

# Syllabus: Introduction to Ancient Philosophy

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## ***1 Overview***

In this introductory course we will inhabit philosophical worldviews that will sometimes strike you as deeply strange, especially those of Plato and Aristotle. The point will be to understand them and their views on metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy, and more in a way that allows us to learn from them. That does not mean agreement; they are not always easy people to *agree* with. Rather we will try to understand why Plato might be so skeptical about democracy; how he might have been pushed to a strange metaphysics of reincarnation; why Aristotle might have thought the life of contemplation was the best life for a human; and why there were such bitter controversies between them over the nature of properties. Both of them were also relentless providers of *arguments*, at a time when the study of argumentation itself was just beginning. So we will also spend a good deal of time evaluating these arguments, partly to see whether any are convincing today.

## ***2 Prerequisites***

There are no prerequisites, though students who have taken an introduction to philosophy and/or first formal logic course will find themselves especially prepared. My hope is that this course is itself suitable as an introductory course, though.

## ***3 Aims***

- To learn how to read historical philosophers, especially those whose starting assumptions are both very different from your own, and usually not explicitly stated.
- To learn how to examine arguments both charitably and critically, and to object to them.
- To learn how to engage in respectful, argumentative discussion with one another.
- To learn some of the most historically influential answers to some of the most difficult and enduring questions humans have asked.

## 4 *Schedule*<sup>1</sup>

You can think of this as the most ambitious version of the class, the class I would teach if I were teaching myself and in advance of meeting any one of you. Depending on class interest, these readings are subject to change—please let me know if there is something you'd like to read about and discuss that isn't on here! Or it might be that we will need to slow down. Revisions are possible, even likely.

I will divide the class *thematically*; we will begin with epistemology, and then do metaphysics, ethics, and politics. But before that, we will read the play *Oedipus Rex*, which we will return to thematically throughout.

### 4.1 *Epistemology*

Plato's idiosyncratic epistemological views frame an enormous amount of how he views the world: it centers his ethics, his metaphysics, and his political philosophy. For Aristotle, while extremely important, it is less central. And for Sextus, as we will see, our inability to know basically anything robs it of any important job to do in how we live. In deference to Plato, then, we'll begin with epistemology.

- Plato, *Apology*
- Plato, *Meno* (two classes)
- Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* (selections)
- Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (selections)

### 4.2 *Metaphysics*

Metaphysics is more or less a category we read back onto the ancient authors; they would not recognize a unified subject. Even so, topics we now call metaphysical were of fundamental importance to Plato and Aristotle; between them they worked out many of the positions therein that we take for granted. So, picking off from Plato's epistemology, we turn to his metaphysics of souls and forms. We then turn to Aristotle's criticisms and modifications.

- Plato, *Phaedo* (two classes)
- Plato, *Republic*, selections from books four through nine (two classes)
- Aristotle, *Categories* (selections)
- Aristotle, *De Anima*, books two and three (selections) (two classes)
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.1–I.6 (selections)

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<sup>1</sup> I am assuming a roughly thirteen-week course with twenty-six or twenty-seven meetings, where each bullet point represents a meeting.

### 4.3 *Ethics*

Ethics suffuses nearly all of Plato's work; it is of concern to him in even the most theoretical dialogues. Aristotle's discussions are more localized to his specifically ethical writings. Interestingly, they don't seem to have many explicit disagreements between them—they are both virtue theorists who prized *eudaimonia*, which we might translate loosely as happiness. In fact, there are few ancient philosophers who *wouldn't* be characterizable this way. The bitterest disagreements concerned the status of pleasure: is it the only thing worth pursuing in a life? We now call that view *hedonism*, and it will be one of our primary focuses. The other will be voluntariness and responsibility: does the good person do wrong voluntarily, and what is voluntariness?

- Plato, *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* (selections)
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII.11–14 and X (two classes)
- Epicurus, Letter to Menoecus
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III.1–5
- Augustine, On the Free Choice of the Will (selections)

### 4.4 *Political Philosophy*

We will end with an examination of *political philosophy* in Plato and Aristotle, specifically with an eye to the role of *knowledge* in politics, the status of democracy, and what the greatest dangers to political communities are.

- Gorgias, *Encomium to Helen* and *Defense of Palamedes*
- Plato, *Gorgias* (two classes)
- Plato, *Republic*, books eight and nine (two classes)
- Aristotle, *Politics*, book one
- Aristotle, *Politics*, book six

## 5 *Assignments*

Class participation is worth a fixed 15%, and attendance is mandatory. Beyond that, there are *three possibilities*. Each will be worth 55% of the rest of the grade.

1. You and another student might decide you are or will be most interested in one particular topic. Then you may both write a 5–7 page paper, followed by a 3–5 page *reply* to your friend's paper in which you raise the strongest objections you can, followed by a 3–5 page *response* to your friend's objections.

2. You may write *four small papers* (3–5 pages) on an issue raised in each section.
3. This option will be limited, depending on the size of the class: you may help to maintain a detailed class *text*, mostly a detailed glossary of terms and ideas. This text will eventually be used to study for the final exam.

The final exam will be worth 30% of the grade and will ask short essay questions about all the material from the class.

## **6 *Odds and Ends***

Regarding plagiarism and other sorts of academic dishonesty, [insert the university's academic dishonest policy here].

This class will require *respectful* participation; in discussion, you will be expected to respond politely to one another and engage one another's points in an open and intellectually honest way. Any sort of insulting or demeaning language will not be tolerated. You will also be expected to pay attention. For some, that means not using laptops, and for others it doesn't. Because I don't want to single anyone out either way, I will rely on your self-knowledge to know which class you're in, and to not distract anyone else in class with them.

And please do come to me with any questions or concerns you have at any point, either by email or by office hours!