

# Phil 770: Seminar in a Classical Author (Aristotle)

*Aristotle's Ethics*

Prof. Jeremy Reid

## Course and Contact Information

Meeting times: M 4:00pm–6:45pm

Location:

Email: [jwreid@sfsu.edu](mailto:jwreid@sfsu.edu)

Office: Humanities Building 360

Office hours: M 1–3pm (in person), W 1–3pm (Zoom), or by appointment

## Course description

The plan for this course is to work through Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* slowly, with reference to other texts in the Aristotelian corpus and recent secondary literature. We will explore how Aristotle's ethical discussion is informed by arguments he makes elsewhere (including the *Eudemian Ethics*, *Rhetoric*, *De Anima*, *Topics*, *Politics*, and *Metaphysics*), and try to map out systematically how these parts of Aristotle's philosophy fits together. We will also read recent scholarly articles and book chapters on Aristotle in order to get a sense of what contemporary Aristotle scholars are working on. Following the topics of the *Nicomachean Ethics* itself, we will discuss happiness; ethical naturalism; character virtue; the central place of pleasure, pain, desire, and the emotions in character virtue; voluntariness and deliberation; theoretical virtue; weakness of will; what pleasure is; friendship; and the value of contemplation in the good life.

## Assessment

50% Weekly Writing Assignments, due Mondays by 11am at the latest, no extensions.

50% Final paper (5000–8000 words)—ideally, get this done by Mon Dec 20; if you do not submit a paper by then, you will automatically receive an incomplete; if your paper is not in by Mon Jan 17 (a week before the Spring semester starts), you will get a 0 for your paper.

There are 13 writing assignments across the semester. I will take the grades for the highest 10, and drop the lowest 3. These will be graded hard, because there are right answers and Aristotle scholars are expected to know them.

## Texts

There are many translations of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, but it is very important that we are reading the same text. For this course, we will be using [Irwin's Hackett translation, the 2019 third edition](#). It is cheap, accurate, and has very helpful notes. Ideally, you would purchase this to have a hard copy, but times be tough and I can provide you with a pdf of another good translation.

For the other Aristotle texts, we will be working from the Barnes editions of the [Complete Works of Aristotle](#) (note that it is in two volumes). It is more expensive, though, and I have provided pdfs. Pdfs of all secondary literature are on iLearn.

## Schedule of Readings

You *must* do the readings from the *Nicomachean Ethics*; we will be going very slowly, so you have no excuse for not getting through these readings. It is *highly recommended* that you do the readings from elsewhere in the Aristotelian corpus, as they provide important context and will introduce to other parts of Aristotle's philosophical system. Those who want to go onto PhD programs or who are serious about studying ancient philosophy should also read the + readings from contemporary scholars, so that you can see how ancient philosophy is done now.

Week 1, Aug 23: What is this 'book'

Barnes, "Roman Aristotle"

Week 2, Aug 30: Happiness and Goodness

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.1–6

Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I.5–7

Aristotle, *Topics* III

+ Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, Chapter 1: "Making Sense of My Life as a Whole"

**Writing Assignment:** Aristotle reports various conceptions of happiness held by other people. What are those conceptions? Why does Aristotle think that they are inadequate? (Hint: try to identify and make use of Aristotle's two *formal criteria* for an adequate conception of happiness)

Week 3, Sep 6: Ethical Naturalism and Puzzles about Happiness

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7–13

Aristotle, *On the Soul* II.1–4

Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IX

+ Russell, *Happiness for Humans*, Chapter 5: “Aristotle’s case against the sufficiency thesis”

**Writing Assignment:** What is Aristotle’s final definition of happiness? Why does the Priam case raise a puzzle for Aristotle’s definition? What is his resolution of the puzzle?

#### Week 4, Sep 13: Virtues of Character

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II

Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II.1–17

+ Jimenez, *Aristotle on Shame and Learning to be Good*, Chapter 2: “Learning through Pleasure, Pain, the Noble, and the Shameful”.

**Writing Assignment:** Aristotle says that we become virtuous by doing virtuous things. Why might this appear paradoxical? What’s Aristotle’s resolution to this paradox? How do you think conceives of the relation between (a) pleasures and pains, and (b) emotions?

#### Week 5, Sep 20: Deliberation, Choice, and Voluntariness

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* III.1–5

Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen*

Plato, *Laws* IX (up to 864d)

+ Kamtekar, “Aristotle contra Plato on the Voluntariness of Vice”

**Writing Assignment:** Aristotle distinguishes between (a) voluntary actions, (b) involuntary actions, (c) mixed actions, and (d) nonvoluntary actions. Explain each category as clearly as you can.

#### Week 6, Sep 27: The Individual Virtues of Character

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* III.6–12 & IV

+ Nussbaum, “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach”

+ Gardiner, “Aristotle on Basic and Non-Basic Virtues”

**Writing Assignment:** List and explain each of the individual virtues Aristotle mentions in the assigned text. What are the corresponding vices for each virtue? What are the relevant pleasures and pains (or affective states) for each virtue?

#### Week 7, Oct 4: Justice

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* V

Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I.13

Aristotle, *Politics* IV

+ Lee, "Justice and the Laws in Aristotle's Ethics", in *Strategies of Argument: Essays in Ancient Ethics, Epistemology, and Logic*.

**Writing Assignment:** What are the two conceptions of justice Aristotle mentions in Book V? What does Aristotle think the main cause of injustice is? Speculate on what the relation might be between the discussion of individual justice in the *Ethics* and the discussion of good constitutions in the *Politics*.

#### Week 8, Oct 11: Virtues of Intellect

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI

Aristotle, *On the Soul* III

Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* I.I-4; II.8-10, 19

+ Nielsen, "Aristotle on Principles in Ethics", in D. Henry and K. M. Nielsen (eds.), *Bridging the Gap Between Aristotle's Science and Ethics*, pp. 29-48.

+ Jimenez, "Empeiria and Good Habits in Aristotle's Ethics"

**Writing Assignment:** Aristotle distinguishes the *phronimos* (the practically wise person) from (a) the person with natural virtue, and (b) the clever person. What does the *phronimos* have that the naturally virtuous person lacks? What does the *phronimos* have that the clever person lacks? Why might Aristotle think that experience helps us acquire practical truths?

#### Week 9, Oct 18: The Akratic and the Vicious

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.1-10

Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I.12, 14

+ Barney, "Becoming Bad: Aristotle on Vice and Moral Habituation"

**Writing Assignment:** Explain as precisely as you can the psychology of (a) the continent person, (b) the akratic/incontinent person, (c) the vicious person, and (d) the brutish person as described in the assigned text.

#### Week 10, Oct 25: Pleasure

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.11-14 & X.1-5

Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I.11

+ Aufderheide, "Processes as Pleasures in *EN* vii.11-14: a new approach"

**Writing Assignment:** Aristotle gives two accounts of pleasure that are not obviously compatible. Explain each account, and weigh in on whether they're compatible or not.

Week 11, Nov 1: Friendship

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII & IX

+ Hursthouse, "Aristotle for Women Who Love Too Much"

**Writing Assignment:** What are the three kinds of friendship Aristotle identifies? What is the basis for each kind of friendship? Describe the characteristics of each kind of friendship.

Week 12, Nov 8: Contemplation and Godlike Happiness

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X.6-8

Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII

+ Kahn, "The Place of the Prime Mover in Aristotle's Teleology"

**Writing Assignment:** There is an enormous debate as to whether Aristotle thinks that happiness consists primarily (a) in virtuous activity or (b) in contemplation. Explain on the basis of the assigned text why somebody might think that (b) is correct. Are (a) and (b) compatible?

Week 13, Nov 15: EXTRA WEEK OF BREAK—NO CLASS

**THANKSGIVING BREAK (NO CLASS Nov 22)**

Week 14, Nov 29: Political Implications of the Ethics

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X.9

Aristotle, *Politics* VII–VIII

+ Kamtekar, "The Relationship Between Aristotle's Ethical and Political Discourses (NE X.9)"

**Writing Assignment:** What does X.9 tell us about the difference between the kind of psychology that Aristotle thinks readers of the *Ethics* will have and the kind of psychology that he thinks most people have? What is the role of laws and punishments in developing character?

Week 15, Dec 6: The Eudemian Ethics

Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* I, II, & VIII

**Writing Assignment:** Making reference to specific passages, highlight some ideas, arguments, or views from the *Eudemian Ethics* that struck you as importantly new, different, or insightful when compared to the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

## **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is a form of cheating or fraud; it occurs when a student misrepresents the work of another as his or her own. Plagiarism may consist of using the ideas, sentences, paragraphs, or the whole text of another without appropriate acknowledgment, but it also includes employing or allowing another person to write or substantially alter work that a student then submits as his or her own. Any assignment found to be plagiarized will be given an "F" grade. All instances of plagiarism in the College of Liberal & Creative Arts will be reported to the Dean of the College, and may be reported to the University Judicial Affairs Officer for further action.

## **Disability Access**

Students with disabilities who need reasonable accommodations are encouraged to contact the instructor. The Disability Programs and Resource Center (DPRC) is available to facilitate the reasonable accommodations process. The DPRC is located in the Student Service Building and can be reached by telephone (voice/415-338-2472, video phone/415-335-7210) or by email (dprc@sfsu.edu).

## **Student Disclosures of Sexual Violence**

SF State fosters a campus free of sexual violence including sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and/or any form of sex or gender discrimination. If you disclose a personal experience as an SF State student, the course instructor is required to notify the Title IX Coordinator by completing the report form available at <http://titleix.sfsu.edu>, emailing [vpsaem@sfsu.edu](mailto:vpsaem@sfsu.edu) or calling 338-2032.

To disclose any such violence confidentially, contact:

- The SAFE Place - (415) 338-2208; [http://www.sfsu.edu/~safe\\_plc/](http://www.sfsu.edu/~safe_plc/)
- Counseling and Psychological Services Center - (415) 338-2208;

<http://psyservs.sfsu.edu/>

- For more information on your rights and available resources: <http://titleix.sfsu.edu>