Ancient Philosophical Inquiry — Syllabus
Reading Seminar attached to *Ancient Philosophy* (Gerd Van Riel), Spring Semester 2023
KU Leuven, De Wulf-Mansion Centre
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Course Description
Amidst different, distinct sub-disciplines, like ethics, philosophy of science/mind, epistemology, and so on, the practice of philosophy centrally involves forms of inquiry that should lead us to the truth we seek—whether about ourselves, about other beings, about the cosmos, and so on. Yet inquiry takes different forms, and what right inquiry looks like is not immediately apparent. For instance, do we presuppose that giving a list of material causes is enough to explain a physical being, or is there something further needed to explain it—for instance, to explain "what" that thing is (such as its essence) besides just listing its material components? Does inquiry necessitate raising problems or impasses about what we think we know but actually do not? To what degree can inquiry give us certain knowledge about things we wish to know in general?

In this course, we will do a close study of central texts which involve and discuss philosophical inquiry and methodology: this bears direct relevance not just to ancient philosophy or the history of philosophy, but also to contemporary philosophy and any field of science involving inquiry. We will focus on central texts from Plato and Aristotle that provide the foundation for all subsequent reflections on inquiry.

Schedule
Total course hours: 12 — Rooms indicated

Session 1 **March 3** *14–16h* Room: VHI.01.0064	Introduction + Plato on seeking the cause and *aporia* in inquiry (pt. 1) **Readings** * Plato, *Meno* 70a–85d
Session 2 **March 9** *9–11h* Room: HIW1.01.0020	Plato on seeking the cause and *aporia* in inquiry (pt. 2) **Readings** * Plato, *Meno* 85d–100b
Session 3 **March 14** *14–16h* Room: MSI 01.12	Plato's *Phaedo*: Inquiring into causes in argumentation (pt. 1) **Readings** * Plato, *Phaedo* 57a–77a
Session 4 **March 24** *14–16h* Room: VHI.01.0064	Plato's *Phaedo*: Inquiring into causes in argumentation (pt. 2) **Readings** * Plato, *Phaedo* 77a–107b
Session 5 **May 19** *14–16h* Room: VHI.01.0064	Aristotle on inquiry (pt. 1): demonstration, dialectic, and knowledge acquisition **Readings** * Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, Book I (A), ch's. 1–4; Book II (B), ch. 19 * Aristotle, *Topics* I.1–6, 11
Session 6 **May 23** *14–16h* Room: MSI 02.23	Aristotle on inquiry (pt. 2): dialectical principles in inquiry into soul/natural phil. **Readings** * Aristotle, *De Anima* I.1–2, II.1 * Aristotle, *Physics* I.1–2, 6–8

Our focus will be mainly, if solely, discussing the primary texts listed in the syllabus above. The student may, however, reference the list of bibliography at the bottom for further investigation, especially if he/she wishes to engage with/discuss recent secondary scholarship for the paper topic.

Office Hours
By appointment only: please contact the course organizer by email (listed above).

Requirements

- *Participation:*
  - As the class is a seminar format, students are expected to have each reading prepared for full discussion in the class and to contribute to each seminar discussion as much as they are able.
  - If the student did not attend the course as required, sufficiently participate in assignments, and/or submit the final course paper (on time), they will receive the result, "not taken" (NA).
  - In case the student cannot, for well-founded reasons, attend the seminar as required, they must inform the course organizer as soon as possible. The organizer may decide to give the student a make-up assignment (e.g. a brief analysis/review on the material covered in the missed seminar session). In case the student cannot attend a class, for serious reasons and regularly or for a long period of time, he/she should inform the examination ombudsperson as soon as possible.
- *Seminar paper:*
  - The final paper should be *1,800 to* (***max***) *2,500 words* — ***not*** include footnotes/bibliography. The deadline is **May 30**.
    - Paper should be submitted directly by email to the instructor. (If submitted over Toledo, the student should also send the paper directly by email.)
  - The topic should be oriented around 10-20 lines of one of the texts discussed in class (or also of the student's choice). All texts chosen must be discussed and approved by the instructor before submission of the paper. See below for a list of sample paper topics/questions.
  - In order to discuss their topics with the instructor, students should submit an outline of no more than one page which includes information about (i) the text to be discussed; (ii) a drafted structure (rough draft is fine) of the paper.
  - **Draft of seminar paper:** All students are **required** to arrange a meeting with the course organizer to review a rough draft **OR** at least outline of their seminar paper before submission. (This can be either part of the paper or an outline, for example.) The draft must be submitted before **April 29** to receive full feedback—latest May 6th.
    - [*N.B. – as of now/May 8, if you have not yet submitted a draft or outline, please send* ***at least*** *a title *ASAP*. We can then at least make sure if your topic will work for the submitted term paper.*]
  - Students are expected to inform themselves about the faculty guidelines for papers and bibliographical referencing: **https://hiw.kuleuven.be/en/study/papers-theses-written-work/index.html**.

Evaluation

The final grade (scale 0–20: see rubric on next page) will be determined as follows:

- Seminar paper: 75% of the final grade.
- Class participation (attendance/discussion): 25% of the final grade.

Please note: The second examination attempt is limited to (re)submitting the seminar paper and/or course work. Participation cannot be retaken. The student who in the course of the academic year did not attend class as required will again receive the N/A result.

Extra Information

- *Plagiarism*

- Plagiarism is easily detected, and the penalties will be severe. Students are expected to inform themselves about the faculty guidelines for papers and bibliographical referencing and about the faculty guidelines with regard to plagiarism: **https://hiw.kuleuven.be/en/study/papers-theses-written-work/plagiarism**.

- *Writing support*
  - See below for some suggested guides on writing the term paper.
  - In addition to the recommendation above to review the final draft with the course organizer, students are encouraged to contact the writing tutors of the HIW Study Lab for help with writing their papers (please note, though, that it is not an editing service).

Grading Rubric

18 - 20	A+	Excellent: High distinction, work of excellent quality.
16 - 17	A	Outstanding: Work of very good quality and well above average.
15	A-	Very Good: Distinction, work of good quality.
14	B+	Good: Generally competent work of quality.
13	B	Satisfactory: Fair but with some shortcomings.
12	C+	Sufficient: Fair but with shortcomings.
11	C	Below Sufficient: Performance meets the minimal criteria.
10	D	Barely Sufficient: Performance just meets the minimal criteria.
8 - 9	F	Insufficient: Some more work is required to obtain a passing grade.
6 - 7	F	Very Insufficient: More work is required to obtain a passing grade.
0 - 5	F	Totally Insufficient: Considerable work is required to obtain a passing grade.

Sample Paper Topics

1. In *Meno* 80a-81a, we see the difficulty (*aporia*) that Socrates leads Meno into, when he asks (80d) how Socrates can "aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing you did not know?" One might think the state of difficulty only applies to Meno in the first case, but Plato broadens this theme of *aporia* with the slave boy, where Meno agrees with Socrates that the slave boy is in a better position when he realizes he cannot give an account of the construction of the eight-foot figure (84a-c). It is only from this point of difficulty/*aporia* that the slave boy is led to the correct answer (84d-85b). On the other hand, despite the tentative answer provided for virtue at the end of the *Meno* (i.e. as a divine gift - 99e-100b), Meno's *aporia*, accounting for what virtue is, remains unresolved.

   In what way is being led into *aporia* connected to philosophical inquiry for Plato? Is it a necessary part of the process, or is it simply accidental to the characters?

2. In *Meno* 89a, Socrates concludes that "the good are not so by nature" if virtue is wisdom (*phronêsis*): in this Socrates seems to deny virtue is innate. On the other hand, the knowledge by which virtue is possible, so Socrates argues, must already exist in the soul in some sense (*viz.* the recollection argument): this seems to imply virtue *is*, in some sense, innate. Does Socrates contradict himself, or is he

speaking consistently, but (for instance) incorporating the notion of "forgotten" knowledge when claiming that virtue is not innate (ala 89a)?

3. In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates puts forward four arguments for the soul's immortality: the arguments from (1) contraries (70c–72e), (2) recollection (72e–78b), (3) similitude of soul's nature (78b–84b), and (4) the final argument, from generation/decay (102a–107a). Why does Socrates present seemingly distinct, separate arguments for the soul's immortality—why could he not have given the final argument (4) from the get-go, if the others are less convincing? Or, if the arguments are connected, in what way are they and/or might they build on each other?
    - Another angle to approach this issue: might the different arguments be necessary to accommodate the intended audience with Phaedo and the other interlocutors? In what way might the premises that they hold, especially as Pythagoreans, be accommodated in the different arguments Socrates puts forward?

4. In the middle of the *Phaedo* (~95a–102a), Socrates explains his dissatisfaction with Anaxagoras, alongside other "natural philosophers" (i.e. Presocratics), who fail to explain the nature of things when they ascribe the causes of things to natural/material elements which are, as Socrates concludes, merely instrumental. (Cf. Socrates' example (98d–100e) of his bones' placement in whatever position, which only tells one of the means to explain a thing, but not the true cause itself: instead Socrates' *intention* is the true cause, besides the material means.) Socrates hence states his interest is to locate the true cause (*aition*) of a thing, as distinct from the items to be explained.

    A couple possible avenues to explore:

    - Is there a connection between this methodology and Socrates' interest throughout the dialogue of the opposites characterizing things (e.g. pleasure-pain, hot-cold, life-death, etc.)? If so, in what way is Socrates' methodology at this point in the dialogue manifested beforehand in the dialogue and, again, in the later part of the dialogue?
    - Is Socrates' methodology here also present in the *Meno*, when Socrates keeps trying to bring Meno to a sufficient definition of virtue that does not simply beg the question (i.e. by defining virtue in terms of the properties that are its effect: cf. *Meno* 79a–c)?

5. In the *Topics* I.11 (104b1–5), Aristotle defines a dialectical problem (*problêma*) as a subject of inquiry involved in choice or truth/knowledge, based on which people hold no opinion or contrary opinions (or also held by the wise in opposition to other people, or in dispute among the wise themselves).

    Compare this with Plato's strategy of using difficulties (*aporiai*) in the arguments Socrates employs with his interlocutors: in what way might Plato be falling into and/or using Aristotle's notion of the problem to help adjudicate for a position?

6. Aristotle in the beginning of the *Posterior Analytics* (I.1, esp. 71a25-30) directly references and responds to Plato's *Meno*, when he concedes that all teaching/learning implies some pre-existing knowledge, arguing that it is not strange to maintain that ignorance and knowledge co-exist, in some sense. This lies in contrast to Plato's denial, both in the *Meno* (esp. 81a–86c) and *Phaedo* (72e–77c) that there is no ignorance in the soul, but merely forgetfulness of knowledge it pre-contains.

    Does Aristotle disagree with Plato's position, or does he fundamentally agree with Plato, except disagree on the use of the terms?

    - There are different angles from which this can be addressed—for instance:
        - How is perception essential for knowledge acquisition in both Plato and Aristotle? Compare and contrast the two approaches: to what degree do both agree or diverge from each other?
        - Compare the description of knowledge acquisition in both Plato (esp. the *Phaedo* account) and Aristotle (esp. *Posterior Analytics* I.1–2 and II.19): for instance, in what sense do both concede some sense in which pre-existing knowledge may be necessary?

7. In *Topics* I.2 (~101b1-4), Aristotle argues that dialectic is the "process of criticism wherein lies the path to the principles of all inquiries"—building on his initial definition of dialectical deduction (in I.1, ~100a5–10) which is an argument that necessarily follows from premises based on reasonable opinions (*endoxa*).

   Some possible topics/questions:

   - How might dialectical arguments be the "path to the principles of all inquiries", in a stronger way than, for instance, demonstrative arguments?
   - Compare Aristotle's description and discussion of dialectical argument in the *Topics* (esp. I.1–2 and 10–12) with Socrates' method of dialectical argumentation in the *Meno* and/or *Phaedo.*

Select Bibliography

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Guides for Philosophical Writing

- Prof. William Fitzpatrick's guide, with sample paper: https://www.sas.rochester.edu/phl/fitzpatrick/sample.htm
  - *N.B. – the use of quotes, while concurring that spare usage is to be preferred, if you have a central text that your paper focuses on, and there are key lines important to your analysis, then you *should* quote the relevant lines, whether in-line or in blockquotes—but only when necessary. Beyond that, the structure of the example paper given in the guide is generally what I would expect.*
- Prof. Martin Lenz's guide: https://www.academia.edu/12008688/How_to_plan_an_abstract_essay_or_thesis

For further reading: *highly* recommended book on improving style of (English) academic writing:

Williams, Joseph M. (1990), *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press).