

PHIL GR9121

Location: PHIL 716

Time: Fall 2019, Monday 10:10-12pm

Office hours:

Plato's *Timaeus*

1. Course description

The seminar offers an introduction to one of Plato's later dialogues, the *Timaeus*. The *Timaeus* is Plato's main writing in physics broadly conceived, where this includes discussion of causes, the cosmos, soul, divinity, and human life. Plato has the main speaker—called Timaeus—announce that an account of the world takes a special form: it is an *eikos logos*, or in another formulation, an *eikos muthos*. Cosmology is a likely account of, and a likely story about, the making and workings of the cosmos.

Many specifics about the *Timaeus* are contested. Already ancient commentators disagree on what it means that in physics we can only offer a likely account. This question relates to a core idea in Plato's *Republic*, namely that the sense perceptible world has the status of “becoming.” As such, it is not the object of understanding. Relatedly, the *Timaeus* contains much-debated discussions of sense perception, properties in the sense perceptible world, and pleasure and pain. Regarding the *Timaeus*'s cosmology, it is contested how many causes Plato recognizes and how these causes co-cause the world. Candidates are: a maker-god called demiurge, reason/mind (*nous*), necessity, matter, and place/receptacle.

The seminar focuses on the *Timaeus*'s conceptions of causation, mind, soul, sense perception, matter, necessity, “making” of the cosmos, and the epistemic status of physics. At times, we explore Plato's proposals by looking at other texts, including selections from early Greek philosophy, Plato's *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Philebus*, Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and the Stoics. Weeks 1-3 are introductory: we cover classic selections on Being and Becoming, cosmology, and causation. Starting in Week 4, we focus on particular sections of the *Timaeus* as well as additional readings that help illuminate Plato's arguments.

We shall have two guest speakers. Papers and/or handouts are pre-circulated and students are expected to read the circulated material in advance. If you are opting to write two short papers, you are welcome to take one of these visits as an occasion to write a response paper. (Note: one of our guest speakers will visit in the Spring. Of course, there is no requirement to attend the Spring session. But students are cordially invited to do so, and I'll try to find a time slot that works for as many of seminar participants as possible.)

2. Requirements

We shall read the *Timaeus* in English. Knowledge of ancient Greek is not a prerequisite for the class; however, students who read ancient Greek are encouraged to use the Greek text.

E- and R-credit reading requirements:

For each class meeting, there is an assigned primary reading. All seminar participants are expected to read the primary text closely. For each seminar session, one or more secondary readings are recommended.

E-credit writing requirements:

Option 1: Two 5-7 page papers, each devoted to the analysis of a passage, one due Oct 30th by email and the other due Dec 20th by email.

Option 2: One 15-18 page paper, due Dec 20th by email. Please email me at the latest by Nov 13th to consult about the topic. Additionally, you are required to submit an outline and abstract by Nov 27 (both can be work-in-progress).

Topics for “analysis of a passage” papers will be announced by email or on the weekly handouts for class. These topics are intended as illustrative of the kind of paper I’m looking for. You’re free to write on other, similar topics. Either way, please run paper topics by me.

Required E-credit and optional R-credit contribution:

At least 6 times per semester, you should post a question or comment on our course website, at the latest 9am in the morning of the day the class meets. This can be very minimal: a question of clarification, a note about some passage you find puzzling or interesting, an observation about some detail; or it can be a bit more extensive: say, an interpretive proposal, response to a secondary reading, etc. It’s also OK to respond to other posts.

3. Week-by-Week Plan

Additional specifics about primary and secondary literature will be announced prior to each class meeting.

Week 1, 09/09: Being and Becoming

Primary Readings: *Timaeus* 27a2-29d6, *Protagoras* 339a-347a (on becoming or being virtuous), *Republic* 475e-480.

Secondary Readings: Dorothea Frede, “The Impossibility of Perfection: Socrates’ Criticism of Simonides’ Poem in the *Protagoras*,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 39 (1986): 729–53; Katja Maria Vogt, “Belief and Investigation in the *Republic*,” ch. 2 in *Belief and Truth* (OUP 2012).

Week 2, 09/16: Knowledge of Nature?

Primary Readings: *Timaeus* 27a2-29d6 (again), *Republic* 475e-480 (again) and Simile of the Line.

Secondary Readings: Myles Burnyeat, “Eikōs Mythos,” *Rizai* 2.2 (2005): 143–165; Sarah Broadie, *Nature and Divinity in Plato’s Timaeus*, Chapter 2 “Paradigms and Epistemic Possibilities,” 2012.

Week 3, 09/23: Causation

Primary readings: *Phaedo* 95c-99, *Republic* 507-509, *Philebus* 23c-31a.

Secondary readings: selections from Michael Frede, “The Original Notion of Cause,” in id., *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minnesota, 1996), 125-150; David Sedley, “Platonic Causes,” *Phronesis* 43 (1998).

Week 4, 09/30: The World—Body, Soul, Time

Primary Reading: *Timaeus* 30-39

Secondary reading: TBD

Week 5, 10/07: Jessica Moss on Being and Seeming

Guest speaker: Jessica Moss (NYU), “Being and Seeming: Plato’s Epistemology”

Commentators: Margaret Corn (Columbia University), Luke Lea (Columbia University)

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Week 6, 10/14: Good Gods

Primary Readings: *Euthyphro* (selections), *Republic* II (selections), *Timaeus* 17-26 and *Timaeus* 39e-42

Secondary Readings: David Sedley, “Becoming Like God’ in the *Timaeus* and Aristotle,” In T. Calvo & L. Brisson (eds.), *Interpreting the Timaeus-Critias*. pp. 327-39 (1997); David Sedley (2009) selection; Sarah Broadie (2012) selection; Katja Vogt, “Three Euthyphro Problems.”

Week 7, 10/21: Human Beings and Sense Perception

Primary Reading: *Timaeus* 42-47, *Phaedo* 65a-67b, *Republic* 523a-525

Secondary Readings: Broadie (2012), 84-90 on the place of mortality in the cosmos; Fletcher, E. (2016), “*Aisthēsis*, Reason and Appetite in the *Timaeus*,” *Phronesis* 61: 397-434.

Week 8, 10/28: Causes and Principles

Primary Readings: Plato, *Hippias Major*, 296e-279c, Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A; selections from Anaxagoras.

Secondary Readings: Stephen Menn, “The Aim and Argument of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*”; Patricia Curd, “Presocratic Philosophy,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/presocratics/>>.

NO CLASS

Week 9, 11/11: How Many Causes?—Reason, Necessity, the Receptacle

Primary Reading: *Timaeus* 47-52d

Secondary Reading: Mary Louise Gill, “Matter and Flux in Plato’s *Timaeus*,” *Phronesis* 32 (1987): 34–53; selection from T. K. Johansen, *Plato’s Natural Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Week 10, 11/18: Elements and the Physics-Mathematics Relation

Primary Readings: *Timaeus* 52d-61c, *Republic* 522c-530.

Verity Harte, “The Receptacle and the Primary Bodies: Something from Nothing?” In: *One Book, the Whole Universe: Plato’s Timaeus Today*, 2010; Müller, Ian, 2005. “Plato, Mathematics, and the Divine.”

Week 11, 11/25: Sense Perception, Pleasure and Pain

Primary Reading: *Timaeus* 61-71

Secondary Readings: Ian McCreedy-Flora, “Affect and Sensation: Plato’s Embodied Cognition,” *Phronesis* 63 (2018): 117-47; Jessica Moss, (2012), “Pictures and Passions in the *Timaeus* and *Philebus*” in Rachel Barney, Ted Brennan, and Charles Brittain (eds.), *Plato and the Divided Self* Oxford 2012, 259-80.

Week 12, 12/02: Human Body, Diseases, Body-Soul Relation

Primary Reading: *Timaeus* 72-90

Secondary Readings: TBA

Week 13, 12/09: Concluding Discussion

Additional meeting March 20, 2020 (everyone is cordially invited—attendance not required)

Klaus Corcilius (Tübingen), “Cosmological ethics and internal order in the *Timaeus*”

Commentators: Qian Cao (Columbia University), Jake Haagenon (Columbia University)

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4. Readings

Primary Texts—please make sure that you have access to one of these two editions

Donald J. Zeyl (trans.), Plato’s *Timaeus*. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000. [This translation is also included in Plato: Complete Works, ed. John Cooper, Hackett]

Plato: Complete Works. Ed. John Cooper. Hackett. [This is a large volume, not easy to carry around; but you’ll need access to other dialogues by Plato, and this is the edition I recommend for these purposes.]

Additional Primary Texts

Cornford, F. M., 1937, *Plato’s Cosmology*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; reprinted, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997. [Contains an influential commentary.]

Waterfield, R. (trans.), 2008, *Timaeus and Critias* (with introduction and notes by A. Gregory), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

A helpful introduction

Zeyl, Donald and Barbara Sattler, “Plato’s *Timaeus*,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/plato-timaeus/>>.

Secondary Literature

Additional secondary literature will be added throughout the semester.

Broadie, S., 2012, *Nature and Divinity in Plato’s Timaeus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Burnyeat, M. F., 1999, “Plato on Why Mathematics is Good for the Soul,” in *Mathematics and Necessity: Essays in the History of Philosophy*, Proceedings of the British Academy 103, T. Smiley (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—, 2005, “Eikōs Mythos,” *Rizai*, 2.2, 143–165.

Frede, M. “The Original Notion of Cause,” in id., *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minnesota, 1996), 125–150.

— “La Théologie Stoïcienne,” in G. Romeyer Dherbey and J.-B. Gourinat (eds.), *Les Stoïciens* (Paris, 2005), 213–232.

Carone, G. R., 2005, *Plato’s Cosmology and its Ethical Dimensions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fletcher, E., 2016, “Aisthesis, Reason and Appetite in the *Timaeus*,” *Phronesis*, 61: 397–434.

Frede, D., 1996, “The Philosophical Economy of Plato’s Psychology: Rationality and Common Concepts in the *Timaeus*,” in *Rationality in Greek Thought*, M. Frede and G. Striker (eds.), Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Gill, M. L., 1987, “Matter and Flux in Plato’s *Timaeus*,” *Phronesis* 32: 34–53.

Müller, Ian, 2005. “Plato, Mathematics, and the Divine.”

Mourelatos, A. P. D., 2009, “The Epistemological Section (29b–d) of the Proem in *Timaeus*’ Speech: M. F. Burnyeat on *eikōs mythos*, and Comparison with Xenophanes B34 and B35,” in *One Book, The Whole Universe: Plato’s Timaeus Today*, R. Mohr, K. Sanders and B. Sattler (eds.), Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing.

—, 2014, “The Conception of *eoikos/eikos* as Epistemic Standard in Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Plato’s *Timaeus*,” *Ancient Philosophy*, 34: 169–191.

Owen, G. E. L., 1965, “The Place of the *Timaeus* in Plato’s Dialogues,” *The Classical Quarterly* (New Series), 3 (1–2): 79–95; reprinted in *Studies in Plato’s Metaphysics*, R. E. Allen (ed.), London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965; and in *Logic, Science and Dialectic*, M. Nussbaum (ed.), Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

Sattler, B., 2012, “A Likely Account of Necessity, Plato’s Receptacle as a Physical and Metaphysical Basis of Space,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 50: 159–195.

Sedley, D., 1997, “‘Becoming Like God’ in the *Timaeus* and Aristotle,” in *Interpreting the Timaeus-Critias*, T. Calvo and L. Brisson (eds.), Sankt Augustin: Academia.

—, 1998, “Platonic Causes,” *Phronesis* (1998).

—, 2009, *Creationism and its Critics in Antiquity*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Strange, S. K., 1999, “The Double Explanation in the *Timaeus*,” in *Plato I: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, G. Fine (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

5. Academic Integrity and Honor Code

Please consult Columbia University's policies on academic integrity as well as Columbia's honor code:

<http://www.college.columbia.edu/academics/academicintegrity>

<https://www.college.columbia.edu/ccschonorcode>

<http://bulletin.columbia.edu/general-studies/undergraduates/academic-policies/academic-integrity-community-standards/>

These policies explain Columbia University's academic regulations and how you can safeguard the integrity of your original work. Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are serious offenses. Please take the time to familiarize yourself with the details of what constitutes plagiarism and academic dishonesty. You are expected to confirm to these policies in your academic work. It is important that you understand that academic dishonesty can lead to disciplinary action, including failure in the course and suspension, or even expulsion, from the University.

6. Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations, students must first be registered with Disability Services. More information on the Disability Services registration process is available online at www.health.columbia.edu/ods. Registered students must present an Accommodation Letter to the professor before an exam or other accommodations can be provided. Students who have, or think they may have, a disability are invited to contact Disability Services for a confidential discussion at (212) 854-2388 (Voice/TTY) or by email at disability@columbia.edu.