

Government 203
Political Theorists and Their Theories: Plato
Spring Semester 2010
Clark University

Jefferson 400
Friday, 1:25-4:15
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Description

The Government Department's "Political Theorists and their Theories" course allows the faculty to select an individual political theorist for extended study – to focus on the arguments of this theorist, the context in which these arguments were made, and the consequences of these arguments over time. For this semester's version of the class, I have chosen to focus upon Plato's dialogues.

Many of you have encountered Plato elsewhere in your coursework. Plato was an Athenian philosopher of the fourth century B.C.E., and is generally credited as the founder of philosophy. He established the first school for training in philosophy, and he was one of the first proponents of teaching philosophy not as a set of truths about the world but as a method we might use to uncover the truth about "forms" – abstract concepts such as justice, beauty, and so forth that we cannot observe but which we use to guide our normative beliefs about the world around us.

Almost all of Plato's dialogues feature a character named Socrates. Socrates was a sort of a philosopher, but unlike Plato, he did not believe in writing down his arguments – he sought to engage others in dialogue, to think about the truths proposed by others and the principles that guided their lives. In the course of his questioning, Socrates acquired a number of followers – disciples, if you will, but not students, since Socrates did not claim to be teaching anything – who sought to emulate his approach. As a young man, Plato was one of these followers, and his dialogues purport to be a record of Socrates' claims.

The most important aspect of these dialogues is their critique of democracy or popular rule. The dialogues all take place at a time of great unrest within Athens. In the late fifth century BCE, a relatively stable Athenian democracy was overthrown as a consequence of military overreach, and Athens was for a time ruled by a small dictatorial group. Shortly before Socrates' death, democracy was reinstated, but this was a fragile democracy, one which frowned upon intellectual exploration of the sort Socrates practiced. Socrates was eventually put to death by this democratic government. Plato presents Socrates as someone who enjoyed the freedom of living in the Greek polis, but as someone who was an unstinting critic of democracy and of the ability of the people to rule.

We will be reading the dialogues sequentially – that is, in the order in which it is believed they were written. This is important because we will be able to trace the evolution of Plato’s arguments. You will need to keep in mind that the sequence of the dialogues does not correspond to Socrates’ life. The first four dialogues we will read – the *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*, and *Euthyphro* all take place in the days preceding Socrates’ death. There is some debate among political theorists as to the accuracy of Plato’s dialogues – that is, the extent to which they reflect what Socrates actually said and thought. Some have argued that the first few dialogues are truer to Socrates’ actual views, insofar as they were written closer to the time the discussions actually took place, and insofar as they describe events that were witnessed by many people. As Plato aged and as Socrates’ death receded into the past, the argument goes, Plato began to take liberties with Socrates’ words, to make the dialogues correspond more with Plato’s views and less with those of Socrates. We will be looking for inconsistencies in the dialogues, and we will keep the problem of the Socrates/Plato distinction in mind as we read.

We will not be reading the two longest dialogues, the *Republic* and the *Laws*. If you have taken my Roots of Political Theory course, you will have already gotten a chance to read the *Republic*. We’re not reading it here partially because if we were to do so it would consume much of the semester, and partially because I want to focus on Socrates’ method of argument here, and that method is best understood by reading the shorter dialogues. We will read one dialogue (and in a couple cases, two dialogues) per week. Each dialogue is an exploration of how we might define a particular term or prove a particular truth about the world. Focusing upon these “truths” one-by-one will give us a chance to do three things. We will get to think about the logic of Socrates’ argument, the extent to which his partners in discussion could have made better arguments against him, and the relevance of the basic claims in his arguments to contemporary affairs.

This will be a seminar-style course, although it is *not* a capstone seminar. What this means is that we will have the luxury of having extended discussions of each of these dialogues, and allowing our discussions to take us where they may. Each of you will get the opportunity to express your views on the dialogues and on the issues raised in the dialogues. The reading load for this class will be relatively light, but it will be imperative that you keep up with the reading and think a bit about it before class.

In many ways, Plato is the father of political theory. Virtually all prominent political theorists have had to grapple with the arguments made by Plato, to consider the merits of the approach he takes to establishing political “truths,” and to grapple with his critique of democratic government. I take it as a given that few of you will endorse Plato’s argument. A major goal of this course, however, is to help you appreciate the problems that have long been associated with democracy and to think about how they might be answered. Although this is certainly not a survey course, a second goal is that the class will serve as an introduction to what political theory is and to making normative claims about politics.

Readings

There is only one book for this course:

Plato, *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

There are several other volumes of Plato's complete dialogues available; you are welcome to use any version, or to track down the individual dialogues we will be reading. If you own a Kindle, the collected dialogues are available for only 99 cents in the Kindle version. Whatever version you use, make sure it has the Greek line numbers.

You may also find it advantageous to consult outside readings; I will recommend a few as the course goes on.

Requirements and Grading

Attendance and Participation. The most important requirement for this class is your attendance and participation. In order to succeed in this course, you must attend class and you must come prepared to discuss the readings. I will take attendance. I also reserve the right to request that you arrive in class with written questions on the readings. Class attendance and participation will account for ten percent of your grade.

Reaction Papers: Most weeks you will prepare a three-page reaction paper to the readings. The precise assignments will vary, but I will be primarily looking for three things: a critique of the logic behind Socrates' argument in the dialogue, a critique of the arguments made by Socrates' interlocutors, and/or a discussion of whether the particular definition sought in the dialogue has relevance to contemporary life. You will wind up writing ten of these; collectively, they will constitute fifty percent of your grade.

Class Presentation: I will designate one or two of you to lead discussion for each dialogue and to lead off with a presentation of your paper. In order to do this, you will need to provide me with a summary of your paper and your plan for organizing class discussion by early evening on Thursday. Your presentation will not be graded separately from your papers, but it will count as part of your participation – and no doubt your paper for that week will be strengthened by the fact that you will write it knowing that you will be using it to begin class discussion.

Other Assignments: I've inserted two assignments that are intended to be fun. First, for the class session of February 26, you will present a research proposal based on one of the dialogues. You will take a proposition in one of the early dialogues and explain how one would test it. Second, for the week of April 9, you will try your own hand at writing a dialogue and presenting it to the class. Each of these projects will be worth five percent of your grade.

Final Paper: You will also write a longer paper, due in early May. I expect that this will be roughly eight pages, and it may require some outside reading. Details will be provided midway through the semester. This paper will be worth thirty percent of your grade.

Class Support:

Because this is a small class, it is my hope that you will find your own participation in this class useful, stimulating, and interesting. I am available for questions, concerns, and comments by email or voicemail. I will have regular office hours and am happy to meet with students at other times as well. Please do not hesitate to offer suggestions on how to make this class a good experience for you or on issues you would like to see covered.

A Note on Web Resources: In writing your papers, you may be tempted to avail yourself of online resources – Sparknotes, Wikipedia, and the like. I cannot, of course, prevent you from doing this, and I did note above that I do encourage you to draw upon secondary sources if you are having trouble understanding the readings. None of the secondary sources you might find – especially these online summaries – will serve as adequate substitutes for doing the reading. The online summaries tend not to contain enough detail to aid you in discussing the works with your classmates, they generally do not provide the textual citations you will need in your essays, and they often do not clearly distinguish between the content of works we are reading in class and other writings by these authors. You will not be able to write good papers for the course if you rely on outside sources instead of the class readings. Besides, it will be apparent to me when I read your papers where the material has come from.

Academic Honesty: Finally, as you should be aware by now, the work you do in this course must be entirely your own. To be sure we all have the same understanding of academic integrity as it pertains to this course, here is what the Academic Advising *Blue Book* (p. 22) has to say on the subject:

Academic integrity is highly valued at Clark. Research, scholarship and teaching are possible only in an environment characterized by honesty and mutual trust. Academic integrity requires that your work be your own. Because of the damage that violations of academic integrity do to the intellectual climate of the University, they must be treated with the utmost seriousness and appropriate sanctions must be imposed. . . **Plagiarism** refers to the presentation of someone else's work as one's own, without proper citation of references and sources, whether or not the work has been previously published. Submitting work obtained from a professional term paper writer or company is plagiarism. Claims of ignorance about the rules of attribution, or of unintentional error are not a defense against a finding of plagiarism.

Suspected plagiarism cases will be referred to the Dean's office. If you are in doubt about whether you have provided adequate citation or used others' work properly, please talk with me before handing your paper in!

Schedule

January 22: Introduction to the Course

January 29: *Apology, Crito*

February 5: *Phaedo*

February 12: *Laches, Euthyphro*

February 19: *Lesser Hippias, Greater Hippias*

February 26: Research Plan Due

March 5: *Gorgias, Protagoras*

March 12: NO CLASS

March 19: *Meno*

March 26: *Phaedrus*

April 2: *Symposium*

April 9: Your Own Dialogue

April 16: *Theaetetus, Statesman*

April 23: NO CLASS

April 30: *Timaeus, Critias*

May x: Final Paper Due