

Lecture: Overview

Phil 234

January 13, 2016

Introductions

Syllabus

The Central Task of the Historian of Philosophy

- Determine what view the historical figure is presenting
- Determine what reasons the historical figure offers to commend that view
- Determine why those reasons might have seemed to that figure to be good reasons to accept that view
- Determine whether and why you agree or disagree with the view

Methodological Principles

- Ancient \neq Dumb
- Principle of Charity: If two interpretations are equally consistent with the text, attribute the more philosophically interesting view to the author.
- Principle of Humility: Be humble in your approach to these texts. If you have an interpretation that attributes an absurd view to a thinker, you should suspect that you haven't exactly figured out what the view is. These views (like all views) can be challenged, but must be challenged *respectfully*.

Chronology of Major Historical Events

- Trojan War (circa 12th Century BCE), semi-mythical, the last year is recounted in Homer's *Iliad*
- By 8th Century BCE, Greek colonies populate southern Italy, Ionia (western Turkey), and elsewhere
- 490 BCE: First Persian Invasion of Greece, under Darius I
- 480 BCE: Second Persian Invasion of Greece, under Xerxes (famous Battle of the 300 at Thermopylae)
- 431–404 BCE: Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, ends with Athens' defeat
- 336–323 BCE: Alexander the Great conquers "all", initiating the Hellenistic Age (*Hêllas* = Greece)

- 196–86 BCE: Gradual takeover of Greece (and “Asia”) by Rome
- 31 BCE: Battle of Actium ends Roman civil wars; Octavian becomes *de facto* emperor (recognized more formally in 27 BCE); transition from Roman Republic to Empire
- 1st–5th Century CE: Spread of Christianity (towards the end of this period, it is adopted by many Roman elite, replacing dominance of polytheistic, “pagan” religion)
- 476 CE: Rome finally conquered, Western Roman Empire falls (but lives on in the East, centered around Constantinople until 1453 CE (when Conquered by Ottoman Empire and renamed “Istanbul”))
- 529 CE: Justinian, emperor of Eastern Roman Empire, declares all pagan schools closed, marking the end of “ancient” philosophy (but much of it lived on, for example in Islamic and Christian philosophy)

Major Philosophical Periods and Philosophers

- Presocratic: 6th–5th Century BCE (centered around Asia Minor (Turkey), Greece, and Southern Italy) (NB: Several of these thinkers were contemporary with or even younger than Socrates)
 - Thales’ alleged prediction of an eclipse in 585 BCE traditionally marks the “beginning” of Ancient Philosophy (so, Ancient Philosophy spans from 585 BCE–529 CE)
 - Major philosophers: Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Xenophon, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Zeno, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Leucippus, Democritus
 - Sophists: Mix of rhetoricians, politicians, and itinerant teachers who taught “success” at political life for a fee (much maligned by Plato)–Gorgias, Protagoras, Melissus
- Classical: 5th–4th Century BCE (centered around Athens)
 - Socrates: 470/69–399 BCE (executed for impiety and corrupting the youth)
 - Plato: 428/27–348 BCE (“student” of Socrates; founded the Academy appx. 387 BCE)
 - Aristotle: 384–322 BCE (went to study at Plato’s Academy at age 17, left after Plato’s death (aged 37); founded the Lyceum 335 BCE)
- Hellenistic: 3rd Century BCE–2nd Century CE (centered around Athens, (later) Alexandria, and (even later) Rome)
 - Major philosophers and “schools”: Epicureanism (Epicurus, Lucretius), Stoicism (Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus, Posidonius, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius), Skepticism (Plato’s Academy beginning under Arcesilaus, Cicero, Sextus Empiricus)
 - * Some people distinguish an “Imperial” period (corresponding to the time of the Roman Empire), containing Cicero, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and others. But, these thinkers mainly just advanced earlier Hellenistic philosophy.
- “Late Antiquity”: 2nd–6th Century CE
 - Neoplatonism (Plotinus); Rise of Christianity and Christian Philosophy; Many commentaries on Aristotle (Alexander of Aphrodisias, Simplicius, Philoponus)