

Plato's Metaphysics

Sean Driscoll

Course Description

What, really, is real? What is the nature of falsity (and truth)? How does causation work? Is the soul immortal? Was the universe created? Is it possible to speak about (or think of) non-being? Students blessed enough to be taking this class will investigate these and other metaphysical questions in Plato.

We will begin the course by discussing some of Plato's most cherished predecessors (Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides, and—of course—Socrates). We will then pay a great deal of attention to Plato's *Phaedo*, a dialogue where we can see Plato developing the metaphysics of each of these predecessors. Following this, we will turn to Plato's criticism of his own metaphysics in the *Parmenides*. And, finally, we will read a couple of dialogues where I think Plato proposes solutions to the problems raised in the *Parmenides* (the *Sophist* and the *Timaeus*). The last two days of the class will be dedicated to discussing influential modern philosophers who keep Plato's metaphysical legacy alive.

A quick note about myself: I teach a variety of courses, but my research is primarily on none other than western philosophy's most groundbreaking, brilliant, and enduring philosopher: Plato.

What will students accomplish by taking this course?

- (1) Students will learn to read Plato.
- (2) Students will gain an understanding of an appreciation for Plato's metaphysics.
- (3) Students will improve their ability to evaluate, analyze, and interpret complex arguments.

How will students accomplish each of these goals?

- (1) Students will accomplish the first goal by doing the assigned reading alongside my reading guides and assigned secondary literature. Of course, we will also be reading important passages together in class.
- (2) Students will accomplish the second goal by engaging in class. This means coming prepared to and being actively present in class. Early in the semester, we will design a set of engagement standards and I will evaluate your achievement of those standards in a personal interview at midterm and at the end of the semester.
- (3) Students will accomplish the third goal by writing a research paper (and by doing a several assignments which I have designed to prepare you for this feat).
- (4) Students will work toward all three of these goals by giving a presentation on one influential modern essay (I will select the essay and provide a detailed framework for the presentation).

Teaching Philosophy

I am dedicated to an “experiential” or “active” learning model—one in which real learning goes beyond mastery of concepts to higher-order skills like interpretation and analysis. Because of this, class time will not be used to “cover” everything that was in the day's

reading. Instead, it will be dedicated to solving problems, applying concepts, and evaluating Plato's arguments. Of course, I will spend some of our time in class explaining difficult concepts, but we will spend as much of our time in class as possible doing other learning activities—actively learning. This format will require a higher level of dedication, and perhaps it will at first be unfamiliar, but it will greatly improve your philosophical abilities.

Zoom Policy and Special Considerations

Because of the engagement required in this class, this is not a class that you can “sit in the back row”—even electronically. If you would like a class where you will be able to do other work simultaneously (your job, driving, laundry, etc.), please choose a different course. As you can see from the grading breakdown below, 40% of your grade will be based on engagement.

Because Zoom format is a new medium that we are all getting used to, let's work together to create a class climate that will promote everyone's learning. Among other things, please turn on your camera. This is a small, upper-division course, and your presence will strengthen our learning community. (Of course, there will be times when this may not be possible, but I hope you will help 'cameras-on' be the norm.) And when you do turn on your camera, try not to do anything distracting (using animated backgrounds, driving, playing games with your pet dog, etc.).

Finally, *classes will not be recorded*. This is because, as explained above, I want to use our class time to develop skills. Part of this requires risk and the open exchange of ideas—an exchange which might be dampened if students are worried that they are being recorded.

Communication Strategy

Because courses have been changed to online, it is important that you know that I am available to help and that I will do my best to respond quickly to your questions and concerns. You can reach me by email at sean_driscoll@byu.edu, and I will check it regularly (though please note that I am not Google, so I am unplugged on Sundays, when I have other meetings, and on most evenings). Please do not send messages through Learning Suite (or Twitter or carrier pigeon or whatever other platform you might have in mind); the best way to contact me is email.

I will also hold regular office hours. During this time, I will be available to talk one-on-one, and I will use Zoom's “waiting room” function for this (students will be admitted from the waiting room individually).

Required Texts:

Cooper, John M., and Douglas S. Hutchinson, eds. *Plato: complete works*. Hackett Publishing, 1997. **NB: This class will be engaged in textual analysis—you should plan to have your book in every class.

I will provide additional secondary readings.

Grading scale

| Grades | Percent |
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| A | 93% |
| A- | 90% |
| B+ | 87% |
| B | 83% |
| B- | 80% |
| C+ | 77% |
| C | 73% |
| C- | 70% |
| D+ | 67% |
| D | 63% |
| D- | 60% |
| E | 0% |

Grading breakdown

| Category | Weight |
|-------------------------|--------|
| Engagement evaluation | 40% |
| Article presentation | 20% |
| Final paper assignments | 40% |

University Honor Code

In keeping with the principles of the BYU Honor Code, students are expected to be honest in all of their academic work. Academic honesty means, most fundamentally, that any work you present as your own must in fact be your own work and not that of another. Violations of this principle may result in a failing grade in the course and additional disciplinary action by the university. Students are also expected to adhere to the Dress and Grooming Standards. Adherence demonstrates respect for yourself and others and ensures an effective learning and working environment. It is the university's expectation, and every instructor's expectation in class, that each student will abide by all Honor Code standards. Please call the Honor Code Office at 422-2847 if you have questions about those standards.

All course materials (e.g., outlines, handouts, syllabi, exams, quizzes, PowerPoint presentations, lectures, audio and video recordings, etc.) are proprietary. Students are prohibited from posting, distributing, or selling any such course materials without the express written permission of the professor teaching this course. Students are also prohibited from sharing links for online class lectures with others who are not registered for the course at BYU. The conduct described in this paragraph could be considered a violation of the Brigham Young University honor code, the Academic Honesty Policy, and potentially an infringement of federal copyright laws.

Preventing & Responding to Sexual Misconduct

In accordance with Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Brigham Young University prohibits unlawful sex discrimination against any participant in its education programs or activities. The university also prohibits sexual harassment-including sexual violence-committed by or against students, university employees, and visitors to campus. As outlined in university policy, sexual harassment, dating violence, domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking are considered forms of "Sexual Misconduct" prohibited by the university.

University policy requires all university employees in a teaching, managerial, or supervisory role to report all incidents of Sexual Misconduct that come to their attention in any way, including but not limited to face-to-face conversations, a written class assignment or paper, class discussion, email, text, or social media post. Incidents of Sexual Misconduct should be reported to the Title IX Coordinator at t9coordinator@byu.edu or (801) 422-8692. Reports may also be submitted through EthicsPoint at <https://titleix.byu.edu/report> or 1-888-238-1062 (24-hours a day).

BYU offers confidential resources for those affected by Sexual Misconduct, including the university's Victim Advocate, as well as a number of non-confidential resources and services that may be helpful. Additional information about Title IX, the university's Sexual Misconduct Policy, reporting requirements, and resources can be found at <http://titleix.byu.edu> or by contacting the university's Title IX Coordinator.

Student Disability

Brigham Young University is committed to providing a working and learning atmosphere that reasonably accommodates qualified persons with disabilities. A disability is a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Whether an impairment is substantially limiting depends on its nature and severity, its duration or expected duration, and its permanent or expected permanent or long-term impact. Examples include vision or hearing impairments, physical disabilities, chronic illnesses, emotional disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety), learning disorders, and attention disorders (e.g., ADHD). If you have a disability which impairs your ability to complete this course successfully, please contact the University Accessibility Center (UAC), 2170 WSC or 801-422-2767 to request a reasonable accommodation. The UAC can also assess students for learning, attention, and emotional concerns. If you feel you have been unlawfully discriminated against on the basis of disability, please contact the Equal Employment Office at 801-422-5895, D-285 ASB for help.

Plato's Metaphysics: Schedule

Unit 1: Plato's Predecessors

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| | |
| Monday, August 31 | Introduction to Platonic "Forms." |
| Wednesday, September 2 | Pythagoras |
| Friday, September 4 | Heraclitus |
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| Monday, September 7 | No Class; Labor Day |

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| Wednesday, September 9 | Parmenides |
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Unit 2: Plato's Socrates

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| Friday, September 11 | "What is it?" <i>Euthyphro</i> 2a-11a |
| Monday, September 14 | "What is it?" <i>Euthyphro</i> 11a-16a |
| Wednesday, September 16 | "No, really, <i>What is it?</i> " <i>Hippias Major</i> 281a-295a |
| Friday, September 18 | "No, really, <i>What is it?</i> " <i>Hippias Major</i> 295a-304e |
| Monday, September 21 | The virtues of definition: <i>Meno</i> 70a-79e. |
| Wednesday, September 23 | Recollection: <i>Meno</i> 80a-86c. |
| Friday, September 25 | Teaching and Knowing: <i>Meno</i> 86c-100c. R.M. Dancy, "Platonic Definitions and Forms." |

Unit 3: Platonic Forms

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| Monday, September 28 | Frames and Forms: <i>Phaedo</i> 57a-61d. |
| Wednesday, September 30 | Orphism, Death, and Invisible Forms: <i>Phaedo</i> 61d-69e. |
| Friday, October 2 | Immortality of the Soul: Contraries, Recollection, and Relativity: <i>Phaedo</i> 70a-78b. David Gallop, "Plato's 'Cyclical Argument' Recycled." |
| Monday, October 5 | The Affinity Argument: <i>Phaedo</i> 78b-80e. |
| Wednesday, October 7 | The Attunement Theory: <i>Phaedo</i> 81a-88e. |
| Friday, October 9 | Drama and Misology: <i>Phaedo</i> 88d-95a. |
| Monday, October 12 | Causation and Socrates' "Second Sailing": <i>Phaedo</i> 95a-102d. Gregory Vlastos, "Reason and Causes in the <i>Phaedo</i> " |
| Wednesday, October 14 | The Exclusion of Opposites: <i>Phaedo</i> 102d-107a. |
| Friday, October 16 | Myth and Death: <i>Phaedo</i> 107a-118a. |

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| Monday, October 19 | <i>Republic</i> , TBA |
| Wednesday, October 21 | <i>Republic</i> , TBA |
| Friday, October 23 | <i>Republic</i> , TBA |

Unit 4: Challenges to Platonic Forms

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| Monday, October 26 | Zeno's Paradox and the forms: <i>Parmenides</i> 126a-130a. |
| Wednesday, October 28 | The Problem of Extent: <i>Parmenides</i> 130a-134e (focus especially on 130a-e). |
| Friday, October 30 | Mereology—wholes and parts. <i>Parmenides</i> 131a-131e. S. Panagiotou, "The Day and Sail Analogies in Plato's <i>Parmenides</i> ." |
| Monday, November 2 | The "Third Man": <i>Parmenides</i> 132a-b. Gregory Vlastos, "The Third Man Argument in the <i>Parmenides</i> ." |
| Wednesday, November 4 | The problem with conceptualism: <i>Parmenides</i> 132b-c. Christoph Helmig, "Plato's Arguments Against Conceptualism. <i>Parmenides</i> 132b3-c11 Reconsidered." |
| Friday, November 6 | The likeness regress: <i>Parmenides</i> 132c-133a. Malcolm Schofield, "Likeness and Likenesses in the <i>Parmenides</i> ." |
| Monday, November 9 | The "Greatest Difficulty": <i>Parmenides</i> 133a-135c. Matthew Duncombe, "The Greatest Difficulty at <i>Parmenides</i> 133c-134e and Plato's Relative Terms." |

Unit 5: Rethinking the Forms

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| Wednesday, November 11 | Method and Metaphysics: <i>Sophist</i> 216a-236d. |
| Friday, November 13 | Puzzles about Being and Nonbeing: <i>Sophist</i> 236d-251a. |
| Monday, November 16 | The "Great Kinds": <i>Sophist</i> 251a-255c. A.R. Lacey, "Plato's <i>Sophist</i> and the Forms." |
| Wednesday, November 18 | Difference and Being: <i>Sophist</i> 255c-260a. |
| Friday, November 20 | Meaning, Truth, Affirmation, and their opposites: <i>Sophist</i> 260a-268d. Michael Frede, "Plato's <i>Sophist</i> on False Statements." |
| Monday, November 23 | The strange world of the <i>Timaeus</i> : <i>Timaeus</i> 17a-27d. |
| Tuesday , November 24 | Metaphysics redefined: <i>Timaeus</i> 27d-29d. |
| Wednesday, November 25 | No Class (Thanksgiving) |

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| Friday, November 27 | No Class (Thanksgiving) |
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| Monday, November 30 | Intellect: <i>Timaeus</i> 29d-47e. |
| Wednesday, December 2 | Necessity: <i>Timaeus</i> 47e-52d. |
| Friday, December 4 | More Necessity: <i>Timaeus</i> 52d-69a. |

Unit 6: Contemporary Platonism

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| Monday, December 7 | Gottlob Frege, "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry." |
| Wednesday, December 9 | Edmond Husserl, "The Origin of Geometry." |