Philosophy: The Love of Wisdom

Philosophy, at its roots, can be seen as a search for wisdom: a quest for better understanding of ourselves, the world, and the best ways to live. In this course, we will examine how this idea is carried out in three of the world’s major philosophical traditions: in classical Greece, China, and India.

However, these ideas are not merely historical curiosities: they are alive and meaningful in our world today. To show this, we will read works by recent and contemporary philosophers who are responding to these ancient ideas and are in a dialogue with them.

Details on the topics we will cover and the readings for each one are provided below. All required texts for the course will be provided either as a course-pack (which students will need to purchase) or as PDF files through MyCourses.

1: Life, Truth, and Lies

We start with Socrates in ancient Athens, on trial for his life, largely because of the way he pursued philosophy. We will then consider his great rivals, the Sophists, whom we can encounter today under different names.
What can we learn from Socrates about the nature of philosophy and about living life “philosophically”? The idea of philosophical irony will be particularly relevant here.

Socrates calls on us to live an examined life. What does that entail, and how does it lead to better living?

This connects with modern ideas about authenticity and bad faith. Do we need to know and acknowledge the truth in order to live well? Or is it perhaps the opposite?

One of the great challenges that Socrates faced was the threat of relativism: that there is no truth, only opinions; no justice, only raw power. We will see how Socrates wrestled with these ideas and their spokespersons, and apply that to similar debates today.

Required:
1. Plato, The Apology
2. Plato, Gorgias (the first part of the dialogue)
3. Plato, The Republic (Book I)

Optional:

2: I, Thou, and We

The idea of humans as social animals is central to many traditions of thought. “It is not good that man should be alone”, we read in Genesis 2:18. The great philosopher Aristotle, in ancient Greece, defined humans as a social animal. Our focus in this unit, however, will be on the classical Chinese tradition of philosophy, and how the conflict between individualism and the demands of society plays out in it. Relatedly, we will consider the debate, within this tradition, about human nature: again, a central question to all traditions of philosophy. Are people by nature good or bad? Or perhaps the very categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are the problem?

Required:
Note –all translations are provided in the course-pack unless otherwise noted; the source is: Ivanhoe, Phillip J.. Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy, edited by Norden, Bryan W. Van, Hackett, 2005.

1. Kongzi (Confucius), Analects: 1.12, 1.15, 2.1-2.7, 2.11, 2.21, 3.3, 3.23, 4.5, 4.6, 4.8-4.10, 4.14-4.17, 4.25, 5.1, 6.18, 6.20, 6.23, 6.29, 7.3, 7.5, 7.6, 7.8, 7.22, 7.34, 8.9, 9.29, 11.12, 12.1, 12.2, 12.7, 12.11, 12.19, 13.3, 13.6, 13.18, 13.20, 14.29, 14.30, 14.34, 14.38, 15.5, 15.18, 15.29, 18.7, 20.3
2. Selections from *Mengzi* (Mencius): 1A1, 1A3, 1B5, 2A6, 4A11, 4A17, 4A27, 4B28, 6A1, 6A2, 6A6, 6A12, 7A1, 7B5, 7B31
3. Selections from *Xunzi: Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* pp. 269-271, 277-8

### 3: Law and Justice

Societies, both modern and ancient, rely on laws to keep the social order and enforce obedience to these laws, by various means. But very often, both in historical times and today, conflicts arise between law and justice, or between the law and certain moral values. How are we to navigate this difficult terrain? Socrates, in the aftermath of his trial, seems to argue that we should obey the law even when the outcome is unjust; famously, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called for civil disobedience in the face of an unjust law. We will take up this philosophical dialogue taking place across the centuries.

**Required:**

1. Plato, *Crito*

**Optional:**


### 4: Self or No-self?

A number of philosophical schools hold that the key to life as it should be lived is to discover your true self. In contrast, Buddhism argues that the very idea of a self is a harmful delusion: only by liberating ourselves from the illusion of self can we free ourselves from suffering. In this unit we will consider first the Hinduist background from which Buddhism arose: the Vedic religion and the fundamental ideas of Vedanta philosophy. We will then contrast these with the
radical philosophical precepts of early Buddhism: the absence of self, the ‘dependent-arising’ of all things, and the role that philosophy can play in liberating us from false beliefs.

Required:


Optional:


Optional, podcasts:

1. https://historyofphilosophy.net/upanisads
2. https://historyofphilosophy.net/upanisads-self
3. https://historyofphilosophy.net/buddha-teaching

5: Recent Philosophy

For our final set of topics, we will consider questions of meaning and interpretation: first, the question of “the meaning of life” – to begin with, what do we even have in mind when we ask for such a thing? Then, we will discuss the idea of a meaningful subterranean world in our own minds, and how we might do better at deciphering this different kind of language.

Required:

Means of Evaluation

The final grade in the course is composed of the following (details below):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Due date</th>
<th>% of final grade</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Final essay: 1st version</td>
<td>March 24th</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final essay: 2nd version</td>
<td>April 12th</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading assignments (best 4 out of 5)</td>
<td>Jan. 27th, Feb. 10th, Feb. 24th, March 17th, March 31st</td>
<td>40 (4x 10% each)</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-class assignments (during conferences)</td>
<td>Throughout</td>
<td>20 (10x 2% each)</td>
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Final Essay

You will be provided topics for the final essay ahead of time, out of which you will choose one. Advice on how to write a philosophy essay will be provided during the tutorial conferences close to the due-date. In the first stage (30%) you will write a full, edited, and polished essay – in other words, *not a sketch or a first draft* but a proper essay. This will receive a grade as well as detailed comments from one of the teaching assistants (TAs).

The second stage (10%): based on the feedback you received, you will *revise and resubmit your work*. To receive the full points, it is expected that you demonstrate an ability to both understand and implement feedback, an important writing skill in both academic and non-academic professional contexts. (Note: even if you receive an excellent mark on the first draft, there is *always* much to improve; this is true at all stages of training, from beginner to expert.) The second draft will only receive a grade, no further comments, but you are welcome to see your TA in person if you have questions about the second draft.

Reading assignments

You will need to complete *4 out of 5* of the reading assignments that will be distributed on MyCourses throughout the term. (You are welcome to complete all five, in which case the best four will be used to calculate your final mark.)

Each reading assignment will be available at least one week before it is due. Please note that, because the answer to the reading assignment will be given in class after the due-date, *late reading assignments will not be accepted unless there are special circumstances* (e.g., being sick for more than one day, etc.).
In-Class Assignments

As noted above, during weeks 2-12 of the term (inclusive), the Friday lecture is replaced by tutorial conferences. In each such conference there will be a short in-class assignment to do and to submit. You are expected to complete 10 out of the 12 in-class assignments, and to do so you need to attend your conference. These assignments will not be distributed on MyCourses. You can miss up to 2 conferences without consequences; if you have a valid reason for missing more than two, please contact me and we will find alternative work for the same credit.

(Students with accessibility or disability issues related to writing: please contact me, we will of course accommodate and resolve any such issues.)

Policy on extensions and late work

If you have a valid reason to ask for an extension, please write to me (oran.magal@mcgill.ca), not your TAs, or come see me during office hours, before the relevant work is due. As a general rule, extensions will be given only for medical reasons or serious personal/family circumstances.

Late reading assignments will not be accepted at all. Late essays (stage 1 or 2) will be penalized 3 percent-points for each day (or part of a day) late, and will not be accepted later than 2 weeks after the due-date.

In-class assignments are meant to be done in class, during the tutorial conferences. You only have to submit 10 out of the 12, so you can miss 2 without any consequences. If you are forced to miss more than 2 conferences for a valid reason (same as above), write to me or come see me during office hours and we will work out alternative work for that credit.

How to Submit Your Work

Submitting work through MyCourses: reading assignments and essays will be distributed through MyCourses (in the ‘assignments’ tab of the course page), and you will submit your work through the same part of the course page on MyCourses.

Please do not submit printed work in class or under my office door, only through MyCourses.

Important: submit all work in PDF or DOCX (Microsoft Word) file formats. Microsoft Word (for PC or Mac) is provided to you for free through McGill. If you are using any other
software, simply use export or save as to save your work as a PDF prior to submitting it. Files submitted in other formats will not be graded, and will not count as work submitted.

**McGill Policies and Statements**

**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.*

*Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l’un des objets est la maîtrise d’une langue).*

**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/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/) for more information)

**Varia**

Mobile computing and communications devices are permitted in class insofar as their use does not disrupt the teaching and learning process. Please do not record the lectures without instructor’s permission.

Instructor-generated course materials (e.g., handouts, notes, summaries, exam questions, etc.) are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor. Note that infringements of copyright can be subject to follow up by the University under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.

As the instructor of this course I endeavor to provide an inclusive learning environment. However, if you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me and the Office for Students with Disabilities, 514-398-6009.

McGill University is on land which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations. We acknowledge and thank the diverse Indigenous people whose footsteps have marked this territory on which peoples of the world now gather.