

I. Mechanics

Read Syllabus together/questions.

II. Course Introduction

Learning is individual and, largely, private.

My role: midwife to your learning and the transmission of these ideas.

As in any human birth, a mother and father is required:

One parent=your desire/need to learn & grow in thinking/understanding.

Other parent=the books you read and think about.

Once you bring these two together, my job is to attend the resulting birth, help you with complications, smooth your way to a comprehension of and engagement with the philosophical ideas you encounter.

Usually begin with either lecture, sometimes line by line mutual exegesis of the text, followed by discussion (exegesis=explanation/critical interpretation of a text), a group report followed by discussion and some lecture

Introduction

Philosophy, as practiced in ancient Greece and here today, involves a kind of thinking most people don't spend time doing (although the cognitive abilities involved are available to anyone).

Philosophy: fr. the Greek "philosophus" (philosopher), which can be broken down into 'philos'=dear, friendly, loving, having an affinity for or strong attraction to; and the Greek "sophos"=wisdom/knowledge. Passion for knowledge that goes beyond what we can get from it, beyond practical concerns.

Western thought involves a generally coherent tradition: that is, it involves a common set of problems, roughly similar set of issues under consideration, and a similar set of terms (vocabulary) in use. Here is what some of the big words mean:

TERMS

Physics vs. Metaphysics

Physics: physikos (of nature), physis (growth, nature), phyein (to bring forth)-- study of nature (tables, chairs, suns, galaxies, world of space and time around us)

Meta-physics: "above/beyond"+"nature". Set of ideas/entities that exist independent of the world of space and time. Examples: pure ideas, spiritual entities, objects of religious thought, etc. Things existing outside of nature itself.

Ontology & Logic

Ontology: speech about beings. A discipline that allows us to analyze the kind of existence things have. Tables and chairs exist somewhat differently, i.e., have a different status and set of "rights" you might say, and are different kinds of things, than, for example, human beings. When we point to these kinds of differences,

we are making "ontological distinctions". We distinguish the kind of beings there are, their different statuses, what we can say about these, etc.

Logic

Logic: daunting word that means something rather plain. Logic is a system of rules for deriving true inferences. If you start with true premises and follow these rules, you will derive true conclusions. See Handout #1b.

Epistemology

Thinking about thinking. What we can know about, and how we can know it. Here we try, among other things, to distinguish different kinds of knowledge. Obviously, knowledge about moral questions is different from knowledge about porpoises. A philosopher concerned with epistemic questions will also be concerned to determine what counts as good thinking, what counts as true knowledge. Of course, this involves them in questions about how we come to know anything, as well as how we come to know particular and different kinds of things. This inevitably leads a philosopher to take positions about what is loosely termed "philosophical psychology", i.e., the study of the mind and how its capacities and functions bear on the possibility and acquisition of knowledge. Most philosophers are to some extent concerned with epistemological questions.

Aesthetics

Theory of the beautiful, the attractive. Asks questions like "Is beauty in the psyche or in the objects where we seem to find them?" How does it bear, if at all, on ethical concerns...is the beautiful related to what is good...the same as what is good....entirely unrelated?

Ethics & Politics (Political Theory)

Ethics is the branch of inquiry that talks about right and wrong, our certainty about what we think we ought and ought not to do, what actions are appropriate/inappropriate for us as human beings, concerned with human choices, with that aspect of human existence which is supra-animal...not directly connected to our status as animals (this does not mean that animals have no moral status, but that we normally do not think that animals are capable of acting morally/immorally.)

Political theory and ethics involve the same concerns, but direct them at different objects. Political theory applies concerns about right and wrong, praise and blame, etc., to the community. Ethics applies these to the individual. Obviously, this makes for deep connections between ethics and politics. Our course will be focused largely on this domain.

Greece

Greece and western Turkey were the birthplaces of systematic, rational thinking as we know it. This occurred during the period 600-300 BCE in and near Greece. Over 2,500 years have passed since this mode of inquiry was first conceived and refined. To study it now, as we must do in the first readings we will be

considering in this course, is a daunting and error-prone task. It requires us to 'think our way back' to an era and way of life we can know only indirectly. If you can perform this act of imagination, you will be rewarded with an fascinating ride through what one poet calls "the morning of thought" in the west.

To understand what Greek philosophers were doing, you must understand how unlikely it was that it be done at all. The dominant way of understanding and explaining the world in and before their time was mythopoetic, i.e., was based upon imaginative stories and storytelling. These stories presented a world driven by capricious, irregular forces existing largely outside the perceptible world of possible human experience. The new mode of inquiry these Ionians, Athenians, and Eleatics invented turned this traditional mode of explanation on its head. Why, in a world where daily life was often more chaotic and unpredictable than our own, did these people come to believe the world was governed by something systematic and regular, let alone one explicable entirely in terms of things which could be found within the world (as opposed to things, like gods, lying outside of it)? Unfortunately, our focus in this course doesn't allow us to explore how and why this change occurred. However, it is worthwhile for you to realize that Plato's thinking about the Ideal State arose as a result of a broad and deep revolution in how Greeks and Turks tried to understand themselves, society, and the world, a revolution that occurred roughly 2500 years ago. Plato's thinking arose during a protracted and serious cultural battle between what we now call philosophers and the Greek poets, dramatists and sophists. These thinkers fought to determine whose mode of understanding and counsel would guide the Greek city states into the future. In a sense, this battle has not died. We see evidence of it in modern debates about the role of science, the arts, the emotions, the inner or "spiritual" life of men, etc. We see it in the way we go about determining how to live in the modern world.

I hope you will always keep in mind that any true philosophical claim is one whose supporting arguments and explanations can, in principle, be retraced by anyone, and which must pass the test of you own intuitions. This does not mean that everyone's intuitions are equally good (if you don't understand the problem correctly, you can quite easily, almost inevitably, have intuitions which cannot be trusted). But it does mean that philosophy is not a "mystery discipline". Like scientific discourse, it is open for inspection, and if you find it wanting, and can produce sound arguments to show it is wrong, then philosophical thinkers must take you seriously. A crucial distinction, as you will see when we read Plato's dialogues, lies between persuasive but bad arguments (associated with the Sophists), and persuasive and good arguments produced by the successful philosopher. It will seldom be the case that you can resolve a given problem here in one sitting, even several. But you should not take these claims as anything more than suggestions from a friend whom you respect.