Ancient Philosophy

Course prefix: PHIL

Course number: 3102

Section: CJ

CRN (you may add up to five):
90018

Instructor First Name: Clint

Instructor Last Name: Johnson

Semester: Fall

Academic year: 2025

Course description:

Why did modern scientific thought emerge when it did and not thousands of years earlier? What can the history of inquiry into the natural world tell us about why we think the way we do today? Does the history of science matter for scientific practice today?

To answer these questions, this course will trace through the history of philosophy from its earliest days in ancient Greece up to the emergence of the modern age in the Renaissance. We will begin by looking at how recognizably philosophical thinking arose with changes in the conception of what an individual is and what we can know about the natural world. We will follow trends in cosmology, astronomy, physics, epistemology, ontology, conceptions of the individual and individual creativity. All of these implied changes in notions of what religion was, what knowledge could be and what role the individual was capable of playing. By the time we arrive at the Renaissance, we will understand why the soil was fertile for the modern worldview to emerge.

Often, scientific revolutions have been characterized by questioning and altering fundamental assumptions about self and world understanding. By seeing the developments that led to the modern world, we can bring to light our own assumptions and better understand the philosophical assumptions implicit in scientific theories. Knowing where the boundaries of thought are and why they are there can be critical in overcoming them. By participating in an ongoing dialog about the worldview changes that shaped philosophical thought throughout the earliest portion of philosophy's history, students will see how modern thought emerged, why it emerged when it did and what implications this has for creative scientific thought today.

Course learning outcomes:

By the end of the course, you should be able to characterize how philosophy arose and how it changed over time in the ancient world. In particular, you should be able to compare the different periods and describe the philosophical shifts that occurred with an eye toward explaining the development of the intellectual conditions necessary for the epochal change from the ancient world to the modern world. In the end you will be able to describe the major ideas of the most significant philosophical figures in the ancient world.

Required course materials:

Required physical books

Allen, R. (1991). *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle* (Third edition). Free Press (ISBN: 978-0029004951)

Saunders, Jason L. (1997). *Greek and Roman Philosophy After Aristotle*. Free Press. (ISBN: 978-0684836430)

Required Texts that are available as eBooks on the web or through the library's website

Annas, Julia (2000). *Ancient Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press. (Print ISBN: 9780192853578, eBook ISBN: 9780191540196)

Blumenberg, Hans (2010). *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*. Cornell University Press. (Print ISBN: 9780801449253, eBook ISBN: 9780801460043)

Kenney, Anthony (2004). *New History of Western Philosophy vol.1: Ancient Philosophy*. Oxford University Press. (Print ISBN: 9780198752721, eBook ISBN: 9780191524974)

Kirk, G.S. and Raven, J.E. (1957). *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*. (archive.org)

Marenbon, John (2002). *Early Medieval Philosophy [480-1150](#): An Introduction*. Routledge. (Print ISBN: 9780415000703, eBook ISBN: 9780203004227)

Marenbon, John (2003). *Routledge History of Philosophy Volume III, Volume 3 : Medieval Philosophy*. Routledge. (Print ISBN: 9780415053778, eBook ISBN: 9780203028469)

Oppy, Graham and Trakakis, N.N. (2013). *History of Western Philosophy of Religion: Medieval Philosophy of Religion: The History of Western Philosophy of Religion, Volume 2*. Routledge. (Print ISBN: 9781844652211, eBook ISBN: 9781317546481)

Shand, John (2005). *Central Works of Philosophy: Ancient and Medieval, Volume 1*. Acumen. (Print ISBN: 9781844650132, eBook ISBN: 9781844653584)

Warren, James (2014). *Ancient Philosophies: Presocratics*. Routledge. (Print ISBN: 9781844650910, eBook ISBN: 9781317493372)

Jasper Hopkins' translations and articles can be found at http://jasper-hopkins.info/

Grading policy:

The best way to gain a comprehensive grasp of philosophical history in the ancient world is to be continuously engaged with the material. We will accomplish this principally through discussions in class that are fueled by your written commentaries. Our ongoing dialogue will be supplemented by the other graded assignments. The final exam for this class is the final paper, which is to be submitted electronically no later than the final exam time. All written assignments must be submitted on Canvas. All assignments are due by 11:59pm on the date listed above. In other words, if they have the correct day stamped on them, they are on time. Otherwise they are late (see below for the late policy).

Graded Assignments

Video journals and mind maps (7.5% each): 30% total

Symposium: 20%

Disputation: 20%

Paper: 30%

Video journals and mind maps

- Mind map: diagram of what the major ideas are, how the ideas relate to each other (arrows, colors, brief comments), and how they relate to thinkers who came before. Circles with short phrases, quick notes, arrows, pictures – anything you can think of that will succinctly get to the heart of the ideas.
- Create and upload a 3-5 minute video explaining how the major ideas work and what you think of them.

While you are welcome to make the videos longer, it is critical that you capture the essence of the ideas in the first 3-5 minutes. This is because it is harder to say things briefly than it is at length. I welcome extended commentary, though, in addition to that. The goal of this assignment is for you to have many ways of showing me how well you understand the material and how much you are thinking about it. I am *not* expecting perfection. You do not need to understand absolutely everything about the ideas - I'm not sure anyone does. I am

principally looking for how much you are engaging with the material. If you are putting energy into understanding the ideas and doing the necessary reading, writing and thinking to catalyze understanding, then you will do well on this assignment.

The structure of the videos should be as follows (each section is equally weighted):

What you need to get an A, B or C on the assignment is listed under each section below

1. Describe what the ideas are and how the arguments for them work

Rubric (letter grades correspond to the descriptions below):

1.
    1. Clear, accurate and thorough descriptions of the ideas, describing the philosopher's arguments for them and a discussion of how those arguments work.
    2. Good, clear descriptions of the ideas and the arguments, lacking in some details
    3. Descriptions of the ideas that are lacking in significant ways.
2. Describe how they relate to similar ideas from earlier philosophers and their own contemporaries
    1. Clear and accurate discussion of the reception history of the ideas (how others responded to them) and any objections that they address in the work
    2. A good account of how the ideas relate to earlier ideas, but lacking in some ways
    3. An incomplete history and/or an account of how others responded and objections to the ideas that is significantly lacking or absent
3. Tell me what you think about the ideas
    1. A carefully considered and detailed reflection on the ideas, including an agreement or objection that details philosophical specifics about why you agree or disagree (e.g., citing a particular passage or specific detail of the argument) that also makes use of additional external sources that were not part of the assigned reading
    2. A good, thoughtful reflection on the ideas, including an agreement or objection that details philosophical specifics about why you agree or disagree (e.g., citing a particular passage or specific detail of the argument)
    3. A simple summary that restates the ideas without clearly conveying your own understanding of them

Final paper and video

The paper:

You will be asked to submit a paper on any substantive philosophical topic in the course. The papers should be at least 2000 words. **You must use and cite external resources. Research is the key to succeeding on this assignment.** Citations should be done according to the Chicago Manual of Style (

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In the paper, you will describe a position of a particular philosopher or philosophers (not too many – depth is key!) and do the following:

- Say what your topic is and what your thesis is. The essay should revolve around **your** original philosophical contribution. In other words, this is not a book report.
- Introduce the problem in the context of philosophical history – what led to this thesis being given by this particular thinker at this particular time?
- Describe the thesis in the context of that philosopher's thought in general (e.g., Kant's moral claims about duty fit neatly with the remainder of his philosophical system)
- Describe your objection, modification or twist on the topic
- Try and determine how that philosopher would have responded to your objection (AI agents are excellent for this)

To do well on this assignment, you will need to understand the figure that you discuss and his or her place in philosophical history. Although this is not an English course, since philosophers cannot often lean on numbers to make the point for them, they are left needing to clearly articulate their ideas in words. Thus, clarity in writing and grammar are important insofar as they facilitate the effective communication of your ideas.

The video:

Along with the paper, I will ask you to submit a short video. This is **not** a summary of the paper. I want you to casually describe the thought process of the paper, emphasizing points where you thought about going a different direction, didn't quite understand something or were surprised by something in your research. I want to hear about the **process** of doing the research and writing the paper. If you put a lot of thought into your own original philosophical ideas in the paper, this will be easy. Those who have AI agents write the papers for them (which is not allowed, of course – see below) will find this much more difficult.

Special note on using online AI agents like ChatGPT for the writing assignments

As we will discuss and demonstrate in class, I expect you to make use of online AI writing tools like ChatGPT. Using tools like this will be an important skill for you going forward. We will talk about how to use them and what the limitations are (viz., they are sometimes wrong and they haven't necessarily read the academic journals). You are of course expected to submit only your own work for the paper and not copy and paste material from these agents. That said, they provide excellent starting points and can be used to find clear and concise ways of saying things. **Since these tools are maturing rapidly and provide clear prose with a single click, the level of clarity and writing expected by this assignment has naturally increased in kind**. Similarly, the bar will be set

higher for getting the information right. That is, since I know how easy it is to provide Wikipedia-level content for your topic from these agents, the onus is on you to make sure that the arguments are represented accurately and provide citations and quotations that support that. This will make the process of writing much easier and better in a variety of ways. I hope that it will enable us as writers in philosophy to focus more on research and quality of argumentation and less on the craft of writing and editing. While some professors are concerned about assigning papers since it is now so easy for students to have these agents write for them, I am embracing the new technology and want to help you to learn how to effectively use it.

Symposium & Disputation

In the first half and as we near the end of the course, we will talk about the earliest universities and the *quaestio* method of instruction and practice. To better understand what this was like, we will engage in our own 'symposium' and 'ordinary disputations' in class.

The class will be divided into groups of equal numbers of students. Though the disputation will be a group exercise in class, you will only be graded *individually*. Each group will select a topic from the pool of questions given in class. As the questions can be answered either affirmatively or negatively (e.g., do humans have free will?), each group will split itself in half with one half arguing one side and the other half arguing the opposing side (called *pro et contra*). Each person will write a paper with the following structure:

1. Statement of the question
2. Articulation of arguments *against* the position that you are taking
3. Articulation of arguments and marshalling of evidence *for* the position you are taking
4. A discussion which more fully explains the debate on the topic
5. Replies to the objections

For an example of this kind of writing, look at Thomas Aquinas' disputed questions on evil (*On Evil*, trans. Richard Regan, available as an eBook through the library). As you can see with Aquinas, doing this well requires concise and clear descriptions of the possible positions for each side. Most importantly, your writing needs to be *precise*. As you dissect the nature of the debate, you will need to find the clearest and fastest method for getting to the heart of each possible position. Similarly, your responses to the opposing positions must address the specific details on how your response effectively dispenses with the kernel of each objection. It is in doing this that the work with your group will be most valuable. It is often far easier to see the shortcomings and gaps in your own argumentation in conversation with others. We allow ourselves to gloss over the weak points of our stances when thinking about them in isolation in a way that we cannot do when we are compelled to try and articulate our positions so as to help another person to understand them.

To do this well, you will need to research others who have written on your topic and deal with the topic using similar subtlety and precision, perhaps answering objections that they might have raised as well. The scholastics were known for the fineness and subtlety of their argumentation. This is therefore an exercise in attention to detail in philosophical argumentation. We will cover strategies for research in the weeks before the disputations.

The disputation in class will proceed as follows:

1. Presentation by each member of the *pro* side arguing for the affirmative answer to the question
2. Presentation by each member of the *contra* side arguing for the negative answer to the question in response to the *pro* side's arguments
3. Response by the *pro* side
4. Open discussion

The in-class portion of this assignment is 25% of the grade, with the other 75% for the written portion. For both portions, you will be graded on the clarity of your presentation and your facility with the material, just as the undergraduates in the early universities were.

Late Policy

Assignments are penalized according to their **_timestamps_** on Canvas:

- Less than 7 days late: -10% total at 1.4% per day
- Between 7 and 14 days late: -20% total at 1.4% per day
- More than 14 days late: -30% total at 1.4% per day
- Assignments turned in *after* the day of the final exam will not be counted

It is a bad idea to submit the assignment five minutes before it is due. Technical difficulties happen. It is best to avoid potential issues by turning it in with plenty of time to spare. Canvas automatically applies late penalties.

Draft Policy

For the written assignments, *you may submit any number of drafts to me for review by email*. I will do everything for the drafts that I normally do for the submitted assignments except for assigning a grade. In addition, I will provide suggestions for revision and research. Submitting drafts like this is entirely optional. I will accept drafts up to one week before each assignment itself is due. After that point, I cannot guarantee that I will be able to get comments back to you before the assignment is due (though I will try). Your drafts do not need to be complete.

This should take the stress out of the papers – and the final exam! Since you have ample opportunity to get feedback on your papers at any time during the semester before they are due, there is no reason to be anxious about the papers. In fact, by the time you actually submit the assignments for grades, those who have submitted drafts and diligently responded to the comments should have a very good feel for the grades they are likely to receive. Therefore, there is no reason for anyone not to do well on the papers – as long as you are willing to put in the work ahead of time to do the drafts and you follow my recommendations for revision and additional research.

You might notice that the draft policy for the debate and final paper means that so long as you are willing to prepare in advance – that's the main point – then should be no reason to stress over how well you will do on these assignments since you should have a good feel for that before you ever turn them in. The design here is simple: this class does not need to be anxiety-provoking because of any unknowns about how good your papers are. You have ample opportunity to find out those things in advance of actually submitting the assignments. While this may seem like an overly generous policy that makes the class easy, it only makes the class easy for those students who are willing to put the work in ahead of time. And since those students are accomplishing the learning objectives of the course by doing so, I see no reason for the assignments to be stressful for them.

Grading system

At the end, all your points will be transformed in letter grades according to the following scheme:
100-90 = A; 89-80 = B; 79-70 = C; 69-60 = D; 59-0 = F.

Attendance policy:

Since class discussions are critical for engagement with the material, **attendance is mandatory**. Regardless of your performance on the graded assignments, you will receive an "F" if you attend fewer than 60%, and nothing better than a "C" if you attend fewer than 80%. Please sign the attendance list that will be available during the first 5 to 10 minutes.

Academic honesty/integrity statement:

Students are expected to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. All work submitted must be original and properly cited. Plagiarism, cheating, or any form of academic dishonesty will result in immediate consequences as outlined in the university's academic integrity policy.

Speaking with other people about the arguments for your papers is helpful and, indeed, is expected. Submitting any work other than your own however is a violation of the Academic Honor Code. Quoting other authors, of course, is common practice. You must however distinguish clearly between your own work and that of others. If you quote or paraphrase

an idea from someone else, you must cite them. All sources should be listed in the references section of your papers. I have a zero tolerance policy for plagiarism. It is the student's responsibility to know what plagiarism is. Plagiarism will be dealt with according to the GT Academic Honor Code.

For any questions involving these or any other Academic Honor Code issues, please consult me or www.honor.gatech.edu.

Core IMPACTS statement(s) (if applicable):

This is a Core IMPACTS course that is part of the Humanities area.

Core IMPACTS refers to the core curriculum, which provides students with essential knowledge in foundational academic areas. This course will help master course content, and support students' broad academic and career goals.

This course should direct students toward a broad Orienting Question:

- How do I interpret the human experience through creative, linguistic and philosophical works?

Completion of this course should enable students to meet the following Learning Outcome:

- Students will effectively analyze and interpret the meaning, cultural significance and ethical implications of literary/philosophical texts in English or other languages, or of works in the visual/performing arts.

Course content, activities and exercises in this course should help students develop the following Career-Ready Competencies:

- Ethical Reasoning
- Information Literacy
- Intercultural Competence