

COURSE OUTLINE/ PHIL 551: TOPICS IN ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

TOPIC 2011: IMMORTALITY

Fall term 2011: M 12:30 – 14:30

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Both Plato and Aristotle discuss immortality as either an impersonal aim of all species, expressed in the physical reproduction of ensouled bodies, or as an activity of reason or some product of that reason. Our aims in this course will be (i) to distinguish the various forms of immortality that Plato and Aristotle believed (or may have believed) a person might enjoy and (ii) to consider the various means a person, or a species, might employ to achieve immortality. Discussions of immortality in ancient philosophy usually begin with Plato's *Phaedo*, where Socrates famously describes philosophy as practicing for death. Death in this context is simply the separation of soul from body. When scholars turn to consider Aristotle's views on immortality, they usually focus on the *De animal*, in particular 3.5, where Aristotle argues for the existence of a 'productive' intellect that is separate from body, unaffected, and unmixed. Because of the *Phaedo's* emphasis on the conception of immortality as a separation of soul from body, and because *De anima* 3.5 concerns an intellect separate from human bodies (on most interpretations), scholarship has often focused on the disembodied possibilities of immortality, and taken the central question to be where the immortality that the soul might enjoy is personal or impersonal.

This course will focus on the contrast between this disembodied immortality and the embodied possibilities for immortality discussed by Plato in the *Symposium* and Aristotle in *De anima* 2.4. In these texts, the suggestion is that human beings desire immortality, but cannot hope to achieve immortal life as individuals; we can, however, achieve a kind of immortality through the eternity of our species, and we can enjoy a kind of participation in the divine activity of contemplation. In 2.4 of the *De anima*, Aristotle suggests that living beings have an impulse toward immortality, a desire to share in the eternal and divine "as far as nature allows" (415a30) and that the nutritive faculty of soul provides all such beings with the means to achieve this immortality through the reproduction of offspring (there is a similar passage at *GA* 2.1 731a25-33). Generation allows then for a kind of embodied immortality, but it is the species that is eternal; no individual embodied being is deathless, although individuals participate in immortality. The desire for immortality is an impulse towards the divine, and this impulse can take another expression in beings that possess a rational faculty – contemplation. That activity, and its relation to immortality, is discussed in both the *Eudemian* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as the *De anima*. The idea that we might access immortality through our bodies – whether through sexual generation, or through an embodied rational contemplation – has as one source the speech of Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*. Plato acknowledges sexual procreation as an attempt to attain immortality, but also entertains the possibility that a different kind of immortality might be open to people, through philosophical practice. This too would not be an individual immortality, nor would it be disembodied, since it begins with the recognition of beauty in human bodies and erotic experience, and is achieved through a joint intellectual production (such as laws or poems). It is not immortality through the persistence of the rational faculty (either as an individual or as a species capacity), but rather through the persistence of the products of that faculty. At the same time Plato, like Aristotle, seems to think that we can attain a sort of immortality through the contemplation of certain eternal entities. So the intellectual path to immortality has two branches: the products of an intellectual activity, and a certain intellectual activity itself.

We will read Plato's *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*, and parts of the *Republic*, the *Timaeus*, and the *Statesman*. We will also read parts of Aristotle's *De anima*, of the *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics*, and of the *Generation of Animals*.

TEXTS: Plato's Complete Works (ed. Cooper), and a coursepack with other readings will be available at the Word Bookstore, 469 Milton Street.

COURSE PREREQUISITES: Students in this course should have completed at least one course in ancient philosophy.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS: (i) Participation, based on attendance, quality of weekly discussion questions, quality of interventions in class (20%) (ii) a class presentation, and a short paper based on that presentation (40%) (iii) term paper (50%).

POLICY ON EXTENSIONS: No extensions will be granted without an appropriate medical note. Late work will be penalized at the rate of a third of a grade per calendar day past the due date. For example, a paper that is evaluated as a B, if one day late, will be assigned a grade of B-; the same paper, if two days late, would receive a C+.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY: McGill University values academic integrity. All students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the code of student conduct and disciplinary procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity for more information).

LANGUAGE: In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.