Updated as of 13/09/23

PHL301H1F: Early Greek Philosophy: The Sophists

Time: Wed. 3:00-6:00
Location: FE240, 371 Bloor St. West

Prof. R. Barney
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Office Hours: Mon 2:30-3:30 at JHB 426, or email me to make an appointment

This course is a survey of the writings and ideas of the ancient Greek sophists of the fifth century B.C.E. -- the golden age of ancient Athens, era of Socrates, Sophocles, and the Peloponnesian War. The sophists, including Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, and Hippias, were intellectual superstars, both celebrated and feared for their dangerous 'wisdom' [*sophia*]. To this day, 'sophist' is a term of condemnation, used for someone who relies on fallacious, unfair ('sophistic') forms of argument. That stereotype goes back to their own day, when they were attacked by Aristophanes and Plato; thanks mostly to Plato's hostility, they have been pushed out of the history of philosophy, marginalized as a kind of anti-philosophical Other. But this stereotype is too simple, and unfair. The sophists were an extremely diverse group -- a movement or a profession rather than a school with a shared theory -- and some sophists were certainly worth serious consideration as philosophers. They were among the earliest thinkers to debate questions about justice, ethics, education, language and rhetoric, religion, and the origins of society; they also were also inventors and practitioners of new forms of rational argument (as well as of manipulative persuasion). In fact, the sophists were the authors of some of the earliest rigorous philosophical arguments which have come down to us, and to study their works carefully is still an excellent way of sharpening philosophical skills.

In the first part of the course, we will mostly focus on the few surviving texts by the sophists themselves, including Gorgias' *On Not-Being, Palamedes,* and *Helen*, the *Dissoi Logoi*, and Antiphon's *Tetralogies*. We will spend several weeks trying to reconstruct what seems to have been a major focus of sophistic thought: a complicated and sophisticated philosophical debate about justice, in which different sophists took opposed positions on questions such as 'What is justice? Is it natural or merely conventional? How is justice related to law? Why should I follow the rules when no one is looking?' This debate heavily influenced Plato; it continues today. We will look briefly at Plato's reactions to it, and in the latter part of the course we will look in depth at his portrayals of sophists in dialogues such as the *Protagoras* and *Euthydemus*. We will read these works both for their own philosophical interest -- so this will also be in part a course on Plato, and how he learns from and reacts to to the sophistic movement -- and for their evidence as to what various sophists might have been up to. We will try to read Plato in a careful and critical way, without assuming that he is just serving up the stereotype to us. Reading Plato is always tricky, and reading sophistic texts is even more so: most are fragmentary, anonymous, enigmatic, and deliberately hard to interpret -- and often funny. (For instance, Gorgias' *On Not Being* proves that nothing exists.) So this course will sharpen skills in the close reading and interpretation of difficult texts as well as skills of philosophical argument and analysis.

Objectives/Outcomes:

- to provide a good grasp of the major figures, texts, ideas, debates, and methods of argument belonging to the sophistic movement of the 5th century BCE, and with it a fuller understanding of the history of Greek philosophy;
- to gain philosophical insight into the complex problems raised by the sophists in ethics, politics, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of language, and philosophical method;
- to improve our understanding of Plato by grasping his engagement with sophistic ideas, including both his critique(s) of the sophists and his appropriation of their ideas;
- to improve interpretive, analytical, critical, and writing skills, including those deployed in argument analysis and in real-time philosophical discussion.

Prerequisites/Consumer Warning:

The prerequisite for the course is PHL200Y; students will be presumed to have passed this course, and thus to have both a general view of the progress of Greek philosophy and some familiarity with Plato. Students are also required to have completed three half-courses in philosophy. This course is *not* designed as a breadth or general interest course: there will be a strong focus on skills of philosophical analysis and argument. Students *may* be permitted to take the course without satisfying the prerequisites, but they do so at their own risk.

Texts:

Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. J.M. Cooper, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997)
Dillon, J., and T. Gergel., eds., *The Greek Sophists* (London: Penguin, 2003) **[= D&G** in Schedule below**]**

The texts are available at the University of Toronto Bookstore: **if at all possible, buy and use them in hard copy.** (Rationale: We will be reading these works very closely, and a hard-copy book is still the best technology for note-taking and reference-finding.) Any further readings will be available as pdf's on Quercus; these are marked with an * in the Schedule below.

Evaluation:

All writing assignments will be graded anonymously: please put only your student number on your work, not your name.

Weekly writing assignments (WWA) (one page; best 5 out of 6) (Sept. 19, 26, Oct. 3, 10, 24, Oct. 31): 20%
First paper (5 pages; due. Oct. 18): 20%
Second Paper (6 pages; due Nov. 29): 25%

Attendance and participation: 10%[1]
Final exam: 25%

About WWAs: There will be a weekly writing assignment (WWA) of approximately one page due most weeks of class (see above list). It must be submitted on Quercus **by noon Tuesday** each week (no extensions, excuses, late submissions permitted without a medical excuse/accommodation). *NB the WWAs are not just reader-response say-anything microassignments*, of a kind you may have come to know during covid. They are micro-essays, designed to give you practice in all the skills you will use in your longer papers; take time to do them properly.

All assignments will be submitted online, and automatically filtered through Ouriginal, our plagiarism-detection system; unless you contact me to request otherwise, your submission of your work on Quercus will be taken to constitute consent to this.[2] I also will make every effort to detect plagiarism and see that it is punished. If you are not sure what counts as plagiarism, start here: https://www.academicintegrity.utoronto.ca/. **The use of ChatGPT and other artificial intelligence tools, apps, and writing and coding assistants is absolutely prohibited in this course.** Any use of them on course assignments will be considered use of an unauthorized aid, which is a form of cheating, and cases will be turned over to the Office of Student Academic Integrity. Please do not kid yourself by thinking that you can consult a bot just to get ideas or a model, and then produce something which will be, and will sound like, your own work: bot-based work is *highly* recognisable. I reserve the right to withhold the grade on any assignment until the student and I have held an illuminating in-person discussion regarding it.

Lateness policy: For late papers, one letter grade will be deducted for the first day or two days of lateness (i.e., a B+ becomes a B), and a second letter grade for being any later than that. No work will be accepted after the last day of classes. (This does not apply in cases of accommodations or where an extension has been granted.)

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[1] How this grade works: Regular class attendance -- meaning punctual, attentive, prepared, respectful engagement with the course and your fellow students -- is expected and required as part of the course. If you attend regularly but do not participate much, your a&p grade will be roughly the same as the rest of your grade. (In other words, shy students will not be penalized: but please, do your best not to be shy!) If you miss a number of sessions and do not participate when present, you should expect a failing a&p grade. If you participate significantly, your a&p grade should be a strong one, dependent on the quantity and quality of that participation. Participation = speaking up in person in the traditional way. If you would strongly prefer the option of online discussion groups instead, please let me know and we can see if there is a critical mass for that option.

[2] Required boilerplate: "Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to Ouriginal.com for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the Ouriginal.com reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of the Ouriginal.com service are described on the Ouriginal.com web site".

Tentative Schedule (subject to revision):

Unless otherwise specified, readings from sophistic authors are from Dillon and Gergel (eds.) (=D&G in schedule); readings from Plato are from the *Complete Works* (see Texts above). Readings marked with a * will be made available on Quercus under the modules for the relevant weeks. Please download these and print them out so that you can make notes on them; or, if you are very attached to reading online, be sure to bring your laptop each week. (In other words, don't bother coming to class without having the readings to hand.)

Readings will be tweaked as the term proceeds; check Quercus Announcements and the weekly modules for any updates.

For each week, our discussions will be organized around the *core readings*; but the *other readings* will often come into discussion as well. Both kinds count as required readings.

Introduction:

Week 1 (Sept. 13): Course Introduction; Who Were the Sophists?
Core Reading: Aristophanes, *Clouds**
Other Readings: for an introduction to the topic, pick any one of: Barney, 'The Sophistic Movement'*, McKirahan excerpt*, D&G 'Introduction'

Part I: The Sophists and their Works:

Week 2 (Sept. 20): Gorgias: Defending the Indefensible I:
Core Readings: *Encomium of Helen* (D&G 76-84), and *Defense of Palamedes* (D&G 84-93)
Other Readings: rest of Gorgias chapter in D&G (43-97)

Week 3 (Sept. 27): Gorgias: Defending the Indefensible II:
Core Readings: Gorgias, *On Not-Being* (D&G 67-76)
Other Readings: Parmenides fragments B1-8*

Week 4 (Oct. 4): Argument on Both Sides of the Question
Core Readings: Dissoi Logoi ('Double Arguments', D&G 318-33), [Hippocrates], *On the Art**
Other Readings: Plato, *Sophist* 232b-6d

Week 5 (October 11): *Nomos, Phusis,* and the Case against Justice:
Core Readings: Antiphon, fragments on justice from *On Truth* (D&G 150-53); Plato, *Gorgias* 481b-86d;
Other Reading: Hesiod excerpt*

Week 6 (October 18): The Defence of Justice and Virtue:

Core Readings: the *Anonymous Iamblichi* (D&G 310-318)
Other Readings: Prodicus, 'The Choice of Heracles'; tba

Week 7 (October 25): Religious Thought:
Core Readings: Critias text 47, aka 'The *Sisyphus* fragment' (D&G 250-3), Protagoras on the gods (D&G 21), Prodicus on the gods (D&G 109-10)
Other Readings: Xenophanes fragments,* Plato *Laws* excerpts, tba

Week 8 (November 1): Legal Argument, Probability, and Causality:
Core Readings: Antiphon, *Tetralogies* (D&G 172-202)
Other Readings: tba

- Reading Week -

Part II: Plato on the Sophists:

Week 9 (Nov. 15): Eristic vs. Philosophy
Core Readings: Plato, *Euthydemus*

Week 10 (Nov. 22): Protagoras in Plato
Core Readings: Plato, *Protagoras*
Other Readings: Protagoras chapter in D&G

Week 11 (Nov. 29): Prodicus and Hippias
Core Readings: Prodicus and Hippias chapters in D&G; Plato, *Lesser Hippias*
Other Readings: *Greater Hippias* 281a-6e

Week 12 (Dec. 6): The Sophistic Legacy: Modern Readings and Revivals:
Core Readings: Grote selections,* Nietzsche selections,* other works TBA*