PHILOSOPHY 551   SEMINAR: ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY   FALL 2013
Stephen Menn   T 2:30-4:30, Leacock 927

PROVISIONAL COURSE DESCRIPTION

   This seminar will give a way into discussions of unity and plurality, divisibility and indivisibility, infinity, continuity and motion in Greek philosophy. We will concentrate on Aristotle's Physics, Books V-VIII, but will start by looking at some texts from the Eleatics (Parmenides and Zeno) and Plato which Aristotle will be taking up; we will also look at Diodorus Cronus, and other Greek philosophers if time permits. Zeno gave both arguments against plurality and arguments against motion, which helped to stimulate the further development of Greek philosophy. Aristotle, on the basis of his theory of motion and of the continuum, gives a solution to Zeno's arguments against motion in Physics VI,9, not only responding to Zeno but also competing with other philosophers' solutions; but he also uses reflection on Zeno's arguments against motion and plurality to develop his own positive theory of motion, the continuum, and indivisibles, throughout Physics VI. Indivisibles or unextended things include not only God and the soul but also points and moments in time; the notion of incorporeal realities seems to enter Greek philosophy through Zeno's notion of indivisibility. Aristotle wants not only to distinguish indivisible or incorporeal things, which cannot be moved, from continuous bodies, which can be moved; he also wants to show what role indivisible things play in motion, whether as the moments at the beginning or end of a motion, the boundaries of the moved bodies, or also as indivisible efficient causes of motion, since Aristotle thinks that indivisibles cannot be moved but can nonetheless move other things. Physics VI, on motion and its relation to continua and indivisibles, functions to support the argument of Physics VIII, which argues that there is an eternal indivisible unmoved cause of an eternal continuous motion and tries to refute Plato's view that the principle of motion is an eternally self-moved soul. We will try, in addition to discussing the general conceptual issues and the historical setting in Greek philosophy, to work out the main central arguments of both books (and connected parts of Physics V, VII, and perhaps other books), to see how Physics VI supports Physics VIII, and also to understand any tensions there may be between or within these books.
   The seminar will be divided into three main units, of roughly four weeks each (the third a bit longer, the first a bit shorter): U1 on the Eleatic and Platonic background, U2 centering on Physics VI, U3 centering on Physics VIII.
   The prerequisite is a course discussing Aristotle not limited to his practical philosophy, or instructor's permission. A good high school math background is recommended; this will not be a chiefly mathematical course, and will not involve any difficult mathematics, but is not for people with math anxiety. No knowledge of Greek is required beyond the alphabet, but you will have to listen to discussions of the meanings of Greek words; any further knowledge of Greek or of Greek philosophy or science would of course be an advantage.
   The Basic Works of Aristotle, ed. McKeon-Reeve, will be available at the Word Bookstore on Milton Street. Students who read Greek are encouraged to do as much of the reading in Greek as they can.