

Myth, religion and philosophy in ancient Greece

Class Time/Place: Mondays, 6:30-9:30pm

Venue: WMY402

Instructor: Ho Wai Ming

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8/F Hui Yeung Shing Building

Course description

The course aims at providing students with an introduction to myth, religion, and especially philosophy in ancient Greece. Through close study of selected passages we learn how gods and human beings are conceived in Greek myths and religion, and how those human-like divinities are transformed into transcendent entities, as well as how the impassable gap between human and divine is surmounted in the Greek philosophy. In so doing, they may be inspired to re-think their own potentials and relation to divinity.

Everything begins with Homer. Homer was the educator of Hellas (Plato, Rep. 606e). In his epics we find not only ancient cults and rituals, but also myths. The Greek word *muthos*, from which the modern word “myth” comes, means tale, narrative and story; as such *muthos* does not carry any implication of falsehood or implausibility. Myths are about gods, and as such they form the core of Greek religion; over and above, myths are about human beings. In the Homeric epics, gods and human beings share the same traits and characteristics, and yet humans are separated from gods by an unbridgeable chasm. In the form of myth, the epics invite us to reflect on goal and meaning of a mortal’s life. After Homer, Hesiod gave mythological accounts of the origin of the universe and the evolution of human races. From Homer to Hesiod, the particularity that marks the stories of Trojan War gives way to a more general *theory* of theo- and cosmogony, albeit still in mythological form. From Hesiod to Presocratic natural philosophers (*phusiologoi*), a process called “From *muthos* to *logos*” took place in the 6th century BCE. Those natural philosophers endeavored to expound the principles and order of the universe. Instead of myths they provide naturalistic and philosophical accounts. With them philosophy and natural

science in the Western world began. Socrates turned the focus of philosophical thinking from exploring the universe to investigation of ethical matters. Plato continued his master's concerns about ethical matters, yet projecting the foundation of morality to a transcendent realm of forms, and in his later dialogues he widened the scope of investigation to cover questions of natural philosophy. In addition, Plato not only *plays* with Greek myths, he also adapts Greek cults and rituals to convey his own philosophical thoughts. In many ways, he is a great integrator. Aristotle, Plato's most gifted and rebellious student, conceived his metaphysics as theology, i.e. theory (*logos*) of divinity (*theos*). Deprived of all anthropological traits, gods become pure thinking substances. In the course, we will study the transition of myth to philosophy, as well as the integration of the former into the latter.

Assessment

Participation and presentation: 25%

Short essay: 25%

Final term paper: 50%

Course outline

1. Introduction – Man and God in Homer

- Reading: selected passages from *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

2. Hesiod—mythological account of the genesis of the universe

- Genealogy of gods and the world order under the reign of Zeus
- Comparison with the Homeric conception of god and man
- Reading: selected passages from *Theogony* and *Works and Days*

3. The Milesians—Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes

- General features of the Milesian cosmology (natural philosophy)
- The god of Milesian natural philosophers
- Anaximander of Miletus—*apeiron* as the *archē* and the genesis of the universe

4. Heraclitus of Ephesus and the ever-changing universe

- Doctrine of flux and Plato's *radical* interpretation
- Doctrine of unity in opposites—Heraclitus' *logos*
- Cosmology
- The Heraclitean god

5. Parmenides of Elea and his doctrine of being (*eon*)

- The true nature of being—everlasting, continuous, monotonous and unchanging ...
- The identity of being and thinking
- The negation of changes and phenomena
- Cosmological account of the phenomenal world

6. God and Theory of Ideas in Plato

- Reception of Heraclitus' theory of flux and Parmenides' theory of being
- Doctrine of ideas—metaphysics
- Being and thinking—epistemology
- The tripartite soul—psychology
- Genesis of the universe—Plato's god and cosmology
- Love of beauty and immortality—*Symposium* and the re-working of the Eleusinian Mysteries
- Selected passages from Plato's dialogues, esp. *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Timaeus*, *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*

7. The Aristotelian God

- Theory of forms and hylomorphic conception of human beings—metaphysics and psychology
- Pure intellect as god, intellectual activities as the highest form of life—from metaphysics to theology

General introduction

Homer

Emily Kearns. *The Gods in the Homeric epics*, in the *Cambridge Companion to Homer* pp. 59-73

Michael Clarke. *Manhood and Heroism*, in the *Cambridge Companion to Homer* pp. 74-90
The essays of Kearns and Clarke provide clear introduction to the concepts of man and god in Homer.

Hesiod

Mondi, Robert. *Chaos and the Hesiodic Cosmology* in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 92 (1989) pp. 1-41

A detailed and creative interpretation of Hesiod's concept of chaos, the first principle of universe.

Presocratic philosophers

A.A. Long *The Scope of Early Greek Philosophy* in the *Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy* pp. 1-21

A good and brief introduction to the scope of Presocratic thinking. While stressing the importance of natural philosophy, the author also calls for attention to the diversity of themes and variety of styles in the Presocratic philosophy.

Kahn, Charles H. *The Achievement of Early Greek Philosophy: A Drama in Five Acts: From Thales to Timaeus* in *Early Greek Philosophy The Presocratics and the Emergence of Reason* 1-17

Clear, easy-to-follow introduction to the development of Presocratic thinking

Thales and Anaximander

Keimpe, Algra. *The beginnings of cosmology* in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy* pp. 45-65

Heraclitus

Graham, Daniel W. *Heraclitus: Flux,, Order and Knowledge*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy*, 169-188

A brief and clear introduction to Heraclitus

Parmenides

Perl, Eric D. *Thinking Being: Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition* pp.7-17
The part on Parmenides in Perl's excellent book on metaphysics in ancient Greece

Plato

Kraut, Richard. "Plato", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/plato/>>.

Aristotle

Shields, Christopher. "Aristotle", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),
URL= <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/aristotle/>>.

Primary sources:

Presocratics:

Hermann Diels and Walter Kranz (DK) *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th ed.
Hildesheim 1952

The standard sourcebook of Presocratic thinkers. All quotations are made according to the DK numbering.

Kirk, Raven and Schofield (KRS) *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1983

English translation of selected fragments with detailed explanation. Good for beginners.

[中譯]

《前苏格拉底哲学家：原文精选的批评史》华东师范大学出版社 2014-15

Daniel W. Graham (TEGP) *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy: The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Presocratics* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2010

English translation of all philosophical fragments with brief explanations.

McKirahan, Richard D. *Philosophy Before Socrates* Hackett: Indianapolis/Cambridge 2010
Useful selections of Presocratic fragments with brief explanation

《古希臘羅馬哲學》北京大學哲學系外國哲學史教研室編譯，商務印書館 1962 年版

Plato

John M. Cooper ed. *Plato. Complete Works* Hackett Publishing Company:
Indianapolis/Cambridge 1997

There are many translations of Plato's dialogues, both online and in printed form.

《柏拉图全集》四卷 王晓朝译；人民出版社 2002-2003

Aristotle

Jonathan Barnes ed. *The Complete Works of Aristotle* Vol.1 and 2 Princeton University
Press: Princeton 1984

Same as Plato, there are numerous translations of Aristotle's works. The editions and commentaries of David Ross are good; the Clarendon Aristotle Series provides good and detailed commentaries on Aristotle works.

《亚里士多德全集》十卷 苗力田主编；中国人民大学出版社 1997

Other Research Literature

Fritz Graf. *Greek Mythology: An Introduction* tr. by Thomas Marier, The John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 1993

Suzanne Saïd and Monique Trédé. *A Short History of Greek Literature* tr. by Trista Selous and others, Routledge: London/New York 1999

Patricia Curd and Daniel W. Graham ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy* Oxford University Press: Oxford 2008

Graham, Daniel W. *Explaining the cosmos: the Ionian tradition of scientific philosophy* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 2006

Charles H. Kahn *Essays on Being* Oxford University Press: Oxford 2012

This book contains essays written at different times by Kahn. The study of the meaning of being is highly relevant to the understanding of Greek philosophy, esp. of Parmenides and Plato.

Perl, Eric D. *Thinking Being: Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition* Brill: Leiden/Boston 2014

Good introduction to the metaphysics of, among others, Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle

Charles H. Kahn *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1996

A good introduction to the early and middle dialogues of Plato.

Christopher Shields *Aristotle.* Routledge: New York 2013

A detailed and clearly written introduction. Perhaps no need to write the whole book at this stage, just take a look at the table of content and read the chapters that are relevant to your learning.

《赫拉克利特著作殘篇》 T.M.罗宾森英译评注; 楚荷中译; 桂林市: 广西师范大学出版社 2007

《理想國篇：譯注與詮釋》徐學庸譯注; 台灣商務印書館 2009 初版/ 合肥: 安徽人民出版社, 2013 年 (簡體中文及希臘文對照版)

《柏拉图的〈会饮〉》刘小枫等译；北京：华夏出版社 2003

Further reference will be given in handouts distributed during the course.