

Humanities 115: Philosophical Perspectives on the Humanities

Second Paper

Instructions

The paper (3–5 pages long) is due Mon., Nov. 8, in class.

As in the case of the first paper: 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.

Note that the topics tend to have many sub-questions. You need not (and probably should not) try to answer all of them. (You *certainly* should not just answer them one after another in order—that would make a bad paper.) I put them there to suggest various directions for thinking about the topic, and in particular to head off superficial or excessively simple ways of thinking about it.

Most of these topics require you to contrast the views or attitudes of different authors and/or characters. When you contrast two or more things, you should avoid saying just “*X is A; Y is B.*” Try to say what the difference means, why it is surprising and/or important.

It would be best to use material from at least two different works, including at least one by Plato. In many cases it would be better if you use more—though not, obviously, to such an extent that you don’t have enough space to treat your individual examples carefully. The emphasis is on the texts we have read since the *Iliad*, but you are allowed and even encouraged to use the *Iliad*, as well (and, as usual, you can even use outside sources if you think they are relevant, although it should still be clear that the paper was written for this course).

As before, refer to the *Iliad* by book and line numbers, and to Plato by Stephanus numbers; use line numbers for Aristophanes. You can cite Xenophon and Diogenes Laertius by page number in the copies I hand out. In all these cases, you need give information about the translation you used only if it’s different from the one I ordered. Once again, you need give full bibliographical references only if you for some reason bring in an outside source.

Suggested Topics

1. How bad—according to our authors and/or their characters—is death? Is there something worse (or *possibly* worse)? If so, what? Contrast the views expressed by different authors and/or characters (note: you *cannot* assume

- that authors agree with what their characters say!), and say something about the significance of the differences you find. Obvious examples: Achilles; Hector; Socrates in the *Apology*; Socrates in Xenophon. (But there are other examples, and more than one answer for some on the list above.)
2. What—according to our authors and/or their characters—does it mean to benefit people? Is it the same as making them better? What makes something useful or profitable? Is it the same as what would make it beneficial? Conversely, what does it mean to harm people? Is it the same as corrupting them (making them worse)? Is wisdom (and/or knowledge and/or understanding) beneficial, useful, profitable (by these standards)? Could it be harmful? (Note: different characters and/or authors may disagree on the meaning of those terms, as well.) (Obviously you will want to discuss Plato's Socrates, but, as far as who else to talk about, there are many other possibilities, including Diogenes the Cynic, Socrates in Xenophon and Aristophanes, various other characters in these authors, and characters from the *Iliad*, e.g. Nestor, Hector, Achilles.)
 3. What—according to our authors and/or their characters—is the correct way of speaking before an audience? (Does it make a difference who you are and who is in the audience?) Is it important to tell them what they want to hear? What they need to hear? (“Need” for what?) Is it good or bad to make them laugh? To make them cry? To insult them? To flatter them? Why? (What is the relationship between speaking well and speaking truly? Speaking justly?) What is the purpose of public speaking? What can go wrong with it? (In addition to the Socrates (in various versions) and Diogenes the Cynic, think of, for example, Nestor, Thersites, Euthyphro, and Aristophanes—including especially his portrayal of himself by means of the chorus.)
 4. Do mortals—according to our authors and/or their characters—inflict suffering on themselves, or can this be blamed on the gods (and/or “fate”), or neither or both? (Note: the question here is about responsibility, not about “free will,” though of course there might be some relationship between the two.) How, if at all, does blaming the gods for one's actions affect one's own responsibility for them. (See Agamemnon's apology (defense), *Iliad* XIX.76–144, and compare Socrates', and note they both are afraid the audience will “murmur”—why? Compare also what Euthyphro says in justification for his planned prosecution of his father.) Similarly (but the answer might be different), are mortals responsible for (what seem to be) their positive achievements? Again, you can contrast the views expressed by different characters, but here you might want to give special weight to some authors'

- own views, insofar as one can deduce them from the plot. What do the different views imply about morality? Or: about religion? (If you wrote about a topic similar to this for the first paper, you should explain how the new material has changed and/or confirmed your previous understanding.)
5. A different topic which could be developed using mostly the same materials (but Aristophanes could play a bigger role): what—according to our authors and/or their characters—is the relationship between the gods—or belief in the gods—and justice? (What does “belief in” mean? Always the same thing? And “justice”?) Again, what are the implications for morality and religion?
 6. Another related topic: why—according to our authors and/or their characters—do the gods love some human beings more than others? If one is not loved by the gods, according to them, is there anything one can do to change that? If so, should one do so (i.e. should one always try to be loved by the gods), and if so why? Does being loved by the gods lead to special benefits? Does it confer special rights or privileges? Why? (Note: the epithet “whom the gods love,” applied to kings in our translation of Homer, actually translates *diotrephēs*, literally “nurtured by Zeus.” But it’s clear nevertheless that the gods of the *Iliad* love various humans for various reasons.)
 7. According to our authors and/or their characters, what obligations (if any) do children bear to parents and vice versa? (There may or may not be a difference between fathers and mothers or between sons and daughters.) What is the source of such obligations? (Are they similar to the obligation of paying off a debt, or of “justice” in general?) What, if anything, might cancel such obligations? Think of the *Euthyphro*; of several moments in the *Apology*; of Strepsiades and Pheidippides in the *Clouds*; also of numerous examples from the *Iliad*. (Note: the *Euthyphro* potentially raises issues about divine parents and/or children, as well as human ones.) (If you use Aristophanes, it is particularly important, and especially in this case, not just to take at face value what the characters say. What attitudes is Aristophanes parodying or commenting on, and what is he implying about them?)
 8. How or to what extent does Plato, in his *Apology* and/or elsewhere, defend Socrates, and how or to what extent does he attack him? Similarly, how or to what extent does Aristophanes attack and defend Socrates? To what extent does he identify with Socrates, and what, if anything, does he show to be the difference between them? (Note: clearly the character of Socrates in the *Clouds* is meant as a parody, rather than a literal representation; you must try to figure out what kind of figure Aristophanes is parodying, i.e.

- what he thinks the real Socrates is like.) Do Plato and/or Plato's Socrates agree or disagree with Aristophanes on these points? How do both compare to Xenophon? (You may want to use the figures of Terrence and Phillip in the *South Park* movie as an analogy. But I strongly recommend making the paper mostly about Plato and Aristophanes; writing about the movie is likely to seem easy and therefore to lead to an uninteresting paper.)
9. Socrates tends to ask questions rather than telling people things (though he does sometimes tell them things). This is clear in both Plato and Xenophon, and there is at least some sign of it in Aristophanes. Why would he do that? How would Plato's Socrates explain this, based on what he says in the *Apology*? Is that the whole story? (Does Plato think it is?) How would Xenophon and/or Xenophon's Socrates explain? What about Aristophanes? (Here again you should try if possible to distinguish between what Socrates' opponents might think, as they are portrayed in the *Clouds*, and what Aristophanes himself thinks.) How does this way of speaking (asking questions instead of committing oneself to statements) compare to Aristophanes' and Plato's ways of writing (through the mouths of other characters)? How does it compare to Xenophon's?
 10. According to our authors and/or their characters, how much respect, if any, is owed to traditional stories, beliefs, laws, customs, or conventions? Of course Diogenes the Cynic (as presented in the stories we read) has an extreme attitude towards this—but remember that in one of the stories Plato calls him “Socrates gone wild.” How does he resemble Socrates, and what nevertheless makes him “gone wild”? Here I'm thinking mostly about Plato's Socrates, but there might be something to say about Aristophanes' and even Xenophon's Socrates, too. And what about Plato and Aristophanes themselves—what are their attitudes on this issue? (You could also discuss some characters from the *Iliad* here. We know what Nestor thinks. Do the other characters agree? Does Homer?)