

Department of Philosophy
Later Greek Philosophy, 107-452B/2016
Tuesdays and Thursdays 16:05-17:25, Leacock 210
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Office hours: Tuesdays 17:35-19:00

Please note: the use of notebook computers in this class is not allowed and electronic gizmos must be turned off.

As the title suggests, the purpose of this course is to introduce students to Later Greek Philosophy. This means that we will be making a careful study of philosophy after Plato and Aristotle. But here it may be useful to sketch some of the different things such philosophy could be at this time. (Indeed, one of the purposes of this course, as perhaps others on the history of philosophy offered in our department, is to give students an opportunity to see how diverse philosophy can be. We will not be discussing all of the people or schools mentioned in the sketch below. But I offer the sketch as part of the syllabus to give students a ‘lay of the philosophical land’.)

Sketch of Some of the Different Things Philosophy Could Be after Aristotle

Aristotle died in 322BCE. By the next generation, philosophy was flourishing in Athens as perhaps never before. This could be seen in the diversity of philosophical sects and schools – some quite new – competing with each other for followers and victory in argument. In addition to the school Aristotle himself founded, the Lyceum, which continued under the leadership first of Theophrastus (c.370-286) and then Strato, there was the Academy, the school originally founded by Plato (427-347). It too had survived under a succession of leaders since Plato’s death, but had taken a new turn by around 273 under Arcesilaus (c.318-242). Before this time, the leaders of the Academy had promoted a positive, doctrinal Platonism taking its source in Plato’s later dialogues. But Arcesilaus dropped this in favour of a Platonism entirely critical in nature. It found its source in the portrait of Socrates Plato presents in the early dialogues, i.e., the Socrates who denies he is a teacher, who knows only that he knows nothing about ethical matters broadly construed and who subjects the alleged expert knowledge in such matters of everybody else to careful critical scrutiny. In this spirit, Arcesilaus made it a policy to argue against the doctrines of other schools, subjecting them to the same critical scrutiny Socrates might himself have applied, often formulating arguments on both sides of a question. Thus he can be said to have inaugurated scepticism, as it came to be known in later Antiquity.

Socrates was a model not only for members of the so-called New Academy under Arcesilaus, but also for a group of philosophers called the Cynics. These people made much of the Socratic idea that virtue alone is good and vice alone, bad: all the things we conventionally take to be good or bad are not so in and of themselves. Hence it is perverse to seek wealth, power and prestige if one does nothing to acquire virtue. Following the example of the famous tub-dwelling Diogenes (404-323), a contemporary of Plato, they went around Athens challenging conventional values as a way of dramatising the implications of their Socratic commitments. Thus they called attention to their poverty, sometimes giving away such wealth they might have had, and they ostentatiously subjected themselves to discomfort and what would count as humiliation by traditional standards of decency. It is reported that Diogenes used to go to dirty places, and that, upon being reproached for this, he said that the sun also visits cesspools without being defiled.

The so-called Stoic school, which took its name from the Stoa Poikile or painted colonnade where its members met, was founded by Zeno of Citium in Cyprus (333-261). Zeno was influenced by the Cynics and accepted from them the Socratic idea that virtue alone is good, and vice alone, bad. But, unlike the Cynics, Zeno and his followers found a place for conventional values in their philosophy. Though they denied that health, pleasure and the well-being of our nearest and dearest are good, they acknowledged that they are “preferred indifferents”, i.e., things that nature, out of its providential benevolence, has ordained we should seek. By the same token, they claimed that disease, pain and even death, whether our own or that of our loved ones, are not bad, but nevertheless nature benevolently ordains that we shun them. Progress towards virtue consists in learning to choose the preferred indifferents over the ones best avoided, while recognising their moral indifference. This effort coincides with progress in exercising our reason. Properly exercising our reason reveals not only the moral indifference of the preferred and the avoided indifferents, but also its own intrinsic goodness (i.e., the intrinsic goodness of proper reasoning itself). The Sage who finally acquires virtue has learned that the one and only good, i.e., virtue itself, is the same as consistently exercising reason in this way. But nature has providentially ordained this exercise of reason for us, and indeed just because it is good. Hence, the virtue of the Sage consists in having thoroughly internalised the order of nature as a way of life. He or she administers his or her life as Zeus – Reason itself – providentially administers the whole world. Since the providential order of the world is thoroughly good, goodness thoroughly imbues the life of the Sage.

A quite different philosophy was developed by the school of Epicurus (341-271). Unlike the Sceptics, Cynics and Stoics, these philosophers did not take Socrates as their point of departure, but rather Democritus (?460-357). Thus their physical theory was atomistic. They believed that the universe has two principles: infinite empty space and the indestructible, simple atomic particles randomly moving about in it. Bodies and their gross properties, and indeed whole worlds, are the effect of the form, motions and collisions of these particles. Since the atoms move randomly, the Epicureans denied that the universe is ordered to the good by providential reason. Hence, their physical theory made it impossible for them to accept the Stoic idea that the good we seek consists in living in accordance with nature; hence, they denied that it consists in virtue. Virtue is not the good as such, but rather a means to the

good. We do not seek it for its own sake, but for the sake of making our lives as pleasant as possible. There is no good other than pleasure and no evil other than pain.

The Philosophers and Schools Who Will be the Focus of our Readings

Our program this term will be to examine critically the philosophies of the Stoics, the Epicureans and the Sceptics. Our way in to their debates will be to focus, first of all, on the competing physics of the Epicureans and the Stoics. We will be interested to see how they use their respective physics to build up rival conceptions of the world as a whole and our place in it. Epicureans and Stoics alike believed that physics has a certain ethical significance: unless you understand the world and our place in it, you cannot live well. This is a very peculiar claim and can be taken in a number of different ways. We will be interested to see how the Epicureans and Stoics come up with very different accounts of it, how they defend it and how they try to fend off the rival view. Then we will be interested to see a challenge raised against both of them by the Sceptics. The Sceptics we will focus on, the Pyrrhonians, argue that the best way to live is to continue investigating. If you continue investigating, you will discover that you can argue on both sides of each positive claim you have examined. Hence you will have found it impossible to settle into a dogmatic position and you will be without any opinion. This freedom from opinions will secure you from the psychic turbulence associated with having commitments. Living in peace of mind is the best way to live. So the Pyrrhonian case against both the Stoics and the Epicureans is that they are all dogmatics and hence far from leading the best life. If this case is defensible, it is devastating, because one thing the Stoics and Epicureans could agree on is that the Sage, who by definition leads the best life, enjoys peace of mind.

In keeping with this program, the course will have three units of roughly equal length, i.e., roughly four weeks. The first unit will be devoted to the Epicureans. Our readings will be from the extant letters of Epicurus and relevant selections from his Roman follower, Lucretius. The second unit will be devoted to the Stoics. Our readings will be from fragments and doxographical reports of the earlier Stoics and extended selections from Diogenes Laertius' 'Life of Zeno' and selections from Seneca's letters to Lucilius. The third unit of the course will be devoted to the sceptics. We will mostly be reading from the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* by Sextus Empiricus. I am not willing to give a week-by-week breakdown of the course, because how much time we spend on a given reading will depend on the pace of class-room discussion.

The books I have ordered for the course are as follows:

Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1997)

Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2001=

These books are available for purchase at the Word Bookstore on Milton Street. (The selections from Seneca's letters will be available in the form of PDFs in due course.)

The **method of evaluation for the course** will be as follows. 10% of the grade will be for class-room participation (note that a necessary, but insufficient condition for getting any credit for participation is regular attendance). 50% will be for a final paper of no more than fifteen pages due on the last day of **THIS** class (Phil.452). 40% for two short papers of no more than five pages due during the term. It is a necessary condition for getting a passing grade that students do all of the assignments and participate in class discussion. (Note: this means that if you cannot find a way to participate constructively in class-room discussion, you cannot pass the course. Note too that constructively participating in class-room discussion presupposes that you keep up with the reading. Hence, if you do not keep up with the reading, you will not be able to satisfy a necessary condition for getting a passing grade, and therefore you will fail.) I expect students to bring the texts with them to class. No matter where we are in the course, you must bring the Inwood and Gerson reader. Finally, McGill University does not tolerate plagiarism.

Les étudiants qui aiment mieux rédiger leurs devoirs en français ont le droit de ce faire ici à l'Université McGill. Veuillez consulter