

PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

21L450 LITERATURE AND ETHICAL VALUES FIRST PAPER ASSIGNMENT

Due by Lecture #10

Papers should be 5-6 pages in length, double-spaced, or the equivalent. (Figure 350 words/page.) You may write on any subject that occurs to you concerning the texts read so far this term. The following list is offered by way of sample topics; you may choose one of them but need not do so.

SUGGESTED TOPICS

Creon and Antigone articulate different views of the authority that they invoke to justify their positions. One of these concerns allegiance, another human nature, a third the nature of the gods. What is Creon's view of these things? What is Antigone's? Does the outcome of the play reinforce one of these views or the other, or does it suggest that both parties to the quarrel are wrong?

What is Creon's position at the outset of the play? What ideals does he stand for or come to stand for during the course of the play? What is Antigone's position at the outset of the play? Granted that the ritual burial of kin is a sacred obligation, but only a ritual (it need only be a token sprinkling, which is all that Antigone can supply), why is it so important to her? Is Ismene (caught-in-the-middle Ismene) an ethical weakling, a mere fence-sitter, or does she represent a reasonable position? Is it ever a good idea to say about someone that they are either a part of the solution or a part of the problem?

Argue for one of the following four views: (a) *Antigone* is a play without a hero (or heroine). (b) *Antigone* is a play where one sort of right collides with another. It has two central characters, two tragic figures.

(c) Creon is the tragic center of the play. (d) Antigone is the tragic center of the play.

N.B. In your answers, offer arguments but make no mention whatsoever of "how the dictionary defines tragic heroes" or "how Aristotle defines tragic heroes".

Martin Luther King associates himself with Antigone at one point. Is he right to do so? Offer reasons on one side or the other and then argue your position.

Discuss the implications of the story of the Garden of Eden in *Genesis* in any way that seems relevant to ethical issues.

Comment in any way on a comparison between Socrates's faithfulness to the laws of Athens (in the *Crito*) and the faithfulness of Abraham in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac.

Give a careful account of the dialogue between Socrates and Polemarchus and/or Thrasymachus at the outset of the *Republic*, highlighting the ways in which the course of the argument lays the groundwork for the conclusions that Socrates will ultimately defend and remark in any fashion that you see fit on the adequacy of the argument.

Discuss the theory of Thrasymachus about justice at the outset of the *Republic*. How does it differ and how does it resemble the theory of Glaucon (who is only reporting on "what people say")? How good is Thrasymachus's case? How well does Socrates refute it? At the end of this part of the dialogue, Socrates says that he has got the better of Thrasymachus's arguments but still doesn't know what justice is. Is he right? How well or badly is the rest of the argument of *The Republic* foreshadowed in this part of the book?

Elucidate any major element of the ensuing text (e.g., Glaucon's myth of Gyges, the validity of the

analogy between the individual and the *polis* (that is, the state, as our translation puts it), the divided line and its connection to the parable of the Cave, the ultimate definitions of the four cardinal virtues [laid out at 433c-d], the issues surrounding the notion that we must have composite selves if the notion "master of oneself" is to have meaning, and so forth), giving a careful account of its presentation in the book and connecting it to what you think is the overall point of view that Plato is pushing.

How do you square the fact that there are two orders of society (Guardians and People), three faculties in the mind, and four virtues? What does this match-up imply, in your way of thinking about any of the following: the book's conception of virtue? the analogy between the state and the individual? the relation between "justice" and "temperance" or "self-control", both of which seem to apply to the state as a whole, rather than belonging to a particular group within it?

Is Socrates right in his judgment upon the Sophists (493b-d)? Does this judgement rightly apply to politicians today or to those who teach the "arts of success" in any competitive or adversarial branch of human endeavor, such as business or law?

Elucidate the Parable of the Cave in Plato's *Republic*. How apt are the various details to the argument of the book as a whole? Are the three parts of the soul represented in the story? Why would those in the cave wish to kill anyone who's been out looking at the sun? After all, his/her eyes aren't used to darkness, and so he/she must seem a bumbling, ineffectual sort of person. What is the point in the parable of being able to look at the sun? Can we ever "gaze upon" the sun?"

Of course, none of us would want to live in Plato's *Republic*. Plato would have Socrates say that this is a good test of whether we are right-minded or one of the corrupt types described at the end of the book. How wrong is he?

The following topics relate to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*:

1. Explain how well Aristotle's view that "you never deliberate about ends" (insisted on at various points, particularly in (III, 3) suits his view that "practical wisdom [*phronēsis*] deliberates well about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life generally, not just particular things" (i.e., the account of practical wisdom in Bk VI).

2. If practical wisdom isn't an art, it isn't of any use in making us good; if it is, we needn't know it but can hire a trainer. How does Aristotle's answer to this paradox (raised at the end of Bk VI) jibe with his general position about virtue?

3. Explain the analogy that Aristotle draws between the way in which cleverness or "smarts" relates to practical wisdom and the way in which natural virtue relates to virtue or excellence in the true sense. (VI, 13.) How is this illustrative of Aristotle's whole conception of the place of virtue or excellence in human life?

4. Both Aristotle and Plato make reference to the existence of something called "*technē*", which is variously translated as "art" or "craft" (as in the phrase "arts and crafts"--boat-building, woodworking, and such like). Discuss briefly the place of this term in the argument of either or compare the use in both. Or: Aristotle at one point (I, 7) argues that if musicians or shoemakers have an "*ergon*" (a direction of their activity towards an end that defines the activity as that of a musician or a shoemaker), so human beings must have an "*ergon*" as well, a direction of their activity that defines it as human activity. How good is this analogy?

5. Try to explain the difference between the views of Aristotle and Plato upon any really important point in their conception of the ethical life and how it relates to their overall conceptions. For example: Aristotle has a notion of the value of learning about ethics that is very different from Plato's.

6. The aim of life is happiness, says Aristotle. There are many who would regard this as untrue, others as perhaps true but something to be regretted, for this aim is incompatible with true morality, still others who regard this as a diminution of the seriousness of life. (Certain philosophers have condemned Jefferson's "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" as a trivialization of the aims of political union.) Comment.

7. Being virtuous (excellent) or acting virtuously (or excellently or nobly—it all depends on the translation) must give oneself pleasure—be good for oneself in the sense that it affords pleasure. Someone who acts virtuously but doesn't take pleasure in the activity is not a fully realized human being. Elucidate as simply as possible some of the grounds for this view of Aristotle's.

8. Some think that the purpose of ethical inquiry and argument is to persuade those who aren't ethical to start becoming ethical. Aristotle says that ethical inquiry is extremely important (throughout Book I) and that it's about how to become good (Bk II, ch 2). At the same time, he doesn't think that people who aren't already good (like young men, who don't know enough about life) can understand what he has to say or profit from it. And he says the same of those whose character has been already be formed by experience and don't have the right views of life. The paradox involved here occurs in one version in III, 6, where Aristotle examines the view that either people see the good properly because they've been lucky enough to get the right ideas into their heads or they don't, because they haven't been that lucky, and so you can't praise one and blame the other, since both are doing what they think is good, as they see it. How would Aristotle deal with any aspect of this?

9. Explain what Aristotle might mean by saying that "man has a function", even as a carpenter and a tanner has.