

Why study nature? Ancient philosophers on the aim and value of natural science

The division of labour that is characteristic of Modern societies but also the idea that the study of nature is primarily important for the development of technology and medicine are two main reasons for which the answer to the question “Why study nature?” may appear trivial today. The purpose of this workshop is to expose the students the different answers that some major philosophers in antiquity, starting with Plato’s teacher, Socrates, gave to this question.

Socrates has often been described as the philosopher who brought down philosophy from heaven to earth. This shift of interest is not reflected just on the moral questions which dominate his thought, but also on his criticism of early natural science. In the *Phaedo* Plato presents Socrates’ disenchantment with people like Anaxagoras who acknowledged the importance of intelligence in his account of nature, but (according to the text) offered the same kind of material or mechanical explanation that was characteristic of early science. Similar reservations are expressed by Socrates in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*. Starting from Socrates’ criticism, in this workshop we will examine different ways by which ancient philosophers attempted to argue in favour of the idea that the *cosmos* is the product of intelligent design. Of central importance for our discussion will be the background of the *Timaeus*, which is the work in which Plato attempts to fulfill his teacher’s vision, by offering an account which celebrates the purposeful nature of the universe. Through the study of a selection of texts (besides Plato and Xenophon: Aristotle, Epicurus, Epictetus, , Lucretius, Cicero, Galen), students will become exposed to the main arguments that shaped an important debate in the history of science, namely the debate between teleology and mechanism, but also to the different though always very articulate answers that ancient philosophers gave to the question “Why study nature?”