

Topics in Ancient Philosophy: Relativism and Skepticism

Course Description

Arguably, relativistic considerations belong to the earliest ideas in Western ethics: the sophists travel and encounter different cultures. The ways in which others are committed to their customs gives them pause. Apparently, every culture sees their own values and norms as ‘natural’; and yet, cultures differ deeply in their value commitments.

A different kind of relativism is implicit in some of the earliest Greek literature and philosophical thought: the world seems to be a place of constant change. There is no stable reality. Mortal nature is in a constant process of dying and regeneration. The world is a place of *becoming*, or worse even of *flux*, not of *being*.

The class is devoted to tracing these intuitions and working through early Greek discussions that are relevant to the development of Greek skepticism. Specifically, we shall discuss how early versions of skepticism relate to early relativism, what the differences between skepticism and relativism are, and whether/how Pyrrhonian skepticism aims to improve upon relativism.

The class covers readings from early Greek philosophy, Plato, Aristotle, and Hellenistic Philosophy, as well as ancient literary texts.

Readings

Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy* (Penguin); John Cooper, *Plato. Complete Works* (Hackett); Annas/Barnes *Sextus Empiricus. Outlines of Scepticism* (CUP green paperback); other texts will be available through Butler/Courseworks.

Requirements

- Students either write one term paper or three shorter papers.
- Students are expected to read the texts closely prior to the class in which they are discussed and to contribute actively to in-class discussion.

Outline of Readings [preliminary]

NOTE: First (unofficial) seminar meeting: Friday, Sept. 9, 11:30-3:45 pm, PHIL 716

Conference *The Many Worlds of the Odyssey*

Homer's *Odyssey* – Early Engagement with Relativism?

Homer, *Odyssey* (Book I.1-10, Books IX and X)

Week 1 (Sept. 12): Custom versus Nature

Herodotus, *Histories* 3.38.

Richard Bett, “Is there a Sophistic Ethics?” *Ancient Philosophy* 22 (2002): 235-262.

Week 2 (Sept 19): Early Greek Thought

Homer, *Iliad* 6.181: “Like leaves on trees...”

Atomism: “The sea is blue at noon and white in the morning”

Week 3 (Sept 26): Early Greek Thought II

Parmenides: perception and not-being

Heraclitus: the world in flux

Week 4 (Oct 3): Plato, *Protagoras* (selection)

Mortal life: becoming, not being

Guest speaker Wolfgang Mann, Philosophy Department, Columbia University

Week 5 (Oct 10): Plato, *Republic V-VII*

The world of becoming

Weeks 6-7 (Oct 17 and 24): Plato, *Theaetetus*

Knowledge is perception: refuting relativism

Week 8 (Oct 31): Aristotle on *doxa*

Topic TBA

Guest speaker Ian McCready-Flora, Society of Fellows and Philosophy Department, Columbia University

Week 9 (Nov 14): Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (selections) and *NE I.3*

Refuting relativism and skepticism

Week 10 (Nov 21): Epicurus on perception and on justice

“All sense-perceptions are true”; justice is by nature and by convention

Week 11 (Nov 28): Early Pyrrhonism

Pyrrho, Timon, and Aenesidemus

Week 12 (Dec 5): Academic Skepticism

Topic TBA

Guest speaker Gisela Striker, Philosophy Department and Classics Department, Harvard University

Week 13 (Dec 12): Sextus Empiricus

Selected readings from *Outlines* Book 1.