

Topics in Ancient Philosophy: Relativism and Skepticism [Preliminary]

Course Description

Arguably, relativistic considerations are the starting point of Western ethics: the sophists travel and encounter different cultures. The ways in which others are committed to their ways of doing things gives them pause. Apparently, every culture sees their own values and norms as ‘natural’; and yet, cultures differ deeply in their value commitments.

A different kind of relativism is implicit in some of the earliest Greek literature and philosophical thought: the world seems to be a place of constant change. There is no stable reality. Mortal nature is in a constant process of dying and regeneration. The world is a place of *becoming*, or worse even of *flux*, not of *being*.

The class is devoted to tracing these intuitions, seeing how they receive sophisticated formulations in Plato, and how ancient skepticism aims to improve upon relativism. Ancient skepticism, as we shall see, aims to respond to phenomena of disagreement and change by insisting on continued investigation. We should continue to investigate, rather than claim that the world must be such-and-such in order to accommodate these phenomena.

The class covers readings from early Greek philosophy, Plato, Aristotle, and Hellenistic Philosophy, as well as ancient literary texts.

Readings

Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy* (Penguin); John Cooper, *Plato. Complete Works* (Hackett); Annas/Barnes *Sextus Empiricus. Outlines of Scepticism* (CUP green paperback); other texts will be available through Butler/Courseworks. [The only texts you absolutely need are the Platonic dialogues. For everything else: since we read only selections, it’s possible to read things through various online resources.]

Requirements

- No prior study of ancient philosophy is required. Though the class is topical, it can serve as an advanced introduction to ancient philosophy.
- Students either write one term paper or three shorter papers.
- Students are expected to read the texts closely prior to the class in which they are discussed and to contribute actively to in-class discussion.

Outline of Readings

Week 1: Herodotus, *Histories* (selections)
Responding to Pindar: “Custom is king”

Week 2: Early Greek Thought I
Homer, *Iliad* 6.181: “Like leaves on trees...”
Atomism: “The sea is blue at noon and white in the morning”

Week 3: Early Greek Thought II
Parmenides: perception and not-being
Heraclitus: the world in flux

Week 4: Plato, *Protagoras*

Mortal life: becoming, not being

Week 5: Homer, *Odyssey* and Bernard Williams, "The Truth in Relativism"

Living in different worlds

Week 6: Plato, *Republic V-VII*

The world of becoming

Weeks 7-8: Plato, *Theaetetus*

Knowledge is perception: refuting relativism

Week 9: Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (selections)

On truth-claims and assertions

Week 10: Epicurus on perception and on justice

"All perceptions are true"; justice is by nature and by convention

Week 11: Early Pyrrhonism

Pyrrho, Timon, and Aenesidemus: from relativism to skepticism

Week 12: Sextus Empiricus

Appearances and belief

Week 13: Sextus Empiricus

Can the skeptic speak? Creating a language without assertion