

# Phil 770: Seminar in a Classical Author – Socrates

Prof. Jeremy Reid

## Course and Contact Information

Meeting times: M 4:00pm–6:45pm

Location: Humanities 374

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Office hours: By appointment

## Course description

This seminar on a classical author will be on somebody who is not an author: Socrates. Despite not writing anything, Socrates played an important role in establishing what philosophy is and how it should be done. In addition, Socrates himself seems to have been a kind of exemplar for many who admired him, demonstrating by his character and way of life what virtue and happiness are.

In this seminar, we will explore the main accounts of Socrates from our ancient sources, comparing how he is portrayed and used by Plato, Xenophon, Aristophanes, Diogenes Laertius, and Aristotle. Though it is impossible to divide cleanly the historical Socrates from how he gets used as a character in others' writings, we will do our best to paint an accurate portrait of Socrates as a person and thinker. In particular, we will consider Socratic views about virtue, whether virtue is teachable, the primacy of virtue as a value, the relationship between virtue, knowledge, and goodness, the role of the teacher or fellow inquirer, the motivational force of *erōs* and the love of beauty in philosophy, whether death is to be feared, and what Socrates' criticisms of his own society and its prominent citizens were. Along the way, we will also consider issues of chronology in the Platonic corpus and the role of the dialogue form in philosophy.

Readings for this course include Aristophanes' *Clouds*; Xenophon's *Symposium*, *Apology*, and *Memorabilia*; and Plato's *Apology*, *Euthyphro*, *Euthydemus*, *Meno*, *Ion*, *Hippias Minor*, *Gorgias*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Lysis*, *Symposium*, *Protagoras*, and *Phaedo*. Though we will (of course) read a lot, most of the readings for this course are light and entertaining, and I hope this course will be a good entry point for students to see why many have considered Socrates an inspiring person and thinker.

## Assessment

50% Weekly Writing Assignments, due **Mondays by noon** at the latest; no extensions.

50% Final paper (5000–8000 words), due **Fri May 26, at 11:59pm**.

There are 14 writing assignments across the semester. I will take the grades for the highest 10, and drop the lowest 4. Aspire to keep your writing assignment to one page. Cite extensively.

## Texts

All texts for this class are provided as pdfs. But I would *very strongly* encourage you to buy the following two editions for this class (Amazon links are for reference only; you are welcome to use other suppliers):

[Plato, \*Complete Works\*](#) (edited by John Cooper, 1997)

[Xenophon, \*Conversations of Socrates\*](#) (trans. Robin Waterfield, 1990)

If you are interested in Hellenistic philosophy, at some point you will certainly need to get: [Diogenes Laertius, \*Lives of the Eminent Philosophers\*](#) (trans. Pamela Mensch, Oxford University Press 2020; it has *very* helpful notes—and pictures!)

If you're really dedicated, we're going to be reading a lot from the following texts (and they will surely be helpful for your final paper research), but they are only gently recommended:

Morrison (ed.), [The Cambridge Companion to Socrates](#)

Ahbel-Rappe & Kamtekar (eds.), [The Companion to Socrates](#)

## Schedule of readings and writing assignments

+ means recommended but not required. Students who are serious about studying ancient philosophy or who want to continue onto PhD programs should do all the readings.

1. Jan 30

Dorion, "The Rise and Fall of the Socratic Problem", in Morrison (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*.

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, Book 2, "Socrates";

+ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, Book 2, "Xenophon, Aeschines, Aristippus, Phaedo".

### [No writing assignment for week 1]

2. Feb 6

Aristophanes, *Clouds*;

Smith, "Aristotle on Socrates", in Stavru & Moore (eds.) *Socrates and the Socratic Dialogue*;

+ Konstan, "Socrates in Aristophanes' *Clouds*" in Morrison (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*.

**Writing assignment:** What are the discrepancies between how Aristophanes, Diogenes Laertius, and Aristotle portray Socrates?

3. Feb 13

Xenophon, *Apology* (= "Socrates' Defense")

Xenophon, *Symposium* (= "The Dinner-Party");

+ O'Connor, "Xenophon and the Envious Life of Socrates" in Morrison (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*.

+ Danzig, "Xenophon's *Symposium*" in Flower (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Xenophon*.

**Writing assignment:** Xenophon (unlike Plato) often explicitly tells us what he is trying to do in his writings. What does Xenophon tell us about Socrates in his own voice?<sup>1</sup>

4. Feb 20

Xenophon, *Memorabilia* (= "Memoirs of Socrates"), Books 1–2;

+ Ober, "Socrates and Democratic Athens", in Morrison (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*.

**Writing assignment:** *Memorabilia* Book 1, chapters 1–2, is Xenophon's defense of Socrates against the charges brought against him in court. Concisely summarize why Xenophon does not think Socrates is guilty of each of the charges.

5. Feb 27

Xenophon, *Memorabilia* (= "Memoirs of Socrates"), Books 3–4;

+ Dorion, "Xenophon's Socrates" in Ahbel-Rappe & Kamtekar (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Socrates*.

**Writing assignment:** One of my graduate students has recently hypothesized that Xenophon cared much more about how Socrates *acted* rather than what Socrates *argued*. Is this hypothesis correct? What do you think the relation is between argument and action in Xenophon?

6. Mar 6

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, Book 3, "Plato";

Annas, *Plato: A Very Short Introduction*, chapters 1–3;

Kahn, "On Platonic Chronology";

Annas, "What are Plato's Middle Dialogues in the Middle of?"

**Writing assignment:** Many scholars have attempted to distinguish three different philosophical projects in the Platonic dialogues: (a) Socrates' *ad hominem* criticisms of the views of others; (b) Plato's presentation of Socrates' positive views; (c) Plato's presentation of his own positive views (often—but not always—with Socrates acting as a 'mouthpiece'). Drawing from Annas, explain why trying to divide up the Platonic dialogues on the basis of these categories is unlikely to be fruitful.

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<sup>1</sup> Annoyingly, the translation of Xenophon I want to use for this class does not have section numbers. For the writing assignments on Xenophon it is ok if you cite by section and page (e.g. *Memorabilia* II.6, p. 119), but if you use Xenophon for your final paper, please use the section numbers, as is scholarly practice. You can find another translation with clear section and subsection numbers online at [perseus.tufts.edu](http://perseus.tufts.edu) (e.g. search "Perseus Xenophon Symposium").

7. Mar 13

Plato, *Apology*;

Plato, *Euthyphro*;

Burnyeat, "The Impiety of Socrates";

+ Nails, "The Trial and Death of Socrates", in Ahbel-Rappe & Kamtekar (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Socrates*.

**Writing assignment:** On p. 69n1 of our edition of the *Memorabilia* the editor says that Xenophon "misses the point" about the religious charges Socrates was found guilty of. On the basis of Burnyeat's arguments and how Socrates is portrayed in each *Apology* we read, do you think Socrates was guilty of impiety? Did Plato and Xenophon "miss the point"?

[Spring Break – No Class Mar 20]

8. Mar 27

Plato, *Euthydemus*;

Plato, *Meno*;

+ Brown, "Socrates in the Stoa", in Ahbel-Rappe & Kamtekar (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Socrates*

+ Fine, "Inquiry in the *Meno*", in Kraut (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*.

**Writing assignment:** The twins in the *Euthydemus* vividly portray a kind of argumentation (called 'eristic') that seems different from how Socrates argues. What are the main differences? Are there any important similarities?

9. Apr 3

Plato, *Ion*;

Plato, *Hippias Minor*;

+ Baltzly, "Plato and the New Rhapsody";

+ Callard, "Being Good at Being Bad: Plato's *Hippias Minor*", in Kraut (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*.

**Writing assignment:** Plato is often said to be deeply opposed to *poetry*, but arguably his beef is with *poets*. On the basis of the readings for this week, weigh in on this debate.

10. Apr 10

Plato, *Gorgias*

+ Moss, "The Doctor and the Pastry Chef"

+ Moss, "Shame, Pleasure, and the Divided Soul"

+ Kamtekar, "The Profession of Friendship – Callicles, Democratic Politics and Rhetorical Education in Plato's *Gorgias*"

**Writing assignment:** [Write on whatever you found interesting or puzzling in Plato's text this week. Make sure you stay grounded in what Plato writes though—i.e. your assignment should have plenty of citations.]

11. Apr 17

Plato, *Laches*;

Plato, *Charmides*;

Nails, *The People of Plato*, "Charmides" (pp. 90–94), "Critias" (pp. 108–113), "Laches" (pp. 180–182), "Nicias" (pp. 212–215).

+ Kamtekar, "The Politics of Plato's Socrates", in Ahbel-Rappe & Kamtekar (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Socrates*.

+ Hobbs, "Arms and the man: *andreia* in the *Laches*", from *Plato and the Hero*.

**Writing assignment:** Considering the historical significance of the people to whom Socrates speaks in these dialogues, why might Plato have chosen to have Socrates talk to Nicias about courage and Critias about moderation? Why might these dialogue end in *aporia* given that Plato is perfectly happy to define courage and moderation elsewhere (e.g. *Republic* 442b–c)?

12. Apr 24

Plato, *Lysis*;

Plato, *Symposium* (up to the end of Aristophanes' speech)

+ Annas, "Plato and Aristotle on Friendship and Altruism".

+ Reid, "Unfamiliar Voices: Harmonizing the non-Socratic Speeches and Plato's Psychology".

**Writing assignment:** The *Lysis* is my least favorite Platonic dialogue, in large part because I don't get what Plato is trying to do. What are some important philosophical moves or important arguments or important points you see Socrates making in this dialogue?

13. May 1

Plato, *Symposium* (Agathon's speech to the end);

Plato, *Menexenus*;

+ Nehamas, "Only in the Contemplation of Beauty is Human Life Worth Living";

+ Nussbaum, "The Speech of Alcibiades";

+ Carone, "The Virtues of Platonic Love".

**Writing assignment:** Often when Socrates gives a long speech, he said he learned the speech from somebody else. Why might this be significant? Is it significant that in the *Menexenus* and *Symposium* these people are women?

14. May 8

Plato, *Protagoras*;

+ Shaw, chapter three "Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Protagoras*", from *Plato's Anti-hedonism and the Protagoras*;

+ Woodruff, "Socrates Among the Sophists" in Ahbel-Rappe & Kamtekar (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Socrates*.

**Writing assignment:** Reconstructing the argument in the text, show how Protagoras attempts to respond to Socrates' concerns about the teachability of virtue in his "Great Speech" (320d–328d).

15. May 15

Plato, *Phaedo*;

Gill, "The Death of Socrates";

+ Baima, "Death and the Limits of Truth in the *Phaedo*".

+ Vasilou, "From the *Phaedo* to the *Republic*, Plato's Tripartite Soul and the Possibility of Non-Philosophic Virtue"

**Writing assignment:** Using both the dramatic characterization and the arguments, reflect on how Plato's portrayal of Socrates' death helps us to understand Socrates as a person.

## Further reading

There's only so much we can cover in a semester, but for those who want to read extra Plato to broaden their understanding of Socrates' characterization, I would especially recommend reading:

- *Crito* (on why Socrates didn't escape from prison);
- *Gorgias* (on rhetoric and Socrates' practice of politics);
- *Phaedrus* (on love and rhetoric done well);
- *Theaetetus* (on knowledge, Protagorean relativism, and Socrates as midwife of ideas).

I am happy to provide you with my lecture notes and secondary literature to help you understand these dialogues independently—there's lots of great stuff out there. Of course, I will happily talk about any Platonic dialogues with you during office hours.

Finally, there are an absurd number of people to keep track of in the Socratic dialogues and in this historical period. Thankfully, other scholars have helped us here: Debra Nails' *The People of Plato* is an exhaustive and brief summary of who's who in the Platonic dialogues (she is especially helpful given that Greeks didn't use last name and many people in the dialogues—e.g. Euthydemus, Antiphon, Clinias—have the same name). I use this book all the time.

## Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a form of cheating or fraud; it occurs when a student misrepresents the work of another as his or her own. Plagiarism may consist of using the ideas, sentences, paragraphs, or the whole text of another without appropriate acknowledgment, but it also includes employing or allowing another person to write or substantially alter work that a student then submits as his or her own. Any assignment found to be plagiarized will be given an "F" grade. All instances of plagiarism in the College of Liberal & Creative Arts will be reported to the Dean of the College, and may be reported to the University Judicial Affairs Officer for further action.

## **Disability Access**

Students with disabilities who need reasonable accommodations are encouraged to contact the instructor. The Disability Programs and Resource Center (DPRC) is available to facilitate the reasonable accommodations process. The DPRC is located in the Student Service Building and can be reached by telephone (voice/415-338-2472, video phone/415-335-7210) or by email (dprc@sfsu.edu).

## **Student Disclosures of Sexual Violence**

SF State fosters a campus free of sexual violence including sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and/or any form of sex or gender discrimination. If you disclose a personal experience as an SF State student, the course instructor is required to notify the Title IX Coordinator by completing the report form available at <http://titleix.sfsu.edu>, emailing [vpsaem@sfsu.edu](mailto:vpsaem@sfsu.edu) or calling 338-2032.

To disclose any such violence confidentially, contact:

- The SAFE Place - (415) 338-2208; [http://www.sfsu.edu/~safe\\_plc/](http://www.sfsu.edu/~safe_plc/)
- Counseling and Psychological Services Center - (415) 338-2208; <http://psyservs.sfsu.edu/>
- For more information on your rights and available resources: <http://titleix.sfsu.edu>