

PHIL331-01A: Ancient Philosophy

2-4-6, 9:40 – 10:50, Quad 344

Dennis Beach, OSB

Office hours: 11:00-noon; 1:00-3:00
evenings (Mary 229) by appointment

Description:

At about the same time that some other Greeks were inventing politics, written language, history, and money, Plato arguably invented philosophy, in part to help people figure out how to cope with these other new inventions. His student Aristotle transformed philosophy into a professional study with its own technical vocabulary. The rest of the Western philosophical tradition has, in many ways, responded to those innovations. Through an intensive reading of some works of Plato and Aristotle, we will hope to gain some familiarity with the beginnings of the Western philosophical tradition.

Texts:

- ❑ Assorted selections from Pre-Socratic philosophers: Web-accessed as needed.
- ❑ Plato: *Laches and Charmides*, translated by Rosamond Kent Sprague, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992.
- ❑ Plato, *Protagoras*. Web accessible excerpt.
- ❑ Plato. *Symposium*. Translated by Paul Woodruff and Alexander Nehamas. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.
- ❑ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*. Translated by Allan Bloom. 2nd Edition. New York: Basic Books, 1968, 1991. (Other translations may be used, but some material from Bloom's notes may be used).
- ❑ Plato, *Timaeus*. Web accessible excerpt.
- ❑ Aristotle, *Selections*. Translated by Terence Irwin and Gail Fine. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995.
- ❑ Epictetus, *The Handbook [Encheiridion]*. Translated by N. P. White. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983.

Objectives:

Our main objective will be to become conversant with the Socratic, Platonic and Aristotelian ways of thinking that have shaped Western thought to the present day. We will learn how to read Platonic Dialogues (although each text has to be approached, to some degree, on its own term, as a unique work of art and thought). Still, there are some constants: Socratic questioning and “care of the soul,” a concern for the unity and coherence of the highest truths, irony as a stimulus to self-examination; a value place on truth and what is essential over mere appearances and opinions. For Aristotle, systematic thought and clarity of vocabulary and method. For Plato and Socrates, concern not only for truth, but also for beauty. We will also try to gain appreciation of the enigmatic insights into perennial problems that are offered by the Pre-Socratics, and creative appropriation of classical Greek philosophy of Epictetus as a representative of the Pre-Socratics. We will also seek to gain an appreciation of that peculiar and propitious culture that was ancient Greece, to gain an appreciation of the context which gave birth to and nurtured these unparalleled giants of human thought – these giants of human *being*. Our overall goal will be double: 1) to help lay for ourselves a solid foundation for further philosophical study, since Plato and Aristotle are essential for such a foundation; 2) to grasp and to be inspired by the enduring insights that Plato and Aristotle offer to thinkers of all times and places.

As in all my upper-level philosophy classes, we will practice the skill of what the philosopher Nietzsche has called “slow reading”: “This art does not so easily get anything done, it teaches to read *well*, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers...” (F. Nietzsche, Preface to *Daybreak*). We will learn to read slowly, think carefully, and question deeply.

Classroom Method and Daily Expectations:

The above remarks on slow reading are apropos of the methods we will employ in the classroom. Nietzsche is right on both counts: slow reading does not get much *done* yet it teaches to read *well*. There is no formula or clinical procedure for doing such close reading: one simply begins and works at it. Such study requires a spirit of generosity, both towards the writer and towards the reader – one has to assume that the thinker saw deeply into a problem and tried to illuminate it, and one has to assume that this insight is accessible to the reader with an active and open mind, even if the reader also glimpses new problems and pursues new solutions.

Plato and Aristotle are each difficult writers, and their difficulties are different.: Plato is sometimes deceptively simple on the surface, but the dialogue form means that one has to ask always, what is really going on below the surface? What does Plato think about the opinions being expressed, both by Socrates and by his “interlocutors.” On top of this, one has constantly to resist the temptation to simplify “what Plato thinks” to a set of formulas, as if the dialogues are some kind of clever technique to simultaneously encode and disguise some set of static truths, At the same time, though interpretation is both necessary and problematic, the notion that “everything is open to interpretation and thus depends on opinion” is the most unSocratic, unPlatonic conclusion one could entertain. Aristotle, by contrast, tempts one to despair by both the systematic, encyclopedic methodology he employs and the enigmatic, sometimes impenetrably elliptical nature of his writing. Thus both thinkers require the reader to exercise vigilance and motivate him or herself to connect with the problems under discussion – otherwise the writings can remain abstract and alien. I will expect to find evidence of your engagement with the problems broached by the texts in our class work and discussion.

I will also expect you to be able to communicate by e-mail and by keeping abreast of the web schedule, as I will send out various clarifications, study questions, exam reviews, etc., this way. The schedule of readings will be kept on the web, linked from our class “jump page”:

<http://employees.csbsju.edu/dbeach/ancient/>

Requirements and Grading:

The section on daily expectations outlines one part of the requirements. I should add that one is expected to demonstrate the required preparation by active participation in class. *The attendance policy is strict: I allow no freebies, will begin to harass you after the second unexcused absence, will drop your participation grade to a “D” at the 3rd, and remove you from the class roster at the 4th.* Absences may be excused if you contact me ahead of time, but only for illness or family emergencies. Doctor’s appointments are unexcused unless for emergencies. All absences, whether excused or not, should be communicated to me ASAP, ideally before the absence; failure to communicate makes the absence count double. Missing an exam results in an automatic grade of F/zero.

Grading will be based as follows. You must pass each of the graded parts to pass the course.

- ❑ Two Exams (20% each): Wednesday, March 15, and Wednesday May 10, 2:00 – 4:00 PM.
- ❑ 2 short papers (15% each), plus a group presentation (10%) on a “Ancient Greek Thought and Culture” secondary source, with a longer individual paper (20%). More details to follow.
- ❑ Daily Preparation and Participation will act as a “ceiling” for your final grade; that is, preparation and participation at a “C” or “B” level will mean that the final grade can be no higher than this “ceiling.”

NB: We may revisit this plan once we can assess our progress and ability to stay on course.