History of Ancient and Medieval Western Philosophy: From the Earliest Beginnings to the Fourteenth Century

The period covered in Philosophy 124 is about twenty centuries: from the sixth century B.C. to the fourteenth century A.D. Its successor in the second semester, Philosophy 125 (History of Modern Philosophy), in contrast, covers less than two. The lopsidedness of this division is somewhat arbitrary but can be defended at least in part by the fact that innovative philosophical activity is relatively scarce during long stretches of the twenty centuries covered. The medieval philosophers of the twelfth century, for example, spent a great deal of their time simply searching out, finding, translating, and trying to understand the texts of Plato and Aristotle, which had been written some sixteen centuries before them.

It may also be thought arbitrary that the course deals only with European, or Western, philosophy to the exclusion of, say, Indian philosophy. The point here is that although similarities can be discovered between the philosophy or sage-literature of India and that of the Presocratics in Greece, it was the latter and not the former that influenced Plato, Aristotle, and, through them, the course of later European philosophy. It is the development of Western philosophy, and not its beginnings, that makes it an organic unity. The importance of Thales is philosophically posthumous: Aristotle talks about him.

A final word on the unity of philosophical thought. What brings together the recorded ruminations of people as distant from one another in time, place, and culture as Thales in the sixth century B.C. and Ockham in the fourteenth century A.D. is not so much their answers to the questions they pose as it is the questions themselves. Philosophers ask speculative questions and create thereby speculative concepts. Theirs aren’t everyday practical questions, and answering them won’t help you start your car in cold weather. They are, instead, extraordinary questions arising from preternatural curiosity (in this respect very much like children’s questions): for example, “Where does the World come from?” “Of what is it made?” “What holds it up?” “Why do people do what they do?” “What distinguishes individuals and types from one another?” “How can things change yet remain the same?” “Why is it that we can see a woman run but not see her think?” As you read the texts of Greek philosophy, you must be on the lookout for the question being asked. Often, especially in the earliest period, the text will present you only with an answer to an undisclosed question, leaving you to consider exactly which of a number of concerns the philosopher might have had in mind. You should also be sensitive to the conceptual underpinnings of speculative queries, that is, what concepts the questioner must have even to put a given question. For instance, one cannot raise the question of the survival and immateriality of the soul without having both the concept of matter and the concept of a kind of entity distinct from matter that nevertheless sustains causal relationships with it. These concepts are familiar to us as part of our cultural heritage, but they were won by the early philosophers only through the most strenuous intellectual effort. Much of the excitement to be gained from studying early Greek philosophy stems from the palpability of the labor to transmute the concrete materials of myth and animistic religion into the sweeping abstractions of philosophy: The World, Causation, Reason, The Unbounded, Stuff, Change, Law, Order, Sameness, Difference, Particularity, Necessity, Chance, Knowledge, Reality, Appearance, and so on. The unity of philosophical speculation through the ages derives from its concern with ideas such as these, as both the tools and the objects of systematic thought.
Required Texts


F. E. Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms*. Available at the College Bookstore.

In addition, there is a Course Reader, which may be purchased at the College Bookstore.

Calendar

Week I (Sept. 3-7): Overview and Introduction

Sept. 7: Overview and Introduction

Week II (Sept. 10-14): Early Greek Cosmology: the Milesians and Heraclitus

Sept. 10: The Milesian Cosmologists
Reading: Kaufmann, 1-13

Sept. 12: Heraclitus and the Problem of Change
Reading: Kaufmann, 14-21; Course Reader (hereafter, CR) (Karl Popper, “Back to the Presocratics”)

Sept. 14: remainder plus discussion

Week III (Sept. 17-21): A Conceptual Crisis; Forms of Recovery

Sept. 17: Parmenides and Zeno on Being and Nonbeing
Reading: Kaufmann, 22-30; CR (Aristotle, *Physics* VI.9)

Sept. 19: The Pluralists: Motion Regained
Reading: Kaufmann, 31-42

Sept. 21: remainder plus discussion

Week IV (Sept. 24-28): Sophistic Relativism; Socrates’ Values and Philosophical Priorities

Sept. 24: The Sophists: Man is the Measure
Reading: Kaufmann, 43-48

Sept. 26: Socrates: The Man and His Mission
Reading: Kaufmann, 65-70 and 82-107 (Plato, *Apology* and *Crito*)

Sept. 28: remainder plus discussion

Week V (Oct. 1-5): Socrates’ Philosophical Method; Plato’s Conception of Reality; Platonic Erôs

Oct. 1: Socrates: On Definition and the What-ness (essence) of Things
Reading: Kaufmann, 70-82 and 151-77 (Plato, *Euthyphro* and *Meno*)
Oct. 3: Plato on Two Worlds and the Theory of Forms; Knowledge; the Nature of the Soul  
Reading: Kaufmann, 108-50 (*Phaedo*)

Oct. 5: The Nature of *Erôs* and the Ultimate Objects of Human Aspiration  
Reading: Kaufmann, 177-99 (*Symposium*)

Week VI (Oct. 8-12; Autumn Recess Oct. 6-9): Platonic Justice

Oct. 10: Plato’s Reflections on Justice and Other Dimensions of Human Flourishing  
Reading: Neilson Library Course Reserve (*Republic* I-III, Sachs translation, 17-111)

Oct. 12: *Republic*, continued  
Reading: Kaufmann, 231-90 (additional selections from the *Republic*)

Week VII (Oct. 15-19): Platonic Justice, continued; Plato’s Critical Assessment of His Theory of Forms

Oct. 15: *Republic*, continued  
Reading: Same as for Oct. 10 and 12

Oct. 17: Problems Associated with an Ideal (paradigmatic) World  
Reading: Kaufmann, 290-97 (selections from Plato, *Parmenides*)

Oct. 19: free day (no class)

Week VIII (Oct. 22-26): Aristotle and a New Turning

Oct. 22: Plato’s and Aristotle’s Categories  
Reading: Kaufmann, 315-24 (selections from Aristotle, *Categories*)


Oct. 26: remainder plus discussion

Week IX (Oct. 29–Nov. 2): Aristotle on the Soul; Aristotelian Ethics

Oct. 29: Essence, Life, and the Soul  
Reading: Kaufmann, 371-76, CR, and Kaufmann, 376-77 (*On the Soul* II.1-4, III.4-5); Kaufmann, 333-34 (*Posterior Analytics* II.19)

Oct 31: Aristotle on Human Flourishing  
Reading: Kaufmann, 378-408 (*Nicomachean Ethics* I-III)
Nov. 2: Aristotle on Human Flourishing, continued
Reading: Kaufmann, 423-42, CR, and Kaufmann, 442-50 (Nicomachean Ethics VII, VIII.1-8, IX.4 and 8-9, X.6-9)

Week X (Nov. 5-9): Aristotelian Ethics, continued; Aristotelian Metaphysics

Nov. 5: Aristotle on Human Flourishing, continued
Reading: Same as for Oct. 31 and Nov. 2

Nov. 7: Aristotle’s Mature Theory of Primary Substance; Theology and the End of the Cosmos (The Unmoved Mover)
Reading: CR (Metaphysics VII-IX); Kaufmann, 360-71 (Metaphysics XII)

Week XI (Nov. 12-16): Hellenistic Philosophies of Life: Epicureanism and Stoicism

Nov. 12: Epicurus and Hedonism
Reading: Kaufmann, 463-90

Nov. 14: Stoicism and Natural Law
Reading: Kaufmann, 505-30

Week XII (Nov. 19-23; Thanksgiving Recess Nov. 21-25): Hellenistic Philosophies of Life: Skepticism

Nov. 19: Skepticism on Flourishing and the Suspension of Judgment
Reading: Kaufmann, 540-45

Week XIII (Nov. 26-30): Skepticism, continued; Plotinus; Augustine

Nov. 26: Skepticism: Discussion of Results of “Experiment”
Reading: same as for Nov. 19

Nov. 28: Plotinus’ Vision of the Cosmos
Reading: Kaufmann, 546-61

Nov. 30: God’s Time and Ours: A Taste of Augustine
Reading: CR

Week XIV (Dec. 3-7): Anselm; Aquinas; Ockham

Dec. 3: Anselm’s Ontological Argument
Reading: CR

Dec. 5: Aquinas’ Philosophical and Theological Concerns
Reading: CR
Dec. 7: Ockham on Universals
Reading: CR

Week XV (Dec. 10-14): Concluding Thoughts

Dec. 10: discussion

Dec. 12: wrap-up

Course Requirements

1) Two papers, three double-spaced pages each (15% each, for a total of 30%). Papers are due in class on Wednesday, September 26 and Monday, November 12. Topics will be distributed. You may, however, write on a comparable topic of your own choosing with the instructor’s permission.

2) A take-home midterm essay, five double-spaced pages, on Plato (25%). The essay is due in class on Wednesday, October 24.

3) A self-scheduled final exam (25%). A week before the end of classes, a study guide containing a list of twelve questions will be distributed. Six of those questions will appear on the final, and you will be asked to write on three.

4) Attendance and participation (20%). Participation will take various forms; for example, on a number of occasions you will be asked to hand in questions or comments on Wednesday in preparation for class discussion on Friday. As the use of laptops and other electronic devices in class can pose a distraction, I would ask that they not be employed.

Note: Grades on late work (i.e., that turned in at any point after it is due) will be lowered one step (e.g., from A- to B+) per day.

Items on Reserve in Neilson Library


