

**Aristotle on Truth and Meaning**  
**2010 NEH Summer Seminar for College Teachers**  
**Professor Deborah K. Modrak and Associate Professor Mark R. Wheeler**

Dear Colleague,

We invite you to apply to our seminar “Aristotle on Truth and Meaning,” a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar for university and college teachers, to be held at San Diego State University in San Diego, California, from 21 June until 16 July, 2010. Our seminar will be devoted to the study of Aristotle’s semantic conception of truth and falsehood, both in light of his account of how human language and thought represent the world and in relation to other conceptions of truth and falsehood from those of his predecessors to those of leading contemporary philosophers. In Aristotle’s model of language and thought, linguistic assertions signify beliefs in the minds of language users. These beliefs represent the world and true beliefs represent the world the way it actually is (while false beliefs fail to do so). Aristotle’s theory of linguistic signification, representational thought, and truth are neatly integrated and provide a highly sophisticated account of how we represent the world. In order to understand his theory better, we shall examine relevant texts from his logical works, his physical and biological works, and his psychological works. The objective of our study of Aristotle’s theory of truth is to better understand how, exactly, Aristotle conceived of the relationship between language, thought, and reality. His theory will also be considered in the light of recent research in the related fields of philosophical semantics, metaphysics and the philosophy of mind. We will undertake a careful study of Aristotle’s texts and the most recent scholarship in these fields.

Aristotle’s theory of truth is important for a number of reasons. First, it is interesting in its own right and informs other central areas of Aristotle’s philosophy. In particular, the way truth is construed and false judgment explained has important implications for understanding meaning and reference. Second, careful consideration of Aristotle’s account of truth provides an excellent vantage point from which to consider some of the most important parts of his philosophical system—his logic, his epistemology, and his ontology. Third, Aristotle’s central thesis is that truth is saying of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not—often called the “correspondence theory of truth.” Some version of this thesis has dominated Western thought about language, mind, and knowledge for two millennia, and Aristotle’s version has a number of virtues. The fifth century sophist Protagoras—in defending his “Man is the measure” doctrine—challenged realist theories of meaning and truth. Plato—in the *Cratylus*—sketched both a conventionalist and a realist account of meaning only to argue that both are hopelessly flawed. He formulated—in both the *Cratylus* and the *Sophist*—a definition of truth similar to Aristotle’s and he highlighted—in the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*—the difficulties, given this definition, involved in accounting for false judgment. Aristotle, preeminent among Plato’s students and the first real historian of philosophy, provides us with unsurpassed insight into these earlier conceptions of truth, falsehood, language and thought.

Yet another reason it is important to study Aristotle’s theory of truth is that it profoundly influenced subsequent theories of truth and meaning, both in substance and method (we would go so far as to

say that there has been no serious rival to Aristotelian semantics until relatively recent times). In the medieval period, for instance, Augustine, Aquinas, Duns Scotus, William of Occam, and others begin with Aristotelian positions on these issues; we can understand much of the epistemology done in the Renaissance and Modern periods as an effort to respond to skeptical challenges without forsaking a correspondence conception of truth. If we understand Aristotle's theory, we can better appreciate these later developments and grasp more easily the reasons given by some for rejecting them. We believe that Aristotle's theory of truth may suggest new directions for contemporary research in the philosophy of language and mind, linguistics and cognitive science. Thinkers such as Frege, Husserl, Heidegger, Quine, Russell, Whitehead, and Wittgenstein either rejected the correspondence conception or radically reconceived it. But it was never without advocates, and recently researchers interested in developing a naturalistic account of language and thought have returned to Aristotle for inspiration and guidance. A growing number of philosophers, cognitive scientists, and others now recognize the importance of his contribution for contemporary research.

### **Seminar Structure and Procedures.**

The co-directors will conduct the seminar through a mix of their own lectures, discussions based on readings of the primary texts in translation and related contemporary research, and presentations by the participants. The formal sessions of the seminar will take place on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday mornings. All seminar sessions will last three hours. Tuesdays and Fridays will be reserved for unstructured research including travel to area libraries. The co-directors will be available for guided independent research whenever the seminar is not in formal session. Each participant will be responsible for leading the seminar on one occasion, and for responding to another participant's presentation on a second occasion. Participants will choose the topics of their presentations; having chosen a topic, a participant will then meet with the co-directors who will suggest readings from the extensive secondary literature on Aristotle's theories and the large body of related contemporary research. Participants will also be encouraged throughout the period of the seminar to participate in an on-line discussion of the formal lectures, presentations and related readings.

Seminar participants will have access to San Diego State University's research library located on campus, and with transportation can make their way easily to the nearby research libraries at the University of California, San Diego and the University of San Diego. The SDSU library belongs to both the local research library consortium and a California State University consortium, the collections of which are on-line, so that participants will have ready access to the materials at all of the major local universities and all of the CSU library collections. Moreover, the inter-library loan department is most helpful in obtaining materials not available within these collections. Participants will have access to the SDSU faculty resource room with computers, scanners, copy machines, FAX machines, and other instructional technologies. The department of philosophy at San Diego State is fully and enthusiastically supportive of the NEH seminar and welcomes participants to all of its facilities.

San Diego offers a wide variety of summer recreational activities, including excellent beaches, tennis and swimming on campus, golf, boating, and sailing, and hiking in nearby mountains, forests, and parks. Sea World, the San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park and Padres baseball games are among popular tourist attractions. It is also possible to arrange trips to the J. Paul Getty and Los

Angeles County museums of art, the Norton Simon in Pasadena and the Huntington Library and Art Collection in San Gabriel.

### **The CoDirectors**

This is the co-directors second Summer Seminar. In 2003 they directed a seminar on Aristotle's theory of meaning. Deborah Modrak, who is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Rochester, has published widely in the areas to be covered in the seminar. Most notably, her recent book, *Aristotle's Theory of Language and Meaning*, is a detailed study of Aristotle's views on language and representation. In it, she deals with all the Aristotelian texts to be examined in the seminar and many of the questions to be discussed. An earlier book, *Aristotle: The Power of Perception*, addresses Aristotle's cognitive theory in detail.

Most of Professor Wheeler's recent scholarly work has been focused on Aristotle's theory of truth. His dissertation demonstrated the relationship between Aristotle's theory of truth, on the one hand, and his metaphysical theory of universals, on the other. While at San Diego State University, he has continued this research, publishing articles on Aristotle's semantic theory and cognitive theory. He is currently at work on a book on Aristotle's theory of truth.

### **Housing**

Since 1986 SDSU has made housing available in the Villa Alvarado apartment complex. These are modest but comfortably furnished two bedroom apartments with kitchen, bath, and living rooms. The cost of these apartments per person for 2010, double occupancy (but private bedrooms), for the entire four-week period will be \$1,3445. The air-conditioned apartments are well equipped. The residential complex also provides a pleasant environment for social gatherings such as barbecues, swimming, and parties (of which we hope to have many).

### **Follow-up Activities.**

We intend to create a website where we can post and make available to all members of the seminar information useful to them prior to, during, and after the seminar period. The site will be on-line in late 2009 and will be maintained throughout the summer of the seminar proper and thereafter. Those teachers who choose to incorporate material from the seminar in their teaching, or who modify texts they already teach in light of the seminar, may submit reports on the results of these activities which will then be posted on the website. We hope to remain in contact with seminar members after the seminar proper through e-mail and to facilitate the exchange of ideas, materials, and experiences relevant to their classroom efforts and research. SDSU will provide us with whatever technical assistance we need to support our website.

### **Stipends**

Seminar participants will receive stipends of \$3,300 to help cover travel and living expenses. Half of the stipend will be available at the start of the seminar. The remainder will be paid out after the seminar's second week.

### **Application Procedure and Deadline**

Your completed application should be postmarked no later than March 2, 2010 and should be

addressed as follows:

NEH Summer Seminar: Aristotle on Truth and Meaning  
c/o Mark Wheeler  
PO Box 15235  
San Diego, CA 92175

We will consider most seriously applicants whose research and teaching will benefit directly from the seminar experience and who promise to engage actively and collegially in a rigorous intellectual endeavor. We hope to attract applicants from a variety of fields including, but not limited to, philosophy, classics, linguistics, psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience, the history of ideas, and other disciplines where the applicant can demonstrate that the seminar will contribute to their professional growth and that they will make a significant contribution to the proceedings. The most important part of the application is the essay. This should include your reasons for participating in the seminar and a description of the research you hope to do as well as the relation of the topic of the seminar to your teaching.

If you have any questions, please contact us at [mark.wheeler@sdsu.edu](mailto:mark.wheeler@sdsu.edu) or 619-379-0686.

Best regards,  
Deborah K. W. Modrak and Mark Wheeler