

# Philosophy & Literature: Visions of Justice

Philosophy 3750  
Professor Erin Beeghly

What is justice? Where do the mandates of justice come from and why do they have authority over us? How do we know what is just? When and how should wrongdoers be punished? Is it better to be just than unjust, to obey or disobey? Philosophers throughout history have asked these questions. Though they often disagree wildly, their exploration of the questions tends to take a similar form. An author articulates a view, presents objections, and then defends the view. Fiction, poetry, and autobiography work differently. Pairing pieces of literature with philosophical texts, we will examine how different kinds of writers explore questions about justice, the answers that they offer us (if any), and the extent to which literature and philosophy can be brought into conversation. We will pay special attention to the way in which gender, social class, race, and ethnicity feature (or fail to feature) in different accounts of a just society.

After beginning with a reflection on the relationship between philosophy and literature, the course divides into three historical eras: (1) Justice in Ancient Greece, (2) Justice in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, and (3) Justice in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21 century United States. Core texts include Aeschylus's *The Oresteia*, Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Students will have the opportunity to do a presentation that explores their own philosophical and/or literary interests as they relate to course themes.

## *Knowledge-related goals:*

Students will understand...

- different ways of conceptualizing justice
- historical variation in questions of justice.
- how literature enhances, as well as provides challenges to philosophical conceptions of justice.
- understand the Euthyphro dilemma, Plato's arguments for obeying the law in the Crito, Marx's theory of justice, objections to racial inequality, as well as arguments for & against racial integration as a political ideal
- understand the way in which different visions of a just society pay attention (or fail to pay attention) to gender, social class, race, and ethnicity.

## *Skill-related goals:*

Students will improve their ability...

- to read and interpret philosophical & literary texts
- to recognize and evaluate arguments
- to communicate ideas clearly in speech and writing
- to engage respectfully with conflicting points of view

## **Course Requirements:**

1. Weekly assignments
2. Two papers (5 – 7 pages)
3. In-class presentation