Humanities 115: Philosophical Perspectives on the Humanities

Second Paper

Instructions

The paper (3–5 pages long) is due Mon., Nov. 11, 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.

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 Plato and Aristophanes, 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. 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*. (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. Don't forget that, in addition to characters from Plato and Aristophanes, you could use examples from the *Iliad*, e.g. Nestor, Poulydamas, Hector, Achilles.)

3. What—according to our authors and/or their characters—is the correct way of speaking before an audience? (Does is 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 Socrates, think of, for example, Nestor, Thersites, Ion, 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.) 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? (Remember that the phrase "divine lot" or "divine allotment," used by Socrates in the *Ion* and the *Apology*, could also be translated "divine fate.") (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 question 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. According to our authors and/or their characters, what obligations (if any) do children bear to parents and vice versa, and what is the source of such obligations? (There may or may not be a difference between fathers and mothers or between sons and daughters.) 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: both the *Euthyphro* and the *Ion* potentially raise 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?)