

PL121 Plato & Aristotle on the Political Significance of Knowledge & Philosophy

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Course Description

Is philosophy useless? Plato's *Republic* might seem to be the strongest possible repudiation of that charge. After all, in the *Republic* we are told that happiness or flourishing (eudaimonia) is only possible in cities ruled by philosophers. But then it is surprising to find Socrates, at the end of Plato's *Meno*, claiming that knowledge is no better a guide to action than true belief. If that claim is right, then shouldn't Plato acknowledge that politicians like Themistocles (whom Socrates there suggests have divinely supplied true beliefs) are just as good at politics as philosopher-kings would be? In this course, we'll press Plato on these questions, by looking past the *Republic* at less commonly studied dialogues, especially his *Politicus* and *Laws*, and by looking at some of the contemporary rivals to whom Plato is responding, including Aristophanes, Isocrates and Aeschines. Then we'll look at how Aristotle inherits and responds to the same questions in his *Ethics*, *Politics*, *Protrepticus* and *Metaphysics* - with an eye to whether Plato and Aristotle really do disagree, as they sometimes seem to, about whether philosophy is useless, or about whether it has specifically political advantages. Along the way we'll encounter hard philosophical problems about what knowledge is, how it affects our actions, what actions are, what we mean when we call something useless or practical, how to interpret Plato and Aristotle - and, not least, what philosophy is.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance and active participation

If you're ill, please stay home. One absence has no effect on the active participation grade. Each further allowable absence will result in a deduction of 10% of the total participation grade, which may however be avoided by posting on the course forum a topical question which genuinely puzzles you, together with some possible answers to that question, and why you don't find them satisfying (about 250 words total). *Active participation* is generally incompatible with laptop and phone use, so **please bring the readings to class in a form that doesn't require using electronics** (e-readers are ok).

Grading and assignments

- 2 **papers** of 4 double-spaced pages, each worth 15% of the final grade.
- 1 **final paper** of 8 double-spaced pages, worth 30% of the final grade.
- 3 **short preparatory** assignments, each worth 2% of the final grade.
- 2 **peer-review** assignments, each worth 2% of the final grade.
- **Active participation** in weeks 1-7 & weeks 8-15, each worth 15% of the final grade.

Late Papers < 48 hours late will be accepted with a doctor's note or for a full grade penalty.

Required Readings will be either on the class website or linked to in the schedule.

Tentative Schedule

[due dates: always at 11:59pm]

- 2.2 Useless and worse than useless**
read (in class) selections from Aristophanes, *Clouds*
- 9.2 Protagoras, Isocrates and Xenophon on useful and useless philosophy**
Plato, *Gorgias* 482c-6d & *Republic* 487a-98d & *Protagoras* 320c-8b
Isocrates, *Against the Sophists* & *Antidosis* §167-323
Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.1-3, 3.10, 4.7 (downloadable [here](#))
[11.2 drop/add deadline]
- 16.2 Socrates on episteme as a ruler**
Plato, *Protagoras* 348c-62a, *Meno* 87d-89a, *Euthydemus* 277d-282a
Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.9.10-11
[optional: Bjelde, *The Practical Value of Episteme*, chapter 1]
- 23.2 The Meno Problem**
Plato, *Meno* 96d-100c
Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*, §3.4
Hyman, [The road to Larissa](#)
Bjelde, *The Practical Value of Episteme for Plato*, chapter 2
- 2.3 The Meno Problem sharpened**
Aeschines, fragments from *Alcibiades*
Plato, *Euthydemus* 288b-293a
Bjelde, *The Practical Value of Episteme for Plato*, chapters 3-4
- 9.3 Plato's Politicus and its rivals on ruling** [1st short prep. due]
Xenophon, [Memorabilia](#) 3.4 - 3.6
Plato, *Politicus* 257a-277c
Aristotle, *Politics* 1.1-3 & 1.7 & 1.12-13
- 16.3 Plato's Politicus continued** [1st paper due]
Plato, *Politicus* 292a-311c [18.3 last day to withdraw]
- 23.3 Lawgiving & education 1:** Plato, *Laws* 1-2 & 3.693c-702e [1st peer review due]
- 30.3 Lawgiving & education 2:** Plato, *Laws* 4-5 & 10
- 6.4 Rulers in the Laws** [2nd short prep. due]
Plato, *Laws* 6 & 7.809a-822d & 12.945b-3e & 12.960b-969d
[optional: Bjelde, *The Practical Value of Episteme*, chapters 5-6]
- 20.4 Aristotle on different kinds of wisdom: sophia & phronesis** [2nd paper due]
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.1-7 & 6 (excepting chapters 4 and 6 of book 6)
- 27.4 Aristotle on the uselessness of sophia** [2nd peer review due]
Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.1-2 & *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7-9
Matt Walker, chapter 1 (excepting §2), 2 & 5 of [Aristotle & the Uses of Contemplation](#)
- 4.5 Do Aristotle's views change?**
Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* book 8 & selected fragments of *Protrepticus*
Matt Walker, chapters 7-8 of [Aristotle and the Uses of Contemplation](#)
[6.5 no class, but 3rd short prep due]
- 11.5 Final discussion**
[20.5 no class, but final papers due (17.5 for graduating students)]