DRAFT: 12/09/25

CLA5022F: Early Greek Political Thought

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Thursday 1-4pm
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Office Hour: Monday 1:00-2:00 in JHB 423, or by appointment

Aristotle's *Politics* and John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971) would recognize each other as, under differences of dress and dialect, fundamentally the same kind of book. Both are inquiries into political theory at its most abstract. They argue for systematic sets of synchronic normative principles, presented as the answer to a question taken to be the foundational puzzle of political theory: What constitutional arrangement provides the common good to a political community? Both address themselves to an open, indeterminately wide audience of self-selecting readers, and abjure all persuasive tools other than those of rational argument. In short, both are philosophical treatises.

Early Greek thinking about politics is not like that at all; and a lot had to happen before the philosophical treatise became the standard unit -- the *Normalbaum* -- of Western political thought. In the works of early thinkers like Hesiod, Solon, Euripides, and Thucydides, reflection on political problems arises in and deploys the powers of some other genre. This political thought 'in the wild' is often found bound up with narrative -- in epic and tragedy, usually a narrative in which divine powers play several kinds of essential role. Early political genres such as epic, lyric, tragedy, comedy, and history are very different from each other, but all afford opportunities for thinking about political ideas and problems in a markedly *open* way: unlike treatises, they lend themselves naturally to presenting conflicting standpoints and ideas (with the conflict left unresolved), or to developing a train of thought and then undermining it, or playing with unresolved ambiguities. They differ from each other (and from treatises) in their relation to temporality, the divine, modalities of possibility and necessity and many other dimensions, and thus in what political problems they make salient and what ideas they make articulable. Meanwhile proto-philosophical prose works like those of the Presocratics and sophists, whether by being fragmentary or through deliberate authorial strategies (such as poetic diction or argument on both sides of the question), are, enjoyably, often open in something like the same way as these literary texts. We will try to figure out what a selection of these difficult open texts are saying about politics. In doing so we'll be grappling with the complex questions raised by *how* they are saying it, and trying to find ways to talk about how in each case the *how* shapes the *that* and vice versa. That is: we will work on trying to articulate some of the differences which form makes to content in political thought.

Recurrent themes will include the relation of the human political order to divine forces (or the absence thereof); the nature of law; how to resolve conflicts caused by greed, violence, faction, and the corruptions of power; Utopia and constitutional choice; and the role of political wisdom. At the centre of all these is the familiar and still-urgent question of justice [*dikê*]: what it is, where

it comes from, what authority it has, and whether and how it can be attained in the world as we know it.

Each week will be organized around a *core text*, to be discussed closely, and a *counter-text* which illuminates or problematizes it. Core and counter-texts will include Hesiod's *Works and Days* and *Theogony*, the *Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, the fragments of Heraclitus, Solon, Antiphon, and Protagoras, the *Anonymous Iamblichi* and *Dissoi Logoi*, Aristophanes' *Wealth* and *Birds*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Euripides' *Andromachê.* We will look only very occasionally at Plato or Aristotle, to give evidence of earlier debates or to clarify differences and continuities. We will also glance at some significant moments in modern reception, and useful developments in contemporary scholarship. The course is intended to be accessible to students from a wide variety of perspectives, ranging from those whose primary interests are literary to specialists in political philosophy.

Readings:

Versions of all the readings will be available in English in pdf form online; but you are encouraged to find (and preferably buy) hard copies whenever possible. For each text, a range of translations will be acceptable for class use (others will be deprecated); other helpful readings will be discussed in class, and students are encouraged to explore the secondary literature on their own. Students with Greek are strongly encouraged to obtain and use the texts in the original; specific suggestions will be given for each week. See 'Schedule' below for more details.

Expectations, Assignments, Evaluation:

Credit for the course will be gained on the following basis:

Presentation (20 minutes, with handout) 15%*
Presentation response (5 minutes) 5%
Micro-paper (about 3 pages of focussed, argumentative interpretive and/or philosophical writing, *not* repeating the presentation): 20% (due Oct. 17)
Paper prospectus (required -- no paper will be graded without prior submission of a prospectus -- but not graded independently of the paper) (due Nov. 10)
Term paper (15 pages or so): 60% (due Dec. 18)

* Students enrolled are expected to sign up to do one 20-minute (no more!) presentation, to be followed by a 5-minute (no more!) critical response by another student. Presentations should be on either the counter-text or a related or secondary reading, to complement our investigation of the core text for the day. Non-enrolled participants in the course are also encouraged to do a presentation and/or response. A presentation must be accompanied by a handout, a draft of which must be submitted to me and your respondent by noon the preceding Monday; you are *strongly* urged to run your topic by me the previous week.

Tentative Schedule:

Each week will be organized around a *Core text*, to be discussed closely, and a *Counter-text* which illuminates or problematizes it. Other relevant ancient texts which will be helpful for interpreting the core text are included under *Further Readings*; likewise a small selection of modern 'secondary' literature.

The readings listed below are tentative: they will be added to, rearranged, and tweaked as we go. In particular, the *Further Readings* will be continuously revised. I will post the *Further Readings* listed below and many more to Quercus; the authoritative 'reading list', saying which readings are required, which suggested, which skimmable and so forth, will be given for each week in an Announcement the preceding Friday. You are encouraged to read widely beyond the required readings, and to look for possible presentation topics in the *Further Readings.*

Note that we will meet for an additional week at the end of term to make up for starting a week late.

Week 1 (Sept. 11): Course Introduction and Warm-Up
Readings: Wohl, 'Introduction to the Politics of Form', Billings, 'Introduction to Tragedy in the Philosophical Age of the Greeks'; Hesiod *Works and Days* lines 1-300; Nelson, Modrine papers

Part I: Divine Justice and Divine Power

Week 2 (Sept. 18): The Justice of Zeus
Core Text: Hesiod, *Works and Days*
Counter-text: Hesiod, *Theogony*
Further Readings: Clay, 'Orientations', Beall 'Justice', Anderson chapter, Nelson, 'Justice', Mordine 'Ainos'
Presentation:
Response:

Week 3 (Sept. 25): Divine Injustice?
Core Text: [Aeschylus?] *Prometheus Bound*
Counter-text: Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound* (pdf excerpts)
Further Readings: Grene, White, Rufell
Presentation:
Response:

Week 4 (Oct. 2): Justice Transformed?
Core Text: Aeschylus, *Eumenides*
Counter-text: Aeschylus, *Agamemnon, Libation-Bearers*
Further Readings: Cohen, Podlecki, vander Waerdt
Presentation:

Response:

Part II: Problems in the Polis:

Week 5 (Oct. 9): Cosmic and Civic Harmony: Kat Furtado Guest Lecture on Heraclitus
Core Text: Heraclitus fragments
Counter-text: Democritus fragments, Anaximander fragments
Further Readings: Antiphon *On Concord;* Furtado chapter, Kahn excerpts
Presentation:
Response:

Week 6 (Oct. 16): Conflict, *Homonoia*, Wisdom
Core Text: Solon fragments
Counter-text: Plutarch, 'Life of Solon'
Further Readings:; Plato, *Statesman*, Diogenes Laertius, Life of Solon; Balot, 'Solonian Athens and the Archaic Roots of Greed'
Presentation:
Response:

Week 7 (Oct. 23): Protagoras on Justice and the *Politikê Technê*
Core Text: Plato, *Protagoras* and *Theaetetus* excerpts
Counter-Text: Sophocles, *Antigone* 'Ode to Man'
Further Readings: Mengzi 3A4
Presentation:
Response:

Week 8 (Nov. 6): Irresolvable Conflict
Core Text: Sophocles, *Antigone*
Counter-Text: Dissoi Logoi, Herodotus excerpts on convention [*nomos*]
Further Readings: tba
Presentation:
Response:

Week 9 (Nov. 13): *Politeia* and Utopia
Core Text: Aristophanes, *Birds*
Counter-Text: Herodotus, 'Constitutional Debate of the Persians'
Further Readings: Constitution of the Athenians, Xenophon, *Constitution of the Spartans,* Menn 'Politeia'
Presentation:
Response:

III. The Birth of Theory:

Week 10 (Nov. 20): Human Nature I: *Phusis*
Core Text: Antiphon fragments on Justice
Counter-Text: Anonymous Iamblichi

Further Readings: Anderson, 'Just Flourishing?' excerpts; Hippias fragments
Presentation:
Response:

Week 11 (Nov. 27): Human Nature II: Desire, Power, Ignorance, Necessity
Core Text: Thucydides excerpts (Melian Dialogues, Mytilene episode, Sicilian expedition)
Counter-Text: Gorgias, *Helen, Defence of Palamedes, On Not Being*
Further Readings: Ludwig, *Eros*; Wohl, 'Erotics of Empire'
Presentation:
Response:

Week 12 (Dec. 4): Is Justice Possible?
Text: Euripides, *Andromache*
Counter-Text: Aristophanes, *Wealth*
Further Readings: Plato, *Republic* I, Thrasymachus fragments, White paper
Presentation:
Response: