

Ancient Philosophy

Code: HUM 2008

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General Information

Description of the course

It is impossible to understand our culture, including science, ethics, politics, and religion, without having at the very least some knowledge of Ancient Philosophy. Western civilization is shaped by its ongoing dialogue with ancient thinkers, such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Augustine, and many others. Although we may not always agree with their answers, we have to give these ancient thinkers credit for having introduced to us – and for having thoroughly dealt with – many of the questions that still occupy us today. What is the nature of reality? What is true knowledge? What is the good life? What does a just society look like? Are there any divine powers and if so, how are these to be understood? How to understand the relation between the soul and the body, for example is it plausible that the soul is immortal?

Of course, speaking of ‘Ancient Philosophy’ as if this were a monolithic whole is misleading. The Greeks were a rather loosely connected collection of contentious individuals and there is not one opinion in Antiquity that has not been heavily contested. Time and again modern philosophers have to admit that their debates are not that original after all; more often than not they have their roots in discussions held more than two millennia ago.

Moreover, the Socratic ideal that not authority or tradition (received opinion) but rational arguments should in the end determine our opinions, is constitutive of Western identity, even if we still fail to live up to that ideal up to this day. Western science, one of the most sophisticated and successful areas of human activity, is unthinkable without the foundational work done by some of our most brilliant ancestors. If one digs around, most contemporary scientists and philosophers of science will find a founding father somewhere in Antiquity.

The same is true of Western religion. Greek – especially Platonic – ideas about supernatural powers, about the cosmos as a hierarchic and harmonic order, about the immortality of the soul all shaped the ways educated citizens of the Roman empire made sense of the news that in Israel someone who purportedly was the son of God, had supposedly redeemed us by dying for our sins.

It is impossible to understand ourselves without understanding how we have become who we are. And for this, we need to investigate the discussions that shaped us. In this course you will receive an introduction to Ancient Philosophy that provides you with an overview of the main positions. In order to come to terms with these positions you will study original texts from Antiquity as well as some clarifying secondary sources.

Objectives

The course has three overarching objectives:

- To provide students with a basic introduction to ancient Greek philosophy
- To teach students how to explore the meaning of philosophical texts by situating them in their historical contexts
- To explore how our culture, and we as part of it, has been shaped by these ancient thinkers

Lectures

The course contains four lectures:

1. From Chaos to Logos: Introduction to Greek Philosophy
2. Greek Tragedy and Myth
3. Aristotle
4. Ancient Philosophy: the Heritage

Attendance at all lectures is mandatory.

Tutorials

Please note: It is important for you to prepare for the tutorial group meetings, even for the first one. Furthermore, prior to every group meeting you are expected to read not only the secondary literature of the previous assignment — which is to be discussed in the first part of the session —, but also the text of the assignment up for discussion in the second part of the session, **including the corresponding primary literature**. For the first tutorial group meeting (first session week 1) this means that you are required to have read Reeve & Miller (2006), pp. 1-3.

Mandatory literature

The course books are:

Copleston, F.C. (1993 [1962]). *A History of Philosophy*. Vol. I: Greece and Rome: From the Pre-Socratics to Plotinus (rev. ed.). New York, etc.: Image.

Guthrie, W.K.C. (2013 [1950]). *The Greek Philosophers from Thales to Aristotle*. Abingdon and New York, NY: Routledge Classics. (ISBN: 978-0-415-52228-1)

Reeve, C.D.C. and P. Lee Miller (eds.) (2006). *Introductory readings in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy*. Indianapolis / Cambridge: Hackett.

Internet sources

Please note: Do *not* use Wikipedia for academic purposes.

An excellent (but unfortunately incomplete) Internet encyclopedia is *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, to be found at the following address:
<http://plato.stanford.edu/>

You can also use *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, to be found at the following address: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/>

Other information on Internet sources, insofar as relevant, will be given in the assignments. A very useful site is that of the Project Gutenberg, from which you can download e-books for free. It is found at: http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Main_Page

Prerequisites

None

Assessment

The examination consists of a mid-term paper in the fifth week and a plenary exam at the end of the course.

The mid-term paper is meant to help students come to terms with some of the main themes of the course in their own manner. The students are encouraged to take up their own position and to defend that position in a logically structured way, on the basis of clear and accurate argumentation and relevant sources.

The plenary exam will have the form of open questions. Its aim is first and foremost to establish whether the student has understood the texts read and is able to reproduce the basic ideas of the authors studied. A second goal is to establish whether the student is able to relate the different philosophers/philosophies to one another. The exam will be graded according to three criteria:

1. Does the answer display a clear understanding of the material under consideration?
2. Is the student able to relate the different thinkers and schools to each other?
3. Is the answer written in clear and correct language and supported by cogent argumentation?

The mid-term paper counts for 1/3 and the plenary exam counts for 2/3 of the final grade. It is possible to compensate an insufficient grade with a sufficient grade on the other part of the exam, provided that the average of the two grades is sufficient.

Attendance and Extra Assignments

If you cannot attend a meeting, please notify the tutor beforehand, or as soon afterwards as possible, indicating the reason why you are/were not able to attend.

Students must attend a minimum of thirteen of the fifteen meetings (viz. eleven tutorials plus four lectures). Students who have attended twelve meetings may apply for one extra assignment according to UCM procedure. Students who have attended eleven meetings may apply for two extra assignments according to UCM procedure. Students who attend ten meetings or less will fail the course altogether.

Please note that the introductory lecture in week 1 of the course is mandatory to begin with.

Resit Policy

Students whose final grade is below 5.5 may take a comprehensive resit examination. This examination will replace their entire grade.

Course Coordinator

The course coordinator is:

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the late Prof. Dr. L.M. de Rijk, to Prof. Dr. Tsj. Swierstra and to Dr. J. Spruyt for their many direct and indirect contributions to this course book.

Images

The images in this course book are all in the public domain.

Schedule

	Monday	Thursday
Week 1	Tutorial-1 - Pre-discussion of ass. 1 – Ionian Philosophers of Nature	Lecture-I “From Chaos to Logos: Introduction to Greek Philosophy” by M. Kardaun Tutorial-2 - Post-discussion of ass. 1 – Ionian Philosophers of Nature - Pre-discussion of ass. 2 – Heraclitus and Parmenides
Week 2	Tutorial-3 - Post-discussion of ass. 2 – Heraclitus and Parmenides - Pre-discussion of ass. 3 – Sophists and Socrates	Tutorial-4 - Post-discussion of ass. 3 – Sophists and Socrates - Pre-discussion of ass. 4 – Plato: Metaphysical Duality
Week 3	Tutorial-5: - Post-discussion of ass. 4 – Plato: Metaphysical Duality - Pre-discussion of ass. 5 – Alternative Views: Aeschylus	Lecture-II “Tragedy, Myth, and Philosophy” by M. Kardaun mid-term being made available Tutorial-6 - Post-discussion of ass. 5 – Alternative Views: Aeschylus - Pre-discussion of ass. 6 – Alternative Views: Sophocles
Week 4	Tutorial-7 - Post-discussion of ass. 6 – Sophocles - Pre-discussion of ass. 7- Plato: Political Ideas and Philosophy of Art	Lecture-III “Aristotle” by J. Spruyt handing in of mid-term paper
Week 5	Tutorial-8 - Post-discussion of ass. 7 – Plato: Political Ideas and Philosophy of Art - Pre-discussion of ass. 8 – Aristotle: (anti-Platonic) Metaphysics	UM closed
Week 6	Tutorial-9 - Post-discussion of ass. 8 – Aristotle: (anti-Platonic) Metaphysics - Pre-discussion of ass. 9 – Aristotle: Political Ideas and Ethics	Tutorial-10 - Post-discussion of ass. 9 – Aristotle: Political Ideas and Ethics - Pre-discussion of ass. 10 – Heritage of Ancient Philosophy
Week 7	UM closed	Lecture-IV “Ancient Philosophy: the Heritage” by M. Kardaun Tutorial-11 - Post-discussion of ass. 10 – Heritage of Ancient Philosophy - General discussion: What is the Relevance of Ancient Philosophy?
Week 8		Plenary exam (usual time and place, two hours)

Assignments

Assignment 1

The Beginnings: the Ionian Philosophers of Nature

“The first Presocratics, Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes – from Miletus in Asia Minor – were concerned to provide cosmologies, reasoned accounts of the world we live in. As Aristotle acutely saw, they focused on what he called the material cause – the question of what our world is composed of. This is the question to which we find answers in terms of water, air and ‘the boundless’. These answers show a very striking degree of simplicity and economy, and bring with them explanations of a wide variety of puzzling physical phenomena. Because of this, these philosophers have at times been seen as precursors of science, with its explanatory hypotheses. It is clear, however, that there is little in these very speculative theories that can be usefully compared with any precise concept of scientific enquiry. A just account has to see these Presocratic figures as transitional, with an intellectual impulse to render our world explicable which has much in common with later philosophy and science.”

Julia Annas (2000). *Ancient Philosophy. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, etc.: Oxford University Press, p. 96.

“As to the Presocratics, I assert that there is the most perfect possible continuity of thought between their theories and the later developments in physics. Whether they are called philosophers, or pre-scientists, or scientists matters very little, I think. But I do assert that Anaximander’s theory cleared the way for the theories of Aristarchus, Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo. It is not that he merely ‘influenced’ these later thinkers; ‘influence’ is a very superficial category. I would rather put it like this: Anaximander’s achievement is valuable in itself, like a work of art. Besides, his achievement made other achievements possible, among them those of the great scientists mentioned.”

Popper, Karl R. (1998 [1962]). Back to the Presocratics. *The World of Parmenides. Essays on the Presocratic Enlightenment*. London / New York: Routledge), pp. 12.

Primary sources:

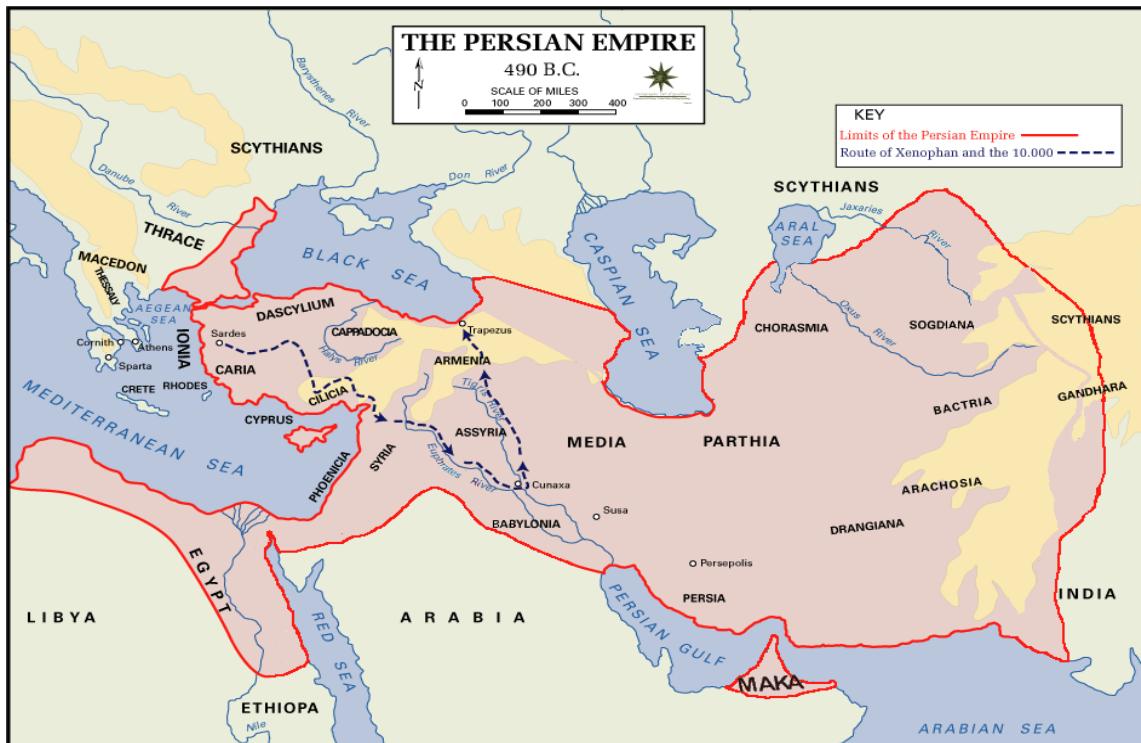
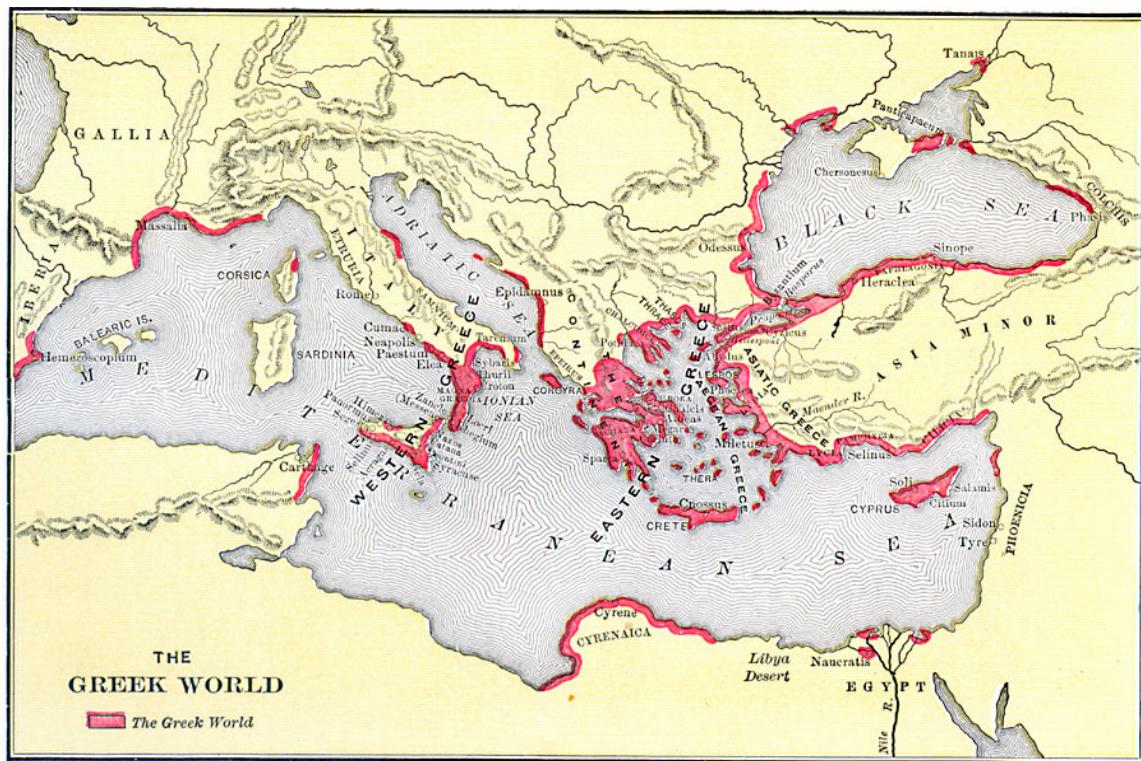
Reeve & Miller 2006, pp. 1-3.

Secondary sources:

Guthrie 2013 [1950], pp. 1-31.

Naerebout & Singor 2014, pp. 71-85.

Popper 1998 [1962], pp. 7-13



Assignment 2

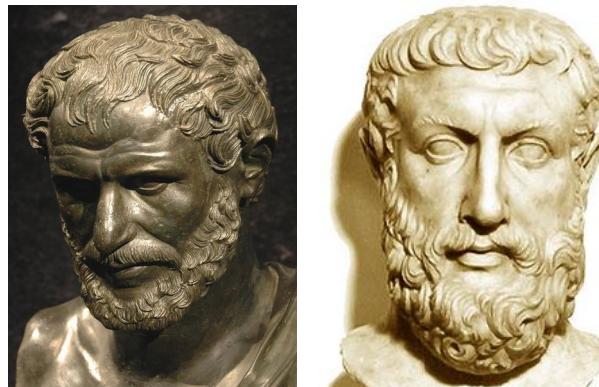
Unidentical Twins: Heraclitus and Parmenides

One of the most enigmatic ancient Greek philosophers is Heraclitus (Ἡράκλειτος). We hardly possess any written work by his hand, but even if we did it is not at all certain that we would easily fathom the full depth of his thought. Already in Antiquity he was nicknamed *ho Skoteinos* (ὁ Σκοτεινός, i.e. the Obscure). Heraclitus looked for a radically different type of unifying principle of reality than the Ionian philosophers of nature before him had done. ‘Change’ seems to have been his main preoccupation.

Parmenides (Παρμενίδης) comes up with an elaborate counterargument against Heraclitus, but retains the latter’s metaphysical monism: whatever our senses may tell us, Being is One, Changeless, Eternal.

Primary sources:
Reeve & Miller 2006, pp. 9-15.

Secondary sources:
Guthrie 2013 [1950], pp. 40-46.
Naerebout & Singor 2014, pp. 117-128.
Roochnik 2004, pp. 31-49.



Assignment 3

Towards Humanism: the Sophists and Socrates

Where the Ionian philosophers of nature were mainly preoccupied with understanding the *arche* (ἀρχή) of the world around us, the sophists turned their attention to humanity.

The sophists defended an extremely anthropocentric world view. In the famous words of Protagoras: “Man is the measure of all things – of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not.” This thesis has become known as the ‘*homo mensura*’-thesis: it is not important to know how reality is – even if that were possible –, but to convince others to see things your way. So, instead of ontology, for the sophists rhetorics is the primary achievement of *logos*. Because of their ethical relativism and the primary importance they attached to (public) speech, one could call the sophists postmodernists *avant la lettre*.

This cannot be said of Socrates (Σωκράτης). He shares the sophists’ concern with human affairs, but otherwise they couldn’t have been more different. In the English language we have the expression “You know you should do the right thing!” We all know what that expression means, and the assumptions behind it: you know what the right thing is, and that is what you should do. In other words, apparently there is some norm or standard by which we should measure our actions. But can we really be sure there is such a standard, and if so, how can we find out what it is?

A famous, classic attempt to search for the foundation of ethical standards is found in Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*. Although Socrates (the leading character in this dialogue) appears to deny that morality is founded upon the gods of the traditional Greek religion, he insists that there are fixed standards. If there were not, we would live in chaos.

Primary sources:

Plato, *Euthyphro*, Reeve & Miller 2006, pp. 47-57.

Xenophon, *Memorabilia* III, x: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1177/1177-h/1177-h.htm#link2H_4_0005.

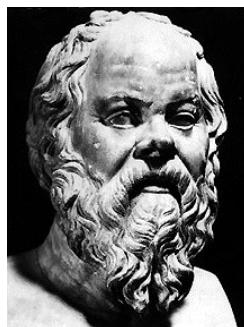
Some of the fragments ascribed to the sophists, Reeve & Miller pp. 30-35.

Secondary sources:

Copleston 1985, Vol. I, pp. 96-115 (= ch. 14).

Guthrie 2013 [1950], pp. 58-74 (= ch. 4).

Naerebout & Singor 2014, pp. 139-149.





<http://existentialcomics.com/comic/76>

Assignment 4

Plato, Part 1: Metaphysical Duality

Socrates' search for certainty is continued by Plato (Πλάτων, 427-347 BCE). According to the latter, the only way in which we can ever acquire reliable knowledge is by looking for standards in a Changeless Domain that transcends our transient world. In his dialogue *Phaedo* Plato has his spokesman Socrates explain for the first time what this transcendent basis consists in.

The scene is the following: shortly after Socrates' death, one of his pupils, Phaedo, reports on his master's final hours in prison before he is brought to death. In the central part of the dialogue Plato has Socrates speak about the World of Forms, a transcendent domain in which Goodness, Beauty, Courage, and so on are situated.

In another dialogue, *The Republic*, Plato clarifies his Theory of Forms from a somewhat different perspective by presenting his well-known allegory of the cave.

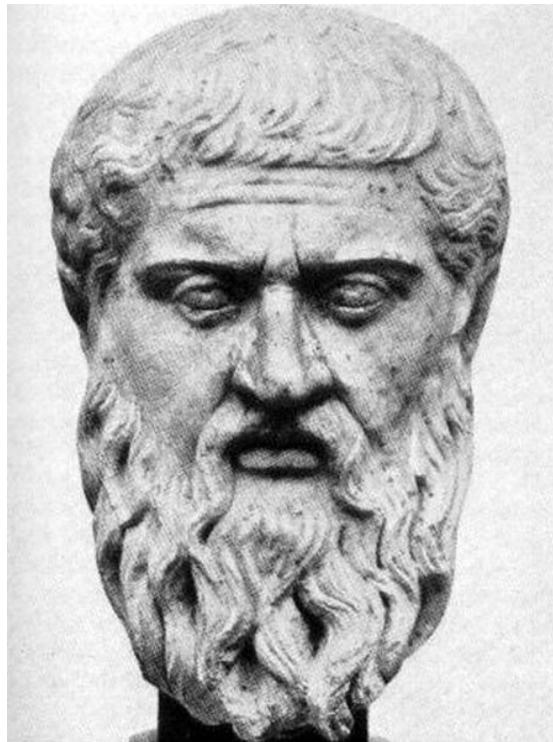
Primary sources:

Plato *Phaedo* 57A1-61C5; 95E6-102A1; 105B5-107D5 (= Reeve & Miller 2006, pp. 107-109; 127-130; 132-133).

Republic VII, 514A-521B (= Reeve & Miller 2006, pp. 201-205).

Secondary sources:

Copleston 1985, Vol. I, pp. 163-206 (= chapter 20).



Assignment 5

Alternative World Views, Part 1: Aeschylus

Drama (= theatrical performance, both tragedy and comedy) is founded on Greek myths. Like any other culture, Greek culture came up with its own myths. Contemporaries were all familiar with these stories.

Obviously, though its contents are essentially of a timeless nature, Greek mythology also contains many data that are of interest to us in that we may gather important historical information e.g. about Greek religion or the development of social organization. In general one could say that myths capture psycho-historical processes that are typical of their culture of origin. Greek poets, particularly the drama poets such as for example Aeschylus (Αἰσχύλος), Sophocles (Σοφοκλῆς) and Euripides (Εὐριπίδης), each in their own way made all kinds of variations on already existing myths. Hence the many different versions of one and the same mythical storyline.

What most tragedies have in common is that they dwell upon situations involving an insoluble moral conflict. People find themselves in situations in which they have to make a choice between two evils. Thus they are forced to do injustice. The question is then how they deal with their problem. The result is all the more dramatic when one or more characters — usually the protagonist, sometimes also the antagonist — realize before the ending of the play, through the disaster that comes from their actions, that they have done wrong. This recognition does not always occur, however.

Primary sources:

Aeschylus *Agamemnon* (<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/14417/pg14417.html>).

Secondary sources:

Graf 1993, pp. 68-78; 142-145.

Graves 2012, pp. 51-70.

Naerebout & Singor 2014, pp. 178-185.

Nussbaum 1986, pp. 25-27; 30-38; 41-50.



Assignment 6

Alternative World Views, Part 2: Sophocles

The American vicar Dr. Martin Luther King has become a symbol of the battle against institutional injustice. Again and again he would inspire his audiences with his grand visions of a better world where humans are treated as humans independently of the colour of their skin or other irrelevant details. Invariably these speeches would begin with the words ‘I have a dream...’

The fictitious figure of Antigone in Sophocles’ play of the same name is famous for her courageous combat against state laws that are unethical as well. The *Antigone* is about the problems that may arise when individuals are forced to observe state laws that are incompatible with their personal conscience.

There are differences of opinion as to who is in the wrong in this drama, as can be gathered from the passages quoted below.

“The play is about Creon’s failure. [...] Neither Creon nor Antigone [...] is a loving or passionate being in anything like the usual sense. [...] But we can now acknowledge that we admire Antigone, nonetheless, in a way that we do not admire Creon. It seems important to look for the basis of this difference.”

(Martha C. Nussbaum (1986). *The Fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 60, 65 and 66)

“It might be thought that the heroic figure in Sophocles [...] whose consciousness is most obviously directed to a demand that transcends mere social esteem, and, even more, reaches beyond self-assertion, is Antigone; she has most often been seen so in the course of her demanding and variegated Nachleben [...]. Indeed, she does call, very famously (454-55), on the “unwritten, solid laws of the gods” as opposed to Creon’s “instructions”; and her last words appeal to a value of piety. [...] Because of much that has happened since, particularly because of Hegel, we tend to see this as a play about political morality. [...] But Creon’s obstinacy does not simply elicit a noble response from Antigone. It triggers a ready and massive self-assertion, and the fact that her end can mean what it does mean (and, still more, what it has come to mean) is in a sense Antigone’s good luck.”

(Bernard Williams (1993). *Shame and Necessity*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, pp. 85-87.)

Primary sources:

Sophocles *Antigone*. Translation by Ian Johnston, available at the following address: <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/sophocles/antigone.htm>.

The United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights; available at the following address: <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>.

Secondary sources:

Nussbaum 1986, pp. 51-82 (= chapter 3).

Taylor 1983 [1963], pp. 51-62 (= chapter 6).

Assignment 7

Plato, Part 2: Political Views and Philosophy of Art

Plato's theory of transcendent Forms (Greek *idea, eidos*), with all its implications for a wide variety of subjects, has had an enormous impact on Western philosophy. The British philosopher Alfred Whitehead famously said that all later philosophies should be seen as footnotes to the work of Plato: "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. I do not mean the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his writings. I allude to the wealth of general ideas scattered through them." (Whitehead 1978 [1929], p. 39).

However, others (starting with some of his contemporaries, such as Antisthenes and later Aristotle) show less respect for Plato's metaphysical thinking. And according to the twentieth-century philosopher Karl Popper Platonic metaphysics are inextricably bound up with a dangerous tendency toward an elitist, if not totalitarian, conception of state and dominion.

Plato's views on art and artists play an essential role in his political thinking. Plato has his own reasons for wanting to ban specific forms of art from his ideal state.

Questions:

Argue whether the following statements are true or false:

- The philosopher-king cannot, according to Plato, act as a Tyrant.
- The philosopher-king cannot be a democrat either.

Incidentally, the idea that art can be dangerous is still very much alive today....

Political Correctness Run Amok!

by Dr. Mark H. Shapiro

"Books won't stay banned. They won't burn. Ideas won't go to jail. In the long run of history, the censor and the inquisitor have always lost."...A. Whitney Griswold.

Lee Gilbert, Professor of Foreign Languages and Literature here at Krispy Kreme U., sent me a copy of N.R. Kleinfield's recent New York Times article "The Elderly Man and the Sea? Test Sanitizes Literary Texts", which chronicles the efforts of the New York State Board of Regents to remove all traces of "political incorrectness" from the recent Regents exams that high school students in the state of New York must pass to receive their diplomas. Thanks to the diligence of Jeanne Heifetz, parent of a New York City high school student and opponent of high stakes testing, we learn that excerpts in the exams from the works of writers such as Annie Dillard, Carol Saline, Isaac Bashevis Singer,

Anton Chekhov, William Maxwell, John Holt, Frank Conroy, Ernesto Galarza and others have been stripped clean of nearly all references to “race, religion, ethnicity, sex, nudity, alcohol, profanity” and just about anything that might be “offensive” in the slightest degree to someone somewhere.

Among the examples cited by Klienfield, all mention of Judaism was removed from the passages taken from Singer’s writing, all mention of blacks was removed from the excerpts from Annie Dillard’s work, and the words “gringo lady” in the passage from Galarza’s *Barrio Boy* were changed to “American lady”. Similarly, an excerpt from a speech by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan praising “fine California wine and seafood” was altered to read “fine California seafood.”

According to the New York Times article, Roseanne DeFabio, the New York State Education Department’s assistant commissioner for curriculum, instruction, and assessment (and presumably for censorship as well) said that the passages were shortened “to make them suitable for testing situations” under the “sensitivity guidelines” in use by the department. These “sensitivity guidelines”, according to DeFabio, are in place so that no student will feel “uncomfortable in a testing situation.” She further was quoted as saying that “Even the most wonderful writers don’t write literature for children to take on a test.”

Needless to say, when the authors and publishers of the passages in question were contacted by Ms. Heifetz and her spouse Juris Jurjevics, who happens to be the publisher of Soho Press, they were not amused by the editorial changes that had been made by the test writers in the name of political correctness. In fact, some of them got down right testy about the matter. Frank Conroy, commenting on changes made to a passage from his memoir *Stop Time* in a letter to the New York State education commissioner, asked “Who are these people who think they have a right to ‘tidy up’ my prose? The New York State Political Police?” And, Annie Dillard, whose passage from *An American Childhood* was altered to remove all racial references even though race was at the heart of the piece wrote “What could be the purpose of an exercise testing students on such a lacerated passage – one which, finally, is neither mine nor true to my lived experience?”

What indeed! Are the airhead educrats in Albany so out of touch with reality that they actually think that high school seniors have to be treated like third-graders? Don’t they know the difference between writing that is gratuitously offensive and writing that conveys vivid images? To remove the Jewishness from a Singer passage is to strip it of its meaning. Surely these Albany bureaucrats don’t think that high school seniors are so innocent that they never have grappled with issues of race, religion, or sexuality. The Irascible Professor would guess that most New York City high school seniors could teach Ms. DeFabio a thing or two about sex! And, most have uttered profanity far more colorful than anything that might be found in the passages that were butchered to ensure that there wasn’t the remotest possibility that some high school senior might have his or her feelings hurt.

This wholesale censorship in the name of political correctness is bad enough. But even worse is the attitude expressed by the censors. DeFabio did allow that it might be appropriate for her department to consider marking passages that they alter, but she apparently does not think it necessary to ask authors for permission to change their work. As far as the IP is concerned, this is not just ignorance. It is arrogant ignorance. If

Governor Pataki has an ounce of common sense, he will make sure that these censor-morons are transferred to assignments where they will have no further opportunities to insult the intelligence of the average high school senior.

Shapiro, Mark H. (2002). Political Correctness Run Amok! *The Irascible Professor. Irreverent Commentary on the State of Education in America Today* (<http://irascibleprofessor.com/comments-06-06-02.htm>).

Primary sources:

Plato, *The Republic*, II 377-380; IV 433A1 – 439A8; V 472B3 – VI 487A8; VII 532B6 – 541B5 (<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm>).

Secondary sources:

Copleston 1985, Vol. I, pp. 223-243 (= chapter 23).

Kardaun 2014, available online: <http://journal.psyart.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/PsyArt-2014-Article-11-M-Kardaun.pdf>.

Naerebout & Singor 2014, pp. 184-187.



Assignment 8

Aristotle, Part 1: (Anti-Platonic) Metaphysics

Plato's most illustrious student was Aristotle (Αριστοτέλης, 384-322). In Aristotle's opinion, to accept the existence of a transcendent domain, like Plato does, is pure nonsense (*phlyaria*). Rather than choosing a supernatural route, Aristotle presents a profound analysis of the world that surrounds us in order to uncover the essences of things. In his description of the origin of Plato's theory of Forms he expresses his criticism quite clearly:

"After Plato in his youth had first become familiar with Cratylus and with the Heraclitan doctrines (that all sensible things are forever in a state of flux and therefore cannot be the object of certain knowledge), he stayed true to these views in his later years. Socrates, however, was engaged in ethical matters (and not the world of nature as a whole), and sought after the universal essence in moral actions. He was the first to concentrate on 'defining'.

Plato accepted his teaching, but held that the definition should not concern the sensible phenomena, but entities of another sort; for a definition cannot apply to a phenomenon, since it is always changing. These 'things of this other sort', then, he called 'Forms'. And the sensible things, he said, were named after these, and owe their existence to their participating in Forms (...) But what is meant by 'participation' remains an open question."

(*Metaphysics* I 6, 987a30-b3, paraphrased)

Subsequently Aristotle phrases a number of objections to Plato's views.

Despite his objections against Plato, Aristotle too is looking for a firm foundation of being. The problem, however, is where to look for it, now that Plato's transcendent world has been thrown out the window.

In order for us to be able to understand Aristotle, we should make a clear distinction between two aspects of his philosophy: (a) what does the world look like? and (b) how do we go about acquiring knowledge of that world?

As to the first aspect (a), Aristotle distinguishes four kinds of principles or causes (Greek: *aitiai*) of being:

1. What something is made of, the 'substrate' or the basic matter things are formed out of (Latin: *causa materialis*). To illustrate what he has in mind here he uses the example of a bronze statue: the bronze is the material cause of the statue.
2. The form (*eidos!*), or that owing to which something becomes a certain something; for example, it is owing to its form that a statue is the statue of a warrior. Aristotle labels this the 'formal cause' (Latin: *causa formalis*).
3. That owing to which things come into existence, including that owing to which things undergo change. Aristotle gives the example of "the father [as] the cause of the child, and in general the maker [as] the cause of the thing made and that which produces change [as] the cause of change". This he labels the efficient cause (Latin: *causa efficiens*).
4. That for the sake of which something exists and towards which all its endeavour, growth, motion, and so on, is directed. Thus Aristotle calls health the 'cause' of going for

a walk, because if we were to ask “Why does one go for a walk?”, an obvious answer would be “for the sake of one’s health”. This cause is known as the final cause (Latin: *causa finalis*). The final cause of something is rooted in its form; in fact, to speak of something in terms of its final cause is another way of expressing its formal cause. For the ultimate goal of each and every thing is to completely realise its form.

The analysis just presented is of a twofold nature. If you look at something purely as it is now, then the efficient cause and final cause do not play a part. From a ‘static’ perspective you can say that something is always composed of form and matter. On the other hand, Aristotle’s analysis in terms of its causes also provides the basis for a dynamic approach to the world. Every form attempts to realize itself in matter (as such mere potentiality), and by doing so in a sense counters its matter. The definitive realization or actualization is thus a process caused by the form as the telos, the goal. The distinction between matter as ‘potency’ and form as ‘act’ is at the basis of Aristotle’s teleological conception of being.

To turn to the second aspect of Aristotle’s philosophy (b): how should we go about acquiring knowledge of the world? According to Aristotle, the essences are in the things themselves. These essences can be gathered by means of abstraction. What we have to do is study these essences, without forgetting that they only have existence in the transient things. Although Aristotle dismisses the realm of Forms handed down to him by his master, Plato, nevertheless he sticks to a notion of knowledge that involves necessity and universality.

Primary sources:

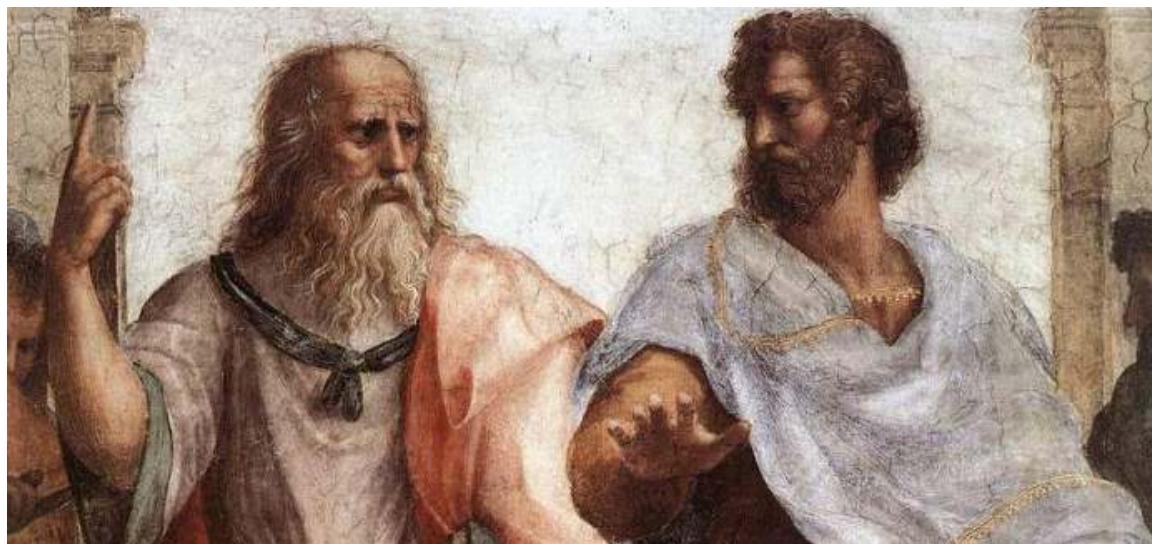
Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I 9, 990b-991b9 (= Reeve & Miller 2006, pp. 292-294) and *Metaph.* V7, 1017a8-1017b27 (<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.5.v.html>).

Secondary sources:

Copleston 1985, Vol. I, pp. 287-319; 372-378 (= chapter 29; chapter 34).

Ross 1995, pp. 1-6 (= chapter 1, part one: ‘The Life of Aristotle’).

De Rijk 1988.



Assignment 9

Aristotle, Part 2: Political Views and Ethics

Modern people tend to hold that what constitutes a good life, is highly subjective. What is a good life for one person might be downright unacceptable to another. The only substantial issue most modern people would agree on is that at the heart of a good life lies the feeling of happiness. This again tends to lead to the idea that one should lead a life collecting as many happy moments as one possibly can: what counts is that you *feel* happy, not whether you have a good reason to do so. Your happiness may well be founded on an illusion, but as long as you feel good that doesn't matter. Think of a movie like *The Matrix*, where people live fake but happy lives.

Morality and politics, on the other hand, seem to have very little to do with being happy. Moral rules may put restrictions on my personal pursuit of happiness, and – as everybody knows – politics is dirty and messy. The most that can be said for morality and politics is that they are necessary evils, to protect one from one's fellow human beings.

For a different take on politics and ethics, we may again turn to the great Stagirite. For Aristotle, politics is the science of human affairs, inextricably connected to man's happiness. Man is by his very nature a ζῷον πολιτικόν (*zōion politikon*), a creature that can only flourish in a society that is rightly organized.

As to ethics, according to Aristotle virtue is a kind of disposition of people who possess excellence of character. To possess virtue will in practice lead to behaviour in accordance with a mean. But what is a 'mean'?

"If ten pounds are too much for a particular person to eat and two too little, it does not follow that the trainer will order six pounds; for this also is perhaps too much for the person who is to take it, or too little – too little for Milo [a famous wrestler], too much for the beginner in athletic exercises. [...] Thus a master of any art avoids excess and defect, but seeks the intermediate and chooses this – the intermediate not in the object but relatively to us."

(*Ethica Nicomachea* II 5)

"It is the nature of such things to be destroyed by defect and excess, as we see in the case of strength and of health (for to gain light on things imperceptible we must use the evidence of sensible things); exercise either excessive or defective destroys the strength, and similarly drink or food which is above or below a certain amount destroys the health, while that which is proportionate both produces and increases and preserves it."

[...]

"The man who flies from and fears everything and does not stand his ground against anything becomes a coward, and the man who fears nothing at all but goes to meet every danger becomes rash; and similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and abstains from none becomes self-indulgent, while the man who shuns every pleasure, as boors do, becomes in a way insensible; temperance and courage, then, are destroyed by excess and defect, and preserved by the mean."

(*Ethica Nicomachea* II 2)

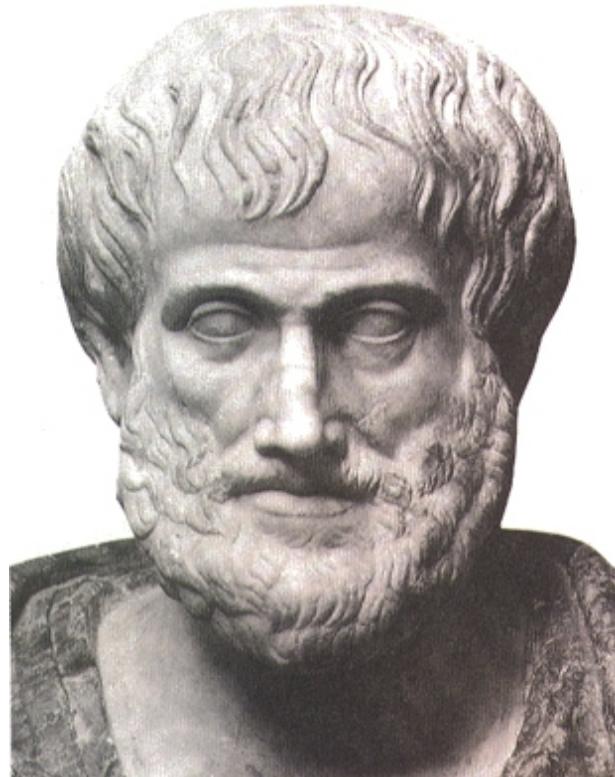
Primary sources:

Aristotle *Politics*, Bk I, 1252a1-1253a39 (= Reeve & Miller 2006, pp. 339-441).

Nicomachean Ethics, excerpts from bks. I and II (= Reeve & Miller 2006, pp. 305-316).

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Copleston 1985, pp. 326 (from no. 9) – 358.



Assignment 10

Ancient Philosophy: the Heritage

Now that we have reached the end of this course, the time has come to reflect critically upon our findings so far. We have seen how throughout history philosophers have attempted to grasp reality. Most philosophers of Antiquity were convinced that reason should be our guide in life. Society too, they believed, should be established on the basis of rational considerations.

However, we have also seen traces of a cultural counter flow. For instance, the tragic poets have made it quite clear that we can never take the place of the gods. However, it is not always clear to us what laws we are supposed to obey, but be that as it may, it is still our duty to conform to them, and if we refuse or are unable to do so, we shall be severely punished! Indirectly, the tragic poets urge us to always remember that we are merely human, and to recognize the multiform, and sometimes inconsistent, nature of human emotions and ideas.

In this assignment we will take the (rather challenging!) views of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) as a starting point for a discussion about what Western civilization may have inherited from ancient philosophy.

Nietzsche has become famous as a philosopher who has launched a vehement attack against what he considers to be the paralyzing primacy of reason which has dominated Western thought since Socrates and his main pupil Plato. In Socrates he sees the first signs of what he calls a ‘decline’, an introduction of two worlds, a supposed ‘real’ world and a world of appearances that surrounds us. According to Nietzsche our faith in this culturally inherited, one-sided use of reason and the scientific progress it has led to, are nothing but a hopeless illusion. And Christianity is the plebeian form of that same illusion, it is to be seen as Platonism for the masses. According to Nietzsche the tragic poets and some of the Presocratics were right to recognize that it is not Being (with a capital B), but chaos that rules the world. It is his conviction that true understanding should embrace that chaos.

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