

VITAL REMNANTS

A GUIDE TO PLATO'S REPUBLIC



McCONNELL CENTER
LEADERSHIP ★ SCHOLARSHIP ★ SERVICE

OF
LOUISVILLE



Recommended Text

The Republic of Plato, 2nd ed.,
translated by Allan Bloom
(Basic Books, 1968 and 1991)



Accompanying Podcast

Vital Remnants Season 1, Episodes
1-8; available on Apple Podcasts,
Spotify, & Google Podcasts

ON READING PLATO

Reading Plato is not like reading a textbook or most other works of political philosophy. Plato writes in the form of a dialogue between Socrates and his interlocutors. (Plato's views are presented through Socrates.) *The Republic* is written as a complete dialogue, so skipping around in the text may inhibit a full understanding of what Plato is doing. The reading will not be "dry," but you will have to concentrate and search for the important elements.

Work at it, and he will reward you handsomely.



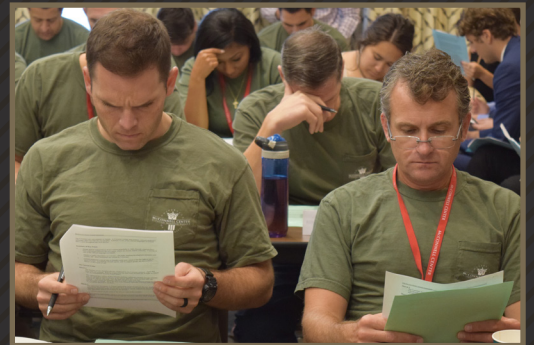
As with all readings, I highly recommend that you **mark your text** as you read. A guide like this will be very helpful to you later on as you read and reread *The Republic*. Most reading assignments are not long, but they will be intense and demand **a careful reading**.

Take your time, think, mark, and take notes!



The book is long but full of incredible insights and assertions that will enlighten and offend. In the following pages, please find a reading guide to help focus your energies on items that are important for political leadership. If you don't understand a certain argument or passage, skip back a few pages and try to uncover the context within which it is occurring.

So... Let's get started!



VITAL REMNANTS | THE REPUBLIC

TARGET I | JUSTICE & LEADERSHIP

Read: Book I and Book II through 367 e, pp. 3-44

Listen: *Vital Remnants* | Season 1, Episode 1

Where We Are

The Republic starts with a discussion of what justice is: the overarching theme of the entire book. Several rival definitions are discussed and refuted before Thrasymachus enters the picture with his definition of justice that has obvious implications for politics.

Key Section

pp. 37-40	“The Ring of Gyges” Allegory
-----------	------------------------------

Consider:

- *What are the rival definitions of justice, including the one presented by Thrasymachus?*
- *What is the goal or “end” of a true leader, according to Socrates?*
- *Who profits more: the just man or the unjust man?*
- *Do rulers/leaders serve willingly? Either way, what are the implications for American politics?*
- *Consider what “The Ring of Gyges” allegory means to you and to our political system.*
- *Who is happier: the just man or the unjust?*



VITAL REMNANTS | THE REPUBLIC

TARGET II | THE EDUCATION & PROPER POLITICAL CULTURE FOR LEADERSHIP I

Read: Book II 368 a through Book IV 427 e, pp. 44-105

Listen: *Vital Remnants* | Season 1, Episode 2

Where We Are

Socrates has now moved to a discussion of the “just city” as a way to discover the definition of justice. He argues that looking at justice on a bigger scale will help us more easily understand what justice is on the individual level. Here, then, starts the discussion of politics.

Key Sections

pp. 51-57	Education of the Guardian Class
pp. 66-67	Can leaders lie to their followers? The “Noble Lie” is introduced
pp. 80-81; 100-103; 153 (473d-474a)	Censorship and Education

Consider:

- *Is there a direct parallel between the individual soul and the life of politics/the community?*
- *What are the origins of war and of the guardian class?*
- *What does his discussion of the proper education of the guardian class tell us about the proper education of American soldiers?*
- *Do you think the imaginative writings and music we are engaged with today have as much impact as Plato presumes?*
- *Think about how much he emphasizes culture and its relationship to politics.*

VITAL REMNANTS | THE REPUBLIC

TARGET III | THE EDUCATION & PROPER POLITICAL CULTURE FOR LEADERSHIP II

Read: Book III 428 a through Book V 472 e, pp. 105-152

Listen: *Vital Remnants* | Season 1, Episode 3

Where We Are

Socrates continues his discussion of the creation of the perfect state by introducing the natural hierarchies that will lead to proper governing and, by analogy, to proper decision-making within our own lives.

Key Sections

pp. 92-93	Choosing rulers
pp. 94-96	The natural inequality of human beings and how to deal with it
pp. 105-125	Justice in the city and justice within the individual; the virtues of wisdom, courage, moderation [temperance], and justice
pp. 127-152	Purpose of unity in the political community: equality of women, relations between the sexes and children

Consider:

- *What do you make of his emphasis on the inequality of human beings?*
- *What is the purpose of the “Myth of the Metals”?*
- *Think about the three parts of the soul and how that image might impact our daily decision-making.*
- *Now that we know what justice is, do you agree?*
- *There is a lot here about constructing the “private” lives of the guardians. What do you make of the rulers’ power/decision to do so?*

VITAL REMNANTS | THE REPUBLIC

TARGET IV | THE PHILOSOPHER KINGS & THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF LEADERSHIP

Read: Book V 472 e through the end of Book VII, pp. 153-220

Listen: *Vital Remnants* | Season 1, Episode 4

Where We Are

Having outlined much of society, Plato now comes to the top and tells us of the Philosopher Kings and how they will be chosen. He goes on to perhaps his most famous allegory, that of “The Cave.” He then revisits education and considers when people should rule and when they should follow.

Key Sections

pp. 153	Philosopher Kings are introduced
pp. 159	Note how opinion falls between knowledge and ignorance
pp. 172-173	The corruption of the good and the role of the Sophists
pp. 190	Here Plato brings to us the “divided line” of his philosophy which is difficult to comprehend. The note on pp. 464 might help.
pp. 193-199	The “Allegory of the Cave”; discusses education, particularly in math, geometry and astronomy
pp. 219-220	Ruling and the life cycle

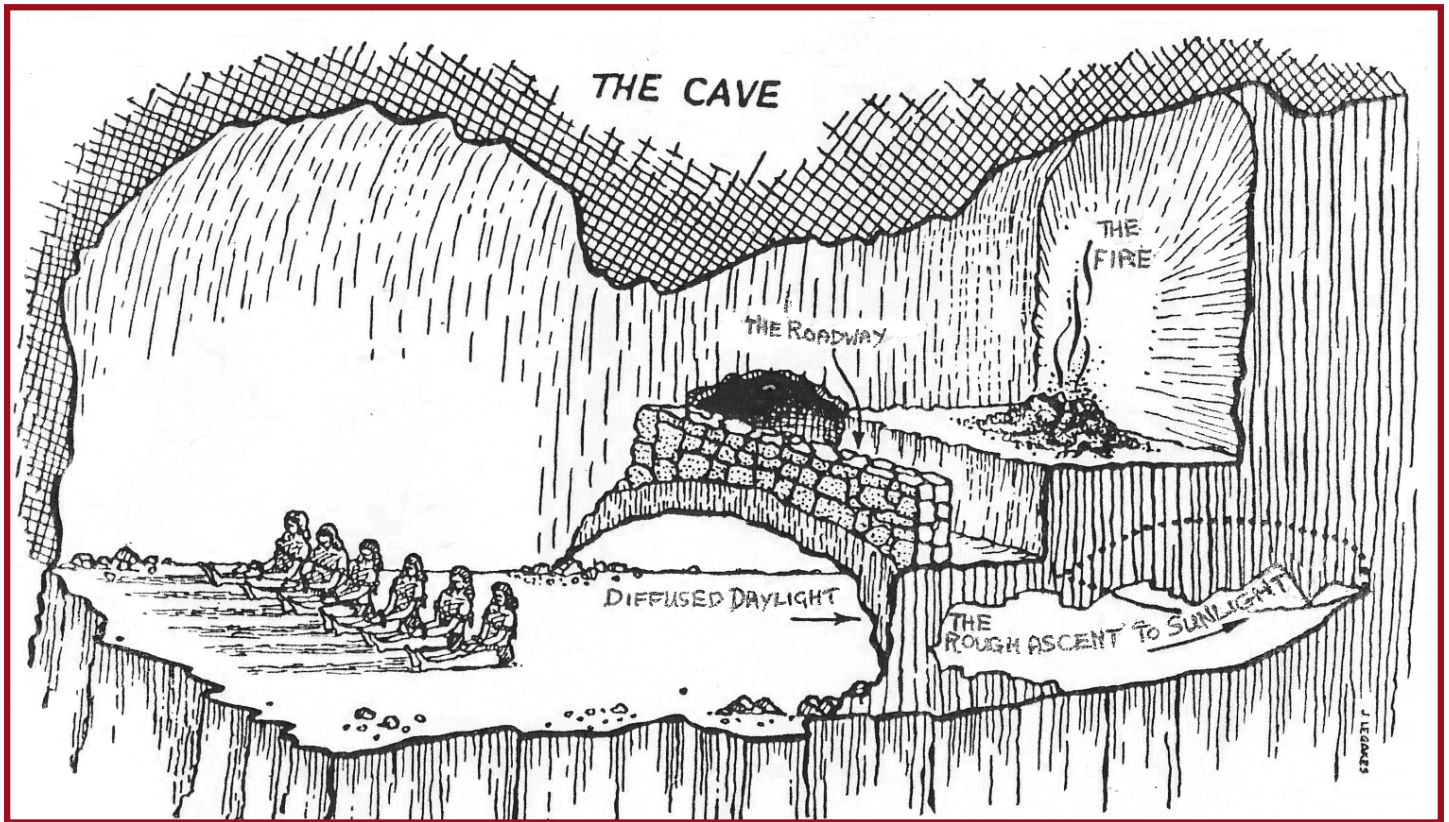
“But the one who is willing to taste every kind of learning with gusto, and who approaches learning with delight, and is insatiable, we shall justly assert to be a philosopher, won’t we?” (155)

[Continued on next page]

VITAL REMNANTS | THE REPUBLIC

[Continued from previous page]

TARGET IV | THE PHILOSOPHER KINGS & THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF LEADERSHIP



Consider:

- *Who are the Philosopher Kings and where do they come from?*
- *What do you think of the image of the sailing ship as a metaphor for politics/ leadership?*
- *Who were the Sophists during Plato's time? Who are they in today's world?*
- *What does the Allegory of the Cave mean for you? What does it mean for society and for education?*

VITAL REMNANTS | THE REPUBLIC

TARGET V | THE TYPES OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP & POLITICAL COMMUNITIES

Read: Book VIII, pp. 221-249

Listen: *Vital Remnants* | Season 1, Episode 5

Where We Are

We have now arrived at one of the most important sections of *The Republic*: Plato's outline of the types of governments and how they decline from the best to the worst. This is a challenging section, as he lays down a strong indictment of democracy. Keep in mind that he is also talking about types of people and not just types of government.

Key Sections

pp. 223	Aristocracy
pp. 223-227	Timocracy
pp. 227-233	Oligarchy
pp. 233-249	Democracy
pp. 244	Rise of Tyranny

Consider:

- Note how the “state” or “regimes” tend to decline over time: Aristocracy to Timocracy to Oligarchy to Democracy and then finally to Tyranny.
- What lessons can we learn from what these regimes look like and what causes their decline?
- Note that the governmental regimes also correspond to types of people.
- Pay particular attention to Plato's understanding of democracy—what it looks like, how it comes about, and how it falls into tyranny. Is he leveling a devastating critique of modern American society?

VITAL REMNANTS | THE REPUBLIC

TARGET VI | THE TYRANNICAL SOUL & CARING FOR THE PROPER SOUL

Read: Book IX, pp. 251-275

Listen: *Vital Remnants* | Season 1, Episode 6

Where We Are

Having considered the other types of governments and individuals, Plato takes a deeper dive into the mind and government of the tyrant. He also returns to the topic of our individual souls and how we should tend to them.

Key Sections

pp. 271	Plato returns to the three parts of the soul and provides a new image through which to imagine it
pp. 271-275	Note his related metaphor of us needing to be farmers of our own souls!

Consider:

- *What does the tyrannical soul look like and from where does it come?*
- *Is the tyrant happy?*
- *Focus on pp. 271-275: If it's not making you better, it may be making you worse!*

“A man becomes tyrannic in the precise sense when, either by nature or by his practices or both, he has become drunken, erotic, and melancholic.” (253)

VITAL REMNANTS | THE REPUBLIC

TARGET VII | OF POETS & THE AFTERLIFE: IMAGINING YOUR LIFE CHOICES

Read: Book X, pp. 277-303

Listen: *Vital Remnants* | Season 1, Episode 7

Where We Are

And here we are, at the end of *The Republic*, but also figuratively at the end of life. Plato concludes by taking us on a trip through the afterlife in order to teach us lessons on how to live.

Consider:

- *Plato begins discussing the “idea” (read as “forms” as in our first lecture) and how craftsmen here on Earth aim toward the ideal form. Poets and artists aim to imitate the form.*
- *Note how much time Plato spends on undermining the power of the poets for appealing to the wrong parts of the soul. See particularly his discussion starting on pp. 290 of how the wrong imagination can corrupt the soul.*
- *Plato makes a defense of the immortality of the soul and tells us the incredible story of “Er” and his travels through the afterlife. How will contemplating this vision of the afterlife inform your life now?*

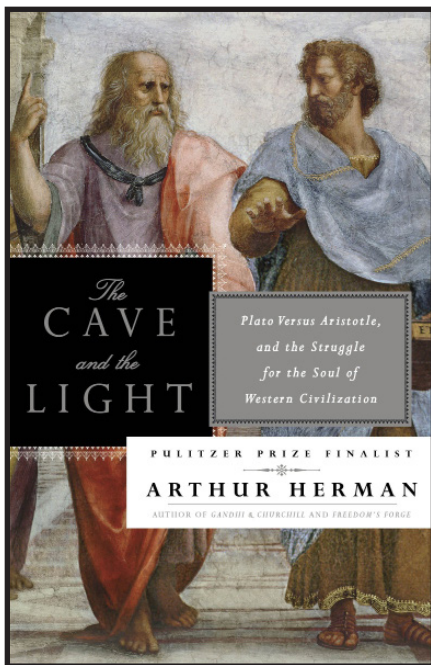
“And thus, Glaucon, a tale was saved and not lost, and it could save us, if we were persuaded by it, and we shall make a good crossing of the river of Lethe and not defile our soul. But if we are persuaded by me, holding that soul is immortal and capable of bearing all evils and all goods, we shall always keep to the upper road and practice justice with prudence in every way so that we shall be friends to ourselves and the gods, both while we remain here and when we reap the rewards for it like the victors who go about gathering in the prizes. And so here and in the thousand year journey that we have described we shall fare well.” (303)

VITAL REMNANTS | THE REPUBLIC

BONUS TARGET VIII | PLATO V. ARISTOTLE & THE STRUGGLE FOR THE SOUL OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

The text: Arthur Herman, *The Cave and the Light: Plato Versus Aristotle, and the Struggle for the Soul of Western Civilization* (Random House, 2013)

Listen: *Vital Remnants* | Season 1, Episode 8



This is a tremendous book—a real tour de force through western civilization. Arthur Herman is able to weave Plato’s and Aristotle’s influence and ideas through all elements of society, including architecture, religion, politics, war, science, art, and poetry. If he is right, the tension between Plato and Aristotle is what made our society so dynamic and so free.

I suggest you get a copy or purchase it as an audiobook. For our podcast, however, we will focus on the final chapter in which Herman discusses the rise of Islamic terrorism, the human genome project, and the stock market crash of 2008—all explainable by understanding the differences between Plato and Aristotle!

You can do this... Continuing your education is a lifestyle. Build the habit!