

**INTERPRETATIONS: PLATO**  
HUMS 221 / PLSC 288 / PHIL 380 / CLCV 321  
Yale University  
Spring 2022

**Course Information**

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**Time/Place:** MW 9-10:15, HQ Co1  
**Professor:** Daniel Schillinger  
**Email:** daniel.schillinger@yale.edu  
**Office:** HQ 162  
**Office Hours:** TTH 12:30-2:30 and by appointment

**Course Description and Objectives**

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Plato remains a canonical philosopher, if not *the* canonical philosopher. Many of us will have read the *Republic* and the *Apology*—perhaps more than once. And having done so, we may think we know, at least in part, how Plato wrote and what he thought. Socratic questioning, the so-called “theory of the forms,” utopian reflections on politics, doubts about democratic Athens: are these not recognizable elements of Platonic philosophy? Yet, the Platonic corpus is vast, varied, dizzyingly dialogic, and surprisingly self-referential. Do the dialogues hang together? How should we read Plato across the dialogues? What did Plato think, after all? Is it possible to say?

This “Interpretations” seminar arises out of these questions—not to mention the observation that many wonderful and rich Platonic dialogues, while central to the scholarship, are rarely taught at the undergraduate level. We will read the *Alcibiades I*, *Charmides*, *Protagoras*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Statesman*. Why these dialogues? Because they are simultaneously similar and different. These dialogues are similar insofar as they address a family of questions: can virtue be taught? How does wisdom inform ethical virtue? What do ambitious and erotic human beings really want? Is there an art of political rule? They also feature recurrent characters such as Socrates and Alcibiades. At the same time, these dialogues are so different that they have often been thought to represent different stages of Plato’s development—from his familiar “early” or “Socratic” period to his “late” period, in which Socrates recedes and the dialogues become almost univocal. Whatever the truth of this periodization thesis, these dialogues display the heterogeneity of Plato’s philosophical project.

By immersing ourselves in these texts, and by working through them in both conversation and writing, we will sharpen our capacities for textual analysis and interpretative argument. We will also engage with some secondary literature, paying special attention to critics who address methodological and literary questions about the Platonic dialogue and the demands placed by this form on the reader.

## **Required Texts**

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Please purchase a personal copy of the following text. Copies are available at the Yale University Bookstore. Alternatively, should you want to buy the book online, Powell's, Bookshop, Abe Books, and Book Depository are good options. All other readings will be posted to the course's Canvas site.

- 1) Plato. *Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997.

## **Course Expectations and Practices**

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By far the most important expectation and requirement for this course is that you read the assigned texts carefully and prior to class. You should expect to read for three hours, and perhaps for much longer, in preparation for each session. Read and read again! Take notes! In this course, the only way out is through—through the text with pen in hand. You should also strive to attend every session. There are no excused absences except in the event of a documented illness or emergency. Most importantly, during class, please try to discuss the texts and to engage with your classmates in a spirit of questioning, openness, and friendship. This seminar hinges on your conversation, careful study, and attention. Students who read carefully and participate enthusiastically will have every chance of success. For my part, I promise to be flexible, open, and available, especially in light of the pandemic. Please don't hesitate to talk to me or email me about anything related to the course.

## **Marking Scheme**

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1) Paper 1 (8 pages due Fri., Feb. 11)	20 %
2) Paper 2 (8 pages, due Fri., Mar. 11)	20 %
3) Paper 3 (8 pages, due Fri., Apr. 15)	20 %
4) Final Exam	20 %
5) Attendance and Participation	20 %

## **Essays and Assessment Criteria**

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Each essay that you write for this course should satisfy the following criteria:

- 1) The essay directly responds to a prompt or question.
- 2) The essay contains a clear yet appropriately complex argument.
- 3) The essay displays careful engagement with relevant texts, ideas, and questions.
- 4) The essay eschews basic errors and achieves a polished writing style.

The third criterion is most important. Even so, “A” essays will satisfy each criterion listed above by exhibiting mastery of both the texts and of the elements of the academic essay. “B” essays will fall short of mastery while attaining competence. “C” essays will satisfy these criteria to a minimal extent. “D” essays will not meet these criteria, though they will suggest some effort. “F” essays will suggest an unacceptable lack of engagement and effort. In addition, essays should be double-spaced, written in 12 pt. font, and formatted according to an accepted style of citation.

With each essay assignment, I will offer more specific advice and encourage you to involve me in your writing process, if you think that doing so would help you. I would be very glad to talk through your ideas, look at an outline, or read a draft.

## **Participation**

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Participation in class discussion is crucial. While participation should be consistent and energetic, it will be graded on its judiciousness and quality. I will sometimes circulate discussion questions before class meetings. Use these questions to guide your reading and to prepare to contribute to the conversation. As a part of your participation in the course, you will sometimes be asked to initiate and guide the conversation by composing your own discussion questions.

## **Extensions and Lateness**

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No extensions will be permitted in the absence of official documentation of a serious illness or an emergency submitted to me prior to the deadline. Late papers will be penalized one quarter letter grade for each day late. To be clear, a late paper that would have received an A- will receive a B+ if it is one day late, a B if it is two days late, and so on. If you anticipate that you will find it difficult to complete an assignment on time, please talk to me as soon as possible.

## **Honor System and Academic Integrity**

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I am serious about promoting academic integrity in this course; any kind of unauthorized assistance will not be tolerated. Please consult the definition of academic integrity in the Yale University Student Handbook. Of course, if you have questions about academic integrity, please ask me.

## **Accessibility and Religious Observance**

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I am committed to accessible and inclusive learning. Students with a Disability Accommodation Notice should contact me as early in the semester as possible to discuss arrangements for completing course assignments and exams. If you will need accommodation for religious observance, please also notify me right away.

## **Provisional Schedule of Readings**

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**CLASSES 1-3:** *Alcibiades I*

**CLASSES 4-6:** *Charmides*

**CLASSES 7-11:** *Protagoras*

**CLASSES 12-16:** *Symposium*

**CLASSES 17-21:** *Phaedrus*

**CLASSES 22-26:** *Statesman*