

PHIL5370 Seminar: Issues in the History of Western Philosophy

Greek Philosophy: From the Presocratics to Plato and Aristotle

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Course description

Western philosophy began with the Greek thinkers in the 6th century BCE. Aristotle named the Presocratics natural philosophers (*phusiologoi*), as they focused on determining the principle(s) of the universe. (see esp. *Metaphysics* book 1 ch.3) Oversimplified though this characterization may be, it grasps a main concern of the Presocratics, namely to provide a naturalistic and philosophical interpretation of the origin and the basic structure of the world. The search for principle(s) (*archē*, plural *archai*) took different forms in the course of time. The Milesians began to inquire into the principles and to give accounts of the genesis of the universe; for Heraclitus, the universe is ever-changing, and he focused more on cosmology, i.e. on determining the underlying structure (*logos*) of the universe than on providing a cosmogonic account of it. Instead of a cosmology, Parmenides put forth an ontology in his existent fragments. According to him, the true nature of being (*eon/einai*) must be everlasting, continuous and unchanging. Each in a different way, thinkers after Parmenides—Anaxagoras, Empedocles and Democritus—had to respond to his innovative and challenging conception of being. Meanwhile, the mysterious Pythagoras taught immortality of soul that obscures the line between men and gods; he probably founded a sect that observed a strict code of conduct. Later the Pythagoreans put forth an innovative ontology according to which all things have numbers, as well as limiters (*perainonta*) and the unlimited (*apeira*) as principles.

Following these lines of inquiry, Plato strived to find a way out of Heraclitus' emphasis on perpetual changes and of Parmenides emphasis on eternal uniformity. His theory of ideas can be seen as an attempt to expose the ontological foundation of the world of phenomena, and to lay down the foundation of knowledge. On the other hand, from Pythagoras Plato

learnt the immortality of soul; and the Pythagorean theory of conceiving being in mathematical terms exerts profound influences on Plato's philosophy; the prominent role of limiters and the unlimited lays the foundation of his theory of principles, according to which the one and the indefinite dyad together form the basis of all kinds of being. Aristotle criticized Plato's theory of ideas, and put forth his own theory of changes. It is often said that Aristotle replaced Plato's transcendent ideas with his immanent forms (*eidē*). However, a closer look into Aristotle's conceptions of god and intellect reveals a transcendent dimension of his philosophy, which may be highly relevant to Aristotle's theory of knowledge.

This course aims at providing an overview of the above development of Greek philosophy. Selected fragments from the Presocratic thinkers, as well as passages taken from the writings of Plato and Aristotle will be discussed. Through careful readings of the selected passages, students should become acquainted with the central themes and issues, as well as with the origin and history of the Greek philosophy.

Assessment

Participation and presentation: 25%

Short essay: 25%

Final term paper: 50%

Course outline

1. The Milesians—Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes
 - General features of the Milesian cosmology (natural philosophy)
 - Anaximander of Miletus—*apeiron* as the *archē* and the genesis of the universe
2. Pythagoras of Samos
 - Immortality and reincarnation of soul
 - The cult of Pythagoras—the Pythagorean way of life
3. 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
4. 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
5. Philolaus of Croton—Pythagorean metaphysics of being
- Limiters and the Unlimited
 - Numbers and being
6. Democritus of Abdera and the Atomists
- Reception of Parmenides
 - The theory of atoms and void
 - Atomic cosmology—infinite number of worlds, chance and necessity
7. 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—cosmology
 - Brief account of the unwritten doctrines—theory of principles
 - Selected passages from Plato's dialogues, esp. *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Timaeus*, *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*
8. Aristotle
- Division of science (*epistēmē*)
 - Theory of changes—physics
 - Theory of forms—metaphysics
 - Theory of soul and the hylomorphic conception of man—psychology
 - Main differences between Aristotle and Plato
 - Selected passages from the Corpus Aristotelicum, esp. the *Categories*, *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *de anima*

Major references

Recommended Pre-class readings

General introduction

A.A. Long *The Scope of Early Greek Philosophy* in the *Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy* 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*, 45-65

Heraclitus

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

Parmenides

Perl, Eric D. *Thinking Being: Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition*, p.7-17

Pythagoras and Philolaus

Huffman, Carl A. *Reason and Myth in Early Pythagorean Cosmology* in *Early Greek Philosophy The Presocratics and the Emergence of Reason*, p. 55-76

Democritus

Taylor C.C.W. *The atomists* in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy* p. 181-204

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 1983

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

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《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 2010

English translation of all philosophical fragments with brief explanations.

McKirahan, Richard D. *Philosophy Before Socrates* Hackett: Indianapolis/Cambridge²2010

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* Cambridge 1997

Benjamin Jowett tr. *The Complete Works of Plato* Akasha Classics 2009

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 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

Further recommended readings

Readings for specific topics will be given during the course.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy provides good introductory essays.

J.L. Ackrill *Aristotle the Philosopher* Oxford 1981

A brief and clear introduction to Aristotle . Good for beginners.

Georgios Anagnostopoulos ed. *A Companion to Aristotle* Blackwell 2009

Jonathan Barnes ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* Cambridge 1995

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

Gail Fine ed. *Plato 1 and 2* Oxford 1999, reprinted 2003, 2008

Fine's editions include many good studies of Plato's philosophy for more advanced learners.

Gail Fine ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Plato* Oxford 2011

Useful short introductions to various aspects of Plato's philosophy

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

Terence Irwin *Plato's Ethics* Oxford 1995

A detailed account of Plato's early and middle dialogues, esp. Republic. Just take a look at the table of content to choose chapters that you are interested in.

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

Irwin and Kahn provide two detailed studies of Plato for more advanced learners.

Charles H. Kahn *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans*, Indianapolis: Hackett 2001

A clear and brief introduction to the teachings of Pythagoras and the further development of Pythagoreanism.

Charles H. Kahn *Essays on Being* 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.

A. A. Long *Cambridge companion to Early Greek Philosophy* Cambridge 1999

Joe McCoy ed. *Early Greek Philosophy: The Presocratics and the Emergence of Reason* Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press 2013

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

David Ross *Aristotle: with a new introduction by John L. Ackrill* Oxford 1995, first published 1923

A clear and good introduction to Aristotle written by one of the greatest Aristotelian scholars.

Christopher Shields ed. *The Blackwell Guide to Ancient Philosophy* Malden/Oxford etc. 2003

The essays in this Guide include general introductions to the Presocratics and to Socrates, as well as introductions to different topics dealt with by Plato and Aristotle; they are good for a first acquaintance with Greek philosophy.

Christopher Shields *Aristotle* 2nd ed. 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.

Christopher Shields ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Aristotle* Oxford 2015

Useful short introductions to various aspects of Aristotle's philosophy

《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