

First Discussion Paper (Due Friday, February 4):

Write a five-page essay on one of the following topics.

1. In the *Apology*, Socrates compares himself to a gadfly and the state to a great steed kept from falling into lethargy by the repeated stinging bites of the gadfly, his point being that the state cannot thrive without someone like himself acting as its conscience. Today we might call such a person a social critic. What, in your opinion, is the place—if any—of the social critic in public life in the United States today? Give examples of individuals who might play such a role. Are there, today, obstacles to trenchant social criticism of a kind that might not have existed in the Athens of Socrates? Is the role of the media in public affairs a relevant issue?
2. Two of Socrates' most important principles stated in the *Apology* are: (a) “Daily to converse about virtue is the greatest good” and (b) “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Comment on these principles from the point of view of their bearing upon your own life.
3. The doctrine of recollection discussed in the *Phaedo* has important implications for the way we think about education. For Plato, education is not a matter of implanting new knowledge in the student's mind, but rather drawing out of the student knowledge that is already there in a latent or confused form. Do you think this a helpful perspective on education? What would it entail regarding the role of the teacher? What would it entail regarding the responsibilities of the student?
4. According to the doctrine of the forms, we cannot attain genuine knowledge in the here and now, genuine knowledge of the forms being possible only for a disembodied soul. In the here and now we have only opinion, not knowledge, and at best mere high probability. Does this seem the right way to think about knowledge? What about scientific knowledge? What about mathematical knowledge? What about moral knowledge? What about one's knowledge of the fundamental principles of one's religious faith?
5. In the *Republic*, Plato argues that an aristocracy is the best form of government, a tyranny being the worst (and democracy the second worst), and that the aristocrat is the happiest person, the tyrant being the unhappiest. After briefly summarizing Plato's reasoning, with emphasis on his theory of justice, explain in what respects you think Plato to be right or wrong in these claims.
6. A famous and controversial section of the *Republic* concerns the censorship of “poetry.” In an ideal state, we are told, “imitative” forms of poetry—by which Plato meant in his time plays—should have no place, because they tend strongly to affect people's behavior and character in ways not easily subject to rational control. In the United States, we take freedom of expression to be a fundamental right. Do you find anything in Plato's argument on this point that seems at all sensible?