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PHIL 505.01: The Concept of Infinity

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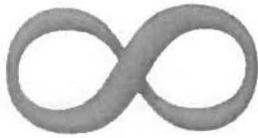
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PHIL 505
The Concept of Infinity



The concept of infinity has both enchanted and bedeviled thinkers since ancient times. The infinite has been both rejected as a horror and an evil of formlessness, and embraced as an ideal of completion and wholeness. The idea of the infinite has played central roles in both mathematics (and thus in the sciences dependent upon mathematics) and in theology. In both areas, the idea has generated confusion, paradoxes, and controversies that continue to divide thinkers today.

In this seminar, we will attempt to come to an appreciation of various ideas of the infinite and of the roles they have played in our intellectual history, and then to develop some reflections of our own regarding the issues that arise. Because the clearest advances in treating the infinite have been made in mathematics—especially through the contributions of Georg Cantor—a good share of our study will be mildly formal in nature. Development of the basic ideas involved, however, will require no special background in mathematics—simply a bit of the logical acuity that is expected of the philosopher—and we will explore as well applications of the idea of infinity in more purely theological and philosophical contexts.

In traditional seminar style, we will spend the first (approximately) ten weeks jointly reading and discussing background material, attempting to become reasonably well grounded in the fundamental issues concerning the concept of infinity. During this period, each seminar participant will settle upon a focus for a seminar paper, and initial drafts of those papers will be presented and discussed during the final five weeks. A revised and polished seminar paper will be due at the end of the term. Evaluation for the seminar will be based on the seminar paper; regular attendance and participation will be presumed.

Primary reading sources for the seminar are Moore, *The Infinite*, and Aczel, *The Mystery of the Aleph*. Additional readings will be made available electronically or on library reserve.

Seminar Leader: Burke Townsend
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F 10-12
& by appointment

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