

**PHL 411.101 (course # 14166)****Plato II****Plato: On Life**

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Autumn 2012  
TH: 1:00-4:10

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(or by appointment)

**Description and Objectives**

“On Life” [περὶ βίου or περὶ ζωῆς]: though there is no Platonic dialogue with this subtitle, no dialogue that poses directly the question “what is life?” we will argue in this seminar that almost everything in Plato’s dialogues can and should be read through the theme of life. From the question of what distinguishes human life from other kinds of life—whether that of plants, others animals, or the gods—to the question of how best to live a uniquely human life, almost all of Plato’s epistemological, ethical, and political concerns are centered around the theme or question of life. But even Plato’s ontology is, as we will see, inflected by this theme of life, insofar as both Being and the Good are commonly characterized by Plato in terms of life, life as opposed to death, to be sure, but also life as opposed to becoming, life as opposed to visibility, phenomenality, corporeality, and so on. We will thus want to ask in the course of the seminar whether the life that Plato privileges in so many of his most important dialogues is not in the end a life beyond or in excess of life, a life beyond what we *call* life, and, thus, a life to which our finite human existences have but limited access.

In order to broach this theme of life, we will range far and wide throughout the Platonic corpus, reading passages from many later dialogues, from *Sophist*, *Theaetetus*, and *Statesman*, to *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws*. But in order to see just how significant this theme is in Plato, we will spend most of our time reading a single dialogue, the *Republic*, and particularly—at least at the outset—the many metaphors and analogies of animal life used in that dialogue to develop everything from the nature of the guardians in the ideal state to a conception of the human soul to a theory of the afterlife. This focus on animal life in the *Republic* will thus be our starting point for asking the question of life more generally, the question of what distinguishes different forms of life from one another and the question of whether there is not some complicity between the ontological question “what is life?” and “life itself”—if there *is* such a thing.

**Required Reading**

Plato I (*Republic I*), Loeb Classical Library; ISBN 9780674992627

Plato II (*Republic II*), Loeb Classical Library; ISBN 9780674993044

Plato VIII (*Statesman, Philebus, Ion*), Loeb Classical Library; ISBN 9780674991828

## Requirements

1. A final 10-12 page research paper due at noon on the Friday following our final class. Absolutely no extensions will be given for this paper. (No title pages, cover sheets, or plastic binders are needed for these papers; just hand in 10-12 pieces of paper—no more—with your name on the top right, stapled or paper-clipped on the top left.)

2. Though there will be no full-length student presentations in this seminar (there are too many of us to make it manageable), I will expect every student to come to class ready to present a question or series of questions that arose from the reading or from the previous class (just 1-2 double-spaced pages will be sufficient). As a way of beginning or motivating discussion, I will often call on one or two seminar members to present their prepared questions. Ideally, these brief reading responses will provide all of us with a set of themes or questions to pursue in final papers.

3. Attendance: everyone is allowed one absence for the quarter. Any more than one absence will result in the lowering of the final grade one to two notches (e.g, from A to A- or B+). (Two late arrivals *for* class, or early departures *from* class—e.g., after the break—will count for one absence.)

Class attendance, attention, and participation are, therefore, *extremely* important, so come tired, come with a hangover, come with a friend if you like, but come.

## Grades

The final paper will count for 75% of the final grade. Class participation, the prepared questions and responses, and attendance will make up the balance of the grade. Incompletes will be granted only in the most extenuating circumstances (like a coma—and even then...).

## Schedule

Because it is difficult to predict exactly how much material we will cover in a given class, definitive reading assignments will be given out only the class before. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to contact a friend in the class to get the exact assignment. Since this is a graduate class, I will simply assume that *everyone* will have done *all* the reading by the beginning of a given class. I will not try to verify this through quizzes, but I will not hesitate to ask questions that anyone who has done the reading should be able to answer and I will ask students at random to present to the class the 1-2 page question or reading summary they will have prepared for each session. So please come prepared; it will make the seminar much more interesting and productive for us all.