

Philosophy 3003G: Plato
Winter Term 2019
The University of Western Ontario Department of Philosophy
Professor D. Henry

Class Time: T 1:30-3:30, W 2:30-3:30
Room: Sommerville House (SH) 3307
Office Hours: Thursday 9:30-11:30 am

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is a critical examination of the philosophy of Plato. Plato is agreed to be one of the most dazzling writers in the Western literary tradition and one of the most engaging and influential philosophers in the history of Western thought. The course will cover representative dialogues from each of the three traditional periods of Plato thought: the early “Socratic” dialogues; the so-called middle dialogues; and his late period. Throughout these dialogues we find the character of Socrates engaged in conversation with various Athenians on a whole range of philosophical issues: What is philosophical inquiry and how should it be conducted? Can rational arguments be used to convince people to follow their best interests or does philosophy need to rely on the art of persuasion? Does knowledge require an unchanging world of Forms or can it be grounded in our immediate sensations of the things around us? Is it more shameful to commit injustice or to suffer injustice? Is the life devoted to the pursuit of pleasure philosophically defensible? If not, what role does pleasure occupy in the good life? Students will engage original texts in translation.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course has two objectives. The first is to give students of philosophy an introduction to the origins and foundations of their discipline, including the problems that define it. The second is to help students develop their ability to read and understand difficult philosophical texts and to reflect on the ideas and arguments they offer us. These are basic skills that every well-rounded philosopher should have. Class discussions and writing assignments are the vehicles for assessing a student’s success in these areas.

REQUIRED TEXT

Plato: Complete Works, ed. John Cooper (Hackett Publishing), ISBN: 0872203492.
Available at the UWO

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students in this course will choose from three different assignment options. The aim is to give students the opportunity to choose the set of assignments that best suit their particular strengths, interests, and time. Weighting and due dates TBD. See below for further explanation.

Option #1

1. Annotated Bibliography (8-10 sources accompanied by 100-150 word abstracts)
2. Project description (2 page, well-developed outline of the major paper, including research question, working thesis, and argument structure)
3. Major paper (15 pages)
4. Participation

Option #2

1. Short Paper #1 (10-12 pages)
2. Short Paper #2 (10-12 pages)
3. Participation

Option #3

1. Literature review x 2 (4-5 pages each).
2. Textual Analysis x 4 (3-4 pages each).
3. Participation.

EXPLANATION AND EXPECTATIONS OF ASSIGNMENTS.

Annotated Bibliography

At this stage students are not expected to have a thesis but only a research topic or set of questions they want to investigate that will help focus their research. The aim of the AB is to help students develop the necessary research skills to be successful in graduate school (doing research is a big part of that) and to provide a solid foundation for writing their major paper by grounding their arguments in an understanding of the relevant literature surrounding their topic. To do that, students need to read all of the relevant literature related to their topic and then *select from that* the most relevant sources for their project (8-10). This takes some amount of effort and time. Shortcutting the assignment by reading abstracts or not carefully considering the content of the sources not only undermines the spirit of the assignment but also puts the student at a serious disadvantage when it comes time to write the paper itself. To get into the A-A+ range, I would want to see at least two main things.

1. Include a brief description of your research topic/question. Without it, I cannot evaluate the strength and relevance of your sources, or suggest some additional sources that might help with your project. Additionally, include with each entry an abstract containing a sentence or two explaining the relevance of the source to your project. I want to see that you didn't just pick the first 8 search results on Google but carefully selected the most relevant sources for your project.
2. The abstracts should not be descriptions of what the papers do; rather, they should present a summary of the paper's central arguments (its main claim[s] and the reasons they offer in support of it).

Project Description/Outline

When writing the project description you should already be at a point in the process where you have a clear sense of what your research question is *and* what the central thesis of their paper will be, even if at that stage that thesis isn't fleshed out in precise detail. I also expect students to have arrived at their thesis on the basis of research done at the Annotated Bibliography stage, and so they will have thought about the reasons why they hold that position they do. Those reasons will form the basis of the supporting arguments for your paper. So the student should already be at a fairly advanced stage of thinking about the paper by the time she writes her project description. It should basically be a skeleton of the paper: 'Here is the question I am trying to answer, here is what I propose to argue (my answer to that question), and here is roughly how I will support that position (the arguments for it).'

Textual Analyses.

Good scholarly writing (a dissertation, a book, a journal article) requires a number of different skills. You need to be able to summarize the argument in the text, defend a coherent thesis supported by well-organized arguments, summarize the current state of the literature, situate your position within some broader debate, and provide a close analysis of difficult arguments or stretches of text. While a term paper would involve all of these skills, the textual analysis assignment (as the name implies) is meant to help students develop the last of these independently of the others. The analysis should not be a short paper or a summary of the text. You should pick a difficult stretch of text, argument, or some other notable aspect of the reading and provide a close analysis of the argument or ideas contained therein. For example, how does the Power Argument at *Gorgias* 466b-468e work? What are the premises and how do they support the conclusion? What role is played by the distinction between “doing what appears best” and “doing what you want”? Or: How exactly should we understand Thrasymachus’ immoralist position as set out at *Republic* 343c-344c? What assumptions are being made? What exactly is Thrasymachus committed to in that passage? The literature reviews can dovetail with the texts chosen for the textual analysis (though must be completed separately). But each textual analysis must present the student’s own original research and not draw on the secondary literature.

Expectations for Option 3.

Good scholarly writing in the History of Philosophy requires a number of different skills. You must be able to summarize the argument in the primary text, summarize the current state of the literature, situate your position within some broader debate, provide a close analysis of difficult arguments or stretches of text, and defend a coherent thesis supported by well-organized arguments. While a term paper would involve all of these skills, Option 3 focuses on two in particular. The aim of the literature review is to summarize the current state of the debate in the literature. The review should begin with a description of the relevant debate and then provide an overview of the major scholarly positions (dividing them into “camps” if possible). Students need not take a side in the debate, but they should demonstrate a grasp of the major positions taken in the literature and be able to summarize the key arguments of specific authors involved. This assignment is designed to help students develop their research skills. The textual analysis assignments (as the name implies) are meant to help students develop the ability to provide a close analysis of difficult arguments or stretches of text for themselves. The textual analysis should not be a short paper, nor should it be a mere summary of the text (‘Plato says this, then he says this, etc.’). You should pick a difficult passage, argument, or some other notable aspect of the work in question and then provide a close analysis of the arguments and ideas contained therein. For example, how does the Power Argument at *Gorgias* 466b-468e work? What are the premises and how do they support the conclusion? What role is played by the distinction between “doing what appears best” and “doing what you want”? Again: How exactly should we understand Thrasymachus’ immoralist position as set out at *Republic* 343c-344c? What assumptions are being made? What exactly is Thrasymachus committed to in that passage? The literature reviews can dovetail with the texts chosen for the textual analysis (though must be completed separately). But each textual analysis must present the student’s own original research and not draw on the secondary literature. While students may select texts from readings already covered in previous lectures, you are encouraged to seek out texts and passages that have not been discussed in class. This better allows me to evaluate your independent critical reading skills.

Participation

Students can choose to “participate” in class discussion in one of two ways. The ideal way is to engage in discussions with fellow students during the seminar itself by asking questions, raising interpretative issues, providing useful summaries of the secondary literature, etc. However, since this will be a big seminar and I appreciate that some students may be more hesitant to speak up, the other option is to submit to me via email a short (1-2 paragraphs max) discussion of issues that arise from the readings and your thoughts on them. These should reflect the sorts of questions or comments that might be part of a discussion. There is no requirement for how often a student participates (on either option). In both cases the participation grade will be evaluated on the basis of the frequency and quality of a student’s comments. Note that the email-submissions must adhere to the maximum 1-2 short paragraphs. Since there is less opportunity in class discussion for each student to participate and offer lengthy, detailed comments this will ensure fairness between the two methods of participation. Also, if I find that too many students are “participating” through email to the detriment of in-class discussion, I reserve the right to shut down email submissions (though students will be given credit for any email submissions to that point).

Audit

Students wishing to audit the course should consult with the instructor prior to or during the first week of classes.

The **Department of Philosophy Policies** which govern the conduct, standards, and expectations for student participation in Philosophy courses is available in the Undergraduate section of the Department of Philosophy website at http://uwo.ca/philosophy/undergraduate/_policies.html. It is your responsibility to understand the policies set out by the Senate and the Department of Philosophy, and thus ignorance of these policies cannot be used as grounds of appeal.