PHIL GR9121
Location: PHIL 716
Time: Fall 2019, Monday 10:10-12pm
Office hours:

Plato’s Timaeus

1. Course description

The seminar offers an introduction to one of Plato’s later dialogues, the Timaeus. The Timaeus is Plato’s main writing in physics broadly conceived, where this includes discussion of causes, the cosmos, soul, divinity, and human life. Plato has the main speaker—called Timaeus—announce that an account of the world takes a special form: it is an eikos logos, or in another formulation, an eikos muthos. Cosmology is a likely account of, and a likely story about, the making and workings of the cosmos.

Many specifics about the Timaeus are contested. Already ancient commentators disagree on what it means that in physics we can only offer a likely account. This question relates to a core idea in Plato’s Republic, namely that the sense perceptible world has the status of “becoming.” As such, it is not the object of understanding. Relatedly, the Timaeus contains much-debated discussions of sense perception, properties in the sense perceptible world, and pleasure and pain. Regarding the Timaeus’s cosmology, it is contested how many causes Plato recognizes and how these causes co-cause the world. Candidates are: a maker-god called demiurge, reason/mind (nous), necessity, matter, and place/receptacle.

The seminar focuses on the Timaeus’s conceptions of causation, mind, soul, sense perception, matter, necessity, “making” of the cosmos, and the epistemic status of physics. At times, we explore Plato’s proposals by looking at other texts, including selections from early Greek philosophy, Plato’s Phaedo, Republic, and Philebus, Aristotle’s Metaphysics, and the Stoics. Weeks 1-3 are introductory: we cover classic selections on Being and Becoming, cosmology, and causation. Starting in Week 4, we focus on particular sections of the Timaeus as well as additional readings that help illuminate Plato’s arguments.

We shall have two guest speakers. Papers and/or handouts are pre-circulated and students are expected to read the circulated material in advance. If you are opting to write two short papers, you are welcome to take one of these visits as an occasion to write a response paper. (Note: one of our guest speakers will visit in the Spring. Of course, there is no requirement to attend the Spring session. But students are cordially invited to do so, and I’ll try to find a time slot that works for as many of seminar participants as possible.)

2. Requirements

We shall read the Timaeus in English. Knowledge of ancient Greek is not a prerequisite for the class; however, students who read ancient Greek are encouraged to use the Greek text.
E- and R-credit reading requirements:
For each class meeting, there is an assigned primary reading. All seminar participants are expected to read the primary text closely. For each seminar session, one or more secondary readings are recommended.

E-credit writing requirements:
Option 1: Two 5-7 page papers, each devoted to the analysis of a passage, one due Oct 30th by email and the other due Dec 20th by email.
Option 2: One 15-18 page paper, due Dec 20th by email. Please email me at the latest by Nov 13th to consult about the topic. Additionally, you are required to submit an outline and abstract by Nov 27 (both can be work-in-progress).
Topics for “analysis of a passage” papers will be announced by email or on the weekly handouts for class. These topics are intended as illustrative of the kind of paper I’m looking for. You’re free to write on other, similar topics. Either way, please run paper topics by me.

Required E-credit and optional R-credit contribution:
At least 6 times per semester, you should post a question or comment on our course website, at the latest 9am in the morning of the day the class meets. This can be very minimal: a question of clarification, a note about some passage you find puzzling or interesting, an observation about some detail; or it can be a bit more extensive: say, an interpretive proposal, response to a secondary reading, etc. It’s also OK to respond to other posts.

3. Week-by-Week Plan
Additional specifics about primary and secondary literature will be announced prior to each class meeting.

Week 1, 09/09: Being and Becoming
Primary Readings: Timaeus 27a2-29d6, Protagoras 339a-347a (on becoming or being virtuous), Republic 475e-480.

Week 2, 09/16: Knowledge of Nature?
Primary Readings: Timaeus 27a2-29d6 (again), Republic 475e-480 (again) and Simile of the Line.

Week 3, 09/23: Causation
Primary readings: Phaedo 95c-99, Republic 507-509, Philebus 23c-31a.
Week 4, 09/30: The World—Body, Soul, Time  
Primary Reading: *Timaeus* 30-39  
Secondary reading: TBD

Week 5, 10/07: Jessica Moss on Being and Seeming  
Guest speaker: Jessica Moss (NYU), “Being and Seeming: Plato’s Epistemology”  
Commentators: Margaret Corn (Columbia University), Luke Lea (Columbia University)  
This visit is part of the Workshop in Ancient & Contemporary Philosophy

Week 6, 10/14: Good Gods  
Primary Readings: *Euthyphro* (selections), *Republic* II (selections), *Timaeus* 17-26 and *Timaeus* 39e-42  

Week 7, 10/21: Human Beings and Sense Perception  
Primary Reading: *Timaeus* 42-47, *Phaedo* 65a-67b, *Republic* 523a-525  

Week 8, 10/28: Causes and Principles  

NO CLASS

Week 9, 11/11: How Many Causes?—Reason, Necessity, the Receptacle  
Primary Reading: *Timaeus* 47-52d  

Week 10, 11/18: Elements and the Physics-Mathematics Relation  
Primary Readings: *Timaeus* 52d-61c, *Republic* 522c-530.  

Week 11, 11/25: Sense Perception, Pleasure and Pain  
Primary Reading: *Timaeus* 61-71

Week 12, 12/02: Human Body, Diseases, Body-Soul Relation
Primary Reading: *Timaeus* 72-90
Secondary Readings: TBA

Week 13, 12/09: Concluding Discussion

Additional meeting March 20, 2020 (everyone is cordially invited—attendance not required)
Klaus Corcilius (Tübingen), “Cosmological ethics and internal order in the Timaeus”
Commentators: Qian Cao (Columbia University), Jake Haagenson (Columbia University)
This visit is part of the Workshop in Ancient & Contemporary Philosophy

4. Readings

*Primary Texts*—please make sure that you have access to one of these two editions
*Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John Cooper. Hackett. [This is a large volume, not easy to carry around; but you’ll need access to other dialogues by Plato, and this is the edition I recommend for these purposes.]

*Additional Primary Texts*

*A helpful introduction*

*Secondary Literature*
Additional secondary literature will be added throughout the semester.


5. Academic Integrity and Honor Code

Please consult Columbia University’s policies on academic integrity as well as Columbia’s honor code:

http://www.college.columbia.edu/academics/academicintegrity
https://www.college.columbia.edu/ccschonorcode
http://bulletin.columbia.edu/general-studies/undergraduates/academic-policies/academic-integrity-community-standards/

These policies explain Columbia University’s academic regulations and how you can safeguard the integrity of your original work. Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are serious offenses. Please take the time to familiarize yourself with the details of what constitutes plagiarism and academic dishonesty. You are expected to confirm to these policies in your academic work. It is important that you understand that academic dishonesty can lead to disciplinary action, including failure in the course and suspension, or even expulsion, from the University.

6. Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations, students must first be registered with Disability Services. More information on the Disability Services registration process is available online at <www.health.columbia.edu/ods>. Registered students must present an Accommodation Letter to the professor before an exam or other accommodations can be provided. Students who have, or think they may have, a disability are invited to contact Disability Services for a confidential discussion at (212) 854-2388 (Voice/TTY) or by email at <disability@columbia.edu>. 