

Plato's Form of the Good
Winter 2024

Seminar Information:

PHIL 210
Professor Shields
Lectures: M 4.00-6.50 in RWAC 472

Office Hours and Contact Information:

Office: Arts & Humanities Building 447
Office hours: W 14.00-15.00 and by appt.
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N.b. I prefer e-mail to telephone as a manner of student contact. I make an effort to answer student e-mails promptly, but please be aware that I measure promptness in this domain in days rather than hours or minutes.

Texts:

Required:

- There are no required texts for this seminar; I will, however, assume that you have ready access to a quality translation of Plato's collected works. Best for this purpose is:
 - *Plato, Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Hackett Pubs: 1997)
- An older, less accurate but comparatively charming set of translations is:
 - *Plato, The Collected Dialogues*, edd. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton University Press: 1962)

Recommended:

- Although we will range freely through Plato's dialogues, and will occasionally also dip our toes into Aristotle's criticisms of Plato's Form of the Good, our primary focus will be on Plato's *Republic*. There are many different sorts of translations of this work, some composed with the needs of those seeking serious philosophical engagement and some not. Several useful translations for our purposes, in no special order:
 - Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Hackett Pubs: 2004) (This has the advantage of availing itself of the most recent critical edition of the Greek text, by R. S. Slings.)
 - Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve 2nd ed. (Hackett Pubs: 1992)
 - Plato, *Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (Penguin: 2008)
 - Plato, *Republic*, trans., with introduction and notes, F. M. Cornford (Oxford University Press: 1951)
- For those with facility in Greek, still marvellous is:
 - Plato *Republic*, trans. with critical notes, commentary, and appendices, by James Adam (Cambridge University Press: 1897, 1902); repr. with a new introduction by D. A. Rees in 1963)
- For our occasional forays into Aristotle's criticisms, conducted in our current orientation mainly for such light as they may shed on Plato's conception of the Forms in general and on the Form of the Good in particular, it will be useful to have ready access to:
 - Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. with introduction, notes, and glossary, by T. Irwin, 3rd edition (Hackett Pubs.: 2019)
 - Aristotle, *The Complete Works* vols. 1 and 2, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton University Press: 1984)
- Two contemporary anthologies that I have found useful in thinking about some of the systematic issues to be assayed in this seminar:
 - Chang, Ruth, *Incommensurability, Incomparability and Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) (This deals primarily

with issues in commensurability, which are one way downstream for our purposes, but in another way not.)

- Rønnow-Rasmussen, T., and Zimmerman, M., *Recent work on Intrinsic Value* (Springer Verlag: 2005)
- It will be useful for you to have read and understood:
 - Moore, G. E., *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge University Press: 1903)

Requirements and Protocol:

Seminar participants will offer one seminar presentation and write one essay, in the neighborhood of 4,000-5,000 words. It is assumed, though not required, that your essay will grow out of your seminar presentation.

Due date for the essay: 15 March

Essay topics will be developed on an individual basis in conjunction with the seminar leader.

The essay is to be submitted electronically in a main-stream word-processing format or (if you use something non-standard) as .pdf documents, to the addresses given above. Papers will be accepted until 17.00 on the due date.

Attendance is expected at all seminar meetings.

Prospectus:

When asked to characterize the good in his *Republic*, Plato demurs (*Rep.* vi 506d-e): he risks appearing ridiculous he says, and so retreats to a multivalent analogy intended to relate his understanding of the Form of the Good and its relation to other Forms: the analogy of the sun (*Rep.* vi 508a-509c). Plato's response does not appear to be an instance of *ironeia*, or mock-modesty; nor is this a refusal spoken by a philosopher who shies away from tackling abstract analysis—after all, he has just somewhat brazenly offered his readers a precise and unblinking analysis of justice (*Rep.* iv 443c-444a). He has, in fact, been called upon to proceed to his account of goodness partly because he himself has insisted that we will never understand the benefit justice bestows upon us without also understanding the good (*Rep.* vi 505a). So, we may begin, at least, by accepting his reluctance to characterize the good at face value. A daunting task, he implies.

This does not mean that he offers nothing by way of characterizing the good. On the contrary, though perennially disputed as regards its implications regarding the nature of goodness, the analogy of the sun is carefully crafted in minute detail. It culminates, moreover, in an extraordinary declamation: 'The good,' says Plato, 'is not being, but is rather being in dignity in power' (*Rep.* vi 509b8-10). In a sense, this seminar is about this remarkable sentence. At any rate, from the instructor's point of view, we may deem the seminar a success if we have by its end arrived at a secure understanding and assessment of this claim. N.b. the 'assessment' here: we want to understand Plato, of course, but our ultimate purpose requires our determining whether we, ourselves, should accept and endorse Plato's metaphysics of goodness.

Making this determination will implicate us in the following topics, *inter alia*: the metaphysics of Forms; ideal vs. peculiar attributes of Forms; Forms and definitions; simplicity; universals and universality; perfect particularity; extensional equivalence and intensional priority; intrinsic and final value; univocity and multivocity; value monism vs. value pluralism; participation; and, above all, Platonic paradeigmatism.

As should perhaps already be clear to those surveying this list, this is in no sense a seminar in Plato's ethics or moral psychology. Although we will unavoidably touch upon issues in these areas, we will do so only when, and to the degree that, they inform our primary interest in Plato's axiology.