

# **GRAECO-ROMAN PHILOSOPHY**

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

## Assignment 1: Melissus & Zeno

Parmenides' invention of logical argument was enthusiastically embraced by his followers, Melissus and Zeno. We'll now take a closer look at some of their arguments. First, by way of background, read the prescribed chapter from G & R. (Chapter 2: The Presocratics).<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Melissus (*Readings*, pp. 18-20)<sup>2</sup>

According to the introduction (p.18), the writings of Melissus offer some innovations:

1. "By arguing that the one thing cannot be rearranged, for example, he may have been criticising his Pluralist contemporaries." Who are these Pluralist contemporaries? Where and how does Melissus argue against the possibility of rearrangement? Why might we interpret the argument against rearrangement as an argument against the Pluralists?
2. "Most importantly, however, Melissus contradicts Parmenides in two way. Parmenides' One was a spatially limited sphere existing in an eternal present. Melissus makes his One both spatially and temporally infinite." Where and how does Melissus argue that the One is both spatially and temporally infinite?

### 2. Zeno's arguments against motion (*Readings*, p.21)

Text 3.c Zeno: the Achilles

3. Analyse the Achilles-argument against movement and discuss the question whether or not it is a valid argument.

Text 8.a/b Zeno: the Arrow

4. Reconstruct Zeno's argument. What is wrong with it, according to Aristotle? Should we accept Aristotle's criticism? Why (not)?

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<sup>1</sup> G & R = D. Sedley (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek And Roman Philosophy*, Cambridge 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *Readings* = P.L. Miller, C.D.C. Reeve, and L.P. Gerson (eds.). *Introductory Readings in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy*, 2nd edition, Indianapolis 2015.

## **Assignment 2: Gorgias, *On Nothing* (Readings, pp. 38-40)**

*On Nothing* was probably a speech, given by the great sophist Gorgias. Before studying this text and answering the following questions, first read G & R Chapter 3: The Sophists and Socrates by way of orientation.

1. The title '*On Nothing*' and its content is meant to call to mind another famous philosopher/ philosophical text. Which philosopher / which text? Explain your answer.
2. Analyse and discuss the logical structure of § 1. Does the argument convince you? Why (not)?
3. In §2, Gorgias builds his argument on a principle that he does not argue for. Which principle is this? Should we accept this principle? Why (not)?
4. In § 3, Gorgias presents a theory about language. Describe this theory in your own words. What criticism could be directed against this theory?
5. What could have been Gorgias' intention with *On Nothing*, i.e. why might he possibly have written it?

### Assignment 3: Plato, Meno-paradox (*Readings*, pp. 97-103).

In the *Meno*, Socrates discusses with Meno the question whether virtue can be taught. This in turn prompts the question of the definition of virtue. After some unsuccessful attempts to define virtue, Meno introduces the famous paradox that has been called after him. This paradox questions the possibility of knowledge. Read the passage that starts at 79e “SOCRATES: Then answer again from the beginning ...” (= *Readings*, p. 97 right column bottom) and ends at 86b “MENO: I think you are right, Socrates ...” (= *Readings*, p. 103 left column top).<sup>3</sup>

1. Plato, *Meno* 79e-80d: Meno famously compares Socrates to a sting-ray. Is this an appropriate comparison? Why (not)?
2. Plato, *Meno* 80d-81a: Meno here introduces the famous Meno-paradox. Formulate this paradox. Do you believe that this is a good paradox? Why (not)?
3. Plato, *Meno* 81a-d: Socrates solves the paradox by famously claiming that knowledge is recollection. Explain how this claim would solve the paradox.
4. Plato, *Meno* 81e-86b: Socrates now seeks to demonstrate that knowledge is indeed recollection. He does so by making a slave-boy double the surface of a square. How does Socrates proceed? Does he indeed demonstrate that knowledge = recollection.
5. Does the thesis knowledge = recollection presupposes the existence of Platonic Forms?
6. Try to think of other ways to solve the paradox, i.e. without the assuming that soul is immortal.

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<sup>3</sup> In the case of Plato, *Meno* 79e-86b (i.e. the passage under discussion), the numbers refer to an early printed edition of Plato's works by the humanist scholar and publisher Stephanus. The pages of this edition were significantly larger than those of modern books, hence the addition to the page-number of the letters 'a' to 'e', 'a' indicating that the passage can be found at the very top of the page, 'e' that it can be found at the very bottom, and the other letters indicating a position somewhere in between top and bottom. Today, the edition by Stephanus have been replaced by more recent (better) ones, we still use his system of referring to Plato's texts. On the so-called Stephanus-pagination, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephanus\\_pagination](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephanus_pagination).

**Assignment 4: Plato, *Republic*: the images of the sun, line, and cave (*Readings*, pp. 203-210)**

The famous simile of the cave appears in the middle of the *Republic*, a dialogue in which Plato presents his readers with the constitution of an ideal (city-)state, called Kallipolis (i.e. Fair-city). The simile of the cave builds upon two other similes, i.e. that of the sun (about the Good as the ultimate metaphysical principle) and the line (about various types of knowledge and their objects).

1. The simile of the sun (*Readings*, pp. 203-205) gives us an impression of the Form of the Good and its function(s). What do we learn from this simile about the Form of the Good?
2. The simile of the line (*Readings*, pp. 205-206) distinguishes between different forms of knowledge. Which are these forms of knowledge?
3. How should we picture the cave? Try to make a schematic drawing of the cave (it need not be a work of art; just a simple schematic sketch will do).
4. What do the various elements of the simile represent (e.g. the prisoners, the cave itself, its shadows etc.)?
5. How do the similes of the sun and the line relate to the simile of the cave?
6. What could be the political message of the cave?

## Assignment 5: Doing the history of philosophy

Now that we have an overview of the history of early Greek philosophy, let us pause to reflect on the question what it means 'do' the history of philosophy. We'll do so by taking a closer look at Aristotle's history of early Greek philosophy in his *Metaphysics* A 3-4 (*Readings*, pp. 294-296).<sup>4</sup>

1. Aristotle does not simply describe the history of philosophy as that of one philosopher coming after another in a temporal sequence. According to what principle does he organize his history of Early Greek philosophy?
2. According to Aristotle, things improved greatly with Anaxagoras: "[h]e seemed like a sober person, and his predecessors seemed like babblers in comparison" (*Metaphysics* A.3, 984b15-20; *Readings*, p. 295).<sup>5</sup> What is so special about Anaxagoras?
3. Aristotle, in keeping with his teleological worldview, describes the history of philosophy from the perspective of his own time: early Greek philosophy gradually progresses into the right direction until it reaches its end or perfect state (*telos* = literally 'end' or 'goal').—Aristotle in fact believed that his philosophy was more or less this final end of the history of philosophy.— Many modern histories of philosophy still adopt this Aristotelean, teleological perspective: i.e. they present the history of philosophy as a development towards an end. Especially telling in this respect is the traditional label 'Pre-socratic philosophy' (literally philosophy before Socrates) to refer to the early Greek philosophers, which suggests that early Greek philosophy should be thought of as a development that culminates into the philosophy of Socrates.

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<sup>4</sup> Note that in this case the initial capital ('A') refers to a so-called book of the *Metaphysics*. A book in this case is the equivalent of our chapter (in Antiquity each chapter would have typically been written on a separate scroll of papyrus; the entire *Metaphysics* hence consisted of several separate scrolls or books). The (Arabic) numbers refer to so-called chapters (i.e. our sections or paragraphs within what we would call a chapter). Hence Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A.3 => say: Aristotle, *Metaphysics* book one (or *alpha*), chapter 3; what you mean is: Aristotle, chapter one, section 3 of the *Metaphysics*.

<sup>5</sup> Note that the number 984b15-20 refers to page 984 in the edition of the Greek text of Aristotle by the 19<sup>th</sup> century German scholar August Immanuel Bekker; a/b in this case refer to the columns (typically there are two columns on each page of the Bekker-edition); the numbers 15-20 refer to the lines. Today, we do not necessarily use the edition by Bekker any longer, but we still use his numbering to facilitate referencing (cf. the continued use of the Stephanus-pagination in the case of Plato). On the Bekker pagination, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bekker\\_numbering](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bekker_numbering).

Many historians of philosophy now find this teleological approach problematic. Think of reasons why one might be hesitant to adopt this teleological perspective. Could you think of alternative ways of telling the history of early Greek philosophy?

4. *Discussion question:* Aristotle studies the history of philosophy because he believes that this is helpful for his own philosophical investigations, so did, for example, Nietzsche and Heidegger. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, could not care less about the history of philosophy. For what reasons, if any, would you study the history of philosophy?

## **Assignment 6: Preparation for midterm exam**

### Preparation midterm exam

1. Make the test exam questions (available on blackboard)
2. Give a one-page graphic summary of this course so far: i.e. list the most important thinkers / philosophical schools that we have discussed so far and indicate (by means of arrows) how they relate to each other (e.g. influence, critical response etc.).
3. Think of themes / thinkers that are still unclear to you and ask for further clarification.



**Assignment 7: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*: on the good life / happiness  
(Readings, pp. 310-315)**

In *Nicomachean Ethics* (EN) Book 1, 1-2; 1. 4-5; 1, 7-8 (Readings, pp. 310-315)

Aristotle examines the question of the good for humans.

1. EN 1, 1-2: Why is Aristotle interested in the question of the good for humans? How does he argue for the existence of such a good? How convincing is his argument?
2. EN 1, 4-5: Why does Aristotle examine the common beliefs about the human good? What are these beliefs? Does Aristotle believe that these beliefs are correct?
3. EN 1, 7: How does Aristotle argue for his conception of the human good? What is this human good according to Aristotle? Do you find his argument convincing? Why (not)?
4. EN 1, 8: What are the so-called external goods? What is the relation between these external goods and the human good as Aristotle had identified it in EN 1, 7?

### Assignment (8): Epicurus, *Physics* (Readings, pp. 358-363)

In his *Letter to Herodotus*, Epicurus presents a summary of his physics. Read the beginning of the *Letter* up to and including the passage on sight (*Readings*, pp. 358-360).

1. Why did Epicurus write this letter?
2. Epicurus distinguishes between things that are non-evident and things that are. Give an (Epicurean) example of evident things. Give an (Epicurean) example of non-evident things.
3. How does Epicurus argue for the existence of atoms and void?
4. Epicurus argues for the existence of an unlimited number of *kosmoi* (worlds). Why does Epicurus assume that there exist such an unlimited number of *kosmoi*?
5. How do we see objects according to Epicurus?
6. How do we see things in dreams according to Epicurus?
7. Why does his epistemology force Epicurus to give the type of account of dreams that he does? I.e. why could he not simply claim that dreams are illusions?

Epicurus continues his letter by discussing how the other senses work. You may skip this bit and continue with his discussion of the human soul (*Readings*, p. 362, last paragraph: “Next, one must see ...” to p. 363, ... as belonging to the soul”).

8. What is the soul like according to Epicurus?
9. Epicurus denies that soul is incorporeal. Which (famous) philosophe(s) in particular held that soul is incorporeal?
10. Epicurus claims that anything incorporeal cannot be conceived of as independently existing, with the exception of the void. Do you agree? I.e. can you think of other incorporeal entities, apart from the void, that somehow have an independent existence?

*Discussion-question 1:* The Epicureans argue that we should not fear death, since the after death there will be no awareness of any possible evil and hence the deceased can suffer no harm. Modern philosophers have argued against the Epicurean position. Thomas Nagel, for example, has argued, even though unaware of it, we may still be harmed. Think, for example, of the case in which my friends

ridicule me without me ever being aware of this. Or, alternatively, suppose that, because of an accident, you, an intelligent person, are reduced to the condition of a happy three-year-old infant, with no knowledge of your previous intellectual achievements. Formulate your own position in this debate on the assumption that the Epicureans correctly assert that death is a state of non-being.

*Discussion-question 2:* Unlike Plato's Socrates, Aristotle, and the Stoics, who all claim in their own way, that happiness consists in living a virtuous life. The Epicureans think that the good life is all about pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Which position, if any of these two, on the good life do you prefer? Why?

**Assignment (9): Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* (Stoic theology) (Readings, pp. 392-395)**

In this passage, Cicero makes the Stoic Balbus defend the Stoic position about the gods.

1. Balbus distinguishes between two important issues concerning the gods: the question whether they exist and the question what they are like. Why, according to Balbus, does anyone agree that the gods exist? How convincing do you find his argument?
2. From § 16 onwards, Balbus addresses the question of what the gods are like. What is the divine like according to the Stoics? How did Chrysippus (§§16-18) argue for this conception of the divine? How convincing is his argument?
3. From § 20 onwards, Balbus presents an argument by Zeno about the nature of god. How is the argument constructed? Is it a good one?

### **Assignment (10): Sextus Empiricus on God (*Readings*, pp. 471-472)**

In this passage, Sextus Empiricus critically examines the various ideas about god and divine providence in order to demonstrate that there are no good reasons to prefer the views on god and divine providence of one school (in particular that of the Stoa) over another.

1. Analyse the argument.
2. Why would Sextus be especially interested in undermining the Stoic dogma about divine providence?
3. Both the Epicureans and the Sceptics seek to undermine the Stoic dogma of divine providence. Compare the two arguments. Which argument, if any, is the stronger? Why?

### **Assignment (11): Plotinus, *Enn. I.6 On Beauty* (Readings, pp. 484-489)**

Plotinus' meditation on Beauty (*Enneads* I.6) takes its inspiration from Diotima's speech in the *Symposium* that we have discussed previously.

1. *Enn. I.6.1* (*Readings*, p. 485): Plotinus discusses and rejects the Stoic theory that visual beauty is a matter of symmetry, since it would entail that "only a composite is beautiful". Why would he be anxious to reject the thesis that only composite things can be beautiful? How does he argue against this thesis? Would Plotinus' Stoic opponent have been impressed by his argument? Why (not)?
2. *Enn. I.6.2* (*Readings*, p. 485) approaches the issue of beauty by contrasting it to ugliness. What, according to Plotinus, causes ugliness? How does Plotinus' definition of ugliness help him to define Beauty?
3. *Enn. I.6.3* (*Readings*, p. 486): "This will suffice for the beauties of the realm of sense, which—images, shadow pictures, fugitives—have invaded matter, there to adorn and to ravish wherever they are perceived." What does Plotinus mean? What text by Plato informs this passage?
4. *Enn. I.6.4-5* (*Readings*, pp. 486-487) discusses beauty and ugliness in the case of the soul. What causes a soul to be beautiful, what causes it to be ugly?
5. *Enn. I.6.6* (*Readings*, p. 487): Plotinus now moves to "a beauty that is its (i.e. the soul's) own. What is this 'own beauty' of the soul?
6. *Enn. I.6.7* (*Readings*, p. 487-488): What, according to Plotinus, is the ultimate object of our desire and hence the ultimate source of all Beauty?
7. *Enn. I.6.8* (*Readings*, p. 488-489) Just as was the case with Diotima's initiation of Socrates into the mysteries of love in the *Symposium*, Plotinus here invites his reader to ascend towards the intelligible. Describe the different steps on Plotinus' version of Diotima's spiritual ladder.
8. *Enn. I.6.9* (*Readings*, p. 489): Plotinus, in conclusion of his treatise, gives us the most important conclusion of his examination of Beauty: "Thus, in sum, one would say that the first hypostasis is Beauty." Plotinus next qualifies this statement. Why should one identify Beauty with the first hypostasis? Why not?

9. *Discussion question*: Today, Plotinus is seen as one of the major Graeco-Roman philosophers. In the past, however, he was often disqualified as a religious mystic. Peter Adamson has formulated a series of 20 rules for doing the history of philosophy (<https://historyofphilosophy.net/rules-history-philosophy>). According to Rule 15, we should, as historians of philosophy, “be broadminded about what counts as “philosophy”. He concludes:

The moral of this story, then, is that historians shouldn't restrict their attention to texts, figures and movements that seem "philosophical" in our sense. Philosophical material is not philosophical because of where it appears, but because (to make a long story short) it is philosophically interesting.

What, if anything, is, according to you, philosophically interesting about Plotinus *Enn.* I.6.1 *On Beauty*? I.e. on what grounds, if any, should we include Plotinus into the history of philosophy, even though his way of doing philosophy seems very different from what passes today as philosophy.