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Greek Ethics – Week 1

Introduction and Plato's Apology

1. Introduction

In this course you will be learning about the views of certain ancient Greek thinkers, but also developing your own views on the questions they discuss.

What are these questions?

Why are we studying Greek ethics?

2. Background

The three main characters:

Socrates: 469-399 BC

Plato: 427-347 BC

Aristotle: 384-322 BC

3. Background to the Apology

The Apology is Plato's account of the speech Socrates gave at his trial.

Socrates was charged with

- corrupting the young
- not believing in the gods of the city and introducing new gods

Why was Socrates put on trial?

Some historical background: Athens and Sparta

How was the trial conducted?

4. The Apology

Socrates claims not to be a teacher.

The conversation with Callias:

Socrates asked Callias whom he trusts to teach his sons: "Who is the expert in perfecting the human and social qualities?"

Callias: "Evenus of Paros, and his fee is 500 drachmae."

Socrates remarks: "I felt that Evenus was to be congratulated if he really was a master of this art and taught it at such a moderate fee. I should certainly plume myself and give myself airs if I understood these things; but in fact, gentlemen, I do not."

Socrates' Mission

The oracle: "no one is wiser than Socrates."

Socrates' response:

"Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? I am very conscious that I am not wise at all; what then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest?"

Socrates cross-examines someone who has a reputation for wisdom. He finds:

"my experience was something like this: I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not. As a result he came to dislike me, and so did many of the bystanders. So I withdrew and thought to myself: "I am wiser than this man. It is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile; but he thinks that he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so that I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know."

The Socratic practice of cross-examination is known, in Greek, as the elenchus.

Question to think about:

Is it necessary to have a certain kind of knowledge in order to improve the young? Socrates makes it clear that he thinks his practice of cross-examining people benefits them. How can he benefit the people he talks to if he doesn't know 'anything worthwhile'?

5. How to study for this course

Reading and questions.