**Syllabus Philosophy course 2018**



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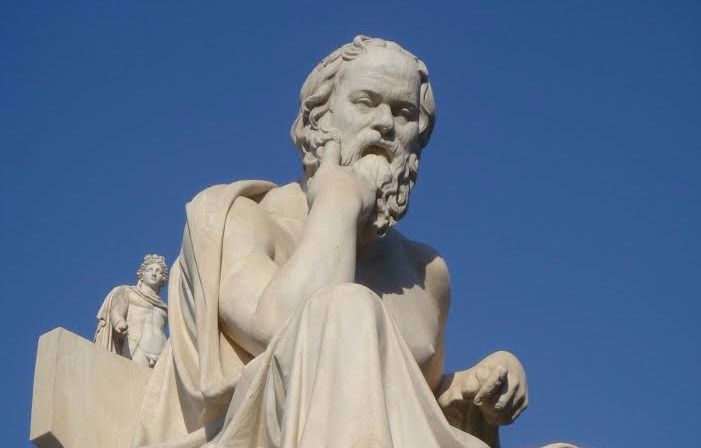
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# What is Philosophy?

What is philosophy? From whence did it come? And what is its origin? The consensus within academia usually is that philosophy started when humankind made the shift from *mythos* to *logos.* This shift consisted in reason’s succession over the mythical attitude towards the world. When explaining reality, people no longer (only) resorted to myths, but attempted to use reason to gain knowledge of reality. Philosophy, literally meaning ‘love for wisdom’, thus began. In the attempt to gain knowledge philosophers started asking all sorts of questions and thought about these questions themselves in order to gain wisdom and increase their understanding.   
 In their quest for knowledge, philosophers posed different kinds of questions. These different types of questions nowadays have become part of separate academic disciplines within universities throughout the world. Below we will offer an overview of them.  
 Within one field of philosophy, we see questions that are related to the nature of reality (metaphysics), or about the categories of being and their relations (ontology). Since philosophers are concerned with the pursuit of knowledge, some questions are indeed about the very nature of knowledge itself. This is what the field of epistemology is concerned with. Epistemic questions are questions about what conditions make knowledge possible, what the scope of our (self)knowledge is (including its limits), how we justify knowledge and how we discern between true and false knowledge. Logics, a specific branch of epistemology seeks to provide guidelines for correct reasoning, and, amongst other things, tries to show how we can make valid inferences   
 Since of old, philosophers are also concerned with questions regarding the good life. This is what the field of ethics studies. It tries to provide a systematic study of our morality by developing concepts about right and wrong, finding justifications for them. Questions involve: How can I lead a good life? What does it mean to be good? What virtues should I develop or strife for? What is the morally right thing to do? What does it mean to lead a morally responsible life? How do I act justly to others? Some philosophers then take the next step to defend these concepts, and act in accordance with them.   
 Not only did philosophers thought about how individuals can behave ethically amongst each other, but also how a just society is to be developed. This is what the strain of political philosophy is concerned with. How do we create a just society? What responsibility do citizens have towards each other? What responsibilities should a state carry?  
 Yet other strains of philosophy are concerned with the art of interpretation of texts, history and dialogue, questions on what is beautiful or ugly (aesthetics), philosophy of technology, philosophy of science, philosophy of language, the thinking of difference and finally, questions about man himself (philosophical anthropology).   
 In short, we could reduce philosophy to three questions: Who am I? Who are the others? And what is the world? When making a practical turn, we might ask: How do I treat myself? How do I treat others? And how do I treat the world?  
 This is but an arbitrary list, which could even be made more extensive and elaborate. In this syllabus, we will try to offer a brief introduction to some famous philosophers and their ideas, with the hope that they can help guide, inspire and inform our thinking.

# Ancient Greece

## Socrates

Socrates (ca. 469 v.Chr. - 399 v.Chr.) is often regarded as the founder of Western philosophy. He came from a wealthy family of whom he refused riches and inheritances to be able to devote his life to things that he thought were nobler: the pursuit of wisdom, the perfection of the soul, the improvement of ideas and leading a virtuous life. He briefly served in the army, where he was known for his valor and heroism. He later led a life of relative freedom, of which he would use all his time to pursuit knowledge in dialogue with others. He didn’t pursue riches in this enterprise. His friends supported him financially, only to such an extent that he had sufficient means to have food and a roof over his head. Socrates died after he was arrested for his philosophical activities. He was convicted for corrupting the youth and offending the gods.  
 For Socrates, philosophy amounted to more than a sole pursuit of wisdom. For him, philosophy was also a form of care for the self (*epimelia heautou).* One of Socrates’ motto’s included: *know thyself (Gnothi Seauton)*. He thought self-knowledge to be of great importance if one is to lead a good life. He even once said: *“the unexamined life is not worth living.”* With this he meant the examination of the self. For him, this is what philosophy should start with. We should therefore have the courage to gaze inwards, and critically and scrupulously examine our own thoughts, convictions and beliefs, thereby bringing our own prejudices and judgements to light. Only then can we get to know ourselves, improve our thinking and use the gained insights to improve ourselves. Only when one has examined one’s own ideas, can one start examine the ideas of others, of which the goal is to improve them. The improvement of ideas, Socrates hoped, would lead to moral improvement. Bad ideas, Socrates thought, can prove to be bad for the wellbeing of individuals, and even for the health of the entire community.  
 Socrates was considered to be a true lover of wisdom, and pursued it tirelessly and endlessly, everywhere he went, and with every dialogue he conducted with others. Socrates came to become very aware of the limits of his own knowledge, of which he famously said: *“All that I know, is that I know nothing.”*[[1]](#footnote-1)   
 The agnostic approach Socrates had towards his own knowledge, led the Oracle of Delphi to proclaim that Socrates is the wisest man, which the Oracle told Socrates’ friend Chaerephon, whom went to the Oracle to inquire who is the wisest man of Athens. When he told Socrates this, Socrates did not become proud or boisterous, but on the contrary sought to refute the claim of the Oracle. Modest as he was about the scope of his knowledge, he thought he would prove the Oracle wrong be conducting dialogues with people that were considered wise. Socrates went to the streets, the markets and parties to question people about their ideas, convictions and (proclaimed) knowledge, in the hopes to get wiser from them. He took much effort to critically and very thoroughly examine the beliefs of others be means of critical questions in dialogues. Since he did this everywhere he came, he acquired the nickname “the hornet”.   
 Socrates was however not only famed by this critical attitude of his. He was also famous for being helpful. Inspired by his mother who was a midwife and helped women gave birth, Socrates considered himself to be a midwife of ideas. He tried (metaphorically of course) to help people give birth to ideas, which he considered to be already innate in people. The only thing Socrates did, was to attempt to ask the right questions to bring this innate knowledge out. This he saw as the main task of a philosopher. For Socrates, the job of a philosopher is not to teach, but to help people think. One famous example is a dialogue he held with an uneducated slave, whom he helped to proof a mathematical theorem just by asking questions. Socrates then said to his interlocutor he watched the entire event: *“You see, Meno, I teach him nothing. All I do is ask questions.”* This has led some to argue that traditionally philosophy has an emancipatory character. We can also see this in Socrates’ attempt to help people reach true and good ideas. Socrates sought to expel bad and false beliefs, since he thought these could bring damage to individuals, but also to society as a whole. Socrates therefore sought to not only reveal and redeem his own ignorance, but also those of others. For him, this was a cooperative enterprise where he himself and his interlocutors could improve themselves. For him this was also a moral inquiry, since his questionings where often about leading a good and virtuous life, and about political matters such as justice. Sometimes the dialogues went so far in questioning that Socrates himself and his interlocutors got confused. They often found that many questions are undecisive and unanswerable, thereby reaching what they called *aporia* (unsolvable doubt or puzzlement). Socrates would namely consistently ask his interlocutors for definitions regarding certain virtues, that the person he questioned would find to hold contradictory beliefs, or that he would find he should change his life if he indeed beliefs in certain principles, when having reflected on them. The aim was never, we should note, to subvert, undermine or ridicule the beliefs of others. His goal was always to improve his own beliefs and those of his interlocutors. He was always concerned with finding the best definitions for concepts and to find the best arguments for beliefs. He hoped this would be conducive to people’s wellbeing and that of society. This is why he sought for sustainable moral beliefs, and was as such concerned with moral progress.   
 For Socrates, only inquiring (moral) beliefs was not enough. He thought that if one has come to develop a justified true belief, say about a virtue, one should act in accordance to that. For instance, if one has ascertained what is just, one should act just. Or if one discovered the nature of generosity, one should behave generously. Ultimately, Socrates hoped that through these efforts, mankind would improve not only in terms of reason, but also in terms of acting.

**Some quotes by Socrates**

*From the Apology*

*“When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and wiser still by himself; and I went and tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise; and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is - for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know.”*

*“What could be the meaning of this—that he who knew nothing, and knew that he knew nothing, should be declared by the oracle to be the wisest of men? Reflecting upon the answer, he determined to refute it by finding 'a wiser;' and first he went to the politicians, and then to the poets, and then to the craftsmen, but always with the same result—he found that they knew nothing, or hardly anything more than himself; and that the little advantage which in some cases they possessed was more than counter-balanced by their conceit of knowledge. He knew nothing, and knew that he knew nothing: they knew little or nothing, and imagined that they knew all things.”*

*Other quotes*

*“If you don't get what you want, you suffer; if you get what you don't want, you suffer; even when you get exactly what you want, you still suffer because you can't hold on to it forever. Your mind is your predicament. It wants to be free of change. Free of pain, free of the obligations of life and death. But change is law and no amount of pretending will alter that reality.”*

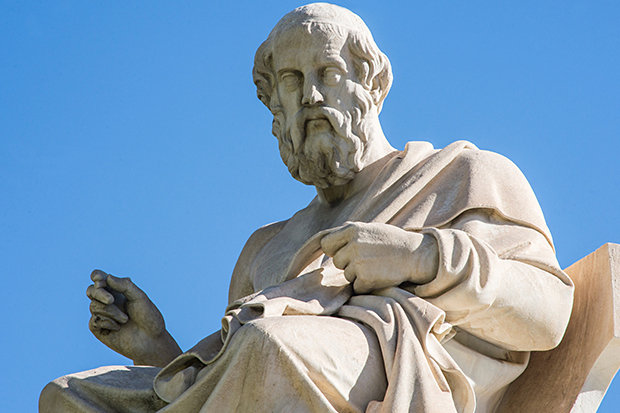
*“Life contains but two tragedies. One is not to get your heart’s desire; the other is to get it.”*

*“Sometimes you put walls up not to keep people out, but to see who cares enough to break them down.”*

*“True wisdom comes to each of us when we realize how little we understand about life, ourselves, and the world around us.”*

*“The really important thing is not to live, but to live well. And to live well meant, along with more enjoyable things in life, to live according to your principles.”*

## Plato

Plato (428-347) was a student of Socrates, who wrote Socrates’ philosophy down in the form of dialogues, making his written work take on a conversational form. He was born into a Aristocratic family of good wealth. Plato shortly considered having a political career, but left that idea behind when Socrates was sentenced to death. In Athens, he founded his very own philosophical school, where he would teach until the end of his life.[[2]](#footnote-2)

### Plato’s Epistemology

Like Socrates, Plato believed that truth can be found in dialogues, lesser so in written work, which made him doubt if he should write everything down. Books, he believed, are static, and as soon one is published, it becomes an intellectual orphan to the author. Plato’s work is often divided in two parts: one where he represents Socratic convictions and the search for the best arguments when it comes to developing concepts, their definitions and ideas. The second phase of his thinking revolves around questions regarding metaphysics, epistemology and political theory, which cannot be traced back to the historical Socrates.[[3]](#footnote-3) Plato continues Socrates’ dialectic method for finding the best arguments for ideas. This means that one idea or position will be challenged by another view. This goes in a dialectical fashion: meaning that one position will incite a counter-position, leading to a clash between positions, which eventually leads to yet another position. Oftentimes, one must give up one’s cherished view in order to be able to defend another that is more defensible.[[4]](#footnote-4) The most common questions that Socrates deals with, are about virtue. The first step of the Socratic method is finding an essential definition of what a certain virtue *is*. Socrates prioritizes definitions in his search for answers *“assuming that we can know the answer to our practical question only if we know the definition of the relevant virtue.”[[5]](#footnote-5)* When questioning his interlocutors, Socrates often claims to know nothing of the matter at hand. When Socrates cross-examines his interlocutors, the result at some point usually is that Socrates’ questions expose conflicts in the beliefs of the interlocutor, which then have to be resolved somehow. The only reasonable way to go about this is to modify beliefs by rejecting the ones that conflict with ideas for which better support can be found.[[6]](#footnote-6)  
 According to Plato we can find knowledge that is innate, but forgotten, by intelligent and selective revision of our beliefs. By means of questioning, self-examination and reflection, we can find the right answers from within. Ultimately, Socratic inquiry can lead from belief to knowledge with a rational ground[[7]](#footnote-7), or to what might be called ‘justified true beliefs’. In order to rationally found a conviction, Plato believed we can use Socratic inquiry to ascertain *“what kind of explanation or justification is needed for knowledge.”[[8]](#footnote-8)* To gain true knowledge of a virtue, for instance, we must be able to define it, which we can only do when we find the single ‘form’ (*eidos*) or character (*idea*), that can be found in all its instances. This form can then serve as a ‘pattern’ or ‘standard’ (*paradeigma*) to explain why a particular person or action is virtuous, for instance, generous, brave or just. These will then be found to have common properties, making it possible to apply the same name to them.[[9]](#footnote-9)  
 This form of philosophy came to be known as the Theory of Forms (or Ideas). The Forms, according to Plato, exist in a transcendent reality. They are stable, perfect and unchanging of which all particular forms found in concrete reality are only imperfect copies which are accessible to the senses. The Forms can only be arrived at intellectually and as such are objects of knowledge, making them separated from sensible tings, which suffer from ceaseless flux. The Forms function as a standard for all things knowable, including virtues such as justice.[[10]](#footnote-10) Some moral properties are hence dependent upon their perfect Forms, of which particular properties are only imperfectly derived, instant forms.[[11]](#footnote-11) The Theory of Forms is aligned with Socrates’ search for definitions.[[12]](#footnote-12) Any true Form, or Idea, is one that consists of a compresence of opposites, meaning that unlike in the sensible world, there can be found no contradictions in the Form or Idea, making these Forms, or Ideas perfect.[[13]](#footnote-13)  
 In Plato’s famous allegory of the cave, he provides a metaphor to show how we *“progress from uncritical acceptance of observational beliefs to reasoned and justified claims to knowledge.”*[[14]](#footnote-14)In the cave, men are imprisoned, chained to a wall. Behind them, a show of puppets is exhibited, of which the shadows are projected on the wall the prisoners are facing. All they see, are thus imperfect copies of what is truly happening behind them. One such prisoner (Socrates), escapes the cave, and slowly comes to observe that there is a world ‘out there’, beyond the darkness of the cave, of which true knowledge can be gained. Socrates steps into the sun, where the sun is a metaphor for *“the cognitive state of being guided by knowledge of the Forms.”* Plato thus distinguishes two forms of knowledge: belief without knowledge (believing there is nothing beyond the shadows on the wall) and knowledge of the Forms. [[15]](#footnote-15) Ultimately, for Plato, we by this method reach knowledge of the Good through dialectic, *“since our knowledge of the Good is the source and basic principle of our knowledge of other Forms.”*[[16]](#footnote-16) If we then come to trust some of our beliefs upon reflection, it will be possible to structure our beliefs in a coherent and mutually supportive manner.[[17]](#footnote-17) These beliefs should help us live more rationally, in order to lead a virtuous and just life.[[18]](#footnote-18) Plato further discusses this in his political philosophy.

### Plato’s Political Philosophy

Plato’s epistemology is not only concerned with reaching truth by founding knowledge on rational principles. For Plato, true knowledge and rational principles should also be practically applied in order to lead more virtuous lives and also to found a just state, which he delves into in his political treatise *The Republic*.[[19]](#footnote-19)  
 Plato beliefs that in order to lead a good life, we must let ourselves be guided by our rational intellects, thereby overcoming what our sensory impressions and sensual desires and physical states incline us to do. For Plato, our bodily desires are only distractions to our rational intellects. We should follow our rationality, since our rational desires reflect our real aims and values. Feelings and appetites, oftentimes conflict with these real aims, which is why rationality should have priority.[[20]](#footnote-20)  
 In the Republic, Plato tries to explain what justice is, and why being just should hold precedence over being unjust. In the book he attempts to found a moral and political theory on his epistemology. Plato seeks to show how rules of justice can lead to a stable regime. For Plato, justice is valuable and good in itself, so we should not only look at how it benefits us.[[21]](#footnote-21) To show this, Plato asks us to consider a just person who is badly off, and an unjust person who is well of. For Plato, the just person will always be better off, since he exhibits good qualities and virtues. According to Plato, in other words, there is no real conflict between morality and self-interest. Justice, Plato shows with Socrates, benefits one’s soul. His theory therefore rests on an account of the soul, and of desires, as also seen above.[[22]](#footnote-22) Plato seeks to show how we can resolve conflicts of motive in dealing with our desires. When confronted with a conflict of motives in dealing with our desires, Plato argues we should decide upon reflection what is the best decision to make. When reflecting, we should reason about our good, which will help us in pursuing our rational desires.[[23]](#footnote-23) There is thus a difference between rational and non-rational desires, both representing different ‘parts’ of the soul.[[24]](#footnote-24)   
 The rational part of our soul considers itself with the value of a present object of desire against other present desires, where also desires that one might have in the future are weighed. Characteristic of non-rational desires, is that they only consider a part, or a phase of the self and often can be related to initial visual impressions, for instance. We should not just blindly follow the desires that stem from these, but should also employ a rational consideration of other available information. Our reason, will help us find our real interests, since it considers all parts of the soul and takes the future into account.[[25]](#footnote-25)  
 The virtues that help us deal rationally with our desires are courage, temperance and wisdom. *“The true judgements in the rational part make a person wise, and the subordination of non-rational to rational desires make him temperate and brave. These three virtues, then, clearly belong to the rationally prudent person.”[[26]](#footnote-26)* Just as a just person consists of different parts, so does the structure of a city, according to Plato. He considers the city as a whole that is organized for the common good, where each part of the organization serves this purpose. For a city to be just, there can be no room for injustices that benefit one at other people’s expense that stem from irrational impulses.[[27]](#footnote-27)  
 Plato argues that the just person will become a philosopher. Eventually the philosopher will come to know “the Forms of justice and other virtues, and will come to love them.” This love goes beyond love for physical beauty, since we will come to love4 persons for their admirable qualities of their mind and character, which we can also find in ways of life, social orders, social and political causes, and hence, ultimately, in the just city.[[28]](#footnote-28)  
 The Forms, for Plato, display an admirable rational order. Once we have seen this, a desire emerges to propagate its beauty in the ways we live, but also in how we affect the world. The latter we do because we realize we cannot propagate beauty in forever in our own lives, finite as they are. This is why we desire to propagate beauty in “other people, works of art, institutions and whole societies.” For Plato, it are philosophers who have the correct values and “want to produce justice and the other virtues in their own lives and in other people’s.” The necessity he feels to do so, will ultimately lead him to undertake government in the ideal state. For philosophers, this stems from a sense of duty, since as soon as philosophers know the Forms, they will enjoy supreme happiness and not want to return to society. They do this, since they consider it to be necessary to reach a just society. There is also a certain benefit for the philosophers, since governing is the best way to express love of the Forms in other human beings. In governing, the philosopher seeks to bring the greatest benefit to anyone, and to seek the good of others for its own sake, thereby reproducing *“the character of his own soul in the product of his creative work.”[[29]](#footnote-29)* Plato’s just state is an aristocracy, where philosophers become kings, or where kings should become philosophers. For him, an aristocracy looks out to the real interests of the people. Plato was opposed to democracy because he believed it *“flatters and molds the impressionable and irrational impulses of the public* (…)*.”[[30]](#footnote-30)* The ideal state, Plato argues, will promote the good of all its members, meaning the rulers should refine from pursuing only security, wealth, honor or power. Every city, Plato claims, is driven by a conflict between the poor and the rich, standing the formation of a city as one in the way. A just city should pursue justice and other virtues, they being not contested goods, since we can pursue them as much as we want without conflict. To the extent we need goods, just people can distribute them without running into insolvable conflicts. [[31]](#footnote-31)

**Selection of quotes from Plato**

*“True beliefs…are not in the habit of staying put for a long time, but run away from a person’s soul, so that they are not worth much, until one ties them down by reasoning about the explanation. And this, Meno my friend, is recollection, as we agreed previously…And this is why knowledge is more valuable than true belief, and is superior to it in having this bond to tie it down.”*[[32]](#footnote-32)

*“Then there must be some technique for turning the soul around, for changing its direction as easily and effectively as possible. The aim is not to implant sight in us, but, assuming that sight is already there but has been turned the wrong way, to get it turn the right way.”*[[33]](#footnote-33)

*“I assume on each occasion whatever I count I judge to be the strongest, and whatever seems to me to agree with this I take to be true…  
 And if someone attacks the assumption itself, you will pay no attention to him, and will not answer, until you have examined the consequences of the assumption, to see if they agree or disagree with each other.”*[[34]](#footnote-34)

*“Then if he finds some necessity to practice the implanting of what he sees there [in looking at the forms] in human characters, in private and public, and not to mold only himself, do you think he will be a bad craftsman of temperance, justice and all the virtues of a people?”*[[35]](#footnote-35)

1. Fun sidenote: the sceptic philosopher Sextus Empiricus took this up a notch and said: *“All I know is that I know nothing, and even that I don’t know.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Irwin, 2011, p. 85 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, p. 86 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, p. 87 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, pp. 88-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, p. 90 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, p. 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, p. 92 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, p. 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid, pp. 94-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid, p. 96 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid, p. 97 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid, p. 101 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid, p. 101 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid, p. 100 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid, p. 101 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid, p. 102 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. If for instance, we would very much like to drink a large amount of alcoholic beverages, but have to do something useful and important for ourselves and/or others the next morning, upon reflection we will then realize that consuming a lot of beverages will not be conducive to the fulfillment of our rational desires. See also p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibiid, pp. 102-3. Looking at the previous example, when we see a nice bottle of alcoholic beverage and feel like drinking it, that is a present desire we have. When rationally reflecting upon our desire to drink the bottle, we will look at what consequences this might pose for the future: a possible hangover, being late for an appointment with a loved one, or whatever. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid, p. 103 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid, pp 103-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid, p. 104 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid, pp. 105-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid, p. 107 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid, pp. 107-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid, p. 89 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid, pp. 95-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid, p. 96 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid, p. 105 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)