PHL301H1S: Early Greek Philosophy: The Sophists

Wed. 3:00-6:00
LM 157, 80 St. George St.

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Office hours: Tues. 2:00-3:00; Wed. 4:00-5:00 (or email me to make an appointment for some other time)

This course is a survey of ancient sophistic thought. The sophists of the fifth-century B.C. -- the era of Socrates, Sophocles, and the Peloponnesian War -- were among the first philosophers to discuss questions about the nature of justice, virtue, society and religion; they also were inventors and practitioners of new forms of reasoning, and authors of some of the oldest philosophical arguments which have come down to us. Unfortunately, very few sophistic works survive even in part, and we cannot help but rely to some extent on possibly unfair presentations of the sophists and their ideas in Plato's dialogues. We will investigate surviving sophistic texts such as Gorgias' *On What Is Not* and *Defense of Helen*, the Dissoi Logoi, and the fragments of Protagoras and Antiphon. We will spend several weeks on ancient sophistic discussions of justice, since it is on that topic that our evidence is most extensive, in the hope of reconstructing some lively and still relevant ancient debates. We will also look in depth at Plato’s portrayals of sophistic theory and practice in dialogues such as the *Protagoras*, *Hippias Minor*, and *Euthydemus*.

The sophists have been enigmatic and controversial figures for thousands of years. Ever since Aristophanes' attacks on them in the *Clouds*, and Plato's in dialogues like the *Euthydemus*, they have been condemned (and occasionally celebrated) as subversive. They stand accused of using devious, petty and 'unfair' tactics in argument, and also of being as dangerous amoralists and relativists. We will ask whether this is a fair representation, and what responses the sophists themselves could and did make to such critiques. The sophists have generally been excluded from or marginalized in the 'history of philosophy': we will ask to what extent the ideas we encounter are philosophical, and in particular what ideas the sophists may have held in common: did the sophistic 'movement' have a shared philosophical agenda? The sophists were famous not only for their ideas, but, even more, for their methods and public performances, as experts and innovators in the art of argument. They developed new techniques of ingenious persuasion and refutation, and produced almost the first rigorous arguments to have come down to us in the European intellectual tradition. Whether they argue 'fairly' or not is a question worth discussing; in any case, their texts offer good opportunities to build skills in philosophical analysis and critical reasoning.

Objectives: to provide a good grasp of at least some of the major sophistic texts and debates and the philosophical puzzles they raise, while improving analytical, critical and writing skills.
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 learning and practising skills of philosophical analysis and argument.

Texts:


The texts are available at the University of Toronto Bookstore. Any further readings will be available on Blackboard.

Evaluation:

Weekly writing assignments (10 assigned, best 8 count for grade): 25%
Short paper (four-five pages; due. Feb. 6; topics distributed Jan. 16): 20%
Paper (six-seven pages; due March 27; topics distributed Feb. 27): 25%
Final exam (3 hours, closed book, during exam period): 30%
Bonus marks for exceptional participation: up to 3% of final grade

Regular class attendance and participation is a course requirement.

There will be a weekly writing assignment of approximately one page due each week in class at the start of class (no extensions, excuses, late submissions, or e-mail submissions permitted), except on dates when a paper is due. Please bring in two copies of the assignment in order to retain one, since they will usually be relevant to the day’s discussion and you may want to refer to yours. Weekly assignments will be graded but (for the most part) not commented on. **Writing assignments will be graded 'blind': please put your student number but not your name on your assignment.**

Tentative Schedule (subject to revision):

For each week, the *Principal Readings* are those we will focus on in class discussions; the *Additional Readings* will help to make sense of them. Additional readings also count as required readings unless otherwise specified, and may turn up on the exam. Readings marked with a * will be available on Blackboard; for other readings, see Texts above.
I. Introduction:

Week 1 (Jan. 9): What Is a Sophist? Who were the sophists?
*Principal readings: excerpts from Aristophanes*, Plato*, George Grote,* and Friedrich Nietzsche*

II: How to Argue Like a Sophist:

Week 2 (Jan. 16): Gorgias: Defending the Indefensible, Part I: Helen
*Principal readings: Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen* (G&W 190-95)
*Additional Readings: Gorgias’ minor texts (D&G 43-66, 93-97)
*Weekly Assignment: an argument analysis of the Helen

Week 3 (Jan. 23): Gorgias: Defending the Indefensible, part II: On Not-Being
*Principal readings: Gorgias, *On Not-Being* (D&G 67-76)
*Additional Readings: Parmenides, fragments B1-8*
*Weekly Assignment: an argument analysis of Gorgias’ argument that the existent is not eternal (Sextus’ version, sections 68-70 of the On Not-Being, D&G 68-9)

Week 4 (Jan. 30): Protagoras and ‘Argument on Both Sides’ [*antilogikê*]
*Principal readings: Dissoi Logoi* (‘Double Arguments’, D&G 318-33), Protagoras texts (G&W 173-89 and D&G 1-42); Plato, *Protagoras* 334a-9e
*Additional Readings: Plato, *Sophist* 232b-36d
*Weekly Assignment: an explanation (not a numbered-premise analysis) of how the Dissoi Logoi argues that the good and the bad are and are not the same (D&G 320-22). Which side of the argument seems to you to be stronger? Does the author seem to intend that side to 'win'?

Week 5 (Feb. 6): Rhetorical Arguments and Probability
*Principal readings: Gorgias, *Palamedes* (G&W), Antiphon, *First and Second Tetralogies* (G&W)
*Weekly Assignment: none as first papers are due


Week 6 (Feb. 13): God, Justice, Nature and Convention: Pre-Platonic Texts
*Principal readings:*
- on religion: Hesiod texts 3-8 (G&W 14-20); Critias, *Sisyphus* fragment (D&G 250-53); Prodicus texts 20-21 (D&G 109-11); Protagoras text 17 (D&G 21); review Aristophanes excerpts (Week 1)
- on justice: Antiphon, fragments on justice from *On Truth* (D&G 150-53); Anonymous Iamblichus texts 6-7 (D&G 315-18)
*Additional Readings: TBA*
*Weekly Assignment: a one-page defense speech using the methods of arguments in the Week 5 texts (especially argument from what is ‘probable’ or ‘likely’ to have happened [to eikos])
Week 7 (Feb. 27): Is Justice Natural or Conventional? A Sophistic Debate in Platonic Texts
Principal readings: Plato, Gorgias 447a-61b, 481c-99c; Plato, Republic Book II
Additional Readings: Plato, Republic Book I
Weekly Assignment: One-page answer: Briefly, how are the views of Antiphon, Callicles and Glaucon different from each other? Which critique of justice seems to you the most philosophically powerful?

Week 8 (March 6): 'Protagoras' on Justice and Political Virtue
Principal readings: Plato, Protagoras to 329e
Additional Readings: Protagoras 329e-49d (see Week 11)
Weekly Assignment: One-page answer: Give a summary of Protagoras' account of justice in non-mythological terms. Should it count as a theory of justice as 'natural' or 'conventional'? 

Part III: Plato on Socrates and the Sophists

Week 9 (March 13): Is Socrates a Sophist?
Principal Readings: Plato, Hippias Minor
Additional Readings: Plato, Apology
Weekly Assignment: an argument analysis of HM 365d-7d, which argues for the conclusion that the liar and the truth-teller are the same person

Week 10 (March 20): Socrates vs Sophists
Principal readings: Plato, Euthydemus
Additional readings: TBA*
Weekly Assignment: an argument analysis of the argument (or arguments?) at Euthydemus 283e-4c for the conclusion that no one says what is false. What is wrong with the argument, and does it nonetheless bring out a philosophically important point at stake? (NB Plato was fascinated by this argument, which seems to go back to Parmenides)

Week 11 (March 27): Plato on Protagoras & Co.
Principal readings: Plato, Protagoras 329 to end; Prodicus and Hippias texts (Chapters 3 and 4 in D&G)
Additional readings: review Protagoras texts (cf. Week 4); Theaetetus 151e-79d
Weekly Assignment: none as second papers due

Conclusions:

Week 12 (April 3): How to Defend Sophists (and Rhetoricians)?
Principal readings: Isocrates, Antidosis (selections)* and Against the Sophists*
Additional Readings: TBA*; review readings from Week 1
Weekly Assignment: one-page discussion: defend any one of Gorgias, Protagoras or Antiphon against the ancient charge of 'making the weaker argument the stronger'. (You can either argue that he did not do this, or that it is not a bad thing to do.)