

PHIL 454
Ancient Moral Theory
Happiness, Virtue, Godlikeness

Classes: Tuesdays / Thursdays: 11:35-12:55, Education Building, Room 433

Instructor: Carlos Fraenkel (carlos.fraenkel@mcgill.ca)

Office Hours: Tuesdays 4:00-5:30; Office 914, Leacock Building

Teaching Assistant: Brandon Smith (brandon.smith3@mail.mcgill.ca)

Office Hours: Tuesdays 2:30-3:30 (or by appointment); Office 934, Leacock Building

Course Description

The question ancient moral theory tries to answer is arguably the most basic human one. “For you see,” Socrates claims in the *Gorgias*, “that our discussion is about what even a man of little intelligence would take more seriously than anything else—namely the question how we should live [*hontina tropon chre zên*]” (500c). Likewise the Roman philosopher and politician Cicero: “For nothing in life is more worth investigating than ... the question ... what is the ... final goal, to which all our deliberations on living well and acting rightly should be directed” (*On Moral Ends* 1.11).

Ancient philosophers are confident that they’re best placed to answer this question—not prophets, priests, poets, mystics, sophists, businessmen, politicians, and so on. They all agree that living well means achieving *eudaimonia*, the most fundamental concept of ancient moral theory, though one difficult to translate: “happiness” and “flourishing” are approximations. They disagreed, however, about what exactly *eudaimonia* is and what we must do to attain it. As Aristotle notes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: everyone wants to be happy, but coming up with an universally agreed upon account of happiness is tough. Should we aim to maximize pleasure (derived from good food, fine wine, erotic adventure, music, art, etc.)? Or should we strive to become decorated generals or revered rulers? Or should we devote our life to study and philosophical contemplation? These are starkly different goals that require starkly different ways of organizing our life.

But what does any of this have to do with *morality*? How is the question if a hedonistic life makes us happier than one devoted to contemplation a *moral* question? Shouldn’t moral theory help us decide if it’s right or wrong to throw a fat man from a bridge to stop a trolley car from crashing into a group of innocent children? Ancient philosophers *are* interested in what makes actions right or wrong, but only in the context of how such actions figure in a happy, flourishing life. Indeed, much of ancient moral theory is a discussion of how *eudaimonia* is related to *aretê*, another fundamental notion that isn’t easy to translate: “excellence” and “virtue” are usually used in English. The question of which actions are or aren’t virtuous, then, is part of the larger question of what makes a life worthwhile.

On the face of it happiness and virtue don’t seem to go hand in hand: we can list any number of happy villains (happy in the subjective sense of enjoying their lives—think of Harvey Weinstein

before he got caught) and unhappy saints (think of Janusz Korczak, the Polish-Jewish educator who in 1942 chose to accompany the Jewish orphans he was in charge of to the gas chambers rather than saving his own life). Ancient philosophers, by contrast, all insist that you must be virtuous in order to be happy. And many (though not all) argue that virtue is sufficient for happiness: if you're virtuous you're happy, no matter what—even if you're poor, sick and old, lost your children in an earthquake, and are being tortured by a tyrant's henchmen.

Ancient moral theory may strike us as strange in other ways, too. We might think that determining which life is happiest is a task for psychologists and social scientists who develop a questionnaire to measure and compare the relative happiness of hedonists, political leaders, philosophers, and so on. Ancient philosophers, however, consider this a metaphysical question, not an empirical one. They were naturalists in the sense that, for them, the universe provides us with exemplars to model our life on and to measure its quality. To see why, we must forget the separation of facts and values that has become a bedrock of modern philosophy. For ancient philosophers, the universe is a kind of value hierarchy (celestial bodies, for example, rank higher—that is: are more perfect and happier—than human beings). The best thing in the universe is God—or, more neutrally: the divine. The more a human life resembles the divine, the better it is. While philosophy today is often described as a secular project and most contemporary philosophers identify as atheists, all ancient philosophers agree that the goal of life is to achieve *homoiôsis theou* (likeness to God). God's life consists in doing what is best and most pleasant eternally and without disruption. Especially Plato and Aristotle identify this divine activity with thinking or contemplation. No wonder, then, that they pick out the contemplative life—the life of the philosopher!—as the one that's happiest. Their answer to the question that animates ancient moral theory is: live in a way that maximizes contemplation!

If ethics is linked to cosmology and metaphysics in this way, we may doubt that ancient philosophers can convince us moderns that their proposals remain viable. But the 20th century has seen much renewed interest in ancient moral theory among both analytic and continental philosophers. Among analytic philosophers this interest is driven by the sense that modern ethics focuses too narrowly on principles and rules for moral decision-making (should we or shouldn't we throw the fat man from the bridge) while neglecting fundamental questions about what makes a life worthwhile, what kind of character we need to live such a life, what can motivate us to act morally, what the educational and political conditions are that enable worthwhile lives, and so on. Among continental philosophers the hope is that we can revive the ancient concept of philosophy as a “way of life” (rather than philosophy as a merely academic discipline).

In this class we will look at how the discussion of *eudaimonia*, *aretê*, and *homoiôsis theou* unfolds in ancient philosophy, starting with the (Platonic) Socrates, then moving to Plato and Aristotle, and ending with the Stoics and Epicureans in the Hellenistic period. Our main goal is to do what historians of philosophy call “rational reconstruction”: carefully reading the primary texts and trying to understand the arguments they set forth. At the same time we'll also raise critical questions and objections and ponder whether these moral views, articulated more than two millennia ago, remain defensible today.

Course Requirements

- 20% **Participation.** This is an advanced undergraduate class whose success also depends upon your active participation and your respectful engagement with other participants. You are expected to attend **every** class, complete all of the readings, and contribute in an informed way. Unexcused absences (without a medical note etc.) will be penalized by 1/3 grade (i.e., A- instead of A etc.).
- 20% **Short paper 1** of ca. 1200 words, due on **October 3**. Analyse Socrates' *elenchus* (= critical examination) of Laches' definition of *andreia* (literally: 'manliness', normally translated as 'courage') in *Laches* 190d-193d. Begin by explaining Socrates' question and why Laches' first answer is inadequate. Next, focus on Socrates' examination and refutation of Laches' second answer. What does Socrates achieve? Finally, a more general question: In *Apology* 38a Plato has Socrates say that an "unexamined life is not worth living." What do you think is the benefit (if any) that one can derive from an examination like the one described in the *Laches* passage?
- 20% **Short paper 2** of ca. 1200 words, due on **November 7**. In the first part of the paper, provide a concise account of the virtue "*eleutheriotês*" ("open-handedness" or "generosity") that Aristotle exposes in *NE* 4.1. In the second part of the paper connect "open-handedness" to the core themes of the *NE* by explaining why an "open-handed" person must have "*phronêsis*" (practical wisdom), and how being "open-handed" contributes to *eudaimonia*.
- 40% **Final paper** of ca. 2500 words, due on **December 16**. The final paper should be comparative, examining and comparing two or more of the approaches we've covered in class. One of these must be a Hellenistic school, i.e., Stoicism or Epicureanism. You should focus on a central issue (or issues) such as their answer to the question of how we should live, their concept of *eudaimonia*, the place of *aretê* in a happy life, the place of knowledge/wisdom in a happy life, etc. Part of your task is to choose suitable texts (from those we've discussed in class) and a suitable topic. In a conclusion, you can discuss whether the views you've examined remain defensible today. But this is **not** a requirement. A lucid explanation of the arguments at stake is perfectly sufficient.

To do well on the short and final papers you need to read and engage the primary texts carefully, cite key passages, and present the arguments you choose to focus on as clearly as you can.

Papers submitted late will be penalized by 1/3 grade per day (e.g. A- instead of A if the paper is one day late).

Please discuss the papers as well as the grades in the first instance with **Brandon, the TA** for this class, who will be correcting them.

Submission of Assignments

All papers must be submitted **electronically** as a **Word document** via MyCourses in the designated Assignment Submission Folder (Short Paper 1 etc.).

To ensure unbiased assessment of your work, please submit all work **anonymously**. Instructions about how to do this will be sent to you closer to the time.

Short Paper 1 will be returned to you by **October 15**.

Short Paper 2 will be returned to you by **November 19**.

The Final Paper will be returned to you by **December 27**.

Course Materials

A. The following books are available at “The Word” Bookstore on 469 Milton Street (payment in cash or cheque only):

1. Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. J. Cooper, Hackett, 1997.
2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translation, introduction, and commentary, S. Broadie and C. Rowe, Oxford University Press, 2002.
3. *Hellenistic Philosophy*, eds. B. Inwood and L. Gerson, Hackett, 1998.

B. A few additional primary texts, as well as all supplementary readings are available on myCourses.

Please note: Always bring the texts to be discussed to class. If you already have a different version of these texts, you may use it. But you **cannot** just read any translation on the internet. You need to have a **hard copy** of a recent scholarly translation.

Though the focus of the class will be on reading and discussing the **primary texts**, I have included a few secondary texts as supplementary readings. If you feel the need to get a scholarly overview over the material, here are three useful surveys (all three are available as eBooks at the McGill library):

- (a) Susan Sauvé Meyer, *Ancient Ethics: A Critical Introduction*, 2008 [a straightforward overview that is both historically and philosophically competent].
- (b) John Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus*, 2012 [a philosophically more ambitious presentation by one of the foremost contemporary scholars of ancient ethics].
- (c) Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, 1993 [an attempt to offer a coherent philosophical interpretation of ancient “eudaimonism,” more systematic than historically nuanced.]

The scholarly literature should not, however, predetermine your understanding of the primary texts. Critically engaging with the sources is a crucial part of the class.

Course Outline

September

A. Introduction

Supplementary Reading: Julia Annas, “The Basic Ideas” (Chapter 1 of *The Morality of Happiness*) [myCourses]

- 3 (a) Happiness, Virtue, Godlikeness: Preliminary Remarks
- (b) Explanation of the syllabus

B. Virtue and knowledge: Socrates in Plato’s early dialogues

Supplementary Reading: Alexander Nehamas, “Socratic Intellectualism” [myCourses]

- 5 (a) Anonymous, *Dissoi Logoi* (Opposing Arguments), 2.9-18 [myCourses]
- (b) Plato, *Meno*, 92d-93b.
- (c) Plato, *Theaetetus*, 152a.
- (d) Plato, *Euthyphro* [*main text* for this class]
- 10 (a) Plato, *Apology*
- (b) Plato, *Meno*, 96d-98a
- (c) Plato, *Euthydemus*, 278d-282d; 288d-293a

C. Plato: Godlikeness and Justice

Supplementary Readings: (a) Richard Kraut, “The Defense of Justice in the *Republic*” [myCourses]; (b) John Cooper, “Plato’s Theory of Human Motivation” [my Courses]

- 12 (a) Plato, *Phaedo*, 97b-99d.
- (b) Plato, *Timaeus*, 27c-32a; 41d-44c; 47e-49a; 50a-c; 52d-53b; 86c-90d.
- (c) Plato, *Theaetetus*, 172c-177b.
- 17 Plato, *Republic*, Book 2.
- 19 Plato, *Republic*, Books 3 and 4.
- 24 Plato, *Republic*
- (a) Book 5: 471e to the end (the claim about philosopher-rulers)
- (b) Book 6: complete
- (c) Book 7: 514a-521d (parable of the cave) and two short passages: 534b-d (on dialectics, showing the continuity with the Socratic *elenchus* at the highest level of the

guardians' theoretical education) and 540d to end (on the implementation of Kallipolis through the expulsion of all citizens over 10 years of age).

26 Plato, *Republic*, Book 9.

October

D. Aristotle: Virtue and Contemplation

Supplementary Readings: (a) D. S. Hutchinson, "Aristotle's Ethics" [myCourses]; (b) John Cooper, "Contemplation and Happiness: A Reconsideration" [myCourses].

- 1 (a) *De philosophia* (excerpt) [myCourses]
(b) *Metaphysics* 12, chapters 6-7; 9-10 [myCourses]
(c) *Eudemian Ethics*, Book 7 (end) [myCourses]
- 3 *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1.
[First short paper due]
- 8 *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2.
- 10 *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 3.
- 15 *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 5.
- 17 *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 6.
- 22 *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 7.
- 24 *Nicomachean Ethics*
(a) Book 8, chapters 1-4 (opinions of the wise and the many, definition of friendship, the three kinds of friendship)
(b) Book 8, chapters 7-12 (equality in friendship, relationship between friendship and justice, unequal friendships)
(c) Book 9, chapters 4 & 8-12 (friendship with one's self, the friend as another self)
- 29 *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 10

E. The Stoics: Living in Agreement with Nature

Supplementary Readings: (a) Malcom Schofield, "Stoic Ethics;" [myCourses] (b) Gisela Striker, "Following nature: a study in Stoic ethics" [myCourses]

- 31 (a) Cleanthes, *Hymn to Zeus* [*Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp.139-141]

(b) Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, Book 2 [*Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 141-161]

November

5 Diogenes Laertius, *Summary of Stoic Ethics* [*Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 190-203]

7 (a) Cicero, *On Ends*, Book 3.16-34; 62-70 [*Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 236-242]

(b) Seneca, *On Peace of Mind* 13.2-14.2 [*Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 243-244]

(c) Seneca, *Letters on Ethics*, 121.1-24 [*Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 244-247]

[Second short paper due]

12 Seneca, *Consolation to Helvia* [myCourses]

F. The Epicureans: Pleasure in a contingent universe

Supplementary Readings: Michael Erler and Malcom Schofield, “Epicurean Ethics” [myCourses]

14 (a) Lucretius, *On the nature of things* Book V, 156-234 [myCourses]

(b) Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* [*Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 5-19]

(c) Epicurus, *Letter to Pythocles* [*Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 19-28]

19 (a) Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* [*Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 28-31]

(b) Epicurus, *The Principal Doctrines* [*Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 32-36]

(c) Diogenes Laertius, *Epicurus’ Ethical Views* [*Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 42-44]

21 Cicero, *Selections* [*Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 45-56]

26 Cicero, *Selections* [*Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 56-65]

G. Conclusion: Can philosophy still guide us in life?

28 (a) Pierre Hadot, “Philosophy as a Way of Life” [myCourses]

(b) John Cooper, “Introduction: On Philosophy as a Way of Life” [myCourses]

December

16 **[Final paper due]**

Mandatory Components of the Course Syllabus

Academic Integrity:

“McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures”

(see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).

Language of Submission:

“In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives.”