

First Discussion Paper (Due Monday, February 19):

Write a five-page (1,500 word) 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: "Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and the power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never have rest from their evils, no, nor the human race, as I believe,—and then only will this out State have a possibility of life and behold the light of day." First, explain what Plato means by this. Second, how might you apply this view to contemporary political life?
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?

7. The parable of the cave is one of the most powerful and influential images in the history of philosophy. Sketch the parable and explain in detail its significance as a representation of the notion of “enlightenment.” Then, reflecting on your own life, discuss some relevant episode in which, for you, some deep truth was revealed or some illusion was exposed.

8. Plato argues in the *Republic* that democracy is the second-to-last stage in the decline from the ideal state. Summarize and critically evaluate Plato’s argument for that claim. Does Plato’s argument have any bearing on contemporary debates about democratic forms of governance?

9. Explain Plato’s final view of justice in both the state and the individual and his concluding argument for why the intrinsically just person will be, for that reason alone, the happiest person. In other words, explain why, in the end, Plato thinks that justice is its own reward. Do you agree or disagree with Plato’s conclusion?