

Introduction to Ancient Greek Philosophy

Professor: Taojie Wang (taojie_wang@brown.edu)

Course Meetings: The course is designed with three meetings/week, 13 weeks/semester timeframe in mind that fits a class size of over 30 students (adjustable to fit other timeframes & smaller class sizes).

Office Hours: Sign up in Google doc.

Course Description

This class will introduce you to some of the major figures and themes in ancient Greek philosophy, from some pre-Socratic Greek philosophers to Plato and Aristotle. We'll work through these figures chronologically, focusing on some of their most famous writings on natural philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Our overarching question will be about the nature and value of philosophical activity. We'll think about what those ancient Greek philosophers are trying to do, why one might want to engage in philosophizing at all, and what role it might play in our living a good human life.

Course Goals

In this course, we will discuss some difficult ancient primary texts, the main concepts they were investigating, and our own views on those topics. Our project involves:

1. Practice close reading and analysis of texts.
2. Develop and refine skills in writing about those texts and topics. Use care in interpreting texts and writing critically, thoughtfully, carefully, and with good use of arguments and evidence.
3. Practice discussing texts and topics with one another in an intellectually honest and productive way.

Course Materials

Required Texts

- Richard D. McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*. Second Edition. Hackett, 2010.
- C. D. C. Reeve (ed.), *A Plato Reader: Eight Essential Dialogues*. Hackett, 2012.
- J. L. Ackrill (ed.), *A New Aristotle Reader*. Princeton University Press, 1987.
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Crisp eds., Cambridge University Press, 2014.

All other readings will be made available electronically on Canvas.

Learning Activities and Assessments

Weekly Response Piece

As a weekly assignment, you are required to write either one response piece to one of the two primary texts for that week or a response to one of your classmates' response piece. A response piece should be between 200-300 words, submitted through Canvas under the Discussion post section. Response pieces are meant to be short notes to help you keep in mind the structure of the text and the question(s) you have while reading the text. It should be something that, once you look back at it during class, can help you have something to say or some questions to ask about the text, which will be important for the discussion sections (more below).

If you are writing a response to someone else's response piece, you are likely to do something different. In that case, if you find the point they made appealing, or that you share the questions they had, you can support them by saying your reasons for finding their point appealing and saying why you think these questions matter. It would also be great if you could offer a potential answer to their questions. On the other hand, if you find that their understanding of the structure of the text differs from yours, this would be a great place for you to see where exactly the difference is and compare the two readings. Or if you have an objection to a point they made, you can do that as well.

Doing these may take a little time at first. However, I will guide you by providing extensive feedback. As the course progresses and you become more familiar with the reading and reflective processes, writing this will become more comfortable and rewarding.

Discussion Sections

Discussion sections will generally take place on Friday. Their aim is to put you in a position to continue the conversation we began in the lecture: to take some of the questions that arise from our texts and figure out what the next move is—and to do so in a collaborative discussion with your peers. This collective work will also help you develop your skills for evaluating philosophical arguments and important claims. Discussion section conversations will take off from the questions you have from writing the response piece. I will collect a few questions from the response pieces from that week.

Papers

Students will be required to write three papers throughout the semester:

- Paper 1: 800 words
- Paper 2: 1000 words
- Paper 3: 1500 words

For each of the papers, you should choose one of the topics we have covered so far in class. In addition to the provided guidelines on how to write a philosophy paper, there will be a class session dedicated to writing before Paper 1 is assigned.

Grades Breakdown

Grades will be based on classroom participation, response pieces, and the three papers. Here's the weight each of these carries:

Discussion section participation: 20%

Response piece: 20%

Paper 1: 10%

Paper 2: 20%

Paper 3: 30%

Attendance Policies

It is expected that you will be present at all course meetings. Please contact me if you cannot make it to class; students may have up to three such excused absences with no effect on the contributions to the participation grade (even without completing any additional work). Beyond three such absences, you will need to contact me to work out alternative arrangements for contributing to our collective work and class conversation (generally, additional comments in the Google Doc, but other options may be available). If you are more than ten minutes late to class, you will be counted as absent.

Diversity, Accessibility, and Accommodation

I strive to make this course a welcoming place for all perspectives, where all students are treated as valued and respected members of the class community regardless of gender, sex, ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual identity, socioeconomic background, or ability. Please reach out to me early in the term if you have a condition, religious commitment, or extenuating circumstance that might require accommodations or modification of any of the course procedures.

Reading Schedule and Important Dates

Week 1

Monday

- Introduction
- Complete the Welcome Survey.

Part I: Pre-Socratic Philosophers

Wednesday

- Early Greek science: Sources, Beginnings (Hesiod), and Thales
Read McKirahan pp. 1–31.

Friday

- Early Greek science: Anaximander and Anaximenes and the Ionian Achievement
Read McKirahan pp. 32–57, 70–78

Week 2

Monday

- Heraclitus
Read McKirahan pp. 112–34.

Wednesday

- Heraclitus (cont.)
Read McKirahan pp. 134–44.

Friday

- Discussion (Heraclitus on change and becoming).

Week 3

Monday

- Parmenides: The Way of Truth
Read McKirahan pp. 145–58.

Wednesday

- Parmenides (cont.): The Way of Truth and the Way of Mortal Opinions
Read McKirahan pp. 158–73.

Friday

- Discussion (Parmenides on change and becoming).

Part II: Socrates and the Sophists

Week 4

Monday

- Socrates' method in Plato's *Euthyphro*; definition; what is piety?
Read McKirahan pp. 365–404. *Euthyphro* 2a–16a (= Reeve, pp. 1–20).

Wednesday

- Socrates on trial: his defense
Read Plato, *Apology* 17a–42a (Reeve, pp. 21–46)

Friday

- Philosophy paper writing workshop.
- Paper 1 assigned.

Week 5

Monday

- Socrates the man, his trial, imprisonment, and death
Read Symposium, Speech of Alcibiades, 212c–223d, Crito 43a–54e, death scene in the *Phaedo* 115a–118a (Reeve, pp. 196–208, 47–59, 149–52)

Part III: Plato

Wednesday

- Introduction to Plato's philosophy.
Read Plato's *Meno* (Reeve pp. 60–96)

Friday

- Discussion (what kind of person was Socrates?).
- Paper 1 due.

Week 6

Monday

- Ways to Forms (1): Love
Read Plato's *Symposium* 172a–223d (Reeve pp. 153–208)

Wednesday

- Love and Rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*
Read *Phaedrus* 277a–279c (Reeve, 209–66)

Friday

- Discussion (Plato's Socrates on love).

Week 7

Monday

- Ways to Forms: (2) Death: *Phaedo* on the immortality of the Soul; doctrine of recollection
Read *Phaedo* 57a–95e (Reeve pp. 97–134). Reread *Meno* 80d–86c (Reeve 72–80)

Wednesday

- *Phaedo* (cont.): Socrates' intellectual autobiography: four causes; final argument for the immortality of the soul; method of hypothesis
Read *Phaedo* 95e–118a (Reeve pp. 134–52) and method of hypothesis in the *Meno* 86c–100c (Reeve 80–96)

Friday

- Discussion (Plato's Socrates on death and the immortality of the soul).

Week 8

Monday

- *Republic* Book V. Plato on knowledge, belief, and the Forms Read *Republic* V, 471c–480a, *Meno* 97a–98c (Reeve, pp. 422–433, 92–93)

Wednesday

- *Republic* Books VI and VII. Ways to Forms (3): Education. Sun, Line, and Cave; the Form of the Good, dialectic.
Read *Republic* Book VI, 505d–511e, and Book VII, 514a–524d (Reeve, pp. 456–74)

Friday

- Discussion (Plato's Socrates on Education and the Good).
- Paper 2 assigned.

Part IV: Aristotle

Week 9

Monday

- Introduction to Aristotle: The *Categories* Read *Categories* 1–5 (Ackrill, pp. 1–11)

Wednesday

- Aristotle's Natural Philosophy: the problem of change; matter and form Read *Physics* Book I (Ackrill, pp. 81–93)

Friday

- Discussion (Aristotle on change).
- Paper 2 due.

Week 10

Monday

- Aristotle on Nature; artifact analogy; potentiality and actuality
- Read *Physics* II.1–2 and *On the Soul* II.5 (Ackrill, pp. 93–97; 174–76)

Wednesday

- Aristotle's teleology
Read *Physics* II.3, II.8–9, *Parts of Animals* I.1 and I.5 (Ackrill, pp. 98–100, 106–110, 220–28).

Friday

- Discussion (Aristotle on change continued, response to pre-Socratics).

Week 11

Monday

- Aristotle's Psychology.
Read *On the Soul* II.1–4, *Meteorology* I.1 & 12 (Ackrill, pp. 165–74, 158–60)

Wednesday

- Introduction to Aristotle's Ethics. Highest good; Function Argument
- Read *Nicomachean Ethics* I (Ackrill pp. 363–76)

Friday

- Discussion (the aim of human life and the Function Argument).

Week 12

Monday

- Aristotle's *Ethics*: Friends and Friendship I
Read *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VIII.

Wednesday

- Aristotle's *Ethics*: Friends and Friendship II
Read *Nicomachean Ethics* Book IX.

Friday

- Discussion (Aristotle on friendship and love).
- Paper 3 assigned (due by the end of next week).