NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Historia de la Filosofía Antigua I

Idioma: EN

EXAM STATEMENT:

The exam consists of two sections. Both must be answered: 1) One question to be chosen and answered from the following three syllabus topics. 2) An open topic, chosen from the course content, for which the student must take into account the guidelines provided by the teaching team on the ÁGORA platform. Each section is worth 1 to 5 points, totaling 10 points. However, to pass the exam, both parts must be answered in a balanced manner. IMPORTANT: The self-formulated question and the development topic chosen from the three proposed by the teaching team cannot belong to the same content block of the syllabus.

Question 1:
A) Philosophy in Magna Greece: Pythagoras.
B) Plato's concept of Being and The World of Ideas.
C) Aristotle: Politics.

Question 2: An open topic, chosen from the course content, for which the student must take into account the guidelines provided by the teaching team on the ÁGORA platform.

Question 1

Plato's concept of Being and The World of Ideas.

STUDENT RESPONSE:

B) Plato’s concept of Being and the World of Ideas

Plato articulates an ontology in which what is fully and properly “being” is not the sensible world of change but the intelligible order of Forms (Ideas). This doctrine arises from two convergent demands: first, the Socratic search for stable definitions (what justice is, what piety is), and second, the Eleatic problem of being and becoming (how knowledge is possible if all sensible things are in flux). Plato’s answer is that there must be objects of knowledge that are stable, self-identical, and non-relative: the Forms.

1) Being as intelligible and stable: the opposition between knowledge and opinion

In dialogues such as the Republic, Plato distinguishes epistēmē (knowledge) from doxa (opinion). Knowledge is of what is (to on) in the strict sense: what is fully, always the same, and graspable by intellect. Opinion concerns what both is and is not: the sensible realm, which is never purely what it is because it is always becoming, appearing differently, and admitting contraries (beautiful in one respect, not beautiful in another). Hence the sensible is an intermediate domain: it “is” insofar as it participates in intelligibility, yet it “is not” insofar as it lacks stable identity.

This yields a graded ontology correlated with a graded epistemology. In Republic VI–VII (Divided Line and Cave), Plato correlates:
- The visible realm with images and physical things, yielding conjecture and belief.
- The intelligible realm with mathematical objects and, finally, Forms grasped by dialectic, yielding understanding and knowledge.

The central point is that “being” is not merely existence but full intelligibility and stability. The more something is knowable in itself, the more it “is.”

2) The World of Ideas (Forms): what they are

Forms are not thoughts or linguistic conventions; they are objective, intelligible realities. Their principal characteristics are:

a) Separateness and self-identity
A Form is “itself by itself” (auto kath’ hauto): Beauty itself, Justice itself, Equality itself. Each Form is one (hen) and self-identical; sensible things are many and mutable.

b) Universality and causal-explanatory role
Forms function as causes (aitiai) of why sensibles are the way they are: a thing is beautiful because it participates in Beauty itself. This gives the Forms an explanatory priority over sensibles and makes them the proper objects of definition and science.

c) Immutability and atemporality

Forms do not come to be or pass away; they do not admit contrary predicates in the same way sensibles do. They ground the possibility of stable knowledge.

d) Hierarchical ordering
Forms are not a mere collection; they are ordered. Above them stands the Form of the Good, which provides the ultimate intelligibility and value of all the others.

3) Participation, imitation, and the relation between Forms and sensibles

Plato describes the relation between sensible things and Forms with terms such as methexis (participation), mimēsis (imitation), and parousia (presence). Sensible particulars are what they are by "having a share" in the Form, yet they never instantiate the Form perfectly. Thus, a just action is just by participating in Justice, but it can also be unjust in another respect; it lacks the purity and unity of the Form.

This relation explains both:
- The stability required for knowledge (through Forms).
- The variability of experience (through imperfect participation).

At the same time, it generates theoretical tensions that Plato himself recognizes, especially in the Parmenides: if Forms are separate, how do sensibles participate without introducing regress (the "Third Man" argument) or splitting the Form into parts? The dialogue constitutes a major moment of Platonic self-critique, pressing for a more rigorous account of participation, unity, and predication.

4) Being, non-being, and the Sophist: reformulating Eleatic constraints

In the Sophist, Plato revisits the Eleatic prohibition against speaking of "non-being." He argues that non-being is not absolute nothingness but difference (heteron): to say "x is not y" is to say that x is different from y. This permits meaningful falsity and negation without collapsing into contradiction. Ontologically, Plato introduces a set of "great kinds" (megista genē)—Being, Rest, Motion, Same, Different—and examines their communion (koinōnia). Being is not an isolated monolith but is articulated through relations among kinds; intelligibility requires that Forms can "mix" in determinate ways (e.g., Motion is; Rest is; Motion is different from Rest).

This move refines the concept of being: being is compatible with structured difference, and intelligible discourse depends on lawful combinations among Forms. Thus, Plato both inherits and transforms Eleatic ontology, securing an account of predication, falsity, and the possibility of dialectic.

5) The Good beyond being: the ultimate principle of intelligibility and value

In Republic VI, Plato situates the Form of the Good as the highest principle. The Good is to the intelligible realm what the sun is to the visible: it is the cause of:
- The being (in a decisive sense) of the Forms,
- Their intelligibility,
- And the knower's power to know.

Plato famously states that the Good is “beyond being” (epekeina tēs ousias) in dignity and power. This does not mean it is nonexistent; rather, it indicates transcendence with respect to ordinary being: the Good is the ultimate source from which being and knowability derive. Ontology and ethics converge: the highest reality is simultaneously the highest value, grounding both metaphysical order and the normative orientation of the soul and the city.

6) Dialectic and ascent to being: philosophical method

Access to being (Forms) requires a conversion of the soul (periagōgē) from the sensible to the intelligible. Dialectic is the method by which the mind ascends from hypotheses to the unhypothetical first principle (the Good), grasping Forms and their relations. Unlike mathematical reasoning, which proceeds from assumptions, dialectic aims to give an account (logos) of the principles themselves and to articulate the structure of the intelligible.

Hence Plato’s ontology is inseparable from a pedagogical and existential transformation: the philosopher is defined by eros for the truth of what is, culminating in the contemplation of the Forms and the Good, and returning to order practical life according to intelligible standards.

7) Cosmological articulation in the Timaeus: sensibles as image of intelligible being

In the Timaeus, Plato presents a cosmological myth in which a Demiurge orders the receptacle (chōra) by looking to the intelligible paradigms (Forms). The sensible cosmos is thus a generated image (eikōn) of the intelligible living being. This reinforces the ontological dependence of becoming upon being: becoming is not chaotic but can be ordered to the extent that it imitates intelligible structure.

Conclusion

Plato’s concept of being identifies full reality with the intelligible, immutable Forms, which alone are strictly knowable. Sensible things occupy a derivative and unstable ontological status, possessing being by participation and thus yielding opinion rather than knowledge. The theory is developed through epistemological distinctions (knowledge/opinion), metaphors of ascent (Line and Cave), metaphysical hierarchy culminating in the Good, and later refinements addressing predication and non-being (Sophist) as well as self-critique of participation (Parmenides). The World of Ideas is therefore the ontological ground of intelligibility, science, and normativity, and philosophy is the dialectical conversion toward that realm of true being.

Question 2

An open topic, chosen from the course content, for which the student must take into account the guidelines provided by the teaching team on the ÁGORA platform.

STUDENT RESPONSE:

The Socratic period marks a decisive turn in Greek philosophy from primarily cosmological investigation to the examination of human life in the polis: language, education, virtue, law, and the conditions of knowledge. This turn is inseparable from the historical context of fifth-century Athens: the consolidation of democracy, the centrality of public speech in courts and assemblies, and the cultural prestige of paideia. Within this setting, sophistry and Socrates represent two competing responses to the same demand: how to educate citizens capable of acting and speaking effectively, and how to justify norms in a world where tradition no longer appears self-evident.

The sophists were itinerant professional teachers who offered instruction for pay, particularly in rhetoric, argumentation, and the formation of political competence (aretê understood as civic excellence). Their emergence corresponds to the practical needs of democratic life: persuasion becomes a form of power, and the mastery of logos is a prerequisite for success. Sophistry should not be reduced to mere “deception”; it is a broad intellectual movement characterized by critical reflection on nomos (law/convention) versus physis (nature), the role of language, and the relativity of customs across poleis. The sophists contributed decisively to the development of grammar, semantics, argumentation, and an anthropological focus in ethics and politics.

A central axis of sophistic thought is the problem of measure and truth. Protágoras formulates the famous thesis: “Man is the measure of all things,” which expresses an epistemic and practical orientation: judgments and values are bound to human perspectives, contexts, and communal agreements rather than anchored in a single, independent order of being. This does not necessarily imply chaotic subjectivism; it supports a pedagogy aimed at improving judgment within the human world by training in deliberation, weighing probabilities, and producing better logoi (arguments). Protágoras’ agnosticism regarding the gods (“concerning the gods, I cannot know…”) further signals the shift from mythic certainties to human-centered inquiry and to the limits of knowledge given the brevity of life and the obscurity of the matter.

Gorgias radicalizes the problem of logos. In the treatise commonly known as On Non-Being, he explores a triple thesis: nothing is; if something is, it is unknowable; if knowable, it is incommunicable. Whether read as serious metaphysics, skeptical exercise, or rhetorical paradox, the work highlights a decisive point: logos does not transparently mirror being. In the Encomium of Helen, Gorgias presents speech as a force capable of compelling the soul, comparable to drugs acting on the body. Rhetoric becomes a technê of persuasion with an aesthetic and affective dimension, revealing that public life is governed not only by demonstration but also by belief, emotion, and probability. The sophistic focus on language thus discloses the gap between truth and persuasion and raises the ethical question of how speech should be used.

Trasímaco, as portrayed in Plato’s Republic, represents the political edge of

sophistic critique: justice is “the advantage of the stronger.” Here the issue is not merely rhetorical success but the foundation of normativity. If laws are made by those in power, then “justice” names the interests of rulers rather than an objective good. This diagnosis forces philosophy to confront the possibility that moral concepts are masks for domination and that political order rests on force disguised as right. Even if Plato’s depiction is polemical, it captures a real challenge: can justice be more than convention, and can it bind rulers as well as ruled?

Against this background, Socrates appears both as a product of the same Athenian conditions and as a radical alternative to sophistic education. Unlike the sophists, Socrates does not present himself as a teacher who transmits knowledge for a fee; he claims not to know, and his activity takes the form of conversation in public places. The central Socratic concern is ethical: how one ought to live, what virtue is, and whether virtue can be taught. Yet this ethical focus is inseparable from a methodological revolution: the demand for definition and the testing of beliefs through dialectical examination.

Our access to Socrates is mediated by interpretations and sources: Plato’s dialogues (philosophically richest but shaped by Platonic development), Xenophon (more sober and moralizing), Aristophanes’ Clouds (comic caricature), and later testimonies (including Aristotle’s remarks on Socratic method). A rigorous account must therefore distinguish the “historical Socrates” from the “Platonic Socrates,” while recognizing that Socrates’ philosophical significance is inseparable from the literary and argumentative forms through which he is transmitted.

Socrates’ method is commonly described through several interconnected moments. First, irony: Socrates adopts the posture of the inquirer who learns from others, disarming pretension and inviting interlocutors to articulate what they think they know. Second, the profession of ignorance (the recognition of not-knowing) is not skepticism for its own sake but an ethical-intellectual discipline: only by acknowledging ignorance can one begin the search for genuine knowledge. Third, the elenchus (refutation) proceeds by questioning an interlocutor’s claims, drawing out implications, and exposing contradictions. The aim is not victory but purification of belief, revealing that many confident opinions are unstable. Fourth, maieutics (midwifery) describes Socrates’ role in helping others “give birth” to insights from within, emphasizing active self-examination rather than passive reception of doctrine.

This method is tied to a substantive thesis often summarized as ethical intellectualism: virtue is a form of knowledge, and wrongdoing is rooted in ignorance. If one truly knows the good, one will do it; hence moral reform requires clarification of concepts and self-knowledge. This explains Socrates’ insistence on definitions of virtues (justice, courage, piety): without knowing what a virtue is, one cannot reliably possess or teach it. The Socratic demand for universal definitions challenges sophistic emphasis on convention and expediency: it seeks what is stable and rationally defensible in the moral realm.

Socrates’ confrontation with sophistry is therefore complex. He shares with the sophists an attention to logos and an awareness of the fragility of conventional beliefs. But he opposes the reduction of logos to an instrument of power and the

conflation of persuasion with truth. For Socrates, speech should be ordered to the good of the soul, not merely to success in the assembly. His stance also implies a critique of political ambition detached from wisdom: without knowledge of justice and the good, political power is blind. The “care of the soul” becomes the highest task, and philosophical examination is presented as a civic service, even if it places Socrates at odds with the city’s expectations.

The trial and death of Socrates, as dramatized in Plato’s Apology and Fedo, crystallize this stance. Socrates portrays his mission as a divine vocation to awaken Athenians from complacency; he refuses to abandon philosophy even to save his life, affirming that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it. The death scene underscores the connection between philosophy and a certain conception of the soul: the philosopher practices detachment from bodily desires and prepares for death as separation of soul and body, not in a morbid sense but as liberation for truth. Even if later Platonic metaphysics develops beyond Socrates, the ethical core remains: philosophy is a way of life grounded in rational accountability.

Socrates’ legacy extends through the so-called minor Socratic schools, which appropriate different aspects of his practice. The Megarian school emphasizes dialectic and logical puzzles, continuing the elenctic spirit in a more formal direction. The Cynics radicalize Socratic independence and critique of convention, translating the care of the soul into an ascetic and provocative lifestyle that exposes the artificiality of social values. The Cyrenaics develop a hedonistic interpretation, focusing on immediate experience and pleasure while still inheriting the Socratic concern with how to live. These divergent trajectories show that Socrates is less a system-builder than a foundational figure who reorients philosophy toward ethics, method, and the examination of life.

In sum, the Socratic period introduces a new center of gravity: the human world of meaning and action, approached through a critical reflection on language and a demand for rational justification. Sophistry reveals the power and ambiguity of logos and destabilizes traditional norms by exposing their conventional bases. Socrates responds by transforming logos into a tool of ethical truth-seeking, insisting that the good life requires examined beliefs and that the soul’s condition is more important than reputation or power. This confrontation sets the agenda for subsequent Greek philosophy: the relation between persuasion and truth, convention and nature, power and justice, and the possibility of grounding ethics in reason.