

Spring 2016

Philosophy PHL 500\_301\_0970 - SPEC/TOPICS/HISTORY/PHILOSOPHY

Interrogating Power: Ancient Greek Perspectives

Daryl Koehn

Moses Naim's bestselling book *The End of Power* claims that the world is witnessing a shift of power away from states and institutions such as corporations and churches toward individuals. Whether or not that claim is true clearly depends crucially upon how we understand the term "power". This course returns to the ancient Greeks to explore alternative understandings of power, notions that call into question Naim's claim.

This class is theme-based. Although we will be reading closely the texts listed below with a view to teasing out various views of power, we will also seek to compare and contrast the notions or dynamics of power that emerge. Reading a variety of ancient Greek texts is especially useful for two reasons. First, the understandings of the ancient Greeks differ widely so we can begin to get some sense of the range of the notion of power. Second, some of the thinkers we will be reading offer "showings" of power while others offer "tellings". "Showings" (as I use that term) rely essentially upon an alert and thinking reader to notice contradictions and tensions in the text; to supply hypotheses as to how and why the author has included certain anecdotes or made certain moves in the course of the argument; to notice defects in the argument; to identify implicit as well as explicit themes and perspectives, etc. "Tellers", by contrast, largely lay out their views in more or less explicit, linear ways and tend not to employ ambiguities, hints in names, odd repetitions, and so forth when advancing an argument and/or displaying their thinking in action. "Showings" are woefully under-theorized by philosophers, in part because philosophers frequently tend to read showings as if they were tellings. We will start to explore how "shown" power may differ in possibly major ways from "told" power.

Upon leaving this class, you should be able to

- Better situate their research and questions within the philosophical tradition and the history of thought
- Articulate various senses of the term "power"
- Begin to offer original readings of key ancient texts
- Draw upon ideas from the class to formulate questions leading to original and significant research and publications

You will write a 12 to 14 page, double-spaced paper on "power" as that term is understood in one of the texts we have studied. The paper should examine the nature of power (if power does indeed have, for the thinker in question, an essence or nature) and the relation of power to "the political". You should motivate your inquiry by conveying what is at stake in your analysis. The paper is due on or before June 15th.

| Week                            | Readings                                  | Questions  | Assignment  |
|---------------------------------|---|--|---|
| <b>One</b><br><b>March 30</b>   | Plato Statesman                           | Why should statesmanship be considered an art or techne? What kind of power, if any, would a political art possess? What can we learn about power from the fact that the stranger has such difficulty using diaeresis alone to locate the art of ruling?   | Quickly scan the entire dialogue and then read from 257A through 286E |
| <b>Two</b><br><b>April 6</b>    | Plato Statesman                           | Why does this entire discussion of politics get conducted by the "Stranger"? Is the stranger the Anti-Socrates as some interpreters have claimed? Why does the text move away from the person of the statesman and toward the activity of ruling?  | Read 287A through end of dialogue.                                    |
| <b>Three</b><br><b>April 13</b> | Plato Apology                             | In what is surely a strange moment, Socrates utters a "prophecy", What kind of prophetic power could Socrates possibly possess, given that he claims to know only that he doesn't know? What does our answer tell us about Socratic power? What kind of power, if any, do his accusers and judges possess? | Read the entire dialogue.   |
| <b>Four</b><br><b>April 20</b>  | Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics and Politics | How does Aristotle under the "political"? Why does he spend so much time discussing slaves by nature? How does the understanding of the political affect how he understands "power"?   | Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. III, chs. 1-3; Politics, Bk. 1 and Bk. VII.7  |

| Week                           | Readings                                | Questions  | Assignment  |
|--------------------------------|---|--|---|
| <b>Five</b><br><b>April 27</b> | Aristotle Politics                      | How does Aristotle understand “faction” and civil strife/revolt? What does his treatment of the regimes tell us about power?   | Politics, Bks, III, IV, V                             |
| <b>Six</b><br><b>May 4</b>     | Herodotus Persian Wars selections       | Herodotus notoriously analyzes the causes of the war between the Greeks and Persians by giving us scores of seemingly disjointed stories. What does this approach to history tell us about the nature of power?                        | Read Bks 1 & 2  |
|                                | Herodotus Persian Wars selections       | What does the ending of Herodotus Persian Wars tell us about his understanding of power?   | Read Bks 8 & 9  |
| <b>Seven</b><br><b>May 11</b>  | Thucydides Peloponnesian War selections | Unlike Herodotus, Thucydides may believe that there are laws of power. If so, what are they?   | Bks, 1, and 6; Bk V. 400-408; Bk Vi, Bk VIII, 562-599 |
| <b>Eight</b><br><b>May 18</b>  | Sophocles Oedipus Tyrannos              | The notion that Oedipus is simply at the mercy of the gods does not seem tenable. But what then is Sophocles suggesting about the nature of human power?   | Read entire play                                      |
| <b>Nine</b><br><b>May 25</b>   | Euripides The Bacchae                   | Pentheus is undone by the end of the play, perhaps by a faulty understanding of power and how it operates. What does the play say about the “power” of our unconscious or “shadow side”? What are political implications of this view? | Read entire play                                      |

