The World of Plato
Georgetown University Liberal Studies Program

Tuesday Evenings, 6:30-9:15

Ori Z Soltes
solteso@georgetown.edu

This course will begin by briefly considering the birth of philosophy in the emerging Greek world and by tracing the development of Western philosophy from Thales to Socrates. Socrates offers new ideas and new questions to Greek thought, arrived at by way of a methodology that placed heavy emphasis on dialogue, discussion and debate. He never wrote down a word of what he discussed over the decades. His pupil, Plato, ended up doing that, and Plato’s Academy—the first ivory tower—became renowned as an institution where all kinds of issues and ideas could be discussed without fear of offending those politically and socio-economically powerful enough to punish one for the offence. Thus with Plato as our guide, we will be asking three essential questions: what are these philosophers asking, how do their questions change ground over time, and what are the sorts of answers to which they arrive. We will end up at the threshold of Plato's pre-eminent pupil, Aristotle and his competing school, the Lyceum.

The changing contexts of philosophical inquiry from the pre-Socratics to Socrates and Plato to Aristotle and the Hellenistic thinker who follow him are in part related to the changing shape of the Greek world. Thus subsidiary aspects of our discussions will include the issue of the relationship of the Greek world to the worlds of Egypt and Mesopotamia; the relationship of Greek philosophy to Greek non-philosophical writing; the rise of Athens as a center among diverse centers of thought; and the legacy of Greek thought within the wider world encompassed by Alexander the Great toward the end of the 4th century BCE—a legacy inherited and carried forward by Rome and ultimately to ourselves.

Grades will be determined by a mid-term and final exam. Both are take-home essays of ca 10-12 pp in length.

Jan 19: What is philosophy and where does it fit into thought that includes myth and religion? From the Egyptians and Mesopotamians to Thales, Anaximenes and Anaximander to Parmenides and Heraclitus.


Feb 16: The Nature of Socrates: Plato's Symposium and Xenophon's Symposium

Feb 23: Love and Friendship: The Lysis and the Phaedrus.
Mar 1: Plato on His Own? The Mind and the State: the Republic. (session 1)

Midterms due on Mar 1

Mar 15: Plato on Education and Art: The Republic (session 2)

Mar 22: What Can We Know and How Do We Learn? The Meno.

Mar 29: The attempt to Create a Philosopher-King: Epistle #7

April 5: How Do We Legislate for the Future without a Philosopher-King? The Laws.

Apr 12: The Problem of Language: Philebus and Cratylus.

Apr 19: Epilogues: From Socrates and Plato to Aristotle and the Hellenistic World.

April 26: From Antiquity to the Present: Conclusions and Implications from Plato to Us

Honor system. MALS and DLS students are responsible for upholding the Georgetown University Honor System and adhering to the academic standards included in the Honor Code Pledge stated below:

In the pursuit of the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life, I commit myself to respect and uphold the Georgetown University Honor System: To be honest in any academic endeavor; and to conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community, as we live and work together.

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