PLATO’S TIMAEUS AND PHILEBUS

Dr. Kelly Arenson
PHIL 554, Spring 2017
Thursdays, 1:40-4:20pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines the metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology of two of Plato’s so-called ‘late period’ dialogues: Timaeus and Philebus. Although the dialogues are quite unique, they address similar issues, among them the nature of reality, belief, and error; the differences among types of knowledge; and the role of physiology in the human good.

The ostensible topic of the Philebus is the good life: is it pleasure or reason that makes the best life the best? After a brief consideration of metaphysics, the dialogue proceeds to classify different kinds of pleasure, and then to do the same for different kinds of knowledge. The dialogue ends with a ranking of the causes of the goodness of the good life. Although almost all of the causes end up having more to do with reason than with pleasure, it is not a foregone conclusion in the dialogue that pleasure contributes nothing to happiness. We will consider the following questions: is Plato’s position in the Philebus largely anti-hedonistic? Does he present a single definition of pleasure or knowledge in the dialogue? How does the ontology of pleasure affect its desirability as an end? How does pleasure relate to belief and perception? How do the dialogue’s metaphysical passages relate to the rest of the work?

The Timaeus is Plato’s account of the creation of the universe. The dialogue features accounts of the creation of the human and world souls, the physiology of the human body, and the methods of the divine craftsman of the cosmos. In addition to those topics, we will discuss the roles played by teleology and necessity in the creation of the cosmos, the nature of time and space, and Plato’s philosophy of destruction.

Both dialogues will be read in their entireties, supplemented by readings from secondary sources.

REQUIREMENTS

Term paper, presentation paper (approximately 5 pages); lead-questioner of other students’ presentation papers; regular seminar participation.

* Fulfills the graduate distribution requirement in ancient philosophy.