

PHL 410.101 (course # 16359): Plato I

Plato and the Invention of Life

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M: 3:00-6:15

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(or by appointment)

Description and Objectives

“On Life” [περὶ βίου or περὶ ζῴων]: 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 questions revolve around the theme or question of life. Even Plato’s ontology, as we will see, is inflected by this theme, insofar as both Being and the Good are sometimes characterized by Plato in terms of life, life as opposed to death, to be sure, but also life as opposed to becoming, phenomenality, corporeality, and so on. We will thus ask throughout this 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.

To broach this theme of life in Plato, we will range far and wide throughout the Platonic corpus, reading passages from many later dialogues, such as *Sophist*, *Theaetetus*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws*. But we will spend most of our time reading a single dialogue, the *Statesman*, and, especially at the outset, the famous myth of the two ages where Plato seems to sketch out not only two conceptions of political rule but two different valences, values, or even types of life. This focus on life in the *Statesman* will 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.

Our approach to the question of life in Plato’s dialogues will be informed in large part by Jacques Derrida’s “Plato’s Pharmacy.” In that important 1968 essay, Derrida argues that Plato is able to develop—indeed, to invent—a conception of speech without or before writing only by means of what he calls the *supplement* of writing. We will thus use this “logic of the supplement” to show how Plato is able to discover—indeed, to invent—a notion of life that would come without or before all death and, thus, without or before what is *called* life. Derrida’s “logic of the supplement” will allow us to read the age of Kronos in the *Statesman*, as well as the politics and philosophical thinking of life attached to it, as just such an invention. It is this thinking of life that will help explain, we will conclude, the Neo-Platonic identification of Being, Logos, and the One with Life itself, a decisive moment, we will argue, for Western philosophy

and theology.

Required Reading

Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); ISBN 9780226143347; *La dissemination* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972).

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. If a student is unable to hand in a paper by this time, he or she should come to the department to take a final exam.
2. Class Presentations and Preparation: each student will be asked to make one 15-20 minute in-class presentation on the material we have already covered or the material we are preparing to cover. (We will discuss this further and assign topics during our first meeting.) I will also expect every student to come to class with 1-2 pages of prepared comments and/or questions related to the readings or the previous class. 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 us all 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 as 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 presentations, participation, 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.

Other Considerations

Students seeking disability-related accommodations are required to register with DePaul's *Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD)*, which helps students to access accommodations and provides support services to assist in student success.

There are two office locations that can provide information about these services:

Loop Campus: Lewis Center #1420, (312) 362-8002

Lincoln Park Campus: Student Center #370, (773) 325-1677

Students can also inquire via email at csd@depaul.edu

Students are also invited to contact me privately to discuss their challenges and how I may assist them with accommodations for the course. Note that this is best done early in the quarter.

Students can rest assured that our conversation will remain completely confidential.