

INTRODUCTION TO ANCIENT GREEK AND ROMAN PHILOSOPHY (PHIL 7)

Course Information

Instructor: Dr. Mariana Beatriz Noé

Email: mnoe@fas.harvard.edu

Class Days/Times: Mondays and Wednesdays 6:00-7:15 PM

Classroom: Emerson Hall 305

Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays 5:00 to 5:30 PM or immediately after class

Location for Office Hours: Emerson Hall 206

Course Description

The purpose of this course is to introduce you to the most influential theories in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy. We start the course by reading Aristotle's selection of "reputable opinions" and reflecting on his—and our—way of building a "philosophical canon." Afterward, we study the fragments of two early Greek philosophers: Heraclitus of Ephesus and Parmenides of Elea. We then take some time to explore the influence that Parmenides and Indian atomism had on the Ancient Greek atomists Leucippus and Democritus. Next is the so-called "sophist" Gorgias; we read excerpts of his "nihilist" philosophical treatise and one of his speeches. The following philosopher we encounter is Plato. We start by carefully studying one complete Platonic dialogue, the *Meno*, since the experience of reading a dialogue from beginning to end is—I think—uniquely inspiring. Other discussions need a little bit more time to be fully comprehended, so we read only selections from his *Republic*. After Plato, we devote a few weeks to Aristotle. We study selections from his practical sciences (*Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics*), his productive sciences (*Poetics*), and his theoretical sciences (*Metaphysics*) in order to map the ways in which they overlap and interact with each other. We dedicate the last part of the course to the three most famous schools in Hellenistic times: the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Sceptics. We also read two Roman authors in these traditions, Lucretius and Seneca, in order to flag commonalities and differences between them. To know more about each selection, please read the **Schedule**.

This class is designed to teach you three general philosophical skills: to speak thoughtfully, think creatively, and write with precision. Each of these skills is tied to an assessment, and all of them contribute to the final grade. To know more, read the **Learning Goals** of the class below.

This course does not presuppose any prior knowledge of philosophy (*i.e.* there are no prerequisites for the course). However, this course *does require* the eagerness to question your own beliefs about the world.

Required Books

It is essential to do the readings prior to the class for which they are assigned. However, it is okay to come to class with the texts *read but not understood*: part of my work during the lectures is to tie what you already understand with what you don't.

Almost all the texts are already uploaded to Canvas, except for four books that I expect you to have. These books have either changed the history of thought and/or are extremely pleasant to read, so even if you never take another class in Ancient Philosophy, I would recommend you buy them.

1) Plato, *Meno* (recommended edition: trans. Long/Cambridge or Grube/Hackett) [Widener location](#) or [Widener location](#)

2) Plato, *Republic* (recommended edition: trans. Grube/Hackett) [Widener location](#)

3) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (recommended edition: Broadie & Rowe/Oxford or Reeve/Hackett) Widener location or Widener location

4) Seneca, *Letters on Ethics: to Lucilius* (recommended edition: Graver & Long/University of Chicago Press) Widener location

If you experience any difficulties obtaining the required texts, please contact me as soon as possible; I can be of help.

Schedule

Week 1: Introduction to the course through Aristotle's philosophical survey (15 pages)

- Sep 6 — Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A 3-5¹
— Appiah, "There is no such thing as western civilisation"

Week 2: Heraclitean Metaphysics, Epistemology, and Ethics (12+11 pages)

- Sept 11 — Heraclitus, fragments D1-D45
Sept 13 — Heraclitus, fragments D46-D88

Week 3: Parmenidean Metaphysics and Epistemology, and Ancient Atomism (11+29 pages)

- Sept 18 — Parmenides, fragments D1-D8²
Sept 20 — Leucippus/Democritus, fragments D10-D24, D29-D32, D39-D61, D73-D76
— Gangopadhyaya, *Indian atomism: history and sources* (selection)
— Leucippus/Democritus, fragments P16-20

Week 4: The "Sophistic" Movement (4+5 pages)

- Sept 25 — Gorgias, *On Not Being*
Sept 27 — Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen*

Week 5: Platonic Definitions and Epistemology (10+18 pages)

- Oct 2 — Plato, *Meno* 70a-80d
Oct 4 — Plato, *Meno* 80d-100b

Week 6: Platonic Ethics and Aesthetics (37 pages)

- Oct 11 — Plato, *Republic* II-III 392c

Week 7: Platonic Psychology, Epistemology, and Metaphysics (28+37 pages)

- Oct 16 — Plato, *Republic* IV
Oct 18 — Plato, *Republic* VI-VII 521c

Week 8: Aristotelian Ethics (20+21 pages)

- Oct 23 — Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I
Oct 25 — Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II and III 1-2

Week 9: Aristotelian Politics and Aesthetics (26+10 pages)

- Oct 30 — Aristotle, *Politics* I.1-3 and VIII 1-3, 5-7

¹ You may want to skip the first two paragraphs of chapter 3; they are hard and we study them later in the course.

² The amount of pages that you have to read for Sept 18 is low, so I recommend that you start reading what is due on Sept 20; the readings for this class are fairly longer.

Nov 1 — Aristotle, *Poetics* 1-6

Week 10: Aristotelian Metaphysics and Epistemology (11+12 pages)

Nov 6 — Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A. 1-3 and Δ 1-2

Nov 8 — Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Γ 1-4

Week 11: Epicureanism and Skepticism (22+14 pages)

Nov 13 — Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* and *Letter to Menoeceus*

Nov 15 — Diogenes Laertius, “Lives of Pyrrho and Timon” 61-101

Week 12: Stoicism (35 pages)³

Nov 20 — Diogenes Laertius, “Life of Zeno of Citium” 39-160

Week 13: Roman Epicureanism and Skepticism (30+19 pages)

Nov 27 — Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* III

Nov 29 — Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism* I 1-35, 209-214, 220-235

Week 14: Roman Stoicism (30 pages)

Dec 5 — Seneca, *Letters on Ethics: to Lucilius* 2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 12, 16, 18, 33

Learning Goals

Our class has three learning objectives. By the end of the semester, you will have improved your ability to speak thoughtfully, think creatively, and write with precision. Assessments are geared toward these skills.

What does “speak thoughtfully” mean? It means that you clearly state what you think, in an organized and precise manner. When you interact with others, you engage with their point of view and listen to them charitably. If you disagree, you first point out the idea—*not the person*—that you don’t agree with and you explain why. If someone else points to a problem in the view you hold, you take the time to consider it. **Training:** in-class participation and attendance. **Assessment:** an exit interview at the end of the semester tests your argumentative skills in the context of a conversation.

What does “think creatively” mean? It means that you read the texts with care and understand what they state (and what they don’t). You analyze the proposals with care and check that they are coherent, convincing, useful, and insightful. For any text, you are able to come up with a further example, argument in favor, objection, and/or question. **Training:** you have to answer 13 pieces of homework (one per week). I post them online after our Wednesday class and pick them up at the beginning of our Monday class—hard copies are mandatory. The pieces of homework consist of short philosophical exercises related to the texts we discussed during the week. **Assessment:** this analytical skill is put to work in the essays (see below).

What does “write precisely” mean? It means that you can present a problem and clearly state your interpretation at the beginning of your essay. Then, elaborate different arguments in favor of your interpretation and respond to objections promptly. You finish by recapitulating your position and enhance it by adding further insights or advantages of your interpretation that other interpretations do not have. **Training:** one 2-page ungraded essay (due online) gives you the opportunity to write your first

³ I know that Thanksgiving week is important for many of you, but this does not mean that the classes on Nov 20 and Nov 27 are less important. Please plan accordingly your traveling schedules, and do so with time.

argument. I provide a substantial amount of feedback here. **Assessment:** two graded essays (due online), 4 pages each.

Rubrics

Assessment	Skill	Points
Participation	Speak thoughtfully	5%
Attendance	Speak thoughtfully	5%
Homework	Think creatively	5%
Essay 1	Write precisely	40%
Essay 2	Write precisely	40%
Exit Interview	Speak thoughtfully	5%

Participation: I expect you to contribute in class at least once per week.

Attendance: absences can be excused for religious and medical reasons. See footnote 3 about Thanksgiving recess. Unexcused absences negatively affect your participation and attendance grade, so please contact me if you cannot come to class.

Homework: I expect you to hand in hard copies of the 13 pieces of homework at the beginning of each Monday class. You cannot skip class and hand in the homework at the end of class. Homework is graded on a pass/fail basis. Emailed pieces of homework are not accepted.

Essays: due online. Late essays will be docked 1/3 of a letter grade for each day it is late.

Academic Integrity and AI Policy

Please familiarize yourself with Harvard University's honor code, available [here](#). If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please contact me before submitting your essay.

I expect that all work you submit for this course will be your own and original (*i.e.* not previously submitted to another class). I specifically forbid the use of ChatGPT or any other generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools at all stages of the work process, including preliminary ones. Violations of this policy will be considered academic misconduct. Note that different classes at Harvard could implement different AI policies, and it is your responsibility to conform to expectations for each course.

On a more personal note, let me add one thing. Learning how to think takes a lot of time, a lot of mistakes, and a lot of practice. If you outsource any of these elements, your learning process acquires "gaps." I have seen these "gaps" affecting students' command of abstract thinking and their confidence so, during your formative years, I would recommend you use AI tools conscientiously.

Academic Accommodations

Any student with a disability who needs academic accommodations is welcome to meet with me privately. All conversations will be kept confidential. Students requesting any accommodations will also need to contact [Harvard University Disability Resources](#) (UDR).

Student Resources and Services

- [24/7 support line](#) for Harvard students who have mental health concerns, whether they are in immediate distress or not, on-campus or elsewhere
- [Workshops and groups](#) organized by Harvard's Counseling and Mental Health Service (CAMHS)
- [Office for Gender Equity](#) (OGE)

- Harvard College Writing Center
- Academic coaching, workshops, and peer tutoring offered by the Academic Resource Center (ARC)