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Masters of Greek Thought: Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle

Course Guidebook

Professor Robert C. Bartlett
Emory University



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Robert C. Bartlett, Ph.D.

Professor of Political Science, Emory University

Dr. Robert C. Bartlett is Professor of Political Science at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, where he has taught since 1999. Before coming to Emory, he taught for three years in the core Western Civilization program at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. A graduate of the University of Toronto, with concentrations in Philosophy and Political Science, Professor Bartlett holds an M.A. in Classics and a Ph.D. in Political Science from Boston College.

Professor Bartlett's principal research concerns the history of moral and political philosophy, with special attention to the political thought of classical antiquity. He has published numerous articles in the leading journals of his discipline, including the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Review of Politics*, and *Journal of Politics*, and he sits on the editorial board of *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy*. His books include Xenophon's *The Shorter Socratic Writings* (editor and translator, Cornell University Press, 2006); Plato's "*Protagoras*" and "*Meno*" (editor and translator, Cornell University Press, 2004); *The Idea of Enlightenment: A Postmortem Study* (University of Toronto Press, 2001); and *Action and Contemplation: Studies in the Moral and Political Thought of Aristotle* (coeditor and contributor, SUNY Press, 1999). Professor Bartlett's research has been supported by fellowships from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the John M. Olin Foundation, the Earhart Foundation, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. He is currently at work on a new translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* that will be published soon by the University of Chicago Press.

Repeatedly recognized for excellence in teaching by the Emory University chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, Professor Bartlett has also received an award for excellence in teaching in the social sciences from the Center for Teaching and Curriculum at Emory and a "Crystal Apple" for excellence in undergraduate lecturing, an award voted on by the student body.

Table of Contents

Masters of Greek Thought: Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle

Professor Biography		i
Course Scope		1
Lecture One	Socrates and His Heirs	4
Lecture Two	The Socratic Revolution.....	8
Lecture Three	Aristophanes’s Comic Critique of Socrates	11
Lecture Four	Xenophon’s Recollections of Socrates.....	14
Lecture Five	Xenophon and Socratic Philosophy	17
Lecture Six	Plato’s Socrates and the Platonic Dialogue.....	20
Lecture Seven	Socrates as Teacher—Alcibiades.....	23
Lecture Eight	Socrates and Justice— <i>Republic</i> , Part 1	26
Lecture Nine	The Case against Justice— <i>Republic</i> , Part 2	29
Lecture Ten	Building the Best City— <i>Republic</i> , Part 3	32
Lecture Eleven	Philosophers as Kings.....	34
Lecture Twelve	Socrates as Teacher of Justice.....	37
Lecture Thirteen	Socrates versus the Sophists.....	40
Lecture Fourteen	Protagoras Undone.....	43
Lecture Fifteen	Socrates versus the Rhetoricians.....	45
Lecture Sixteen	Rhetoric and Tyranny.....	48
Lecture Seventeen	Calicles and the Problem of Justice	51
Lecture Eighteen	What Is Virtue? <i>Meno</i> , Part 1	55
Lecture Nineteen	Can Virtue Be Taught? <i>Meno</i> , Part 2	58
Lecture Twenty	The Trial of Socrates I— <i>Euthyphro</i>	61
Lecture Twenty-One	The Trial of Socrates II— <i>Apology</i> , Part 1.....	64
Lecture Twenty-Two	The Trial of Socrates III— <i>Apology</i> , Part 2	67
Lecture Twenty-Three	The Trial of Socrates IV— <i>Crito</i>	71
Lecture Twenty-Four	The Socratic Revolution Revisited— <i>Phaedo</i>	74
Lecture Twenty-Five	Aristotle and the Socratic Legacy	77

Table of Contents

Masters of Greek Thought: Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle

Lecture Twenty-Six	The Problem of Happiness— <i>Ethics</i> 1	80
Lecture Twenty-Seven	Introduction to Moral Virtue— <i>Ethics</i> 2	83
Lecture Twenty-Eight	The Principal Moral Virtues— <i>Ethics</i> 3–5	86
Lecture Twenty-Nine	Prudence, Continenence, Pleasure— <i>Ethics</i> 6–7	89
Lecture Thirty	Friendship— <i>Ethics</i> 8–9	92
Lecture Thirty-One	Philosophy and the Good Life— <i>Ethics</i> 10	95
Lecture Thirty-Two	The Political Animal— <i>Politics</i> 1–2	98
Lecture Thirty-Three	Justice and the Common Good— <i>Politics</i> 3 ...	101
Lecture Thirty-Four	Aristotle’s Political Science— <i>Politics</i> 4–6	104
Lecture Thirty-Five	The Best Regime— <i>Politics</i> 7–8	107
Lecture Thirty-Six	Concluding Reflections	110
Timeline		113
Glossary		117
Biographical Notes		122
Bibliography		128

Masters of Greek Thought: Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle

Scope:

This course will explore the thought of three profoundly influential thinkers in the Western tradition, thinkers whose very names call to mind the spirit of philosophizing or the “love of wisdom”: Socrates (469–399 B.C.), Plato (c. 429–347 B.C.), and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.). The three are most obviously linked by their historical epoch and their common devotion to the search for truth. But they also share a more immediate bond, for Socrates was the teacher of Plato, and Plato in turn became the teacher of Aristotle. Taken together, then, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle constitute one of the most remarkable flowerings of the human mind, and this course will explore their path-breaking attempts to grasp the world as it is in truth or “according to nature.”

Socrates of Athens inaugurated a fundamentally new approach to philosophy, one we still acknowledge by speaking of all the thinkers before him as simply “the pre-Socratics.” A brief examination of pre-Socratic thought will prepare us not only to see the new importance Socrates gave to moral concerns and questions (such as, “What is justice?” and “What is virtue?”), but also to reflect on the deepest reasons for his turning to such questions. Since Socrates himself did not write—we do not possess a single line from his own hand—we must first look for our knowledge of him to those of his contemporaries who both knew him and wrote about him. The earliest source of this kind is the great comic playwright Aristophanes (c. 457–385 B.C.), whose *Clouds* is at once a hilarious send-up of Socrates and a thoughtful critique of him (Lecture Two and Lecture Three). We then turn to the four Socratic writings of Xenophon (c. 428–354 B.C.), a student of Socrates who was both a remarkable military commander and a gifted man of letters (Lecture Three and Lecture Four). If Aristophanes’s comic play is a searching examination and critique of Socrates, Xenophon’s Socratic writings are an able defense of him and include a direct rebuttal of Aristophanes’s criticisms.

We devote Lecture Six through Lecture Twenty-Four to Plato’s presentation of Socrates, a clear indication of the great importance of Plato both in his own right and as an aid to our understanding of Socrates. Indeed, Plato indicates that to study Plato is to study his Socrates. In the 35 dialogues that have come down to us as his, Plato never speaks to us in his own voice; he

appears only once as one among many nonspeaking spectators at Socrates's trial, and he records not a single conversation between himself and Socrates. Our encounter with the Platonic Socrates begins by observing how Socrates presented himself to his potential students. The most fascinating example is Socrates's attempt to educate young Alcibiades, the ward of Athens's greatest democratic statesman, Pericles (Lecture Seven). Yet Socrates's efforts failed, and Alcibiades went on to have a hair-raising political career marked by jaw-dropping treachery.

Plato's presentation of Alcibiades as a would-be student leads naturally to his portrait of Socrates as a teacher of justice, for (to put it mildly) Alcibiades was deficient in his understanding of justice. Lecture Eight through Lecture Twelve will therefore be devoted to an examination of the *Republic*, the quintessential dialogue on justice. We turn next to Socrates's principal rivals as teachers, the sophists—represented by the most famous sophist of the day, Protagoras (Lecture Thirteen through Lecture Sixteen)—and the rhetoricians, represented by a celebrated practitioner, Gorgias (Lecture Seventeen through Lecture Nineteen). In the *Meno*—devoted to the comprehensive question, “What is virtue?”—we meet a young man who went on to become a notorious political criminal—and who boasted of being the student of none other than Gorgias (Lecture Twenty)!

Our treatment of Plato and his Socrates culminates in a discussion of the four dialogues concerned with the trial, imprisonment, and execution of Socrates (Lecture Twenty-One through Lecture Twenty-Four). What was it about Socrates's philosophizing that prompted the freest, most cosmopolitan city in ancient Greece to convict him on a charge of “corrupting the young” and “not believing in the gods of the city”? Is the tension between Socrates and his political community a product of simple misunderstanding? Of pernicious slander? Or is there a necessary tension between the philosopher as such and every political community, even a relatively tolerant democracy?

These political questions prompt us to turn to Plato's most famous student, Aristotle (Lecture Twenty-Five through Lecture Thirty-Five). For although Aristotle writes about nature as a whole, human as well as nonhuman, to a greater degree than did Plato, Aristotle in his own way continues the innovations of Socrates and Plato. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Lecture Twenty-Six through Lecture Thirty-One) and *Politics* (Lecture Thirty-Two through Lecture Thirty-Five), for example, Aristotle seeks to bring a new clarity and even scientific precision to our moral and political concerns. If Socrates is credited with being the founder of political philosophy, Aristotle

can lay claim to being the founder of political science. Among the most searching questions explored by the *Ethics* is how our strong desire to be happy, or to possess the greatest good for ourselves, co-exists with our equally strong desire to do the right thing or (in Aristotle's phrase) to "act nobly." Key to this inquiry is Aristotle's riveting portrait of the most excellent characteristics for any human being to possess—what he calls "virtues," both moral and intellectual—for the virtues promise us a life at once happy and admirable. In the *Politics*, Aristotle acknowledges the great importance of the political community to our moral education, and from this consideration he proceeds to analyze the various kinds of regimes; above all "the best regime." This best government is the capstone of Aristotle's philosophy of human affairs and provides a fascinating point of comparison with our own democracy. We will conclude by reflecting on the ways in which Aristotle was both indebted to and departed from his intellectual forefathers, Plato and Socrates—and on the debt we owe to all three thinkers.