The purpose of this course is to introduce students to the philosophy of Plato (429?-347BCE). To that end, we will carefully read and discuss selections from his work that convey an idea of the breadth of his interests and his strategies for advancing them.

One way to get a start at understanding Plato is to recognise that he took himself to be competing with a disparate group of intellectuals often referred to as ‘sophists’. The word ‘sophist’ comes from the Greek word ‘wise’. Thus all the sophists claimed to have some kind of wisdom. They also claimed that they could impart their wisdom to students, and eagerly took on students for a fee. In short, they were professional teachers of the wisdom they claimed to have. To have any success in the business, sophists had to be able to attract students. This required that they be able to explain to prospective students the following two things: first of all, what the object of their wisdom and teaching would be; second of all, why anybody should want to spend time and money studying this object with them. In Plato’s day (and in the generation before him), you could study poetry, speech-writing, the art of debate, politics, mathematics, music, the art of memory, genealogy, natural history, among other things. But why study one of these things instead of another? Would it just be a matter of prestige? Or a matter of gaining influence in your community, or satisfying your curiosity? Would any of these bodies of wisdom be worth the effort? Might there be a body of wisdom we should prefer to all of the ones professed and taught by the historical sophists?

Plato was not himself a professional teacher: he did not make money by giving anybody lessons. But he set up a school, called the Academy, and he tried to recruit the best minds in the Greek world to come study with him there. He had to give people a reason to come to him rather than to any of his rivals. Plato’s pitch to people shopping around for an education would depend on his answers to the following sorts of questions: ‘Suppose I study at the Academy and suppose I acquire wisdom from you, Plato, and your colleagues. What will it be wisdom of? Why should I want to be wise about that thing, whatever it is?’ He can be understood to offer different answers to these important questions. He will suggest, for example, that you should not spend your time and money studying disciplines that pander to public opinion, like oratory and speech-writing. For then you will be a captive of conventional ideas or the way things seem to people, i.e., you will be a captive of appearances. If we ask what’s wrong with that, the answer will be that appearances are too shifty to be the object of genuine knowledge: the object of genuine knowledge is not appearance, but rather being. This will raise more questions. For example, why should we prefer knowledge of being to mere opinion about appearances? Plato will try to convince us that our salvation depends on it. If we are convinced by his argument, we will then want to know how to achieve knowledge of being. Here we will find that Plato tries out different answers, many of which depend on thinking about what mathematics, as a body of knowledge, can teach us all the truths.

Our program this term will be to see how Plato develops his answers to the questions I just formulated and the case he tries to make for studying philosophy or dialectic at the Academy. This will mean reading lots of selections from Plato’s surviving works. But it is important to understand that reading these works presents a very special challenge, because none of them is a straightforward treatise: most of them are dialogues (a couple are monologues) placed in the mouths of mostly historical people that Plato has decided to remember in a peculiar way, namely as engaged in philosophical discussion. These dialogues are often very engaging as dialogues, because they are so well written. But it leaves us with a serious problem: what does Plato himself think? There is no straightforward answer to this question. Moreover, many of the dialogues end without resolving the philosophical problems at their centre. This can be disappointing and frustrating. At the same time, it is obviously deliberate on Plato’s part. Thus one of the challenges we will be facing is to figure out what we can get from dialogues without resolution in which Plato never directly figures as an interlocutor. If nothing else, we will have to take seriously the thought that Plato is leaving us with a lot of work to do on our own. But we will do some of this work together during the course of class discussion about the readings.

§1 Our Programme for the Course This Term

I have ordered one book for the course: Plato, Complete Works, eds. John Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1997). It is available for purchase at the Word Bookstore on Milton, a couple blocks beyond the Milton gates. You can pick it up in person. You can also order it online – with delivery or curbside pick-up. Here’s the link: https://www.wordbookstore.ca/phil-354-plato
The course will be broken down into n units of roughly the same duration. Please note: I am not willing to give a more precise week-by-week timetable for the course, because how long we spend on any given reading will depend on the pace of class-room discussion, which will be determined by you.

**Unit One:** Our reading in this unit will be Plato’s ‘apology for Socrates’.

**Unit Two:** Our reading in this unit will be Plato’s ‘Protagoras’.

**Unit Three:** the ‘Hippias Major’

**Unit Four:** the ‘Meno’ and the ‘Euthydemus’

**Unit Five:** selections from the *Republic*

**Unit Six:** selections from the ‘Sophist’, if time permits.

§3 *Aims of the Course and the Importance of Keeping up with the Readings*

The **pedagogical aim** of this course – its **desired outcome** – is to enable students who find that they are still interested in Plato to continue exploring his writings and philosophy on their own in an informed and fruitful way after the term is over and to help all students enrolled in the course develop fundamental philosophical skills, i.e. reading and analysing difficult texts, discussing those texts in a constructive way, and writing up their reflections on those texts clearly, concisely and effectively. For the course to achieve those outcomes, all of us must commit to work through the readings in a disciplined way. Philosophy is like any worthwhile human activity: you need to develop a routine so that you regularly engage with it throughout the week. You must therefore keep up with the readings and come to class prepared to discuss your questions about them. You must also have the book with you in class so that we can look at problem passages together.

§4 *Method of Evaluation*

There will be one short paper due early in the term on an assigned topic worth 25% of the final grade, a final paper on a topic of your own choice (in consultation with me) due on the last day that this class meets worth 40% of the final grade, a final closed book exam to be held during the exam period worth 25% of the final grade. The remaining 10 % of the final grade will be for constructive contribution to class room discussion. Regular attendance is a necessary (but insufficient) condition for getting any credit for participation.

The exam will be designed to test one thing and one thing only: **whether you have done the readings or not.**

§5 *Important McGill Policies*

McGill University is committed to **intellectual integrity.** That means that it **does not tolerate plagiarism.** You must inform yourself of its policy on this important matter. Follow this link: [https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/academicrights/integrity/cheating](https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/academicrights/integrity/cheating)

À noter finalement que les étudiant(e)s de l’Université McGill ont le droit de soumettre leurs travaux en français s’ils/elles le désirent: [http://www.mcgill.ca/firstyear/undergraduate/your-first-year/first-year-programs/francophone](http://www.mcgill.ca/firstyear/undergraduate/your-first-year/first-year-programs/francophone)