384-01H Topics in Ancient Philosophy: Plato's Philebus

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Overview:

This seminar will pursue a close reading of Plato's *Philebus*. This dialogue explores in depth the most fundamental and urgent question that any human being can ask himself: what is the best life that I can live? Taking up a suggestion from the *Republic*, Plato considers the relative importance of pleasure and wisdom in the good life, and in the course of this examination he explores topics ranging from hedonism to the structure of being, from the best method to gain knowledge to the psychology of malice. In the course of reading this dialogue we will also consider some major themes in Platonic philosophy in comparison to other dialogues, reflect on the importance of philosophy itself, and, perhaps most importantly, think about how we ourselves can live the good life.

Course Objectives:

By the conclusion of this course you should be able to:

1) Reflect thoughtfully on the questions, arguments, and theories that our readings put forward.
2) Articulate your considered thoughts on these questions, arguments, and theories clearly and precisely, both in the writing assignments and in class discussion.
3) Compare the ideas raised in the dialogues with each other, with those of other thinkers, with the interpretations found in the secondary literature, and with your own views.
4) Apply the insights you have gained to your own life and to our own time and place.

Requirements:

1. Reading

Reading is the foundation of the course. Consequently, it is extremely important that you read carefully and consistently before every class. Page assignments vary significantly from week to week. They are sometimes short, but the material is often dense and difficult, so I recommend devoting a substantial amount of time to read, re-read, and take notes on the assigned material. Please see the end of the syllabus for the tentative reading schedule.

*Note:* Since this seminar meets only once a week, it is particularly important not to fall behind on the reading or other assignments. Do the work whenever your schedule allows, even if that is several days before the class meets. Ideally you will be able to do most of it on Tuesday and Wednesday, so that the material is fresh when you come to class, but if not, do at least review the material shortly before the class meets.
We will read the entirety of Plato’s *Philebus*. I will provide the translation, with notes and commentary included. We will also read numerous passages from other Platonic dialogues by way of comparison. I will provide those passages as well. In addition, there will be a research component to the course (see below), which will require that you read some of the secondary literature on the *Philebus*. Secondary materials will be available either online, at Xavier’s library, or through the OhioLINK or ILLiad distribution services.

2. **Writing**

   **Journals:** Throughout the semester you will keep a journal on Canvas, with one entry of 1-2 pages due each week. The purpose of the journal is to encourage you to think through the material as you read it, so that you will understand and appreciate it better and be better prepared for class discussion. For each entry, you should comment on some aspect of the reading that you found interesting, questionable, or problematic. Don’t try to write about the reading as a whole. You may explore a question that you have about the text (or that the text itself raises), advance a line of criticism, develop a possible interpretation, compare an idea from the text to something outside the text, or write in a more creative vein inspired by the material. Whatever you do, I want to see evidence of your active thinking in relation to the reading. I do NOT want to read mere summaries of the material; those are boring for me to read and for you to write. And unless I say otherwise, you MUST write in relation to the reading; don’t just toss out your opinions or make only very vague connections to the text. Sometimes I may ask you to write on a specific issue or question; if not, you may write on anything you like from the assigned material. Entries must be submitted before the beginning of class to receive credit. Each entry will be graded according to four criteria: thoughtfulness, thoroughness, understanding of material, and clarity. In addition, all entries will be viewable by your classmates; this will provide an opportunity for you to learn from each other. To encourage you to take advantage of this opportunity, you may earn additional points on your weekly entry (between .05 and .2) if you offer substantive comments to a fellow classmate’s entry before the following class.

   **Research Paper:** Your final assignment will be a thesis-driven research paper of 10-12 pages due on Canvas by the end of the day one week after the last day of class (May 7th, 11:59 PM). The paper may address any themes from the *Philebus* and other texts that we read. At least two outside sources (other than Plato) must be consulted and cited in the paper. These sources must be either philosophers or scholars writing about the dialogues and themes you are addressing. Wikipedia and Sparknotes (and other such sources) are not acceptable; you may consult and cite reference works like the Stanford and Internet encyclopedias of philosophy (plato.stanford.edu and www.iep.utm.edu), but neither counts as one of the required sources. Late papers will be penalized a full letter grade per day late (i.e. per every 24 hours following the deadline), and short papers will be penalized a partial letter grade per page short (i.e. anything less than a full page; 9 1/2 pages are not 10 pages).

3. **Presentations**

   Twice during the semester each student will be responsible for giving a presentation and leading the subsequent discussion. I’ll pass around a sign-up sheet with available dates on the first day. There should be three main elements to your presentation: 1) Summarize key points from the readings that you want to highlight; 2) Pose one or two important questions that arise from these points; 3) Address the question(s) you raised by analyzing the issues at stake in them in the context in which they arise. This means you must engage with the issues in the context of our readings, and so must not simply state your own opinions and ideas, though these may certainly be involved. The presentations should last 10-15 minutes, after which I will expect you to answer questions from your fellow students as well as from me. Then I’ll open the floor to general discussion of the issues you have raised. You will be responsible for leading this discussion for at least another 10-15 minutes. Your journal on this day may serve as the basis of your presentation, but should not simply repeat it verbatim. Your presentation may be fully written out or based on an outline, but either way I would prefer that you not simply read your entire presentation. That tends to result in a wooden and detached recitation, lack of eye contact, and a generally uninteresting delivery. Your grade will be based on the substance of your prepared work as well as the clarity, fluidity, and persuasiveness of
your presentation of it, including your answering of questions and participation in the following discussion. I will average the grades of your two presentations.

4. Participation

Philosophy depends on active participation in dialogue. Particularly in a small seminar, it is important that everyone make an active contribution to the class. Consequently, class participation makes up a significant percentage of your final grade. Participation generally consists of asking and answering questions, making comments, and at the very least appearing interested and engaged in what is being said by others. On Canvas I will post up a document spelling out my standards for class participation and explaining the grading of the extra participation options mentioned below. I will assign a provisional participation grade halfway through the semester based on three main criteria: quantity (how much and how often you are participating), quality (the insightfulness and helpfulness of your remarks), and engagement (your demonstration of attention, interest, and responsiveness to the material). I will take improvement into account in determining your final participation grade.

Extra participation credit: While your participation grade will be primarily determined by your contribution to class discussion, you may also improve this grade through the following activities:

1) Talk with me about the class material (that means the actual content of our reading and discussion, not particular assignments, your grade, or other matters) for at least 15 minutes in office hours.
2) Attend any E/RS lecture or other pre-approved philosophy event and write a 1-2 page report summarizing and commenting on the event. You must turn this in by the following class.
3) Take part in a reading group on the Philebus in Greek that will resume meetings this semester. This group usually meets once a week for an hour or two. I’ll give you more information about this in class.
4) Volunteer to peer review a classmate’s research paper draft. I will say more about this option closer to the end of the semester.

Attendance: Attendance is particularly important in this class since we meet only once a week. Failure to attend class will result in penalties applied to the class participation portion of your final grade (see below). If you miss more than one class, I will begin deducting a partial letter grade for each additional absence from that portion of your grade. So if you miss 3 classes, a B will be reduced to a B-, at 4 it becomes a C+, and so on. I will not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences, but I will give you the opportunity to make up an absence. If you want to make up an absence, you will need to come talk to me about the class material AND write a two-page paper about the material for that class; this is in addition to your required journal entry and cannot simply repeat what you say there (or vice-versa). However, any student who misses 4 or more classes (i.e., 4 weeks and more than ¼ of the total) for any reason will automatically fail the course (or be asked to withdraw). I reserve the right to start counting lateness to class as absence if it becomes chronic. If you arrive after I check attendance, it is your responsibility to make sure I don’t count you as absent.

5. Protocols

Twice during the semester I will ask each of you to compose and present a “protocol,” which is a detailed summary of the previous seminar. This will involve jotting down key points from that day’s class, writing them up into a form fit for class presentation, and then presenting them at the beginning of the next class. After the presentation the note-taker will be responsible for taking questions from me and from the class about any points raised in the protocol. That report should be emailed to me before the beginning of class; I will post it to Canvas, where everyone in the class will be able to read it. It is not necessary to follow a standard format—detailed outlines are fine, as are fully written out reports—but do be sure to include at the top your name as well as the date of the class you are reviewing. Protocols will be assessed based on their thoroughness, accuracy, and clarity, as modified by the effectiveness of the note-taker at presenting them and responding to questions. I will average the grades of your two protocols.
**Grading:**

- Journals: 25%
- Research Paper: 25%
- Presentations: 20%
- Participation: 20%
- Protocols: 10%

*Note:* I use the 4 point grading scale (the same one used for your GPA). On that scale 4=A, 3.67=A-, 3.33=B+, 3=B, 2.67=B-, 2.33=C+, 2=C, 1.67=C-, etc. Some grades may fall in between two of these numbers, in which case I will indicate your letter grade as falling in between the two. I will not round up or down until I calculate your final grades. At that point I will round up or down to the nearest letter grade mark (e.g. a 3.17 becomes a B+, a 3.16 becomes a B). However, in borderline cases I will take into account your overall effort and commitment, as well as your improvement over the course of the semester.

**Academic Conduct:**

Academic dishonesty of any sort will not be tolerated. Most serious is plagiarism. If you turn in work that is not your own in any way—for example, copied in whole or part from another student, from secondary texts, from the Internet (this includes SparkNotes), etc.—it will receive no credit, and will be reported to the Dean’s Office. A second offense will result in expulsion from the course. Note that I will be checking for plagiarism. Plagiarism aside, in both your written work and class discussion, it is very important that you be honest: about what you don’t understand, about what you like or don’t like, about questions or problems you may have, and about your ideas and opinions.

**Reading Schedule:**

1. **Week 1 (1/15):** *Phileb.* 11a-14b  
   - The Good as Pleasure or Wisdom: *Rep.* 504e-506e (1125-27)  
   - Hedonism: *Gorg.* 491d-495c (835-38)  
   - Eristical Argument: *Rep.* 537e-539c (1152-54), *Soph.* 251a-c (273)

2. **Week 2 (1/22):** *Phileb.* 14c-16b  
   - One and Many: *Parm.* 129a-130a (362-4), *Theae.* 201d-208b (223-31), *Soph.* 243d-245e (264-67)  

3. **Week 3 (1/29):** *Phileb.* 16b-18d  

4. **Week 4 (2/5):** *Phileb.* 18d-20c  
   - Aporia: *Rep.* 350d-e (994), *Meno* 80a-b  
   - Second Sailing: *Phaedo* 99d (86)

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1 Subject to change over the course of the semester.
Week 5 (2/12):  
Phileb. 20c-23b

Week 6 (2/19):  
Phileb. 23b-27c
Four kinds: Tim. 27e-30c, 47e-52d (1234-36, 1250-55), Stat. 283d-285c (326-8)

Week 7 (2/26):  
Phileb. 28c-31b

Week 8 (3/12):  
Phileb. 31b-36c
Definition of Kinds of Pleasure: Phaed. 60b, 64d-69e, 82b-84b (52, 56-60, 92-3), Tim. 64a-65b (1266-7), Rep. 580d-587a (1188-94)
Perception: Theae. 151d-160e, 184b-186e (168-79, 203-06)
Desire: Symp. 201d-212c (489-94), Phaedr. 246a-257b (524-33)

Week 9 (3/19):  
Phileb. 36c-44b
False Pleasures: Prot. 351b-358b (781-6)
False Judgment: Theae. 187b-195b (207-16) [or to 201c, p. 223]
Flux: Theae. 179d-183c (198-203), Rep. 583c-584a

Week 10 (3/26):  
Phileb. 44b-50d
Excessive Pleasure: Tim. 86b-87b (1285-6), Gorg. 491d-495c (835-38)
Tragedy/Comedy: Apol. 33c, Rep. 393c-398b (1030-35), 595a-608b (1199-1212), Laws 816d-817e (1483-4)

Week 11 (4/2):  
Phileb. 50d-55c
Pure Pleasures: Tim. 65a-b, Rep. 584b (1192)
Being/Becoming: Rep. 475e-480a, 507e-521b, 531d-535a (1102-7, 1127-38, 1147-50), Tim. 27e-30c, 47e-52d (1234-36, 1250-55)
Last Argument: Gorg. 497e-499b (841-43)

Week 12 (4/9):  
Phileb. 55c-59d
Knowledge/Education: Rep. 521e-534e (1138-1150)
Dialectic: Rep. 531d-535a (1147-50)
Rhetoric: Gorg. 447a-466a (792-809)

Week 13 (4/16):  
Phileb. 59d-64a
Necessary Pleasures: Rep. 558d-559d, 581d-e (1169-70, 1189)

Week 14 (4/23):  
Phileb. 64a-67b
Idea of the Good: Rep. 504e-509c (1125-1130)

Week 15 (4/30):  Conclusion