

Plato

Philosophy 327a
Skidmore College
Fall Semester, 08 Sep – 08 Dec 2010
MW 4.30-6.20p, Ladd 206

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Office Hours: M 3:15-4:15p, W 2:15-3:15p, and by appt.
Course Website: platoseminar.wordpress.com

Required Text

Plato: Complete Works, Cooper, ed. (Hackett, 1997)

Course

The hope of this class is that by studying Plato of Athens (427?-347 BC) we may come to understand, better than by studying any other philosopher, the purposes, methods, and preconditions of philosophizing. The hypothesis through which we will read and discuss Plato is that philosophizing is the name of the discipline concerned with pursuing self-knowledge, and that Plato—among his many other literary, political, intellectual, and argumentative interests—aims in his dialogues to depict and vindicate this pursuit. What knowledge is, what the self could be, what special relations between the two might hold, and how such a pursuit could deserve study and even a whole life: these are, uncontroversially, the central questions of philosophy at every point in the history of its practice. Plato is neither the final nor most elaborated word on these questions, but he is, it might fairly be said, both the first word and the writer most continuously attentive to the existential, social, and political vitality of the questions.

In this seminar we will read six of Plato's 30+ works (in terms of pages, 12% of his oeuvre). These six are special for giving explicit attention to the questions of self-knowledge. The argumentative density, dramatic richness, and allusive complexity of each demands close reading, analysis, and reconstruction, and therefore we will rarely work with more than fifteen pages of text per class. We will also look occasionally to Plato's predecessors, sometimes to reading guides I will provide, and infrequently to recent scholarly commentary.

Besides endeavoring to see how Plato's dialogues present Socrates persuading his acquaintances about the importance rigorous reflection on their commitments and desires, we will try to understand some further features of Plato's work.

- (1) Plato's dialogues are realistic and engaging written depictions of an uncommon but familiar variety of spoken conversations occasioned by everyday sorts of worries and governed by quasi-ethical norms of responsiveness and productivity.
- (2) Some of what we see in these conversations is argument: a special form of talking which seeks constant agreement, aims for verifiable truth, depends on the acknowledgment of the similarities and differences among ideas, transfers explicit commitment from some beliefs to other beliefs, is often hypothetical or revelatory rather than contentious, and is conducive to being 'outlined' — clarified in form — in order to be judged for goodness by anyone capable of rational thought.
- (3) The lead character of Plato's dialogues is his teacher Socrates (469-399 BC). Plato presents him as a somewhat opaque model of good practice, successful in subtle ways, and morally and temperamentally distinct from other practitioners of philosophy and other pedagogical and intellectual pursuits.
- (4) Plato treated the creation of his dialogues as a significant though not exclusive project of his philosophical life: he also founded a school of research and study, tutored tyrants in Sicily, and presumably lectured or talked about all sorts of topics. He must have understood certain kinds of reading, study, and guided discussion a key part of a philosophical education or career.

Class time

We will spend much of our time in conversation about our assigned texts, often through close reading of important or characteristic passages, and also through argument reconstruction and assessment, character analysis, summary at various levels of abstraction, and critical response. Since our reading in Plato is solely of dialogues—of people talking to one another for reasons and thus having, presumably, exemplary conversations—principal questions will be: “Why did he just say that?” “What would have made him agree to that dubious proposition?” “Is it reasonable for him to have thought that really follows?” “They’re changing the topic awfully fast, aren’t they?” “Is this exchange really a muddle, or is it just me?” “What would it take, and what would happen, if I myself really believed this?” “What possible reasons could Plato have had for bringing us to think this?” “Is studying this making my life any better?”

You should take notes every day, about what your classmates or I say and what's written on the board. I will expect your work to reflect familiarity with what we've talked about. In-class use of your computer must be limited to note-taking. Please do not read or send texts or other electronic communications during our meeting time.

Students interested in reading passages in Greek may join an ancillary reading-group.

Work

A broad range of writing assignments will give you a chance to work on the skills learned in class, to strengthen your familiarity with our texts, to engage in a deliberate manner with your peers and your instructor, and to develop your ability to articulate your reactions to the conversations and claims we read about. There are four categories of assignments; three involve some degree of revision.

Five Homework Assignments [40%]

Every several weeks you will respond to a prompt about the reading I will distribute at least two class-periods in advance. For each you may write as much as you wish.

HW I: Obeying the oracle.

HW II: Examining, arguing, defining.

HW III: Investigating myths and investigating oneself.

HW IV: Temperance, modesty, and virtue.

HW V: Knowledge, self-awareness, and the good city.

Because this course is not a one-on-one tutorial, writing serves as the main way by which you develop and articulate your thoughts about the reading and class discussion. And because this course contributes to the liberal arts curriculum of the Bachelor's degree, it has the obligation to help you improve those skills implied by a successful completion of that curriculum. Accordingly, you should take the writing seriously.

To get a C on an assignment, your work must be mostly responsive to the prompt, acknowledge relevant portions of the texts in question, have relatively clear exposition, and show some personal reflection. Getting a B takes complete responsiveness to the prompt, fully substantiated claims and citations, good structural organization, and demonstrated serious thoughtfulness about the issue. Getting an A- requires the above, plus excellent command of the reading, multiple modes of argument and preemptive counter-argument, crystalline structural organization, and both rigor and imagination in confronting the issues in question. An A paper exceeds an A- especially in its rigor (analytic sharpness and systematicity) and imagination (creative and exploratory and comprehensive ways of answering the prompt).

At some point during this semester your paper may not receive credit the first time I read it. I will return it to you with comments and a request to meet in office hours by a certain date. You will think about the comments, we will talk in detail about problems with your old draft and your plan for reworking it, and then you will resubmit a revised version or section of the original paper by another specified date. After reading this revision, I may require yet another sequence of revisions; refusing or failing to try to make adequate revision will prevent your paper from receiving credit. That your paper goes through this revision process does not mean your paper would otherwise fail—indeed it could even have gotten an B+, say—but that I am catching a problem.

Assignments will always be due in class at the beginning of class. I will accept assignments only by hardcopy, never by email, unless you are explicitly told on the syllabus or prompt to email them. You must staple and paginate multi-sheet assignments, and include full heading information (full name, course number, name of the assignment, and the date it is due); failures to do so will lower the grade.

Late assignments will not be accepted except by my discretion and if you have a good faith reason. In this case your assignment will lose a grade letter every 48 hours it is late. For example, if your printer broke thirty minutes before class and you want to run the paper over to my office after class, I will likely accept it, but you will still receive a grade-letter reduction. Or if you forget an assignment due Wednesday and put it in my mailbox that Friday at 4p, you will receive a two grade-letter reduction.

Class blog [20%]

You are asked to contribute, both as original poster and as commenter, to our course blog each week that you do not have seminar minutes duty (see below). Original posts might normally be only several paragraphs long (e.g., 500 words long)—though they might sometimes be much shorter or longer—and may be on any matter relevant to the reading, course discussion, papers, Plato, or the nature of philosophy and self-knowledge generally. You might talk through a confusion you have, cite what you think is a deeply significant passage, speak up about something you thought we papered over in class, ask a question of your classmates, report on some article you read, transcribe an eavesdropped purportedly philosophical conversation, narrate a good anecdote from your life, define a pertinent virtue, or write in any other way that could contribute to your and your classmates' understanding of self-reflection and the good life. Comments should follow up other posts/minutes in ways that contribute to the overall thoughtfulness of the thread, and are likely to provoke yet further discussion.

Participation in the blog constitutes a fifth of your overall class grade. The largest part of your score will be regular participation; it will be very difficult to get an A without at least one substantive post and pertinent reply each (non-seminar minutes) weeks. The rest of your score will come from the coherence, insight, creativity, variety, responsiveness, and generosity of your posts and replies.

Seminar minutes [15%]

Each class session (except 9/8, 12/6, 12/8) will have a student responsible for producing the minutes: the record of items discussed, points made, examples given, digressions taken, and confusions identified. You are not expected to reproduce the conversation verbatim but to create a document which will help your classmates remember and understand what we spoke about on your assigned day. You may format this document each time however you wish. Publish this document as a blog posting with the title, e.g., "Minutes Sep 15," within 72 hours of the end of the relevant class session. This will be graded like the other blog posts. We will assign days in class.

Abstract + Presentation + Final Paper [25%]

The final project will be a seminar paper on your choice of topics about the *Charmides*. This dialogue is, of our assigned works, the one most directly concerned with the widest range of philosophical conundrums—epistemology, ethics, philosophy of psychology, political theory, and methodology—but it also one of the most confounding and least written about. The hope is that, in the course of our protracted reading of this dialogue and our discussions of other matters, you will find a single issue which will reward your intense analysis, close reading and literary interpretation, research in the secondary literature, and discussion with me and your classmates.

I recommend coming by office hours to talk about your ideas by the third week of November. A two page plan will be due by email by class time Monday, 22 November. I will return it to you with advice as quickly as possible; its quality will contribute to your final project score. During the last week of class you will give a brief presentation, with a two-fold purpose: to share the most provocative aspects of your project, and to ask your classmates for help with the most difficult questions of your project; its quality will contribute to your final project score. The final paper, due during finals period, to which you must staple a printed-out copy of the marked-up version of the 2pp plan, should be 10-20 pages. (I will be happy to read an intermediate or partial draft up to the last Friday of the semester.) Your score on this final paper will take into account the cogency with which you set out your puzzling issue; the argumentative, imaginative, and literary resource with which you work through it; your use of all relevant previous course discussions and materials; and your general rigor of research, exegesis, discussion, and presentation.

Logistics

Attendance

Much of the activity and value of the class comes through our twice-weekly discussions. Accordingly, your final grade will take into account your attendance, which I will spot-check. Repeated tardy arrivals and insufficient participation may count as absences. You must submit appropriate paperwork to excuse any absence. After two unexcused absence, each absence will lower your grade by one increment (e.g., from A- to B+).

Grades

Your course grade will represent the precision, accuracy, comprehensiveness, care, thoughtfulness, and effort demonstrated by your participation in the course activities. You will receive the grade nearest to your average numerical score.

A 4.0 – Extraordinary	B- 2.66	D+ 1.33
A- 3.66	C+ 2.33	D 1.0 – Minimal pass
B+ 3.33	C 2.0 – Acceptable	D- 0.66
B 3.0 – Good	C- 1.66	F 0.0 – Fail

Technology

Please check class-related emails each weekday, and respond promptly. I will do the same. I will email you additional readings and assignments if I do not distribute paper copies. Please check with fellow students to ensure you have not missed any handouts, which include paper-prompts and notes.

Accessibility

If you are a student with a disability and believe you will need academic accommodation, you must formally request accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities. You will also need to provide documentation which verifies the existence of a disability and supports your request. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center.

Cheating

Academic dishonesty in any portion of the academic work for this course shall be grounds for failing the entire course and communication of dishonesty to the College. This includes, but is not restricted to, any plagiarism on any paper, or cheating on any portion of the homework. Plagiarism includes, among other things, not citing text, paraphrases, or ideas taken from any assigned or unassigned reading, or other students' comments or papers. Read at cms.skidmore.edu/advising/integrity/index.cfm and please ask about any case you're concerned about.

Reading and Assignment Schedule

September

- W 08 Biography of Plato. Syllabus.
- M 13 Diogenes Laertius, "Life of Plato"; Nails, "Plato of Athens." Introductions.
W 15 *Apology* 17a1-35d8.
- M 20 *Apology* 35e1-42a4. **HW I**
W 22 *Alcibiades* 103a1-119a8.
- M 27 *Alcibiades* 119b1-135e7.
W 29 *Greater Hippias* 281a1-291c6.

October

- M 4 *Greater Hippias* 291d1-304e9.
W 6 Selections from Pindar, Sappho, others. **HW II**
- M 11 *Phaedrus* 227a1-241d4.
W 13 *Phaedrus* 241d5-257b6.

M 18 *Phaedrus* 257c1-269d2.
W 20 *Phaedrus* 269d3-279c8.

M 25 Midpoint overview of class. **HW III**
W 27 *Charmides* 153a1-161b2.

November

M 1 *Charmides* 161b3-167a8. **HW IV**
W 3 *Charmides* 167b1-176d4.

M 8 Selection of *Charmides* secondary literature.
W 10 Selection of *Charmides* secondary literature. **HW V**

M 15 *Phaedo* 57a1-72e1.
W 17 *Phaedo* 72e2-88c5.

M 22 *Phaedo* 88c6-100a7. **Final Paper Abstract due.**
W 24 **[THANKSGIVING]**

M 29 *Phaedo* 100a8-115a2.

December

W 01 *Phaedo* 115a3-118a10.

M 6 **Presentations.**
W 8 **Presentations.** Course evaluations. Recapitulation of course.

F 17 **Final Paper Due by 1.30p.**