

PHIL 2325
ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICAL THOUGHT

COURSE INFORMATION

Class Meetings: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday (1:35-2:40); 110 Kariotis Hall

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Office Hours: TBA

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Community, Friendship, Love, Justice – we perk up when we hear these words, as they pick out a few of our core values. These values have a history: one that begins over 6000 years ago, in the Mediterranean, with the Egyptian, Persian, and Greek civilizations. In this course, we examine the Greek civilization and focus primarily on the *classical period*, from 510 BCE-323 BCE. During this time, we see the birth of philosophy as we know it today, and the flourishing of Greek democracy and political thought.

The majority of this course will be dedicated to Plato's *Republic* (376 BCE) and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* (~340 BCE). In these writings, we are met with some of the earliest attempts to make sense of the aforementioned ideas of community, friendship, love, and justice. We also touch on the origins of Greek philosophy and political thought and discuss later developments in the Hellenistic period (322-31 BCE), including Epicurean and Stoic philosophy. By the end of this course you will understand one source of our current thinking about philosophy and politics. You will also appreciate what it means to live *reflectively* with our values – to ensure that they represent the best of who we are.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The primary objectives of the course are to

- Give you familiarity with one of the most important periods in philosophical history.
- Refine your ability to carefully read and analyze texts.
- Develop your skills as a writer – learning to produce clear, coherent prose and craft well-structured arguments.
- Develop your skills as a communicator – learning to receive feedback on your ideas and writing from your peers and to give helpful feedback to others.
- Spark your natural curiosity for philosophical ideas and questions.

REQUIRED TEXTS

- **All readings** are available through our **course website**.
- If you click on the “readings” folder in the “content” folder, you will notice 14 folders, each one of which corresponds to a week that our class is in session. Any other information pertaining to the readings or assignments for that week will also be posted there. You will be updated to about any changes to the content or schedule by me via email.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. 3 essays (see schedule below for due dates). – **60% of your final grade**.
 - Each of these essays will cover a particular sub-unit in the class. The first essay will concern **Plato**; the second, **Aristotle**; the third, the **Hellenistic** philosophers.
 - These essays will be **argumentative**: you will receive a question related to the particular subtopic. Using what you’ve learned from the readings on this topic, our discussions, and your reflection assignments, you will develop and defend an argument.
 - For example, if we are discussing Plato you might argue that because we do not reliably experience shame at the right things, any appeal to our inner sense of justice to motivate us to be virtuous will inevitably fail. Virtue requires that one accept *external* standards.
 - An example of how such an essay may be structured is as follows: introduction – where you make clear the topic of the essay, **your position, the reasons that you think justify your position, an objection that someone might make to your position, how you plan to respond, and the significance of your argument** (i.e., what follows if you’re right). The following paragraphs of the essay would then spell out each of these five elements of the essay – from your position to its significance).
 - We will discuss essay writing in more detail when the time comes to do so.
 - Each of these essays will be **1200 words**.
2. 3 reflections (see schedule below for due dates). – **30% of your final grade**.
 - Like the essays, each reflection will cover a particular sub-unit of the class.
 - These reflections will be **interpretive**: you will receive a question related to a certain part of one reading (e.g. what does Aristotle see as the chief obstacle to cultivating prudence? What does he propose we do to overcome this obstacle? Does he see this task as difficult?). Your aim here is to get the reader to understand **why** Aristotle holds the position he does in this instance. The question of whether Aristotle is justified holding this position is a different question altogether and belongs in your essays.
 - The aim of these reflections is to serve as **scaffolding** for your essays. Before we can construct well-informed arguments, it’s important to be acquainted with what others have said about the topic. By writing these reflections, you will develop the necessary skills to write essays that represent your considered thoughts on a topic.

- The structure of your reflections will differ based on the question that you receive. Due to the length of these reflections, most will have a 2-3 paragraph structure, though we will discuss the writing of reflections in more detail when the time comes to do so.
- Each of these reflections will be **500 words**.

3. Participation & Attendance – **10% of your final grade**

- **5%** of your grade will be based purely on attendance.
- You are free to miss one week of class without harm to your grade. If you miss a fourth time, you will lose 1% of your final grade; if you miss a fifth time, you will lose 2% of your grade; if you miss a sixth time, you will lose 3% of your grade, etc. The maximum you can lose on the basis of your attendance is 5%. That said, if you were to miss 8 days of class it would also have an impact on your participation grade.
- **5%** of your grade will be based purely on participation.
- How does one participate? There's the normal way of course – asking questions in class, engage with others productively when in groups, bring to class any requested materials (e.g. if we have a workshop day, you will be expected to bring a complete rough draft of your essay or reflection to class). Philosophy, unlike other disciplines like chemistry or biology, flourish with your participation. The aim is not for me to deliver content to you (though I will certainly assist you in helping to understand the readings) but to engage with you in conversation about the topics of the readings.
- Many of you may not feel comfortable participating. There will be other options for people to gain their participation grade. The chief one of which is sending me questions about the reading. If you feel like were unable to participate well a particular week, you can send me **2 questions & 2 comments** about the reading for that week. I will respond to every question, so you may also wish to use this medium to seek clarification on an issue or delve further into issues that we didn't get to cover in class.

4. **Grade Scale**

- A 93-100
- A- 90-92
- B+ 88-89
- B 83-87
- B- 80-82
- C+ 78-79
- C 73-77
- C- 70-72
- D+ 68-69
- D 63-67
- D- 60-62
- F 0-59

EXPECTATIONS

What you can expect from me:

- I will upload any course readings **at least a week** prior to when they will be covered in class – you can expect the same when it comes to the reflection and essay topics.
- I will grade any and all assignments **within 10 days** of them being turned in.
- I will respond to any and all emails **within 48 hours**.
- I will hold office hours **as scheduled**. If you are unable to attend office hours, you are more than welcome (even encouraged) to set up another time for us to meet.
- I will shift the class schedule as deemed necessary for *your learning*. If we need extra time on a topic or you're collectively interested in pursuing a topic further, I will make any necessary changes to the schedule. **These changes will be communicated via email.**
- I will begin each class by writing down 2-3 questions on the board to help frame our discussions. **These questions will be circulated in advance** (at the end of the prior class) so that you can keep them in mind when you're completing the reading.
- I will engage with you – in writing and in person – in a **thoughtful manner**. As I see it, this thoughtfulness has two components. I will be **respectful** of your ideas, and also dedicated to **your improvement** as a thinker and writer. At times, this dedication will require me to be critical in my feedback, which is I sign that I take you seriously.
- I will be **understanding and empathetic** regarding any challenges that you face, either in this class or in your personal lives (to the extent that they bear on your ability to turn work in on time, keep focus, maintain motivation, etc.).

What I can expect from you:

- You will **attend** each class, or notify me of your absence prior to class
- You will attend class having **read** and being prepared to **discuss** the material for that day. My advice is that you a) complete the reading twice and b) make a note of 2-3 questions and 2-3 comments you have. This exercise will cement your understanding of the material and give you a sense of which points you found interesting and/or confusing. Points of interest and/or confusion are the perfect material for discussion.
- You will **complete your work** on time or notify me of your inability to do so.
- You will engage with me and your classmates in a **thoughtful** manner. Show the same dedication to others (and to yourself) that I do to you. For this semester, for three hours a week, you and your classmates are on a bit of a journey. The journey will not always be easy, and we will all meet obstacles along the way. Lift each other up.
- You will **not give up on yourself**. At times, the readings and the assignments will be difficult. If you feel like you are slipping or things have stopped making sense, *reach out*.

There is nothing honorable about suffering in silence. I am here to help with anything you may require along your journey, but you must always keep pushing.

- You will **stay curious** and **work to improve**. We have a lot to learn from each other and from the material that we will be discussing throughout the class. If you work to maintain your sense of curiosity and desire to improve throughout the course, you will come out of this experience as a better writer and a clearer thinker.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Week 1: Beginnings –

9/9 – Introduction

9/10 – Selections from Homer, Hesiod, Archilochus, and Solon

Week 2: The Aim of Philosophy – In Greece, philosophy begins with the 5th century educational revolution. Up to that point, education covered taught math, grammar, music, and wrestling. With the dawn of democracy, and the ideal of an active and informed citizenry, a new batch of educators cropped up, asking what was necessary to be a good person. What did the philosophers add to this discussion?

9/14 – Plato, *Protagoras* (selections)

Selections from Gorgias, Antiphon, and *Double Arguments*

9/16 – Plato, *Laches*

9/17 – *Laches* (cont.)

Week 3: Aspiring to Virtue – We are introduced to perhaps the greatest work of the history of western philosophy (the *Upanishads* enjoys that status elsewhere). The starting point for this work is a question: “what is justice?” As we see immediately, Socrates (and Plato) is not primarily interested in justice, in our sense, but in virtue. His question is better put, “what is virtue and why should we care?”

9/21 – Plato, *Republic* I

9/23 – *Republic* II. -372c

9/24 – *Republic* II. 372c-end

Reflection 1 Due: 9/26

Week 4: Virtue, in the City and Soul – Plato’s view comes into focus this week. We learn that virtue, in the context of both the city and soul, consists of a proper balance between the parts of an integrated system. So, what are the “parts” of the soul? And what are the “parts” of the city. And what does it mean for the parts of either to enjoy a proper balance? Further, how does one attain this balance?

9/28 – *Republic* III

9/30 – *Republic* IV. -433a

10/1 – *Republic* IV 433a-end

Week 5: The Horrors of Vice – Last week, Plato offered up his picture of the virtuous person and the virtuous city. He also argued that we have reason to cultivate virtue in our soul, and to work to establish a city based in virtue. That said, Plato recognizes that we may not be convinced by him. In service of his argument, Plato weaves a tragedy of the horrors of vice in hopes that we all be set straight.

10/5 – Plato, *Republic* VIII -562a

10/7 – Plato, *Republic* VIII 562a-end; IX-578c

10/8 – Plato, *Republic* IX.578c-end

Essay 1 Due: 10/10

Week 6: Love & Desire for the Good – In some ways, Socrates argument for why we should be just fails. The most he can say is, “if one at all aspires to virtue, one would not wish to live the life of the tyrant (i.e., one who is vicious, lacks self-restraint and is monstrous to others) nor would one wish to live in a city of tyrants. So, what explains our desire to be virtuous? What drives us forward? Love.

10/12 – **No Class**

10/14 – Plato, *Symposium*

10/15 – *Symposium* (cont.)

Week 7: Virtue and the Human Being – We now turn to consider the writings of Plato’s most famous student: Aristotle. Ethics and political science (which are one and the same for him) begins with the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*. Our discussion begins with the former, and with Aristotle’s picture of the human person and his sketch of the virtues. We also treat Aristotle’s method of philosophizing.

10/19 – Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I

10/21 – *Nicomachean Ethics* II

10/22 – *Nicomachean Ethics* III.6-end; IV.3, 5

Reflection 2 Due: 10/24

Week 8: Prudence and Friendship, and Happiness – Aristotle claims that it is not enough to memorize the table of virtues - one must learn to *put them into practice*. The first step of practicing virtue reliably is understanding how certain virtues apply in which particular circumstances (e.g., what does it mean to exercise moderation in exercise?). Prudence gives us insight and friends keep us to on track.

10/26 – *Nicomachean Ethics* VI

10/28 – *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.1-7; IX.4, 8-10, 12

10/29 – Continued Discussion of Prudence and Friendship

Week 9: Aristotle and the Science of Politics – We are introduced to Aristotle’s science of politics, and how treats the connection between politics and ethics. We also learn a bit about what the relationship is between individuals, their particular role in society, and the community as a whole. Remember how you had a sneaking suspicion that Plato was a tyrant? Aristotle agrees. And yes, we discuss slavery.

11/2 – Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7-end; *Politics* I.1-2

11/4 – Aristotle, *Politics* I.3-7, 12

11/5 – Aristotle, *Politics* II.1-5

Essay 2 Due: 11/7

Week 10: Democracy, Citizenship, and the Best Regime – The roots of democracy go as far back as the 6th century BCE, in Greece. That said, democratic theory begins with *Politics* III. Therein we find the chief arguments for democracy, along with some consideration of the mechanisms required for a democracy to function properly. We are also introduced to the ideal regime, and life, for a person.

11/9 – Aristotle, *Politics* III

11/11 – **No Class**

11/12 – Aristotle, *Politics* VII.1-8, 13-15

Week 11: Epicureanism – We tackled the works of Plato and Aristotle, learned about the beginnings of Greek political thought, and managed to see that the Sophists weren’t all that bad, even if they were a bit craven. For the next four weeks we will be considering Epicureanism and Stoicism. We turn first to a most underrated figure, Epicurus, and his greatest cheerleader (and famed poet), Lucretius.

11/16 – Diogenes Laertius, *The Life of Epicurus* (selections)

11/18 – Epicurus, “Principal Doctrines”; Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus”

11/19 – Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* (selections)

Week 12: Thanksgiving – It’s almost Thanksgiving. (Emperor) Marcus Aurelius, former ruler of half the known world, declares: “hug your parents, bury the hatched with your siblings, listen patiently to your grandfather tell the same story for the 100th time, make time for your friends, learn to appreciate the turning of seasons, etc.” (Paraphrasing, sort of.). Seriously – this is the good stuff.

11/23 – Marcus Aurelius, *Mediations* I-II, V, X

11/25 – No Class

11/26 – No Class

Reflection 3 Due: 11/28

Week 13: Stoicism – We dipped into the world of Stoicism last week with Marcus Aurelius. This week we dig in a bit more on Stoicism. Since we don't have much to go on in terms of the Greek Stoics, we have to rely on the Romans. Like with Lucretius, many of these later Roman philosophers faithfully interpreted, and extended the Greek import. We consider Epictetus and Seneca in particular.

11/30 – Epictetus, *Enchiridion*

12/2 – Seneca, “On the Tranquility of the Mind”; “On the Shortness of Life”

12/3 – Seneca, “On Providence”

Week 14: Closing Thoughts (well, almost) – We end our journey with the most influential philosopher in the Western tradition. Well, at least the most significant. I think. The founders grappled with the *Republic*, slogged through the *Politics*, smirked with Epicurus, and sat quietly with Marcus Aurelius. But there was one figure they knew by heart, and who they respected above all: Marcus Tullius Cicero.

12/7 – Cicero, *On Obligations I*

12/9 – Final Discussion

Essay 3 Due: 12/11