Syllabus: PHIL 421/521

**Aristotle (CRN 17186/17187)** Fall 2019, Thursday 1600-1850
Professor: Peter Warnek  warnek@uoregon.edu
Office Hours (246 SCH): Tuesday 1300-1600, and by appointment.

**Course Overview**

Our objective is to carry out, through seminar discussion, a reading of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Due to limitations on time, our reading will have to be selective. Some passages will be treated in less detail in order to examine others more closely. Still other passages 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.

Aristotle’s *Ethics* marks a decisive event within 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 and physics and logic. However much subsequent approaches to ethics depart from Aristotle, in a basic sense they all remain indebted to him. To speak of ethics and ethical inquiry is to speak of a history which begins 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 to a good human life. Yet human action is a complex, manifold phenomenon, protracted over time. While it always concerns what is actually done in the particular moment, it also involves and relies upon some articulation which anticipates in a general way what is called for. The Greek word for such an articulation is *logos* (λόγος). *Logos* is notoriously difficult to translate. It has the sense of speech, word, discourse, argument, reason, ratio and account. One of the most difficult questions facing us as readers of the *Ethics* is how to account for the role of *logos* in action. Human life inhabits its world through speech, as a world that opens itself up with speech, but this spoken world is never a matter of its mere rationality or given articulation. Moreover, the human way of having speech 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 an understanding.

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 directs itself toward action, that would bring about the human good through a life of action. The success of this inquiry, as a discourse, thus depends in part upon our way of being receptive to it, since it depends upon whether and how we are able to hear what it says. How might this discourse 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? The very possibility of ethics hangs on this question.

**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
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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 (6 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Text (pages)</th>
<th>Topics</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>No Class</td>
<td>NASPH Conference</td>
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<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>10.10</td>
<td>I, 1-4 (1-4)</td>
<td>Introductions. The task and method of the inquiry.</td>
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<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>10.17</td>
<td>I, 5-13 (4-21)</td>
<td>Happiness, action and the human good.</td>
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<td>IV</td>
<td>10.24</td>
<td>II (21-36)</td>
<td>Active conditions, ethical virtue as a mean.</td>
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<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>10.31</td>
<td>III, 1-5 (36-48)</td>
<td>Choice, deliberation and the possibility of ethics.</td>
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<td>VI</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>III, 6-12 (48-58)</td>
<td>Courage and temperance.</td>
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<td>VIII</td>
<td>11.21</td>
<td>VII (118-143)</td>
<td>Unrestraint (akrasia) and dissipation (akolasia).</td>
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<td>IX</td>
<td>11.28</td>
<td>No Class</td>
<td>Thanksgiving Break.</td>
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<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>VIII-X (143-200)</td>
<td>Friendship, pleasure and theoria.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finals</td>
<td>12.11</td>
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<td>Final Papers due.</td>
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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
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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.)


---. Aristotle’s Metaphysics. Green Lion Press, 1999


Bernet, J. The Ethics of Aristotle. Methuen, 1900.


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