

Humanities 115: Philosophical Perspectives on the Humanities

First Paper

Instructions

The paper (3–5 pages long) is due Wed., Oct. 21, in class.

The below topics are suggestions. If you want to write on another topic, feel free to do so. It might be a good idea, however, in that case, to check with one of us first.

Since the main point of the papers is to help you think carefully and in detail about the material, it is important to find specific, relevant pieces of text which support your point(s). (Refer to the *Iliad* by book and line numbers, and to Plato by Stephanus numbers—give full bibliographical references only if you for some reason bring in an outside source. It is not necessary to quote the text you cite, unless the specific wording is important to your point.)

There is no need for you to establish a crushing argument in favor any thesis. For example, it is perfectly fine, in fact probably a very good sign, if you can't come down on one side or the other of a question: just make sure to cite texts which pull you in different directions. And it is fine, actually unavoidable, to rely on one or two key examples, assuming without proof that they are somehow representative.

(**Grading criteria:** the best thing you can do is have an interesting and surprising idea. If you have such an idea, structure your paper around it, don't save it for the last paragraph! It is also important to show a careful engagement with the texts, however: you can easily get an A even though we think your conclusions are wrong, but you will be graded down if we think your reading is careless. Finally, it is also important, though not *as* important, to have a coherent and well-structured argument. I encourage you to proofread carefully, but typographical errors, spelling, grammar, etc., will not affect your grade.)

Suggested Topics

1. How are the characters in the *Iliad* different from us, and/or how are they the same? (Here “us” means, roughly speaking, modern people—but you may want to make it more precise.) (Obviously 3–5 pages is not enough to discuss this question in full generality. Try to focus on particular characters/situations and on some particular issue: e.g., justification of actions; reasons for praise or blame; attitudes towards one's enemies.) (Note: if you only want to argue that Homer's characters are the *same* as us, you had better say first why someone might *think* they were different.)

2. How is the *Iliad* different from a book we would write (the kind of book we normally write)? Say something about either (a) what those differences show about the way this book was produced and used or (b) what those differences imply about our use of the book (e.g. our treatment of it as a “classic”). You may or may not also want to discuss passages from the beginning of Numbers (which you can cite by chapter and verse). For alternative (a), you might want to use material from Plato’s *Ion*.
3. How are the gods depicted in the *Iliad*, how do the human characters relate to them, and how do those two things fit together (or fail to fit together)?
4. Discuss the relationship (as depicted in the *Iliad*) between (a) virtue or praiseworthiness and (b) physical appearance and/or physical strength. You might also want to mention intelligence; also what it is that makes a god or gods love certain characters. (Note: the intent of this question is for you to discuss the attitude of Homer and/or his characters about these issues, not your own attitudes.)
5. What is the status of women in the *Iliad*? Try to discuss: (a) how they are treated (by men); (b) what men say/think about them; (c) what they say/think about themselves. How did Homer and/or his audience think about women? (Note: it is not safe to assume that his audience was all male!)
6. How is war viewed in the *Iliad*? When and how is war “glorified,” and when and how is it not? Discuss one or more of: (a) how the (human) characters see war (b) how the gods see war (c) how the narrator portrays war.
7. Discuss the character of Nestor. What does he represent? On what subject(s) does he have good advice, and why? What is the relationship between his advice and what characters actually do? (By this I mean to ask not only whether his advice is taken on particular occasions, but whether he advises the *kind* of thing that people ordinarily do.)
8. In the *Ion*, we see a philosopher, Socrates, confronting the society or culture in which Homer plays a central role. What does this encounter show about the nature of that society and/or its use of Homer, and about the nature of philosophy? What was new about philosophy compared to what came before?