

PLATO, V3121 (PRELIMINARY SYLLABUS)

Course Description

The course offers a survey of Plato's philosophy. It is structured around two topics that Plato pursues throughout his life:

- (1) Why is knowledge good, and belief bad?
- (2) In which sense is it the case that everyone desires the good?

Both questions respond to ideas central in Socrates' philosophy:

- (S1) Only an examined life can be a good life.
- (S2) Everyone desires the good; no one does wrong voluntarily.

Accordingly, we have two broad topics: normative epistemology, which aims to understand the role of knowledge in a good life; and the theory of motivation, which aims to explain how human beings are motivated to act.

We read dialogues standardly considered early, middle, and late. The early dialogues are often referred to as 'Socratic'; they often focus on topics particularly relevant to Socrates' thought. We read two of these texts, *Ion* and *Apology*, moving on to a transitional dialogue (between early and middle), the *Meno*.

Next, we study significant portions of two of the most famous middle dialogues: books IV, V-VII, and VIII-IX of the *Republic*, and Socrates' speech in the *Symposium*.

Plato's later dialogues are considered particularly difficult. However, they are also particularly interesting. The class covers two of these texts: *Theaetetus* and *Philebus*.

Text (ordered at BookCulture): *Plato. Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, Hackett.

Students have access to my book manuscript *Belief and Truth: A Skeptic Reading of Plato* and its as-of-yet incomplete companion book *Desiring the Good: A Socratic Reading of Aristotle*. Both books contain chapters on the dialogues we study.

Requirements

In-class participation: It is essential to do the readings prior to the class for which they are assigned. All students are expected to participate in in-class discussion. Participation counts for 10% of the grade.

One-page assignments: Three one-page assignments, focusing on analysis of passages or arguments. Each one-page assignment counts for 10% of the total grade.

Papers: Two 6-page papers, each counting for 20% of the grade.

Midterm: 20% of the total grade. We hold a midterm instead of final because the last part of the class is rather difficult. Plato's late dialogues are intriguing, but also puzzling, and not necessarily apt for an exam.

Outline of Readings and Topics

Week 1: What is expertise?

Ion

Week 2: What is ignorance?

Apology; topic for 1-page assignment, due in class end in week 3

Week 3: Everyone desires the good

Meno

Week 4: How to move from belief to knowledge

Meno; topics for first paper (on material from weeks 3-4), due in class in week 5

Week 5: Desire for a good life

Symposium

Week 6: Motivational conflict – the desires of reason, spirit, and the appetites

Republic IV; topic for 1-page assignment, due in class in week 7

Week 7: Ignorance, belief, and knowledge

Republic V-VII

Week 8: Mental disorders

Republic VIII-IX

MIDTERM (in class)

Week 9: Disagreement, appearances, and relativism – “the wind is cold for me”

Theaetetus, Part 1

Week 10: Belief and truth

Theaetetus, Part 2

Week 11: Belief, theory, and knowledge

Theaetetus, Part 3; topics for second paper (on material from weeks 9-11), due in class in week 12

Week 12: False pleasures

Philebus

Week 13: Sophisticated hedonism

Philebus; topic for 1-page assignment, due in class in week 14

Week 14: The good is the good life

Philebus