





Philosophy (PHIL) 240

Ancient Philosophy: The Rise of Reason in a Mythic World

(Revision 2)

Status: Replaced with new revision, see the [course listing](#)  for the current revision 

Delivery mode: Individualized study online 

Credits: 3

Areas of study: Arts or Humanities

Prerequisites: None; No pre-requisites; previous credit in philosophy recommended.

Precluded: None

Challenge: PHIL 240 is not available for challenge.

Faculty: [Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences](#) 

Overview

Is there such a thing as ultimate truth, or is truth just a matter of personal opinion? The ancient Greek sophist Protagoras famously said that "man is the measure of all things." The poem "Late Lament" at the end of the Moody Blues song "Nights in White Satin" repeats the same idea: "But we decide which is right, and which is an illusion." If I just make up my own values, then it would seem that nothing obligates me to respect them. Indeed, why should I think I'm obligated to have values at all? Against Protagoras, Socrates and Plato raised the question as to whether we should be looking to something outside ourselves for guidance. But if so, how can I determine what that is or where it comes from? Religious traditions recommend belief in gods, heroes, and demons. Is it realistic to look for anything more than whatever we each personally decide to believe in, or does our ability to think and reason offer an alternative to belief? Or do we need some kind of hybrid born of both?

Philosophy arose out of the mythic and religious matrix of ancient worlds. Throughout the development of philosophy from its obscure origins to its flowering in the classic period of Plato and Aristotle, this course follows a tension between two sides of human existence: one turned inward toward human rationality, and the other turned outward toward the possibility of transcendence. We'll see that many of the questions we ask about the meaning of our lives today were first raised in the ancient world. In the process of reflecting upon these questions as they first emerged out of the world of gods and heroes, we will not only get a firm grounding in the philosophical ideas of the ancients but we will also gain new perspectives upon the relation between cultural tradition and reason. Thereby we'll also appreciate the relevance of this course to the multicultural world we live in today, a world in which we see religious believers trying to reassert their beliefs - sometimes even against reason. Students will come out of this course not only having learned from the great philosophers of ancient Greece in whose shadow the history of Western thought has played out, but they will also gain a different vantage point from which to critically assess the intellectual life and cultural productions of modern societies.

Prepare to be both challenged and amazed on this fascinating journey!

Outline

The course consists of 7 units divided into three parts.

Part I: From Gods to Philosophers

Unit 1: The Presocratic Philosophers

- Unit 1.1: Hesiod: The Primal Separation of Earth and Sky
- Unit 1.2: Thales: Foundationalist Thinking
- Unit 1.3: Anaximander: The Unlimited Source of Everything
- Unit 1.4: Pythagoras: The Numerical Harmony of the Cosmos
- Unit 1.5: Heraclitus: The Unity of Difference
- Unit 1.6: Parmenides: The Way of Truth and The Way of Seeming

Part II: Plato's *Republic*

Unit 2: *Republic* Book I

- Unit 2.1: The Enigma of Socrates
- Unit 2.2: Traditional Values and Paying Debts
- Unit 2.3: Benefitting Friends and Harming Enemies
- Unit 2.4: The Sophist Enters

Unit 3: *Republic* Book II

- The Ring of Gyges and the Just State

Unit 4: *Republic* Book IV

- Justice in the Soul

Unit 5: *Republic* Book VI

- Unit 5.1: Beyond Being to the Good
- Unit 5.2: The Divided Line and Thinking Without Images
- Unit 5.3: Out of the Cave and into the Sun

Part III: Plato's Late Writings and Aristotle

Unit 6: Plato Returns to the Primal Separation of Earth and Sky

Unit 7: Aristotle and the Plurality of Being

Evaluation

Your final mark in Philosophy 240 will be based on your grades for the Study Questions in all three parts of the course and the two essay assignments. To **receive credit** [↗](#) for this course, you must submit all written assignments and receive a course composite grade of at least **D (50 percent)** [📄](#). The weighting of the composite grade is as follows:

Please note that the assignment structure is set up in such a way that you must proceed sequentially through all the assignments, receiving instructor feedback on each one before proceeding to the next. This means that multiple assignments cannot be submitted at once or in a random order. If you register for this course, please take note of this assignment structure and plan your schedule accordingly.

Activity	Weight
Study Questions (10 questions at 2% each)	20%
Essay Assignment 1	40%
Essay Assignment 2	40%
Total	100%

To learn more about assignments and examinations, please refer to Athabasca University's **online Calendar** [↗](#).





Materials

This course either does not have a course package or the textbooks are open-source material and available to students at no cost. This course has a **Course Administration and Technology Fee** [↗](#), but students are not charged the

Course Materials Fee.

All required readings are taken from open source internet sites. The commentaries on the readings as well as other study materials are available on the course Moodle site.

Important links

- › [Academic advising](#) 
- › [Program planning](#) 
- › [Request assistance](#) 
- › [Support services](#) 

Athabasca University reserves the right to amend course outlines occasionally and without notice. Courses offered by other delivery methods may vary from their individualized study counterparts.

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View [previous revision](#) 
