

Syllabus: PHIL 421/521

Aristotle (CRN 25024/25030) Winter 2017, Tuesday & Thursday 1830-2020
Professor: Peter Warnek warnek@uoregon.edu
Office Hours (246 SCH): Tuesday 1200-1350, and by appointment.

COURSE OVERVIEW

This objective of this course is to carry out, through seminar discussion, a reading of the ten Books of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Within the time allotted to us, this reading will, however, have to be selective. Some passages will be examined more closely, while others will be treated in less detail. Still other parts of the text will have to be passed over. You are responsible for reading the entirety of the *Ethics* on your own. For a schedule of assigned readings, see the table below. We will do our best to keep to this schedule, although it may be necessary to make modifications as the term progresses.

The *Ethics* is a foundational text for the Western philosophical tradition, so much so that it first establishes the field of "ethics" as a disciplined inquiry over and against other inquiries, such as physics and logic. However much subsequent approaches to ethics may depart from the views presented here by Aristotle, in a basic sense they all remain indebted to him. The very question of ethics will always have to be considered as it originates first of all with Aristotle.

Aristotle understands the *Ethics* first of all as an inquiry or *methodos*. But ethical inquiry is distinctive, insofar as it does not merely seek knowledge, like other inquiries. The end of ethical inquiry is not mere understanding but action (*praxis*) or, better still, acting well, which Aristotle takes to belong intrinsically to any good human life. But human action is also a complex, manifold phenomenon, protracted in time. While action always comes down to what is actually done in the particular moment, action in its complete sense also involves and relies upon a certain articulation which anticipates in a general way what must be done. The Greek word for such an articulation is *logos* (λόγος). *Logos* is difficult to translate. It refers to speech, word, discourse, argument, reason, ratio and so on. One of the most difficult questions facing any reader of the *Ethics* is how the role of *logos* in action is to be understood, precisely as it informs and enables human action. Human life inhabits its world through speech, as a world that opens itself up through *logos*, but this spoken world is never a matter of its mere rationality or articulation. The human way of having *logos* is always also given in a receptivity to things said. Being able to speak presupposes being able to hear, to listen. In listening to a *logos* that concerns a matter of action, we are called to address something more than what is merely understood.

As an inquiry, the *Ethics* is itself a discourse, that is, it both presents a *logos* and proceeds by means of *logos*. Yet this discourse does not merely seek a knowledge of the human good; it would be an inquiry that ends in action, that brings about the human good through acting well. The success of the inquiry thus depends upon our way of being receptive to its *logos*, and concerns whether we are able to hear what it says in such a way that it might effectively transform our praxical lives. Being a good reader of the *Ethics* amounts to being able to be ethically affected and altered by the discourse this inquiry initiates and undertakes. One of the questions we will pursue seriously in this course is whether, how or to what extent such an ethical transformation is possible. How does our response to the text, grounded in our receptivity to it, open up the question of an ethical responsibility? According to Aristotle, the possibility of ethical hangs on this question.

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REQUIRED TEXTS

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Focus Philosophical Library). Available for purchase at the Duckstore. (I will also post a pdf of the original Greek text on Canvas. For those of you who have even a slight familiarity with ancient Greek, I strongly encourage you to make use of the original Greek. During seminar I will frequently introduce Greek terms in order to enrich our understanding of the text.)

Please note: I may also post supplemental reading material on Canvas. For a list of texts relevant to this course, see the attached bibliography.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- Participation in seminar.
- Papers. For undergraduates (PHIL 421), a midterm paper (7-8 pages) and a final paper (10-12 pages) will be assigned. Graduate students (registered in PHIL 521) are to submit a final paper at the end of the term. Graduate students should draft a prospectus of this paper (1-2 pages) by week five of the term and submit it to the instructor for feedback.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Week	Date	Pages	Book, chapt	Topics
I	1.10		Syllabus	Course Overview and Requirements.
	1.12	1-9	I, 1-7	Establishing the task and method of the inquiry.
II	1.17	1-9	I, 1-7 (cont.)	The best life (happiness) and virtue.
	1.19	9-21	I, 8-13	The difficulties such an inquiry presents.
III	1.24	21-28	II, 1-5	The emergence of active conditions in human life.
	1.26	28-36	II, 6-9	Elaborating virtue as a mean.
IV	1.31	36-41	III, 1-2	Complicit acts and deliberation.
	2.2	41-49	III, 3-6	Responsibility, choice and the possibility of ethics.
V	2.7	49-58	III, 6-12	Courage and temperance. Cowardice and dissipation.
	2.9	66-72	IV, 3-4	Greatness of soul. Honor and virtue.
VI	2.14	79-102	V, 1-11	Justice.
	2.16	102-109	VI, 1-7	The virtues thought and our relation to <i>logos</i> .
VII	2.21	109-118	VI, 8-13	Wisdom (<i>sophia</i>) and practical judgment (<i>phronesis</i>).
	2.23	118-133	VII, 1-7	The problem of unrestraint (<i>akrasia</i>).
VIII	2.28	133-143	VII, 8-14	Dissipation (<i>akolasia</i>) distinguished from unrestraint.
	3.2	143-162	VIII, 1-14	Friendship.
IX	3.7	162-180	IX, 1-12	The importance of friends and self-love.
	3.9	180-196	X, 1-8	Pleasure. Different kinds of pleasure. Happiness.
X	3.14	196-200	X, 9	Ethics and politics.
	3.16		Conclusions	<i>Praxis</i> and <i>Theoria</i> .

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DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS

If you have a documented disability and anticipate needing accommodations in this course please notify me or your GE within the first two weeks of the course. Please request a letter from Disability Services verifying your disability and stating your needed accommodations.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

In addition to improving the basic skills developed through a study of the humanities and the liberal arts – such as an increased awareness of the limits of instrumental reason, greater care in critical thinking, more articulate and effective communication, whether spoken or written – this course exposes the student to the cultural legacy of Greek ethical thought, as it continues to bear upon our ways of understanding human agency and responsibility. In particular, the course raises the question of individual and collective freedom and responsibility, and through an exposition of this question, encourages the student's active participation in the social and communal world, by promoting good citizenry and fostering an awareness of the unique challenges facing human agency, political or otherwise. The course also furthers a sensitivity to historical and cultural differences, by providing the student an opportunity to consider how these very differences do not divide our shared world but enrich it. In short, the course serves as an antidote to the numbing, leveling effects of mass society, by challenging its tendency to promote thoughtless, apathetic lives.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

(Please see me if you have questions about a particular topic in the *Ethics*.)

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