

PHILOSOPHY

The Political Character of Ancient Greek Religion

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Course Information

The ethics course (PHIL 100) is designed to familiarize the students with methodical attempts to answer the question what it means to lead a good human life on the basis of Plato's *Republic*, which is the requisite text.

The ancient political philosophy (PHIL 362) course is a survey of ancient political thought with an emphasis on Plato's and Aristotle's political writings.

We touch upon religion in both courses. From a modern perspective, the ancient philosophical approach to religion is very distinctive. Both Plato and Aristotle understand politics as the architectonic art that oversees, along with everything else, religious institutions to ensure that their effects coincide with those of legislation.

IMP Experience

With Arthur Dewey, my mentor, we discussed Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* and the significance of the faculty of imagination in Loyola's thought. Under my mentor's guidance, I read Antonio De Nicolas' *Powers of Imagining: Ignatius De Loyola, A Philosophical Hermeneutic of Imagining Through the Collected Works of Ignatius De Loyola* (State University of New York Press, 1986).

Spiritual Exercises: *Composition, Contemplation, Colloquy*

Ignatius' emphasis on taking the world as it is, made a particular impression on me, especially as it relates to the ancient philosophical way of approaching the realm of nature and culture. In the *Spiritual Exercises* again and again one becomes engaged in compositions of place. One sees "in imagination" [65] or "with the eye of imagination" [66]; one "hears, tastes, smells, feels" [67-70], one "applies the five senses" [121], immersing oneself completely into the images recalled or evoked, becoming part of their drama. The imaginative re-enactment carries with it the faculties of the emotions and intelligence, effecting, thus, their active integration into what is envisioned. The act of imagining is a dynamic re-creation of the self called to engage anew with the realm of the familiar, the given, it inhabits. Such contemplative vision becomes the beginning and the end, the α and the ω , of action, which, to the degree that it is human action, is also public.

Course Objectives in Light of my Acquaintance with Ignatian Spirituality

While my objectives have not changed in essence, I try to apply more consciously the imaginative pedagogy of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Composition of place: Both courses begin with a lengthy introduction to Ancient Greek Culture, which emphasizes the function of religion and myth as the carriers of the community's collective experience and self-consciousness. We discuss the Great Dionysia of Athens, a religious festival funded by the city, which included drinking celebrations culminating in a religious procession that marched through the city to the theater of Dionysus

for a three-day theatrical contest. The goal is to allow the students to recreate imaginatively the ancient *eusebia* (piety) embodied collectively by the citizens.

Contemplation: The thought of the classical philosophers on religion is introduced as commentary of the established customary practice. (1) Ethics as Introduction to Philosophy: Socrates observes in the *Republic* (379a) that “it’s appropriate for [political] founders to know the patterns on which poets must base their stories and from which they must not deviate.” So, even though he and Adeimantus will not compose the poets’ poems for them, they will spend considerable time (bks II and III) determining precisely “the patterns for theology or stories about the gods.” Traditional religion is embraced as an indispensable dimension of the political life. This happens though only after an elaborate scrutiny of religious institutions, according to the principles established as paramount in guiding political action. True statesmanship depends on knowledge, and knowledge pertains to the intelligible world without which one is confined to the world of opinion. (2) Ancient Political Philosophy: To the pluralistic and disconnected list of human excellences, promoted by the agnostic Protagoras (Plato, *Protagoras*), who thinks that man is the measure, Socrates counters an organic model of virtue, where piety needs to be harmonized with the other virtues, primarily wisdom and justice.

The students consider these suggestions in contrast to the modern assumption that the private can be isolated from the public, that human beings are first individuals and then members of a social structure. The students think critically of pluralistic assumptions, especially in light of the fact that every legislative act is a definitive one embracing a certain set of values.

The full theoretical implications of the ancient position are discussed. According to ancient political philosophy, the environment of the *polis* (culture) enables the development of *logos* both as language and as the continuity of human intelligence in the arts and sciences. Human intelligence is actualized in structured environments and channeled towards distinct skills, crafts, or arts, in the effort to satisfy common needs, i.e., all arts are in the service of the common good. While each art has its own objectives and goals, taken together these objectives and goals should be woven into the common political good. Failure to do so has dangerous consequences for the human well-being, as Plato provocatively shows whether in the case of rhetoric, poetry, or religion.

Colloquy: No definitive answer is given. That the ancient *polis* embraces principles foreign to the ones of our age is no news. M. Schofield is pointedly advising that “it would be a mistake for those of us who are some species or other of democratic liberal to think we can find very much to identify within its [the *Laws*] pages.” Acknowledging that there is a message for our times, he warns us that it is one “not beckoning us” (“Religion and Philosophy in the *Laws*,” in *Plato’s Laws: From Theory into Practice*, ed. S. Scolnicov, L. Brisson, Academia Verlag, 2003, p. 13). But if human beings are political animals, the student of Plato and Aristotle could retort, allowing the operation of diverse powers in the *polis* without understanding their origins and nature, and without conceiving of a plan to integrate their ends, leads directly, even inevitably, to deviations, what Plato calls *hemartēmenai politeiai*.

What both courses stress are the inherent difficulties of some very popular modern assumptions. What is also stressed is that our and our students’ lot at this point in time is to think creatively of possible reconciliations or to continue to suffer the many injustices our deviant constitutions breed. The question of a common political good that goes beyond the

negatives that the individual's rights protect is upon us. While life and liberty are necessary, they are not sufficient goods. Happiness needs to be commonly defined and pursued.

Loyola writes from the perspective of 16th century individualism. Imagining and understanding the ancient Greeks in their context raises the political problem as the most urgent in human life and allows for creative extensions of Ignatius' thought. He compels us to do so. He taught us that by actively imagining we partake of the demiurgic divine activity.