

Humanities 115: Philosophical Perspectives on the Humanities

Third (Final) Paper

Instructions

The paper (3–5 pages long) is due Wed., Dec. 8, in my office, Gates-Blake 228, by 4:30pm. Gates-Blake is the building connected to Cobb. (I am setting the 4:30pm limit mostly because Gates-Blake gets locked at some point in the evening—I'm not sure exactly when.)

As in the case of the other papers: 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 me and/or Justin first.

The intent of the paper is to discuss the views or attitudes of our authors and/or their characters, rather than your own opinions on a certain topic. Of course you can't and shouldn't completely keep your own opinions out of it, but your argument as a whole should aim at establishing something about or authors and/or their characters mean. Your thesis should be your own, original idea about *that*.

(In particular, this means your argument should *not* mainly aim at showing that our authors and/or their characters are good or bad or right or wrong. Before you could ever decide that you would have to figure out what they actually think and how they actually act, which is what this paper should be about.)

There are two difficult but important distinctions which can potentially be drawn between Socrates and Plato: (1) between Plato's Socrates and Socrates as he really was; (2) between Plato's character Socrates and Plato himself. I use the phrase **Plato and/or Socrates** below to indicate that you *might* want to make either or both of these distinctions. (For the purposes of distinction (1), data from Aristophanes and Xenophon could obviously be important, and possibly some of the stories about Plato and Diogenes the Cynic; there are other ways of guessing, too.) (Note also that Plato might not always portray Socrates in the same way—Socrates in the *Apology*, the *Euthyphro*, the *Meno*, and the *Republic*, might all be different.)

All of the below topics require you to use material from both Plato and Aristotle. As I just mentioned, Aristophanes, Xenophon, and the stories about Diogenes could be useful as well. In addition, all of the topics allow (though none require) the use of Homer. But even if you do use some of that material, please make sure that both the *Meno* and Aristotle play an important role in your paper.

Refer to Plato by Stephanus numbers and Aristotle by Becker numbers. As before, use book and line number for Homer and line numbers for Aristophanes. You can use page numbers in Xenophon and Diogenes Laertius. In all these cases, you need give information about the translation you used only if it's different from the one I ordered/handed out. Once again, you need give full bibliographical references only if you for some reason bring in an outside source.

Suggested Topics

1. What would Plato and/or Socrates¹ say about our society (define this as broadly or narrowly as you want)? What would Aristotle say? (Again, you could possibly try to bring in other sources, as well.) Warning: for a paper on this topic to be good it will almost certainly have to present opinions which are recognizably *not* just those of some contemporary political faction. However, if you think (this is not a foregone conclusion) that Plato, Socrates, or Aristotle would criticize some or all of us, you could (probably should) say a few words about how we might defend ourselves. Final note: you could also try using some material from the *South Park* movie here. But be very careful how you do that.
2. Who is happy/fortunate/blessed? That is: (1) what kind of things count as happiness or good fortune and/or (2) what kind of factors can bring about happiness or good fortune in someone's life? What would Plato and/or Socrates say, and what would Aristotle say (in response)? Here there is obviously more room to discuss Homer, as well. (For example: to what extent is Aristotle defending traditional notions against Plato and/or Socrates' attack, and to what extent does he agree with their attack?) (Diogenes, Xenophon's Socrates, and/or Aristophanes could also come into this.) (Note: do *not* take "happiness" to be the

¹See instructions above for the meaning of "Plato and/or Socrates."

name of a *feeling*, something like cheerfulness: we discussed this in class!)

3. Return of a previous topic: the status of women. How do Socrates and/or Plato attack traditional ideas about this? Why? (How is this related to broader issues?) Are they serious? (Are they feminists?) What is Aristotle's response? (You may, but don't have to, use the *Iliad* as a source of information about what the "traditional ideas" were. If you do, you can't *necessarily* assume either that Homer presents a simple and consistent picture, or that Athenian women in the 5th century BC are exactly like Homer's women. Aristophanes might also be relevant.)
4. Return of another topic: the gods (and "piety"). Did Socrates and/or Plato introduce new gods and/or attack belief in the traditional gods and/or attack belief in any gods whatsoever? How and why? How does Aristotle respond? (If you want to write about this, you might be interested in Aristotle's explicit statements about the nature of God/the gods in the *Metaphysics* and elsewhere. I'll be happy to provide copies of some relevant passages if people are interested. We'll be reading a little of that material next quarter.) (Note again that Aristophanes, Diogenes, and Xenophon are all potentially relevant.)
5. What is or are wisdom and philosophy? (For example: are they a kind of knowledge and/or "art," and if so what kind?) Should we want them and why? What do Plato and/or Socrates think? (What they say and what they think *might* be different.) What about Aristotle? (What about Diogenes, Xenophon?) How are these positions related to traditional ideas and/or to other contemporary Greek ideas? (E.g., think of Nestor, Odysseus, Ion, Euthyphro, Meno/Gorgias, Euthydemus/Dionysiodorus.)
6. What is virtue, what is teaching, and can virtue (whatever that is) be taught (whatever that is)? What do Plato and/or Socrates think? (What do Meno and/or Anytus think, before and after Socrates talks to them?) Was Socrates virtuous? Did Socrates teach virtue? (Did he teach Plato? Did he teach him virtue?) What does Aristotle say about all or any of the above, and why? (Did Plato teach Aristotle? Did he teach him virtue?) Optionally: how do any of these positions relate to

older views (e.g. to the views of Homer and/or his characters about the nature of courage)?

7. Compare Socrates with Aristotelian virtue. How would Socrates react to Aristotle's definition of virtue? Would he attack it? If so, how—hasn't it been designed specifically to repel his usual attacks? If not, why not, given that he always seems to attack people's definitions? (Is there something about Aristotle's definition which would *please* Socrates?) If you think Socrates would attack, would Aristotle be able to defend himself, and how? Another angle: does Socrates himself seem to be virtuous according to Aristotle's definition, and, if not, then how, if at all, could he defend himself, or how could Plato defend him? (Do they think that Aristotle has missed some kind of virtue? Or that Socrates really *does* meet Aristotle's definition, though he seems not to?) Another angle: would Aristotle take the side of Socrates' accusers? If he wouldn't, then how would he defend Socrates against them—the same way Socrates defends himself in the *Apology*, or a different way? If he would, then how would he answer Socrates' arguments in his own defense?