

Ancient Greek Philosophy

PHIL 1110-601

Spring 2025

Class: Wednesdays, 5:15pm – 8:15pm EST | Cohen 392

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Office Hours: Thursdays 12:30-1:30 PM

I. Course Description

What is philosophy? How does it differ from science, religion, literature, and other modes of human discourse? This course traces the origins of philosophy as a discipline in the Western tradition in the thinkers of Ancient Greece and Rome. We will examine how "natural philosophers" such as Thales, Anaximander, and Heraclitus distinguished their inquiries from the teachings of poets such as Homer and Hesiod; how ancient atomism had its origins in a response to Parmenides' challenge to the very assumption that things change in the world; how Socrates reoriented the focus of philosophy away from the natural world and toward the fundamental ethical question, "how shall I live?"; how his pupil Plato and subsequently Aristotle developed elaborate philosophical systems that address the nature of reality, knowledge, and human happiness. Finally, we will examine the ways in which later thinkers such as the Epicureans and Stoics transformed and extended the earlier tradition.

II. Course Objectives

The goals of the course are to:

- Develop your philosophical skills, chief among which is the ability to identify, charitably reconstruct, and critically evaluate arguments.
- Develop your ability to talk about philosophical arguments, questions, and figures in a precise way.
- Develop your expository and critical writing skills.
- Provide a general introduction to the similarities and differences between different ancient schools of thought, their problems, and solutions.
- To give you the intellectual tools to evaluate some of the central legal institutions of our society.

III. Teaching Method

Instruction will consist of one weekly class meeting.

This class meeting will be a mixture of short lecture, discussions, and group activities. Each class meeting will be centered around a handout, but we will often pursue interesting lines of inquiry that stray from the lesson plan in order to encourage free thought.

This course will also involve a significant amount of active student participation in reconstructing and evaluating famous arguments on the board, socratic discussion circles, and other group activities.

IV. Evaluation Method

1. *Assignments* – Your final grade will consist of the components described briefly in the following table.

Assignment	Value	Tentative length	Description/Comments
First paper	15%	5-6 pages	A short paper on Pre-Socratics or Plato.
Second paper	20%		A short paper on Aristotle, Epicurus, or Stoicism.
Midterm Exam	15%	1 hour	Timed assessment based on readings and philosophical skills discussed and practiced in class.
Attendance	25%	-	See attendance policy below.
Participation	25%	-	See participation policy below.

2. *Grading scale* – We will use the standard grading scale on Canvas:

A	94-100%
A-	90-93%
B+	87-89%
B	84-86%
B-	80-83%
C+	77-79%
C	74-76%
C-	70-73%
D+	67-69%
D	64-66%
F	<64%

3. *Pass/fail*. In order to earn a passing grade in the course, you must complete each of the assignments above in good faith. This includes the attendance and participation component of the course grade.

4. *Extra credit*. No extra credit will be offered in this course.

V. Course Materials

Here are the required books for this course:

Author	Title	Edition	Publisher and year	ISBN
Curd & McKirahan	<i>A Pre-socratics Reader</i>	2nd edition	Hackett, 2011	9781603843058
Reeve	<i>A Plato Reader</i>	1st	Hackett, 2012	1603848118
Irwin & Fine	<i>Aristotle: Introductory Readings</i>	1st	Hackett, 1996	872203395
Gerson & Inwood	<i>Epicurus Reader</i>	1st	Hackett, 1994	872202410
Gerson & Inwood	<i>The Stoics Reader</i>	1st	Hackett, 2008	872209520

Additional readings will be posted on Canvas, under Files>Readings.

VI. Course Policies

1. *Attendance* – Attendance will be recorded at the beginning of each meeting. If you are 15+ minutes late with no legitimate excuse that will count as an absence (you can still get participation points for that day). You are granted two unexcused absences (no questions asked, you don't need to notify me or make a CAN). Any absences beyond this will result in -4% from your attendance grade (since we meet only once a week). For excused absences, you will be required to submit an Excused Absence Form (accessible on Canvas) and make a CAN.

2. *Participation* – Participation is evaluated based on the frequency and quality of your contributions to discussion during class. This is not a “gimmie”, and you will be evaluated on participation as if it is a normal assignment. Participation also includes preparedness (e.g., having done the reading and come to class ready to learn). Consistent use of laptops or technology for activities unrelated to class will significantly affect your participation grade. After each class I will grade your participation on a scale of 1-3 (unexcused absences are a 0 for participation).

3. *Readings* – I expect you to read the material assigned for each date *before* the given lecture or

(when applicable) recitation. As with all academic texts, you will find that you may sometimes have to read a text twice to get a working grasp of the arguments the author is advancing. Have your copies of the textbook and any other assigned texts handy during lectures and recitations so we can consult passages together with ease.

4. *Extensions and late assignments* – Individual requests for extensions on writing assignments will be granted only in truly exceptional cases, such as hospitalizations, or family emergencies..
5. *Etiquette* – In order to ensure safe, fruitful, and civil philosophical engagement, please observe the following guidelines:
 - a. *Discussion*. You are welcome (even encouraged!) to disagree with one another, and with me, but always do so respectfully and in terms that stimulate rather than stifle discussion. In particular, I expect you to listen to what others have to say, let others speak, and address all participants courteously.
 - b. *Charity* – I expect you to be a charitable interpreter of your interlocutors, be they your peers, myself, or the authors we will be reading throughout the semester. Assume at all times that your interlocutors are after the truth—just as you are—and that their efforts to get at it are in good faith. If some statement you read or hear seems obviously false, attempt to find some interpretation of it on which it seems at least plausible, even if you do not ultimately accept it.
6. *Distractions* – During class, I ask that you set your phone to vibrate or silent and keep it out of reach. I also ask that you refrain from laptop use, except when this is part of some special accommodation or when you need your laptop to refer to an electronic copy of a text. Whenever those conditions are satisfied, I ask that you refrain from online shopping, checking social media, and so on. Research suggests that we are worse at multitasking than we think we are, and that laptops impair not just your own learning in the classroom but also that of classmates around you who can see your screen.

VII. Accommodations

1. *Documented disability* – Any student with a documented disability who needs accommodations is requested to speak directly to Weingarten’s Disability Services *and* with me as early as possible in the term (*preferably within the first two weeks*). All such discussions will remain strictly confidential.
2. *Religious observance* – If you require accommodation due to religious observance, please contact me *within the first two weeks of the course* in order to set up alternative arrangements. All absences due to religious observance are excused.

VIII. Contact Policy

I will reply to emails within 48 hours (though expect a longer response time over weekends or

breaks). If I do not reply within 48 hours, please send me a reminder (on some weeks I receive an overwhelming amount of email and some messages fall through the cracks). I will only answer simple, specific questions over email, or any question pertaining to the logistics of the course not already answered in this syllabus. For all other matters, (and, in particular, to discuss substantive philosophical questions) please talk to me after class or come to my office hours.

When in doubt, use the following heuristic: If it would take me more than 2 or 3 sentences to answer your question, it would be more efficient to speak after class or during office hours.

Tip: If you use the Canvas inbox feature, it is more likely I will see your message than a normal email, because it will stand out more than a normal email.

IX. Office Hours

If you are planning on attending my office hours during a given week, *write me ahead of time to let me know*. I ask that you do this so I can apportion my office hours equitably among all those who contact me ahead of time and arrange for separate meetings on weeks in which there is high demand. But I also do this to find out whether anyone is planning on attending on a given week. If I have not received any emails by the beginning of office hours, I will cancel them for that week.

I will be holding office hours both in person and on Zoom. If you plan to attend office hours, please let me know whether you would like to meet in person or virtually.

X. Writing Assignments

1. *General* – There are two writing assignments in this course. Detailed instructions for both papers will be distributed in a separate document well in advance of the due dates. I encourage you to reach out to me with any questions or concerns about writing a philosophy paper.
2. *Expectations* – Philosophical writing is difficult, particularly if you have never done it before, but even if you have. That said, it is a skill like any other: it gets easier the more you work at it. For that reason, *you should not despair if you do not obtain the grade you were hoping for on your first writing assignment*. The assignments in this course are structured so that you can learn from your mistakes early on without paying a significant penalty in terms of your final grade. Provided that you learn from and implement the feedback you receive, you should see an increase in the quality of your written work (and, therefore, in your grade) with each subsequent writing assignment.

XI. Academic Integrity

All written work in this course will be submitted through Turnitin, a plagiarism-detection software integrated into Canvas. We will not accept submissions through any other medium (e.g. in hard copy or by email). All written work will also be checked for AI-assisted plagiarism.

It goes without saying that all written work in the course must be your own. Please familiarize

yourself with the university's Code of Academic Integrity. Academic integrity violations will result in a failing grade for the assignment. Serious violations will be reported to the Center for Community Standards and Accountability (formerly the "Office of Student Conduct") and may result in a failing grade for the course.

XII. Additional Resources

- For general information on philosophers, philosophical concepts, or philosophical approaches, consult the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* at <http://plato.stanford.edu>
- For additional guidance on reading philosophy, consult <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>
- I will give you some guidance on philosophical writing, but if you want additional guidance, consult <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>
- For hands-on help with your writing, take advantage of the Marks Family Writing Center. For information on writing consultations, see <http://writing.upenn.edu/critical/wc/>
- For guidance on how to avoid plagiarism, consult the Purdue Online Writing Lab's resources, which you will find on their website (https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html) under "Avoiding Plagiarism."

XIII. Course Reading Schedule

All the information can be found on Canvas (mostly under "Modules" and "Assignments"). *Canvas will always have the most up-to-date information on course readings and assignment deadlines.*

Material assigned for a given date is revisable in light of unforeseen circumstances or the natural progression and specific needs of the course. The same holds for assignment deadlines. Readings marked with an * will be available on Canvas, under Files>Readings. All other readings are in the assigned books.

Recommended readings will be provided as well. These allow you to deepen your understanding of the topic we are discussing on a given class meeting. I will sometimes discuss these in class, but you are not expected to engage with them for anything other than your own edification.