam answers*

Have a look at the examiners' report for FHS of philosophy on WebLearn.¹ You will see that a reoccurring complaint among examiners in philosophy is that students fail to answer the question asked in the exam, and instead write out everything they remember about some topic without connecting their knowledge to the question asked. Some even memorize tutorial essays and try to replicate them in the exam. *Do not do this*. Examiners want to see you answer the question *as it is asked*. So, when approaching exam questions *take time to think about the question being asked* (and the terms used in raising it). Do not pretend as if some part of the question isn't there. If a question asks you to explain X and Y, make sure you address both X and Y. Also consider any ambiguities that may arise from how the question is phrased, or whether or not that way of asking the question might beg the question, or skew one's answer in some way.

Another recurring complaint is that students use technical terms or refer to philosophical positions without giving a short definition or explanation what they mean by their use. *Do not do this*. If an answer requires you to, e.g., mention Forms, give a brief explanation what these are. Note that this applies to gobbet answers too, especially if the gobbet text itself mentions some technical argument or term. Use your judgement. Some terms may be general enough to not require explanation. This may depend on the context. If the correct understanding of a term or position is central to the correct understanding of your answer to the exam question, then give a brief explanation of it. Remember that this is an examination. You are being examined on your knowledge of the topic, and hence, you shouldn't take for granted that your reader will know what you mean. The point of the examination is, after all, to show what you know about the topic. So, don't make the examiner guess at what you are trying to say.

When preparing for the exam, have a look at a few of the examiner's reports for past exams. Make note of what virtues good answers feature, and what vices bad answer feature. A good answer need not exhibit all the virtues, even if bad answers tend to exhibit multiple vices.

¹ Link: <https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/portal/directtool/cd7b8b86-fac1-4901-96b6-4362c9aa72d7/>.

§2. Some thoughts on writing exam answers

I recommend practicing writing outlines for your exam answers.² During the exam you will be asked to answer 3 essay questions and 1 gobbet question consisting of 3 passages to analyse. This means you have 45 minutes max/question. Being able to quickly select which questions/passages you feel most confident answering is therefore important.

Good outlines can help you do this. Ideally, the outline should help you break down the question asked ensuring that you answer it fully (see the complaint noted above), give you an overview of what all you feel is relevant to the answering the question (which can help you assess if you feel confident answering that question), and help you organize this into a clear, structured, argument. One of the virtues of a good exam answer is clarity of expression. Make sure all your answers exhibit at least this one.

§3. Preparing for the exam

Remember that while the exam aims to cover all or as much of the *Republic* as possible, you will answer a selection of questions: 4 questions in total, of which 3 are essay answers, and 1 is the gobbet question which involves analysing 3 passages from a selection (roughly 6). Some topics are raised more often than others. Rather than trying to be prepared to answer every kind of question that might come up, I would focus on a smaller selection of topics you feel you are particularly strong at. The faculty reading list mentions 13 themes or topics of the *Republic*; being prepared to write answers to 7 or 8 of these major themes should be sufficient to answer the three essay answers and the three gobbets. Have a look at the previous examinations to get an idea of which themes are more recurrent than others; note that there is no guarantee that some topics that have been more recurrent in the past will be part of the examination in your year. Also note that the themes are not isolated topics but connect in various ways to the other topics and themes of the *Republic*. Knowing how these topics fit together or how they may be relevant to other questions in the *Republic* is therefore highly recommended.

If you are unsure what examiners are looking for in a particular question you may consult the examiners' report for the past exams for a rough idea what the examiners look for in questions (or criticism they may have had). Note that these are highly general remarks made by examiners, recorded to give an indication of how all students in a given year did. They may nonetheless be helpful in giving you some ideas for how to approach examination questions. For a list of the different kinds of exam questions that might be raised about (or at least require

² You can practice this by looking at past exam papers. Past FHS papers in philosophy can be found on WebLearn, organized by subject: <https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/portal/directtool/cd7b8b86-fac1-4901-96b6-4362c9aa72d7/>. These do not always contain the latest exams, but they can usually be found on OXAM: <https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/portal/site/oxam>.

discussion of) books I-V of the *Republic*, see Prof. Castagnoli's handouts for his lectures on Books I-V (the handouts end with example exam questions).³

Even if you will not have to answer all the question, I do recommend reading the entire *Republic* at least once. The set translation for 115 is: Plato, *Republic*, translated by George Grube, revised by C.D.C. (David) Reeve (Hackett, 1992); it contains a helpful outline of the passage of the argument for each Book. Also read one of general guides to the *Republic*, such as Julia Annas' *Introduction to Plato's Republic* (OUP, 1981), or Nicholas White's *A Companion to Plato's Republic* (Blackwell, 1979). Then read up on the secondary literature for the topics you've chosen to focus on.⁴ Don't forget any notes you taken or comments you may have received during tutorials.

§4. Three tasks to do to help you revise

Here are three tasks you can do while reading for exam over the break. These are intended to help you get a good overview of the work as a whole. This in turn should help you deepen your understanding of the topics you choose to focus on, and to see how they connect to other topics the *Republic* covers.

§4.1. *Short summaries.* Write short summaries or notes on the following topics/questions:⁵ Keep these as short as possible, but by all means do expand on the topics you wish to focus on.

- Define some key concepts: what is "justice" (*dikaionês; dikaios*) for Plato? How does it fit and how doesn't it fit with our concept of "justice" (e.g. a moral notion vs. a legal notion)? What is "injustice" (*adikia*)? How does "*pleonexia*" (greediness, trying to get more than one's worth, to outdo) fit with injustice? What is "skill" or "craft" (*technê*)? What is "virtue" or "excellence" (*aretê*)?⁶
- Write short summaries of the accounts of justice given by the different characters in *Book I*. Think about how these might fall short in Plato's view? Is Trasymachus advancing one or two views? What should we make of Cleitophon's interjection (starting at 340a) add to the discussion?⁷
- What are Glaucon's three classifications of goods?

³ The handouts are (currently) available on WebLearn:

<https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/portal/directtool/e7abc43c-1c52-46e6-b3ec-6ebd592f343b/>.

⁴ See the faculty reading list for a comprehensive list of suggested reading both general and focused on particular topics. The latest version of the reading list can be found among Prof. Castagnoli's handouts (see link in the previous footnote).

⁵ Note: you may already have answers to some of these questions in your notes or tutorial essays, if so make use of them!

⁶ Here Annas 1981 "Introduction" and "Chapter 1" can be helpful, see also the footnotes for Book I in the set translation by Grube & Reeve.

⁷ Here "Chapter 1" of Annas 1981 is helpful. Alternatively look at "Chapter 11" of Terence Irwin's *Plato's Ethics* (OUP, 1995).

- What is the challenge the brothers issue Socrates? Think about: Why isn't Adeimantus happy with his brother's speech? What does his speech add to the challenge (if anything)?
- Summarize each kind of city imagined from the "healthy city" or "city of pigs" to the *Kallipolis*. How do they differ from each other? Think about what difference correct education makes as part of this argument?
- What are the three classes in the ideal city? What are the three "parts" of the soul? What functions or roles do they have? How do the classes/parts relate to other classes/parts? How do the parts relate to the classes?
- What is the "correct" education (poetry, gymnastics, and music) outlined in Books II-III meant to accomplish?
- What is the "noble lie" & what kinds of lies or falsehoods does Plato think are acceptable for the rulers to tell? What might be problematic about this?
- Give a summary of the four virtues and how they manifest themselves in (a) the society, (b) the soul.
- List the different kinds of "opposites" given by Socrates in his arguments about the "parts" of the soul (in Book IV). In what sense are these "opposites"?
- Summarize the "three waves" Plato discusses in Book V.
- What are the two arguments Socrates discusses as part of his argument that women can be rulers in Book V? (See 452e & 456c).
- How does the true philosopher differ from the untrue one (in Book VI)?
- What is the difference between knowledge and "belief"/"opinion"?
- Summarize the "three images" in Books VI-VII. Think about what each section of the line is supposed to be. How do these, on the one hand, relate to knowledge and opinion discussed earlier in Book VI, and, on the other hand, how might they relate to the Cave discussed in book VII?
- Give a summary of the educational programme of philosopher-kings/queens in Book VI. How does this relate to the early education in book III?
- Summarize each of the constitutions of the four cities and their rulers (in Books VIII-IX). Pay attention to the kinds of desires or appetites they exhibit.
- What are the three final arguments given in Book IX? Think about how they might be related to each other? Or if they are independent?
- In what sense might the philosopher kings and queens be happier than the tyrant? Are the other classes in the *Kallipolis* happy? Think about what Plato might say? In what way might the "natures" of different kinds of people relate to their happiness?
- Set out the main stages of the criticism of art in Book X. Think about: is this account in conflict with Plato's earlier discussion on poetry in Books II-III? Why does Plato postpone the criticism of art until Book X?

§4.2. *Some gobbets.*⁸ Prepare gobbet-style answers (around 500 words) for the following passages:

- Book I, 340d-341a.
- Book I, 347b-d.
- Book II, 359d-360e.
- Book II, 368c-369a.
- Book II, 373e-374e.
- Book III, 399e-400a.
- Book III, 415a-d.
- Book IV, 420c-421a.
- Book IV, 436b-c.
- Book IV, 439e-440a.
- Book V, 454c-d.
- Book V, 463e-464b.
- Book V, 472c-e.
- Book VI, 488a-e.
- Book VI, 508d.
- Book VII, 518b-c.
- Book VII, 533b-e.
- Book VIII, 546b-c.
- Book IX, 571a-b.
- Book IX, 583b-c.
- Book X, 612b-e.

§4.3. *Outline the Republic.* Write an outline of the *entire* Republic. What topic or question is raised or addressed where? If you know this by heart, then you will instantly know where in the Republic each of the gobbet questions occurs and what it's context is. This may sound daunting, but if you've done the two other tasks, then you've already almost completed an entire outline! Some tips:

- Use the Book numbers and the line-numbers! The outline should not contain more info than necessary. For example:
 - o Book II, 368c-370a: Socrates introduces the City-Soul comparison.
 - o Book II, 370a-372d: Socrates introduces the first city.
 - o Book II, 372d-373d: Glaucon objects and the city is turned into a luxurious city.
- The previous two tasks (summary notes + gobbet answers) already give you a rough structure of the main topics and themes of the *Republic*, it is not complete, but you can use it as a starting point.
- The Grube-Reeve translation (the set text) contains a helpful summary of the passage of the argument at the start of each Book. Use this as a way to fill out the outline, or as a starting point for it.

⁸ For thoughts on answering gobbet questions, see my gobbet writing guide (distributed separately).

- A less detailed outline of the entire work would be to simply list the main arguments and important passages that occur in each book.