Morris Colloquium - Social and Political Justice in Ancient Greek Philosophy
April 11-12, 2025
University of Colorado - Boulder

Titles and Abstracts

Alphabetical by speaker surname.

Emily Hulme (University of Sydney)
"Men's virtues, women's virtues?"
Are there different virtues for men and women? For some schools in ancient philosophy, this question is laughable—as silly as asking if there's men's water and women's water. Others do claim there are different virtues, but this position is formulated a range of ways, from Aristotle's claim in the Politics that silence befits women (but not men), to Pythagoras' claim that generosity is a particularly feminine virtue, to the most common formulation on which courage is a man's virtue, and temperance a woman's. The purpose of the talk will be to present current research on what the querelle des femmes, inasmuch as it existed, looked like in ancient Greek philosophy (which I take to revolve around the question mooted above) across a range of schools, with a glance as well at our evidence for female membership in these schools.

Dhananjay Jagannathan (Columbia University)
"Aristotle on Political Justice and Household Justice"
Aristotle tells us in NE V.1 that the primary forum for the exercise of justice is in regard to strangers. He expands on this thought further in NE V.6 when he claims that political justice, which prevails among equals whose interactions are governed by law, is the core sense of justice. Aristotle then draws the inference that justice in the household applies more to husband and wife than to the householder's relations to either his children or slaves, though even this falls short of being political. In this talk, I aim to reconstruct just how Aristotle thinks that household justice is related to political justice, with a special focus on the question of educating children, who are said to be ruled monarchically in Politics I.12, and on the close connection between education and legislative understanding in NE X.9. Moving beyond education, I also explore whether Aristotle's account can account for the pertinence of problems of both distributive and corrective justice within families.

Monte Johnson (University of California, San Diego
"Democritus on Social Justice in a Democracy"
Democritus offered a definition of justice and injustice in the context of his work On Contentment (Peri euthumiês): "Justice is to do ta chrê eonta (what needs to be done or

what is useful); injustice is to fail to do ta chrê eonta (what needs be done or what is useful), but turn away" (B256 Diels). The term chrê is ambiguous between "need" and "use", and Democritus seems to exploit this ambiguity. Part of his theory of justice is rooted in an anthropological speculation about human evolution and the development of language and civilization, according to which humans needed to incapacitate (viz., exterminate) hostile animals and people that threaten their survival. But another part of his theory of justice is rooted in a psychological theory about the good condition of the human soul: contentment (euthumiê), which depends on minimizing painful emotions like envy, jealousy, and relative deprivation, and maximizing pleasant emotions like joy, satisfaction, and security. In this paper I examine his definition of justice and the function it and related concepts play in his ethical and social-political theory, including his theory of poverty, wealth, and mutual aid. There are several innovative aspects of his theory: beyond the grounding in a naturalistic theory of human history, there is his emphasis on the importance of autonomous (as opposed to heteronymous) sources of moral sanction, and the compatibility of his theory of justice with pro-democratic attitudes and positions. Here the contrast between Democritus' views and contemporary anti-democratic views, such as those of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, is stark and should be of the greatest interest to those interested in the otherwise very poorly documented history of pro-democratic attitudes in the classical era.

Brennan McDavid (Chapman University)
"Plato's Ideal and Non-Ideal Craftsmen"

Plato's political theorizing, in both its ideal and non-ideal iterations, proceeds from particular premises about human nature. Scholars have argued that developments and revisions in his theorizing follow from his reconsideration of human nature and its potential. The focus of the present study is Plato's attitude toward that principle of human nature specifically as it applies to craftsmen. Unlike other scholars who assess changes in Plato's conception of human nature by comparing the citizens of Kallipolis with the citizens of Magnesia—the latter group explicitly excluding craftsmen—I will focus on the craftsmen alone. Does Plato in any way alter his estimation of the capacities of that class of people? Whereas in the Republic he carefully embeds the activities of production within the apparatus of the state, seemingly under the pessimistic outlook that activities involving the exchange of money for goods and goods for money require oversight if they are to avert evil outcomes, what treatment does he give those activities in light of his purportedly updated views about human nature? Are craftsmen and other money-makers granted greater license or less? And should we approach these questions as if to examine arguments following from first principles or leading to them? That is, can we reverse engineer Plato's conception of human nature by observing his treatment of craftsmen—as Bobonich and others believe we can do by observing the treatment of citizens in Magnesia—or can we find out nothing in absence

of clear statements of what he takes human nature and its potentialities to be? I begin with a stock-taking survey of Plato's treatment of craftsmen in the ideal city Kallipolis and in his second-best city Magnesia, and then argue for a particular interpretation of how to compare these treatments. Finally, I draw out conclusions for how we can understand Plato's conception of human nature.

John Proios (University of Chicago)
"Can Every Cook Philosophize? Plato's Elitism about Philosophy"
In a number of texts, Plato argues that philosophy liberates the soul. In some of these texts, he also suggests that everyone is capable of practicing philosophy by virtue of their rational souls, and he shows some interest in upsetting certain social hierarchies by emphasizing that social identity is irrelevant to the capacity for philosophy. This would seem to be the material for a commitment to democratizing philosophy and universalizing the project of philosophical liberation. Yet Plato is remarkably uninterested in this. Instead, he frequently characterizes philosophy as the purview of an elite minority. In this talk, I ask why Plato maintains this elitism in spite of having a more universal alternative available to him. I focus on Plato's insistence, in the Theaetetus especially, that philosophy requires leisure. I argue that Plato's elitism about philosophy is not simply a reflection of contingent ideas he has about the economics of leisure (roughly, that leisure needs a division of labor). In the final part of the talk, I explore the idea that Plato's conception of philosophy expresses, in a revisionary way, the historical way of life of a leisured Greek elite.

Jeremy Reid (San Francisco State University)
"The Good Person and the Good Citizen in Aristotle's Politics"
This paper brings together and seeks to explain three claims Aristotle makes about citizen virtue and justice. The first claim is that the work (ergon) of the citizen is to preserve the constitution (Pol. III.4, 1276b27–29); the second claim is that justice is relative to the constitution (Pol. V.9, 1309a33–39); the third claim is that it is only in the best constitution that the same person is both a good person and a good citizen without qualification, whereas in nonideal constitutions people are good relative to their constitutions (Pol. IV.7, 1293b5–7). These three claims form an interesting triad, for what they suggest is that the kind of constitution that you live under determines not only what it means for you to be a just citizen, but also what it means for you to be a good person; so if we think that the virtuous person is a just person (as we should), then I think there is a very serious question about how a virtuous person ought to behave in a non-ideal constitution. If the job of the citizen is to preserve the constitution, but the constitution is not unqualifiedly good, should a virtuous person seek to preserve it? And if justice is relative to the constitution, but the conception of justice in that constitution is not correct, how can a virtuous person act justly in those circumstances? In short, how

does the virtuous person get it right when their state orders them to do something they think is wrong? This paper argues that Aristotle's conception of justice is constitution-relative because justice achieves common goods through collective action and norm-propagation, and that while Aristotle does not offer a theory of civil disobedience, there are ways to improve the constitution within the constraints Aristotle specifies and that manifest virtue.

Rachel Singpurwalla (University of Maryland)
Plato on the Private Ideology of the Family

Plato is hostile to the private family. In the Republic, he advocates eliminating the private family (at least for the guardians); and while he allows for private families in the political proposals of the Laws, he clearly considers it a second-best way of structuring a just society. But what is the source of Plato's hostility to the private family? Plato's most well-known criticism of the private family occurs in Republic V, where he argues that the private family is an impediment to the unity of the city in so far as it leads rulers to favor the interests of their own family members over the common good. In this paper, I explore a distinct problem with the private family, one which has received less attention from scholars: the private family, like the city, has its own ideology, or deeply held system of beliefs, values, and ways of behaving. This feature of the private family is an impediment to the twin aims of the political art: promoting the virtue of the citizens and the unity of the city.