

Ancient Theories of Knowledge and Logic (FIL4561)

Fall 2022 | Current 20.11.22 | Bjorn Sether Wastvedt

Description

This course traces the development of what we know of as epistemology and logic from the earliest philosophical fragments through Neoplatonic thought. Along the way, we focus on the development of key concepts in this field of philosophy by identifying where authors use central Ancient Greek terms—*epistēmē* and *technē*; *doxa*, *gnōsis*, *nous*, and many others. We will focus almost exclusively on primary texts and ancient testimonia. I will focus on developing your own thinking on these issues.

Epistemological questions surfaced as soon as philosophical inquiry began in earnest with the Milesians' theories of the substance of reality. Xenophanes, the Eleatics, and Protagoras added nuance to epistemological inquiry early on, earlier than we find such maturity in perhaps any other area of philosophy. Plato documents and elaborates these debates in both the shorter ethical works and in the later dialogues. Aristotle then systematizes the field for the first time with his influential logic, but in the Hellenistic period we often see the old Presocratic debates brought to the fore, but with much added sophistication and explicitly logical reasoning. The Sceptic challenge is perhaps the greatest; we will end the survey by looking at Neoplatonic responses to it, especially in Plotinus.

On the development of the course: My goal has been to provide a solid grounding in a crucial aspect of ancient philosophy that intersects with your interests (e.g., logic) but does not overlap with the content of FIL4560. My own experience indicates that exposure to ethics comes more easily and more often in ancient philosophy circles, so it's good to start out your master's degree with a bit of an antidote. I am also always eager to talk about virtue ethics (Aristotelian, Stoic, modern), philosophy as a way of life, and just about anything else, outside class.

Required Course Books

NB: I recommend that you buy copies of the Plato and Aristotle (two volume) collections if feasible, as they will be valuable throughout and after your degree. They are still the best collected editions in English, though some of their individual texts have seen improved translations.

A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia (Hackett, ed. Curd & McKirahan, 2nd ed.)

Plato: Complete Works (Hackett, ed. Cooper) ([UiO: 4 copies](#))

The Complete Works of Aristotle (Oxford, ed. Barnes), Vol. 1 ([online at UiO](#))

Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings (Hackett, ed. Inwood & Gerson, 2nd ed.): [UiO: 3 copies](#)

Plotinus: Ennead V (Loeb Classical Library, ed. Armstrong) ([online at UiO](#))



Michel Corneille the Younger, "Aspasie au milieu des philosophes de la Grèce" (1673, currently in the Palace of Versailles)

Seminar Sessions: every other Tuesday in GM 113 from 10:15–12:00

1. **30.8 Introduction, Presocratics I:** The Milesians (Curd pp. 13–29), presentations of past work
2. **13.9 Presocratics II:** Xenophanes, Heraclitus, the Eleatics, Anaxagoras, Democritus, Protagoras (Curd, pp. 31–72, 101–131, 144–148)
3. **27.9 Plato I:** excerpts from *Euthyphro* (all), *Meno* (all), *Phaedo* (72e–84b, on the soul and recollection), and *Theaetetus* (186e–210d, comprising the second and third arguments)
4. **11.10 Plato II:** excerpts from *Republic* (502c–541b on the education of the philosopher, the line, the cave); *Parmenides* (126a–142a on problems with the Forms, and the first of the deductions), *Timaeus* (27a–37c, prelude on metaphysics and epistemology, and the beginning of the construction), and *Philebus* (55c–67b, on kinds of knowledge and the construction of the mixed life)
5. **25.10 Aristotle:** theory of knowledge and the basics of Aristotelian logic: *Categories* 1–5, 13; *De Interpretatione* 1–9; *Prior Analytics* I, 1–7, 27; *Posterior Analytics* I, 1–4, 10 & II, 19; *De Anima* III.3–8, 427a18–32a13; and two of my lecture videos (here and here)
6. **8.11 Epicureanism** in Inwood & Gerson: *Letter to Herodotus* (pp. 40–42), “Ancient Collections of Maxims” (32–40), Lucretius’ testimony (63–65), Cicero’s testimony (45–49), “The Polemic of Plutarch” (65–71), and “Short Fragments and Testimonia from Uncertain Works” (81–85).
Stoicism, including Chrysippus’ logic: I&G pp. 111–131 (including Chrysippus’ logic in the long excerpt from Diogenes Laertius) and 179–190 (Epictetus’ report of Diodorus’ “Master Argument,” the “Lazy Argument,” and related testimonia)
- R. 14.11 Review for final school exam, GM 374, 08:15–09:45
7. **22.11 Scepticism** (261–341 in I&G, including Academic Scepticism, Pyrrhonian Scepticism and Sextus Empiricus, with optional logic reading, 341–361) and **Plotinus**, *Ennead* 5.3.1-9, 13, 17; 5.5.1-2; 5.6.1

Requirements

Attendance is required at each session. Email well ahead of time if you have an unavoidable conflict.

Reading is expected in its entirety. Focus on topics of particular interest, but give time to each page.

Response papers for sessions 2–7: Develop an original argument about the readings for the next meeting. Focus on some epistemological theme. Do not use secondary sources. Send to all before 8am on the Monday before each session’s meeting. Aim for approximately 500 words.

Four-hour written exam (40%), held 15.00-19.00 on 29.11 at Silurveien 2 OsloMet Sal 1C. Attendance is mandatory. Please attend the review session! Post-course celebration afterward, location TBD.

Term paper of 10 pages for FIL4560 (60%, consult Eyfi). This will be separate from FIL4561 material.

Office hours and contact: I have office hours in GM 352 on Fridays from 12-1pm. Just stop by, or make an appointment if you like. I am more than willing to meet at other times and to discuss non-course philosophy. Zoom by appointment is possible. When problems or concerns related to the class, the reading, or your general program of study arise, please do not hesitate to contact me by email. I answer all emails at least once each day from Monday to Friday. Two weeks between meetings is far too long to go without any communication, so if you are wondering about the response papers or the reading or anything else in the course, please let me know. Remember that it is your responsibility to work through the assigned texts on your own initiative. We cannot possibly cover everything of interest during our sessions.

On graduate work in philosophy: Graduate work in philosophy should be difficult and time-consuming. There is far too much to read, to write, to talk about, and it is (hopefully) too closely related to life itself. This is perhaps why you chose this program: it is not the kind of thing that can be completed—one can progress, but indefinitely. Do not let insecurity or timidity stand in the way of that progress. Communicate with your professors early and often. Be bold in what you write. Aim to contribute in every class, reading group, seminar, or lecture. Get to know the profession from the beginning of your study, and make decisions about your education by working backwards from professional goals. But in all this, make room for a life as well.