PHIL 354: PLATO (WINTER 2019)

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Office Hours: TBA

Time & Location: TR 4:05-5:25 ENGTR 1100

Course Description

This course gives an introduction to the philosophy of Plato (428?-348 BC). Two broad topics will frame our readings: virtue and knowledge. By carefully reading a number of dialogues by Plato, we will aim to understand and critically evaluate some of Plato’s answers to the following questions: What does it take to lead a good life, privately and publicly? Is a sort of knowledge necessary and sufficient for having a good life? How do individual virtues (such as prudence, justice, temperance/sound-mindedness, piety and courage) relate to each other and to living a good life? How do pleasure and pain stand in relation to the aim of living well? Can we act against what we believe best? What is knowledge as opposed to mere opinion? What is the proper object of knowledge? How can we gain knowledge?

Making Plato’s views fully intelligible requires understanding what motivated him to develop his views. Some of these motivations will be internal to the development of Plato’s philosophy. As we will see in greater detail, a position someone takes on some of these issues informs or constrains the position that person can rationally take on some other issues, and Plato is very interested in exploring such connections. To mention just one example, we will see in the Protagoras that if living a good life requires acting in a certain way and if we sometimes act against what we know to be best, knowledge of what is best cannot be sufficient for living a good life.

It will become clear that Plato treats some topics differently in different dialogues. We will reflect on whether what Plato says in different dialogues on the same topic are compatible or they signal a change of his position.

We will also read some background texts to get a sense of the problems Plato inherited and how he responded to prior attempts at tackling those problems. Along with Plato’s dialogues, we will read some medical writings and mathematical texts since medicine and mathematics (arithmetic and geometry, but also “applied” mathematics: optics, harmony, astronomy, and mechanics) served as model “arts” for Plato. In order to understand the background to Plato’s criticism of the competing proposals to teach oratory (Gorgias), or “physics” or natural history (Antiphon) (theories on the origin of the universe but also on the origin of human beings and societies) to make people succeed in life, we will read texts by these Pre-Socratic thinkers. We will also read additional texts to understand Plato’s criticism of the types of explanation used in physics as practiced by his predecessors.
Plato’s answers to the questions above are attractive in their outlines, but questionable in their details. Although it is not an aim of this course to discuss criticism of Plato’s views and alternatives to his views developed by Aristotle and other ancient philosophers, we will hint at potential objections and alternatives to Plato’s views as we discuss his arguments.

The purpose of this course is not only to give an overview of some of the important topics in Plato’s philosophy, but also to help students develop the knowledge and skills required to read Plato, and other ancient philosophical texts that are in dialogue with Plato, intelligently and critically.

**Course Requirements**

(a) Two questions for class discussion (2.5+2.5=5%)

(b) In-class reading comprehension test (20%)

(c) Midterm paper (25%)

(d) Take-home exam (50%)

(a) You will submit two questions on the readings for two different days. This is a pass/fail task. In order to get a passing grade, you need to motivate your question briefly (some schematic examples: (1) Plato says X here, but it can mean Y or Z. Which one is more likely to be the intended meaning of X here? (2) What Plato says in this place suggests P, but what he says in this other place suggests Q. P and Q appear to be in tension. Can these two statements be reconciled? (3) Plato seems to take these premises to support the thesis T1, but they only support the weaker thesis T2. Is the argument invalid or is there a way to interpret the premises to make the argument work? (4) Plato makes this obscure statement. Can we understand that statement to mean this clearer idea?) If your question is not up to this standard, I will ask you to submit another question. A sign-up sheet for questions will be available in the second week.

(b) The test will be written by hand in class.

(c, d) All other work must be submitted electronically as an MS-Word document through the MyCourses portal on the date and at the time indicated in order to avoid penalties. Students are advised to save electronic versions of all their work.

When you refer to a passage from Plato in your questions, midterm paper and take-home exam, you must cite the Stephanus page(s) of that passage (number-letter combinations (e.g., 21d) printed in the margin of our book, Plato: Complete Works (and most other respectable editions of Plato’s works)).
You can write an excellent work by using *only* the primary sources. In fact, you are encouraged to use *only* the primary sources in your written work. If you use secondary literature, you must cite it properly and provide textual evidence from the primary sources for your claims.

*To support academic integrity, your assignments may be submitted to text-matching or other appropriate software (e.g., formula-, equation-, and graph-matching).*

**Grading Criteria:**

To do an excellent work in this course, you need to be able to do more than repeat what Plato says or what was said in class. An “A” indicates that you not only understand the material, but that you have also thought critically about it, grasping at least some of its subtleties and implications. A “B” reflects an above-average understanding of the material without any major errors; “B” work does not capture the complexity of the issues. A “C” suggests a struggle with the material that results in basic comprehension but is flawed by some significant misunderstandings or errors. A “D” indicates only a rudimentary comprehension of part of the material with most of the material being misunderstood. An “F” indicates no understanding either of the assignment or of the material.

**Submission of Assignments and Late Submission**

Extensions will normally be granted only with appropriate medical note. I am willing to consider granting short extensions due to exceptional circumstances, if you present your case to me with relevant documents and get my approval at the latest 48 hours before the deadline. If you want to ask for an extension due to an unforeseeable event that would warrant an extension (e.g., loss of a loved one), get in touch with me as soon as possible.

Late work will be penalized at the rate of 3% points per calendar day past the due date. For example, if a paper got 75% and is late for a day, it will receive 72%; if the same paper is late for two days, it will receive 69%.

**Note on readings and participation**

It is indispensable to do the assigned readings for each day and have the texts with you for class discussion. We will be reading difficult texts. Make sure to do the assigned readings carefully; preferably read more than once and take notes. The reading load is designed with the usual academic obligations of an undergraduate student in mind. You should have enough time to do the readings carefully.

Students are expected to participate in class discussions. You should be prepared to answer questions about the readings posed by the instructor or your peers (not necessarily correctly, but thoughtfully and in a way that contributes to class discussion).
Although there are no official prerequisites, you are expected to have some experience with how to evaluate arguments and to interpret philosophical texts charitably and critically.

**Policy on the use of technology in class**

Pursuant to McGill University’s policy regarding electronics in the classroom, the use of electronic devices (computers, iPads, cell phones, etc.) is not permitted in lectures. All electronic devices must be turned off and stored during the class period. If you wish to be exempted for medical or academic reasons, please send me an e-mail setting out your reasons. The recording of lectures is not permitted and is illegal without the consent of the instructor. Please consider these policies before enrolling for this course.

**Mandatory Syllabus Statements:**

*McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/for more information).*

*In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.*

*In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.*

**Texts:**

The main text for this course is *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by Cooper and Hutchinson (Hackett Publishing). This book will be available at The Word Bookstore, 469 Milton Street (*The Word accepts cheque and cash only; no debit or credit cards*). Other readings will be made available on MyCourses. You should have all the assigned readings for that day with you in class: if there are assigned readings for a day which are not from the book, print them out and bring them to class.

**Tentative Weekly Schedule**

This weekly schedule is a reminder to keep us on track to cover all the material I intend us to read and discuss, but how much time we will need to spend on each reading will be subject to the pace of class discussions. So we might fall behind or go ahead of this schedule by a few classes.
I will also announce in advance which particular passages in the following week’s readings our discussions will focus on.

I may assign additional short texts to supplement the readings below.

You are expected to regularly check the announcements on MyCourses on the readings.

**Week 1**
Jan 8 - Introduction
Jan 10 – Apology (entire dialogue)

**Week 2**
Jan 15 – Euthyphro (entire dialogue), Euthydemus 278e-282e
Jan 17 - Protagoras from the beginning to 334c

**Week 3**
Jan 22 - Protagoras from 334c to the end
   Euclid – Optics (excerpts)
Jan 24 – Gorgias from the beginning to 466a; 500a-501c
   Gorgias - Encomium of Helen; Hippocratic texts (selections)

**Week 4**
Jan 29 – Gorgias 466a-481b; Meno 77b-78a; Republic IX 578c-579b
Jan 31 – Gorgias 481b-500a
   Antiphon (excerpt)

**Week 5**
Feb 5 – Gorgias from 500a to the end
Feb 7 – IN-CLASS TEST

**Week 6**
Feb 12 – Meno from the beginning to 86c
Feb 14 – Meno from 86c to the end

**Week 7**
Feb 19 – Phaedo, from the beginning to 77a
Feb 21 – Phaedo, 77a – 95a
Week 8
Feb 26 – Phaedo, from 95a to the end

Aristotle – On Generation and Corruption I.5 (excerpt)

Feb 28 – Clitophon (entire dialogue), Euthydemus 288d-293a (with 278e-282e assigned before); Republic I from the beginning to 336a

Reading Week (Mar 4-8): No classes

Mar 10 – MIDTERM PAPER DUE

Week 9:
Mar 12 – Republic I 336a – II 367e
Mar 14 – Republic II 367e-377e; III 408c-IV 421c

Week 10
Mar 19 – Republic IV from 421c to the end of IV
Mar 21 – Republic from V 471c to the end of VI; X 596a-598c

Week 11
Mar 26 – Republic VII (entire)
Mar 28 – Republic VIII 558d-559c; IX (entire)

Week 12
Apr 2 – Parmenides from the beginning to 133a
Apr 4 – Timaeus (TBA)

Week 13
Apr 9 – Timaeus (TBA)
Apr 11 – Revision