Philosophy 331: Ancient Philosophy

Course Syllabus

Professor: Stephen Bloch-Schulman

Fall 2014

4 Credit Hours

Office Hours: 12:30-2 and 4-5 T/Th and by appointment

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“We are much less Greek than we believe.”

Michel Foucault

**Course Description:** Even though Sophocles lived quite late in the history of the Greeks, in two excerpts, he points to the central problems that motivate Greek thinking. In the first, we find the problem of the worth of human existence:

“Not to be born is best of all;

When life is there, the second best

To go hence where you came,

With the best speed you may.”

Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*

Put in different terms, the problem—as it was understood by the Greeks—is this: human life is frequently unfair, often unpleasant, and always fraught with peril. And then you die. There is no salvation to be found in death. What, then, makes human life worth living? This is the *practical* problem and it drives not only ethical enquiry in the Greek world, but also political and social enquiries as well.

In the second quotation from Sophocles, we find the beginning of the answer to the first problem:

“There is much that is *deinon*, but nothing

that surpasses man in *deinotaton*.”

Sophocles, *Antigone*

The answer to this first problem, the practical problem of the worth of human life, has something to do with the nature of *human* life. That is, the answer to what makes a human life worth living is to be found in what makes a humanlife *human*. In other words, it is to be found in the answer to the question: “what makes an x [in this case, a human being] an x?” And this “what makes an x an x?” is the second guiding question of Greek philosophy. This is the ontological question. To see what guides this enquiry, we might ask two related questions: 1. What is it that makes a being a being at all? In other words, what gives this thing existence? and 2. What is it that makes this thing that exists *this* kind of being rather than some other kind of being?

Important Note: While we might have been led to believe that Greek thinking is not so strange or so foreign to us, as Foucault argues, we should see otherwise. Though no one would doubt that the Greeks have influenced us radically—that is, from our roots—the precise nature of that influence is not easy to determine. Instead of focusing on what influence they may have had on us—a philosophical problem of the first order, given the difficulty first of figuring out what they said and what they meant and then figuring out how to articulate what “influence” means and looks like and then, on top of that, trying to see the Greek’s influence on us through these many years and many, many changes—**we will limit our work to trying to understand the Greeks, and the Greek philosophers in particular, in their own terms.** We will thus be looking not at what we think of them, but of what they think of themselves and of each other.

Another Important Note: This is neither a history course nor a history of ideas course. It is not even a historical philosophy course. It is an opportunity for us *to think with the Ancients*. This means that, through there will be some historical stage-setting, our work will be the work of philosophers—reading these texts philosophically, figuring out what they were trying to say (and arguing about the meanings of the texts), thinking with these authors philosophically and questioning philosophically. It means that we will have to be on guard against letting our expectations both about the work and about what it means to study this work determine what we see. If nothing else, to be a philosopher is to learn to see differently. And to study Ancient philosophy, therefore, is to learn to understand the Ancients as they might understand themselves.

**Course Objectives**: The goals of this class are fourfold: to think philosophically with the Ancients, to read the Ancients philosophically, to write about the Ancients philosophically, and to focus on those Ancient ideas/philosophers who are likely to appear in other philosophy classes. These four goals require a fivefold set of subsidiary goals: to become more or practice in difficult contexts 1. open-mindedness, 2. persistence-mindedness, 3. evidence-mindedness, 4. responsibility for your own learning and 5. in addition, to gain the beginning of an authentic understanding of the Greeks.[[1]](#footnote-1) And, to do this through a focus on those Greeks whose work is most likely to appear in other philosophy classes. While I have put the content of the class later on this list, it is ***by examining the content*** —what the Greeks wrote—that all of these goals will be attained. Learning the content knowledge (through careful reading and dialogue about the texts) and being able to articulate the ideas in discussion and in writing is therefore both one of the goals of the class and the means to achieving all of the other goals in the class.

1. *Open-mindedness:* The core of open-mindedness lies in a certain appropriate modesty, namely, the modesty of a person who recognizes that the way she lives is not the only way that human beings can live. Thus, by studying seriously a radically different way of being in the world, we will gain an ability to ‘enlarge’ our way of thinking, to imaginatively have those who are absent be present.[[2]](#footnote-2) And by so traveling with our imagination, we gain a fresh perspective on our own lives and the way we live. The main ways of achieving this goal will be through open dialogue, both an open, thoughtful and respectful dialogue with others in the class, and also an open, thoughtful and respectful dialogue with the authors and texts we will be reading. This will include both oral dialogue (e.g., class discussion) and written dialogue (e.g., reading responses).
2. *Persistence-mindedness:* The texts we will be reading are extremely difficult and, even in the best of circumstances, trying to understand someone else’s perspective is always a genuine challenge. All too often, we read something and hear what we want in the text, that is, we hear ourselves projected into the text rather than trying to listen for what the text tells us.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet, we must listen to what the text says, even if it is not what we want to hear. To really allow your imagination to go wandering, you need to enact a certain sacrifice.[[4]](#footnote-4) This does not happen all at once, but requires a repeated (re-)opening up to the Other. Only this opening and re-opening leads to a deep understanding of another’s perspective. The main ways this will be enacted in class is through reading works that challenge our most basic assumptions and then through the dialogue that comes from this reading material. It will also happen through your writing about these other perspectives, articulating the rationale for them.
3. *Evidence-mindedness:* Even if we are truly open-minded (and thus accept that we don’t know) and we are persistent-minded (and thus are committed to reading what is in the text and understanding the Greeks in their own terms), we need guidelines for how to judge when we come up with problems of interpretation. We need, therefore, a procedure for our search. The procedure that philosophy offers is the procedure of argument; in the philosophic sense, this is the deliberate and determined use of all of the available evidence to support certain (and not other) conclusions. This will be a leitmotiv of all of our discussions, the writing assignments and all of the grading.
4. *Responsibility-taking:* Students will practice, and thus become habituated to fully taking responsibility for themselves and individual learners and for the learning of the group as members of a learning community.
5. *AND Content:* It goes without saying that every goal described above requires and leads to a slow and careful consideration of the texts we will be examining. See the description of the class above for more information about the content. But do notice that we are focusing on those texts and philosophers who are most likely to appear in the other work that you might read in other classes in philosophy.

One other note: As we will see, in Aristotle's *Ethics*, he describes a mistake some people make when they discuss ethics, namely, they expect more certainty from a science than is appropriate to that science. Unlike math, he says, where we do (and we ought to) expect certainty, when it comes to ethics, we ought not expect certainty and to do so is in error. I mention this because we need to have appropriate expectations for this class. We need to be modest about to what extent *any* single-semester class can meet the rather large goals that have been set out here. These goals are appropriate for all of college (or for all of life), so if you move more in the direction of these goals, that will be quite an accomplishment in a mere semester.

**Required Texts:**

**PLEASE BE SURE TO GET THE TRANSLATIONS I SPECIFY (it will make your life easier)**

1. Homer, *The Iliad*, translated by Robert Fagles (though the title of the

work is not apt)

2. Thales and Heraclitus fragments (handouts)

3. Plato, *Meno* and *Apology* (the latter is also poorly named, too), all in

Plato, *Five Dialogues*, translated by G.M.A. Grube, revised by John M. Cooper, second edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002).

4. Plato, *Republic* (once again, the title is not accurate), translated by

Allan Bloom, excerpts (handouts)

5. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Martin Ostwald (Prentice Hall, 1962)

produced for the Library of Liberal Arts

6. Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, second edition, New York: WW Norton& Co., 2010.

**Course Structure and Course Requirements**:

**Attendance:** You will not do well in this class if you do not attend class-sessions. Class is structured in a way that, you will quickly see, requires your full attention and your full participation.

Furthermore,as it says in the official handbook, I am to inform you that in the case of an absence, you *“are responsible for material and assignments whether or not the absence was excused.”* In other words, if you miss class, it is *your* responsibility to hand in whatever was due before it was due and to get notes for the class, to read the material, and to have all of this done *before* you come see me to discuss what you missed.

**Grades:**

You will be graded on 3 types of assignments:

1. *Summaries*

For new material, you will work with a small group of others to write a very brief summary of the reading. You will be working with a small group of classmates as a team to summarize a portion of the text. This is a way to prepare you to write a good exegesis. But here is the trick: your group’s summary can be no more than 57 words total.

One other thing: if you are not arriving at your group’s meeting prepared to discuss the work carefully (or do not show when you should), you will be given one warning. If it happens a second time, you will be excused from the group, and you will have to do the summaries solo. [If there is an emergency—baring something awful—you will need to email both your group members **and me before your scheduled meeting with your group**.]

Summaries need to be submitted on time. Summaries are graded pass/fail. If your group receives a passing grade, your individual grade for the course will not change. If you group fails a summary, you will be penalized 1% on your final course grade (e.g., if you would have received a 90 in the course and your group failed two summaries, your final grade for the class will be an 88).

1. *Short Writing Assignments:*
2. Type One: Miscellaneous

Occasionally*,* you will work independently to write a. a very short essay, b. a reflection on how the course is going, or c. a portion of one of your longer papers. These will be explained in the class before they are due; see the student schedule for due dates. [Citations must be included, wherever appropriate.]

1. Type Two: Exegeses

You will also be individually writingexegeses. You will, in your exegesis, be explaining one **very** short passage of the text in great detail. This exegesis you will email to me **before the class period**. These are to be tight exegeses—I am not looking for your opinion or your feelings and I am not looking for summaries of the text. These are to be between 505 and 714 words each. [Citations must be included, but they do not count towards this word count.] Each reading response must unpack the meaning of one quotation from the work we will be discussing in class, and the quotation you work with should be of the smallest possible size, e.g., if you can write a good exegesis on three words, do that.

You cannot repeat what has already been said in class, though. This needs to be an original reading of the text.

*Bonus: for the first 5 exegeses, you will receive a 5% increase in your grade if you* ***plausibly*** *use a version of one of the following two templates:*

1. *“While it may look like X means Y, I will show that this is not true/not the best way to understand X.”*

*or*

1. *“While passage Y might have been overlooked, it is important to text X because Z.”*

**Grading for short writing assignments**: I recognize that you are busy and that things outside of school (e.g., family, work, friends) can get in the way. So I am excusing you, right now, from two short writing assignments. If you have not emailed me your writing assignment before the beginning of class, you don’t need to explain to me why you didn’t. You don’t need any excuse; you will just not hand in a short writing assignment for that class. Unless there are very serious circumstances, all of the others are unable to be excused. Let me be blunt here: *you are already excused from handing in your two short writing assignments—unless there is a real emergency, no other excuses will be accepted*.

3. Longer Papers

You will write three longer papers. These are due Oct. 3 and Nov. 7 (note: both of these are Friday due dates) and at the end of the final exam period. The purpose of these papers is to give you an opportunity to show your skills in three areas: 1. a close reading of the part of the text we have discussed in class, 2. a close reading of parts of the texts we have read but that we have not discussed in class (or have not discussed in detail), and 3. clear and persuasive argumentation based on evidence. Each must be no longer than 1551 words (citations must be included, but they do not count towards this word limit).

For the longer papers, anything submitted 10-100 minutes late will be docked 2%. Papers that are handed in after the 100 minute window, will be marked down an additional 3% and then an additional 10% for each 24 hours that they are late. For the exegeses and summaries, anything submitted late will not count.

\*\*\*NOTE: YOU NEED TO CITE PROPERLY FOR ALL ASSIGNMENTS!\*\*\*

**\*\*\*NOTE: EVERYING IS SUBMITTED VIA EMAIL. YOU NEED TO SAVE A COPY OF EVERYTHING YOU SUBMIT AND THE EMAILS IN WHICH YOU SUMBIT THEM TO MAKE SURE THEY ARE NOT LOST IN THE ETHERWORLD\*\*\***

Short Writing Assignments (10 x 4.6% = 46%) + Three Longer Papers (3 x 18%= 54%)= 100%

The scale is the following:

A 93-100%

A- 90-less than 93%

B+ 87-less than 90%

B 83-less than 87%

B- 80-less than 83%

C’s and D’s work like B’s

F less than 60%

Tentative Schedule

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Week 1: Aug. 26 and 28 |  | Intro to class/*The Iliad* |
| Week 2: Sept. 2 and 4 |  | *The Iliad* |
| Week 3: Sept. 9 and 11 |  | *The Iliad*/Thales |
| Week 4: Sept. 16 and 18 |  | Heraclitus/*Meno* |
| Week 5: Sept. 23 and 25 |  | *Meno* |
| Week 6: Oct 1 and Oct 3 | Longer Paper one due Oct. 3 | *Meno* |
| Week 7: Oct. 7 and 9 |  | *Meno* |
| Week 8: (no class Oct. 14) Oct. 16 |  | *Defense Speech of Socrates* |
| Week 9: Oct. 22 (no class  Oct. 24) |  | *Defense Speech of Socrates* |
| Week 10: Oct. 28 and 30 |  | *Defense Speech of Socrates* |
| Week 11: Nov. 4 and 6 | Longer Paper two due Nov. 7 | *Republic* and 7th Letter |
| Week 12: Nov. 11 and 13 |  | *Nic. Ethics* |
| Week 13: Nov. 18 and 20 |  | *Nic. Ethics* |
| Week 14: Nov. 25 (no class Nov. 27) |  | *Nic. Ethics* |
| Week 15: Dec. 2 |  | *Nic. Ethics* |

Final exam: Due Dec. 9th by 4 p.m.

**Elon Honor Code**

Elon’s honor pledge calls for a commitment to Elon’s shared values of Honesty, Integrity, Respect and Responsibility.  To be clear about what constitutes violations of these values, students should be familiar with the Judicial Affairs policies in the student handbook, including violations outlined at

<http://www.elon.edu/e-web/students/handbook/violations/default.xhtml>.

Students with questions about the specific interpretation of these values and violations as they relate to this course should contact this instructor immediately.  Violations in academic-related areas will be documented in an incident report which will be maintained in the Office of Student Conduct, and may result in a lowering of the course grade and/or failure of the course with an Honor Code F.

Violations specifically covered by academic honor code policies include: plagiarism, cheating, lying, stealing and the facilitation of another’s dishonesty.  Multiple violations will normally result in a student’s temporary suspension from the University.

For issues of academic integrity and honesty, refer to the Elon Academic Honor Code. Students will be held accountable for their actions, and thus need to know the code and follow it at all times. You can find information about the Elon Academic Honor Code in the Elon Student Handbook. In there are any questions or concerns, please ask me. All suspected violations of the Honor Code will be handled through the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. Furthermore, if you are found to have violated the Honor Code, you will automatically receive a failing grade for the course.

Let me point, in particular, to the problem of plagiarism. Plagiarism is cheating, and it will be taken extremely seriously. If you do not know the rules about plagiarism—what you can and cannot quote and how to do it legitimately—make sure you speak to me before you hand in your work. As the Elon student handbook makes clear: “Any student must be thoroughly familiar with methods for documenting the use of another person's sentences, arguments or ideas.” That means that it is your responsibility to cite properly. I would be happy to help you before something is due, but this is something you need to get right all of the time.

**Elon Disabilities Services**

If you are a student with a documented disability who will require accommodations in this course, please register with Disabilities Services in the Duke Building, Room 108 (278-6500), for assistance in developing a plan to address your academic needs. For more information about Disabilities Services, please visit the website <http://www.elon.edu/e-web/academics/support/disabilities_services.xhtml>.

*What is an exegesis, and how do I do one?*

You should read like a detective. Do not just pay attention to the most obvious clues, but also to the less obvious clues—and pay close attention to how the less obvious clues relate to the more obvious clues. Reading is about interpretation—that is, trying to figure out what things mean. It is not merely in figuring out what the facts are, but in trying to piece together what the relevant facts are and what they mean, and coming up with a theory about what the text means. It requires reading inquisitively, and actively.

The word “exegesis” means anexplanation or an exposition (and an exposition is the “action of expounding or explaining; interpretation, explanation. Also an instance or mode of this; an explanation, interpretation”). In addition, exposition is the “action of putting out to public view; an instance of this; a display, show, exposure.”[[5]](#endnote-1) **An exegesis, then, is to explain something, to interpret something by bringing some element into public view; that is, to expose something that might otherwise go unnoticed into the light of a public reading.**

Practically speaking, an exegesis reveals something about the text that a less-close reading would overlook. Generally speaking, there are two foci of exegetical writing:

1. An exegetical reading might examine a part of a text that, upon close inspection, says something different than what it might first appear to say. That it, it might show that, though a passage seems to be saying x, it is actually saying y.
2. An exegesis might highlight and reveal the importance of a portion of the text that is likely to be overlooked.

That means that, in the end, the most successful exegetical readings actually **change the way we understand the text**. We might come to see that while the text seems to be about x, it is really about y. If you can do that in your exegetical writing, you will have “expose[d] something that might otherwise go unnoticed” and you will have brought that “into the light of a public reading,” and therefore, will have succeeded. Thus, you will have, like the detective, made sense of something not obvious, and what you have made sense of will help you understand the whole in a new and more nuanced way.

1. These were adapted from H. Reed Geertsen, “Rethinking Thinking about Higher-Level Thinking,” in *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 31, 2003 (January: 1-19). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The articulation of these goals owes much to Hannah Arendt’s conception of ‘enlarged mentality’; see Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, edited by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 137-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On the challenge of hearing what the text says, see John Sallis’s wonderful introduction in John Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogue*, third edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 1-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Arendt, *Responsibility*, 140-143. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. These definitions come from the Oxford English Dictionary, available on-line at <https://webvpn.elon.edu/+CSCO+d0756767633A2F2F717670677662616E656C2E6272712E70627A++/cgi/entry/50079859?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=exegesis&first=1&max_to_show=10> and <https://webvpn.elon.edu/+CSCO+d0756767633A2F2F717670677662616E656C2E6272712E70627A++/cgi/entry/50080597?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=exposition&first=1&max_to_show=10>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)