

PHIL V2101 Pre-Socratics through Augustine

Fall 2017

Location: TBA

Time: Monday/Wednesday 1:10-2:25pm

TAs: TBA

Course Description

The course offers an introduction to ancient philosophy. It does not presuppose any prior knowledge of philosophy or antiquity.

Main objectives of the class:

- Introduction to central questions in ancient philosophy.
- Introduction to questions in philosophy that continue to interest philosophers today, and that were first discussed in antiquity.
- We shall study ancient philosophical proposals with a view to acquiring general philosophical skills.
- We shall practice the skills needed for the analysis of different kinds of texts relevant to the reconstruction of ancient philosophical views: fragments, dialogues, lecture-notes, treatises.

We start with Parmenides, one of the main figures in Presocratic philosophy. We will explore his outstanding influence by asking how the atomists—Leucippus and Democritus—engage with his theses.

The largest part of the course will be devoted to the so-called classical period of ancient philosophy, represented by Plato and Aristotle. Before we turn to the study of several complete Platonic dialogues, we read some brief selections (*Phaedo* 96a-99d, *Apology* 19d-22e), trying to get a sense of who Socrates—Plato's teacher—is. Our study of Plato then begins with the *Euthyphro*. In the *Euthyphro*, Plato asks his interlocutor, Euthyphro, for an account of piety. As the dialogue proceeds, it becomes clear that it is difficult to give the right kind of answer to a "What is X?" question (in this case "What is piety?"). According to Plato's portrayal of him, Socrates is interested in definitions, or accounts of things. With any object of study, he wants to know *what it is*.

Next we turn to the *Meno*, where similar problems are explored, this time via the question "What is virtue?" How can we search something that we do not know? If we do not know what virtue is, can we even begin to think about virtue? Are we doomed to be ignorant?

In the *Republic*, Plato presents an account of the kind of knowledge needed to satisfactorily answer a "What is X?" question. The person who knows the answer to "What is the Good?" knows the Form of the Good. She knows an intelligible, abstract entity: the Good. Our study of the *Republic* shall focus on what precisely this means. What are Plato's Forms? How should we understand his distinction between being and becoming, and how does it relate to Plato's distinction between knowledge and belief? Why is knowledge so important to our lives?

In Aristotle, we begin with some excerpts from the *Topics* (a book on method), and then study in detail large parts of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Book I of the *Metaphysics*. Like Plato, Aristotle discusses knowledge and wisdom in ethics: knowledge and wisdom are integral to the leading of a good life. We study Aristotle's theory of action, his conception of happiness, his notion of practical wisdom, and his discussion of the best human life.

Metaphysics I begins with the famous sentence that all human beings desire to know. We shall ask what this means, and how Aristotle argues for this claim. It is a key Aristotelian proposal that knowledge is concerned with 'the why.' The knowledgeable or wise person can explain why things are the way they are. She knows the first causes and first principles of things. Aristotle develops a theory according to which there are four kinds of causes. In *Metaphysics* I, he reviews the positions of his predecessors, the Presocratics and Plato, arguing that they came up with preliminary versions of these four kinds of causes.

We then turn to Hellenistic philosophy. We briefly look at Epicurean atomism, a theory which aims to improve on Presocratic atomism, and arguably is not vulnerable to Aristotle's objections, or at least not in the same way in which PreSocratic atomism is. These questions lead us to study some brief passages from Aristotle's *Physics*.

Epicurus coins the notion of a *criterion of truth*, a notion that also becomes central in Stoic philosophy and to the debates between Stoics and Skeptics. We discuss some key Hellenistic arguments regarding knowledge, belief, and the criterion of truth.

The course ends with a discussion of St. Augustine's theory of knowledge, which anticipates arguments that are associated with Descartes.

Readings

The following books are ordered at Book Culture on 112th street, between Broadway and Amsterdam: *Early Greek Philosophy*, tr. and with an introduction by Jonathan Barnes (Penguin); Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Hackett: Indianapolis, 1996); Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Broadie/Rowe, Oxford University Press). Additional readings can be downloaded through Courseworks.

Requirements

- Careful reading is essential to do well in class. Please be aware that, even if some of our readings are short, it takes time to read them in such a way that one is able to think about the arguments and the ideas. You are expected to read the texts prior to the class for which they are assigned.
- Regular attendance at, and participation in class.
- Regular attendance at, and participation in discussion section.
- Three one-page assignments, one three-page paper.
- A midterm and a final examination.

Grading

- Midterm 20%.
- Final examination 25%.
- Participation in class and in section 10%.
- Three one-page assignments, together 30%.
- One short paper, 15%.

Outline of readings

You are expected to read emails associated with this class. Announcements may also be made at the beginning of class. Make sure to be punctual.

Week 1 (09-06): Thales and Parmenides

Thales: all fragments in Barnes ch. 2, with special attention on Aristotle, *Met.* 983b6-11, 17-27.

Week 2 (09-11 and 09-13): Parmenides, Melissus, Leucippus, Democritus

Parmenides: all fragments in Barnes ch. 9, esp. 28 B 8.1-52.

Melissus: first fragment in Barnes, ch. 10 (Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 103.13-104.15).

Week 3 (09-18): Leucippus and Democritus

Leucippus: first fragment in: Barnes ch. 20 (Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 28.4-15).

Democritus: first and second fragment in ch. 21, I Atomism (Simplicius, *Commentary on On the Heavens* 294.30-295.22 and Aristotle, *Met.* 985b4-20).

Weeks 3 (09-20) and 4 (09-25): “What is X?”-questions

Plato’s *Euthyphro*

Weeks 4 (09-27) and 5 (10-02 and 10-04): Is investigation possible?

Plato’s *Meno*

Weeks 6 (10-09 and 10-11) and 7 (10-16): Being and becoming, knowledge and belief

Plato’s *Republic* (selections).

Weeks 7 (10-18) and 8 (10-23 and 10-25): Aristotle on method and on the good human life

Aristotle’s *Topics* I (selections).

Nicomachean Ethics Book I, II.1-6, VI (selections), X (selections).

Week 9 (10-30 and 11-01): Aristotle on wisdom and causes

Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* I (on Courseworks).

Fall Break

Week 10 (11-13): Aristotle on wisdom and causes, continued

Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* I (on Courseworks).

Weeks 10 (11-15) and 11 (11-20): Epicurus & extracts from Aristotle’s *Physics*

All readings on Courseworks. Fragments on physics 4A, B; 5 A, B; 6A; 7 A, B; 8 A, B; 9 A, B, C; 10 A, B; 11 A, B, D, E. Aristotle, *Physics* IV.7 and 8 (section which is online). *Early Greek Philosophy*, Barnes, section on Zeno. Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 138.3-6, 138.29-140.6, 140.18-141.11.

Thanksgiving

Week 12 (11-27 and 11-29): Stoics and Skeptics

All readings on Courseworks. Fragments on virtue and on the theory of knowledge, some Skeptic arguments and Stoic responses. 60 (all), 61 (all), 39 (all), 40 (all), 41 (all).

Week 13 (12-04 and 12-06): Augustine on knowledge

Passages from *The Trinity* on knowledge (on Courseworks).

Week 14 (12-11): Review

Preliminary schedule of assignments

Precise deadlines for all assignments will be announced in class or by email. To help you plan, here is a preliminary schedule:

Week 2: 1-page assignment on Presocratics

Week 4: 1-page assignment on Plato's *Euthyphro*

Week 8/9 or 10/11: Paper on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* or *Metaphysics*.

Week 12 or 13: 1-page assignment on *Epicurus* or *Stoics*

University/course policies

Disability Services

If you have a disability or impairment that requires special accommodation, please make sure to get in touch with the Office of Disability Services <<http://health.columbia.edu/disability-services>>. All requests must go through this office, which grants special accommodations. I will make every effort to help, so please get in touch with me too.

Academic Honesty

It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes a breach of academic honesty. Make sure to read Columbia's official policy at <<http://www.college.columbia.edu/bulletin/universitypolicies.php>>.

Whenever you are in doubt, please consult with me or the TAs. We will not tolerate any kind of cheating, plagiarism, or other forms of academic dishonesty.