

Department of Philosophy
Ancient Metaphysics and Natural Philosophy/ 453B2018
Professor Alison Laywine
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Office hours: Tuesdays 17:40-19:00

No use of laptops in class

When this course is offered, we pick a special topic, question or issue in ancient metaphysics and natural philosophy. This term, the topic will be colours and sounds. Colours and sounds make up the texture of our lives as sentient beings. They relay information to us about our physical environment. They also enrich our lives by contributing to our aesthetic experience. We regard certain patterns of sound as musical and certain patterns of colour as visually pleasing. It seems reasonable to expect philosophers to have something to say about them. We would like to know how they are produced, how we perceive them, what sort of things they are and whether they are at all (and not just a side effect of our interactions with the world). We would also like to know whether we may treat our perception of them as knowledge in any robust sense of the word and even how our language about them works (are 'rough' sounds rough by analogy with tactile properties?) Can they be given a rigorous mathematical treatment? Does the aesthetic delight we take in them signal anything special about the world around us? Colours and sounds are objects of different sense organs, but can what we learn about the former help us understand the latter, or vice versa? For example, are colours mixtures in something like the way that musical intervals are a blend of notes of different pitch? These are questions of intrinsic interest. Natural philosophers and metaphysicians of antiquity struggled (in interesting, illuminating and creative ways) to answer them. Their efforts will be the topic of this course.

The course will have six units of roughly two or three weeks. How long we spend on the material in any given unit will depend on the pace of classroom discussion, which will be largely up to you. (Unit Two will almost certainly take longer than two weeks; it's quite possible that we will end up folding units five and six into each other.)

Unit One: Presocratic theories of colours and sounds – fragments and doxography of Philolaus, Archytas, the Euclidean *Sectio canonis* (for their account of sound and musical 'harmonia'); fragments and doxography of Empedocles and Democritus (for colours)

Unit Two: Plato on colours and other sensible qualities in the *Timaeus*

Unit Three: Aristotle on perception in general – *De anima*, Book Two

Unit Four: Aristotle on colours in the *On Sense and Sensibilia*

Unit Five: Sounds do not just have pitch, they have other qualities. Can these qualities be accounted for? Rigorously? The Peripatetic De audibilibus and Ptolemy's *Harmonics*, Book One

Unit Six: talking about colour and sounds – how does our language about such properties work?

The readings will be made available as PDF scans and posted on Mycourses. Students are expected to have **done the readings ahead of time** and to **bring the readings to class**. Since the use of laptop computers is not allowed, this will mean printing up the readings – ahead of time. The method of evaluation will be 10% for constructive classroom participation. Getting credit for participation presupposes you come to class regularly. Coming to class regularly is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for getting credit for participation. 90% of the grade will be for written assignments. There will be a final paper and (probably) a shorter paper early in the term.

Ceux et celles qui aiment mieux rédiger et soumettre leurs travaux en français ont le droit de ce faire à l'Université McGill (<http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/search/local/french>).

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