

V 2101 Pre-Socratics through Augustine

Fall 09
T/TR 11:00 to 12:15
209 Havemeyer Hall

Readings

The following books are ordered at Book Culture (formerly Labyrinth), on 112th st., between Broadway and Amsterdam:

- *Early Greek Philosophy*, translated and with an introduction by Jonathan Barnes (Penguin);
- Plato. *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Hackett: Indianapolis, 1996);
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (translation by Ross, revised by Ackrill and Urmson, Oxford).

Additional readings will be on reserve in Butler Library (indicated on the syllabus: BL). You can download the texts from Reserves through the course webpage on Courseworks.

Requirements

- Each student will be expected to read the texts prior to the class for which they are assigned.
- Regular attendance at, and participation in class.
- Three one-page assignments, one short paper (ca. 1500 words).
- A midterm and a final examination.

Grading

- Midterm 20%.
- Final examination 30%.
- Paper 20%.
- Three one-page assignments and in-class participation, together 30%.

Course Description

The course offers an introduction to ancient philosophy—it does not presuppose any prior knowledge of philosophy or antiquity.

Main objectives of the class:

- Through selected readings, we shall study how ancient philosophers *engage with each others' views*, and with pre-philosophical views.
- We shall practice the skills needed for the study of the *different* kinds of

texts in which ancient philosophy survives (fragments, dialogues, lecture-notes, treatises).

- Introduction to the ancient discussion of ‘What is *virtue*?’
- Introduction to the ancient discussion of ‘What is *knowledge*?’
- Introduction to the ancient discussion of ‘What is *being*?’

We start with a brief study of Pre-Socratic philosophy, focusing on Thales, Parmenides and Democritus. We will explore the outstanding influence of Parmenides by asking how the atomists—Leucippus and Democritus—engage with his theses.

The largest part of the course will be devoted to the so-called classical period of ancient philosophy, represented by Plato and Aristotle. Before we turn to the study of some complete Platonic dialogues, we try to get a sense of who Socrates—Plato’s teacher—is. We do so by reading some excerpts from Platonic texts (*Phaedo* 96a-99d, *Apology* 19d-22e). Our study of Plato then begins with the *Euthyphro*, an early dialogue (according to a widely accepted relative chronology of Plato’s works). In the *Euthyphro*, Plato asks his interlocutor, Euthyphro, for an account of piety. As the dialogue proceeds, it becomes clear that it is very difficult to give the right kind of answer to a “What is X?” question (in this case “What is piety?”). This type of question is key to Plato’s picture of Socrates: Socrates is interested in definitions, or accounts of things. With any object of study, he wants to know *what it is*.

From the *Euthyphro*, we turn to the *Meno*, where the same problem is explored further, this time via the question “What is virtue?” How can we search something that we do not know? If we do not know what virtue is, how do we even begin to study it? Are we doomed to be ignorant?

In the *Republic*, Plato present an account of what it is that we come to know when we are able to satisfactorily answer a “What is X?” question. The person who knows the answer to “What is the Good?” knows the Form of the Good. She knows an intelligible, abstract entity: the Good. Our study of the *Republic* shall focus on what precisely this means. What are Plato’s Forms? How should we understand his distinction between being and becoming, and how does it relate to Plato’s distinction between knowledge and belief? Why is knowledge so important to our lives?

In Aristotle, we begin with some excerpts from the *Topics* (a book on method), and then study in detail large parts of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Book I of the *Metaphysics*. Like Plato, Aristotle discusses knowledge and wisdom in ethics: knowledge and wisdom are integral to the leading of a good life. Indeed, Aristotle argues that the life of theory is the best life available for human beings. We study Aristotle’s theory of action, his conception of happiness, his notion of practical wisdom, and his discussion of the best human life.

Metaphysics I begins with the famous sentence that all human beings desire to know. It is a key Aristotelian claim that knowledge is concerned with ‘the why.’ The knowledgeable or wise person can explain why things are the way they are—she knows the first causes and first principles of things. Since knowledge is so centrally concerned with causes, we need a theory of causes. Aristotle develops a theory according to which there are four kinds of causes. In *Metaphysics* I, he reviews the positions of his predecessors, the PreSocratics and Plato, arguing that they came up with preliminary versions of these four kinds of causes. The fact that they did not come up with yet another kind of cause confirms for Aristotle that, indeed, there are precisely the four kinds of causes he thinks there are.

We then turn to Hellenistic philosophy. We briefly look at Epicurean atomism, a theory which aims to improve on PreSocratic atomism, and arguably is not vulnerable to Aristotle's objections against atomism—or at least, not in the same way in which PreSocratic atomism is.

Epicurus coins the notion of a *criterion of truth*, a notion that also becomes central in Stoic philosophy and to the debates between Stoics and Sceptics. We discuss some key Hellenistic arguments regarding knowledge, belief, and the criterion of truth.

The course ends with a discussion of St. Augustine's theory of knowledge, which anticipates in interesting ways arguments that are associated with Descartes.

Outline

Weeks 1-2: *Thales, Parmenides, Melissus, Leucippus, Democritus*

Thales: all fragments in Barnes chpt. 2, but with special attention on Aristotle, *Met.* 983b6-11, 17-27; Parmenides: all fragments in Barnes chpt. 9, esp. 28 B 8.1-52; Melissus: first fragment in Barnes, chpt. 10 (Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 103.13-104.15); Leucippus: first fragment in: Barnes chpt. 20 (Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 28.4-15); Democritus: first and second fragment in chpt. 21, I Atomism (Simplicius, *Commentary on On the Heavens* 294.30-295.22 and Aristotle, *Met.* 985b4-20).

Week 3-4/1: Socratic Investigation
Phaedo 96a-99d, *Apology* 19d-22e, *Euthyphro*.

Weeks 4/2-7/1: Plato on Knowledge and Belief; Being and Becoming
Meno, *Republic*.

Weeks 7/2-9/1: Aristotle on the Good Life
Topics I (selections), *Nicomachean Ethics* I, II, VI, VII, X.

Weeks 9/2-10: Aristotle on Wisdom and Causes
Metaphysics I (BL).

Week 11-12/1: *Epicurus*
Fragments on physics (BL) 4A, B; 5 A, B; 6A; 7 A, B; 8 A, B; 9 A, B, C; 10 A, B; 11 A, B, D, E.
Aristotle, *Physics* IV.7 and 8 (section which is online) (BL). *Early Greek Philosophy*, Barnes, section on Zeno. Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 138.3-6, 138.29-140.6, 140.18-141.11.

Week 12/2-13: *Stoics*
Fragments on virtue and on the theory of knowledge, some Sceptic arguments and Stoic responses (BL)
60 (all), 61 (all), 39 (all), 40 (all), 41 (all).

Week 14: *Augustine*
Passages from *The Trinity* on knowledge (BL).

Outline of assignments

Week 2: 1-page assignment on Pre-Socratics

Week 4: 1-page assignment on Plato's *Euthyphro*

Week 8 or 10: Paper on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* or *Metaphysics*.

Week 12 or 13: 1-page assignment on *Epicurus* or *Stoics*

Note 1: Precise reading assignments for each class will be announced in class. Please read emails associated with this class. I will use Courseworks to send out assignments and information. Further material will be uploaded to the website on Courseworks.

Note 2: Regular, punctual attendance is a requirement for this course. Please be aware that announcements sometimes have to be made at the **beginning of class**.