

# Classical Greek Philosophy - PHILO 212 (Spring, 2006): Syllabus

## Course Information

- Instructor: Christopher Young
- Class meets Tuesdays and Thursdays, from 5:35pm to 6:50pm
- Office Hours: T.B.A.
- Email: cmy5@cornell.edu
- Course website: [www.chrisyoung.net/teaching](http://www.chrisyoung.net/teaching)
- Course prerequisite: At least one previous course in philosophy and English 120

## Required Texts

These books are all available at the Hunter College Bookstore:

- Curd. *A Presocratics Reader*
- Plato. *Gorgias* (translated by Donald J. Zeyl)
- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* (translated by Terence Irwin)
- Inwood and Gerson (translators). *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*
- Cicero. *On Moral Ends* (edited by Julia Annas, translated by Raphael Woolf) [Note: This book may be delayed in getting to the Hunter College Bookstore.]

Please note that although the Curd selections are required reading, we won't use much of this text, so you may want to photocopy the relevant sections if you can.

## Course Work

- Course work will consist of:
  1. Three short papers (20% each)
  2. One final exam (30%)
  3. A participation and attendance grade (10%)

## Course Description

What is a good life? How should we regard pleasure? virtue? friendship? political power? intellectual accomplishment? death? What attitude should we take towards our emotions? What is the relationship between what we know and believe and what we do? How can we be truly free?

Ancient philosophers were as interested in these questions as most of us are. And just as we disagree about the answers to these questions, so did ancient philosophers disagree with each other. In this course we will spend most of our time on three central texts which take up these and other questions:

Plato's *Gorgias*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Cicero's *On Moral Ends*. Additional topics will include the Presocratics, and Plotinus.

## Statement on Academic Integrity

Hunter College regards acts of academic dishonesty (e.g., plagiarism, cheating on examinations, obtaining unfair advantage, and falsification of records and official documents) as serious offenses against the values of intellectual honesty. The College is committed to enforcing the CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity and will pursue cases of academic dishonesty according to the Hunter College Academic Integrity Procedures."

**There is a complete ban on research (library, internet, etc.) for this class.**

## Schedule of Readings

We will work through the numbered topics at a rate of about one per class.

### 1.

- Topics:
- Introductory remarks
  - What is ancient philosophy?
  - Course work and expectations
  - An overview of the class

### 2.

- Topics:
- The Sophists: Protagoras, Gorgias, Antiphon, Critias (pay special attention to Antiphon and to Gorgias's fragment on *Helen*)
  - How to write a philosophy paper
- Reading:
- *A Presocratics Reader*, pages 97-108

### 3.

- Topics:
- Who was Socrates?
  - Who was Plato?
  - Plato's life and work
  - An Introduction to Plato's *Gorgias*
- Reading:
- *Gorgias*, 447a-455a

### 4.

- Topic:
- Socrates and Polus begin to argue
- Reading:
- *Gorgias*, 455a-466a

### 5.

- Topic:
- Socrates and Polus: Is it better to suffer injustice than commit it?
- Reading:
- *Gorgias*, 466a-469a

### 6.

- Topic:
- Socrates and Callicles: But seriously, is it better to suffer injustice than commit it?

Reading: • *Gorgias*, 469a-481a

**7.**

Topic: • Socrates and Callicles, continued

Reading: • *Gorgias*, 481a-491d.

**8.**

Topics: • Finishing the *Gorgias*  
• Reflecting on the *Gorgias* as a whole

Reading: • *Gorgias*, 491d to the end

**9.**

Topic: • An introduction to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

Reading: • *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I (you can skip chapter 6)

**10.**

Topic: • What is happiness?

Reading: • *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I (you can skip chapter 6)

**11.**

Topic: • The human function

Reading: • *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I (you can skip chapter 6). Focus especially on chapter 7.

**12.**

Topic: • What is a virtue of character?

Reading: • *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, chapter 13, Book II, and Book IV, chapter 1.

**13.**

Topic: • The intellectual virtues

Reading: • *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI

**14.**

Topic: • Weakness of Will

Reading: • *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, chapters 1-10.

**15.**

Topic: • The varieties of friendship

Reading: • *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII

**16.**

Topic: • Friendship and self-regard

Reading: • *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IX

**17.**

Topic: • Pleasure

Reading: • *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, chapters 1 to 5

**18.**

Topic: • Happiness reconsidered

Reading: • *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, chapter 6 to 9.

**19.**

Topics: • The Presocratics: Democritus

Reading: • *A Presocratics Reader*, pages 79-88, plus a supplementary handout.

**20.**

Topic: • Background on the Epicureans

Reading: • *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, pp. 3-5, 28-45, 75-80, 95-102.

**21.**

Topic: • An introduction to Cicero's *On Moral Ends*

Reading: • *On Moral Ends*, Book I, sections 1 to 26

**22.**

Topic: • Torquatus defends Epicurus

Reading: • *On Moral Ends*, Book I, sections 27 to 71

**23.**

Topic: • Cicero criticizes Epicurus

Reading: • *On Moral Ends*, Book II  
• *A Presocratics Reader*, pages 79-88

**24.**

Topic: • Background on the Stoics (Diogenes Laertius)

Reading: • *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, pp. 103-110, 190-203.

**25.**

Topic: • More background on the Stoics (Arius Didymus, and others)

Reading: • *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, pp.203-233, 244-260

**26.**

Topic: • Cato expounds Stoicism

Reading: • *On Moral Ends*, Book III

**27.**

Topic: • A critical discussion of Stoicism

Reading: • *On Moral Ends*, Book IV

**28.**

Topic: • Plotinus

Reading: • Handout (Selection from *The Enneads*)

## How to Ace This Class

- Proof-read your essays before you hand them in. Spelling mistakes and bad grammar will result in a lower grade.
- Take the opportunity to rewrite the short assignments. Don't be discouraged by a low grade. The problems with your paper are almost always fixable.
- Review the final exam question you've chosen from time to time, so that your readings and notes remain focused on it. Try to work on the exam throughout the semester.
- When you take notes on the readings, be sure to record proper references to the texts so that it is easy to cite material on your papers and your final exam.

## Short Assignments

- Your assignments should be **no more than 2 pages long, double-spaced**. Please do not attach a cover page. Be sure to staple the pages of your assignment together.
- Avoid quotation when you're explicating a text. I want to see you try to put the ideas in your own words.
- These assignments are intended to focus your attention on the texts we're reading in class. **No outside research is permitted for these assignments**. This includes Internet resources, books and articles from the library, and so on.
- You may choose to write two drafts of the short assignments, and discard the lower of the two grades. Second drafts of the short assignments are due on the final day the class meets.
- I prefer that you submit assignments by email, though you may also submit paper versions. Accepted submission formats are: .rtf, .doc, .txt, .wpd, and .odt. Please, please, please do not submit anything in .wps.

### Assignment #1

Reading: Plato's *Gorgias* (Focus on 466a-469a)

Socrates and Polus disagree about whether the orators in the city have great power. Why does Socrates think that the orators have the least power in the city?

### Assignment #2

Reading: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.7, Aristotle appeals to the function of human beings in order to reach more precise conclusions about the human good. His argument has long perplexed commentators, and will probably perplex you, if you stop to think about it. Briefly describe the "function argument" that Aristotle offers in I.7 and briefly explain how an intelligent critic of Aristotle's might go about disputing it.

### Assignment #3

Reading: Cicero's *On Moral Ends*, especially Books I and II.

In Book II of Cicero's *On Moral Ends*, Cicero claims that Epicureans such as Torquatus are confused about what pleasure is. What does he mean? What does Cicero think the basic confusion is, and why does he think that it matters?

### Final Take-Home Exam

You don't need to write more than 8 to 10 pages in total for the exam, but there is no length restriction.

This exam is a chance to show off what you've learned in the class. Originality is good, but never pass up a chance to demonstrate your familiarity with the texts we've studied. About 30% of your grade is for originality, and 70% for a demonstrated familiarity with the texts we've studied this semester.

Because this is an exam, it is less formal than a paper. But you still need to include references to texts which you either paraphrase or cite. (Indeed, you should cite texts if only to help demonstrate that you've read and understood them.)

- Please submit your final exam by email. Accepted submission formats are: .rtf, .doc, .txt, .wpd, and .odt. Please, please, please do not submit anything in .wps.

Answer one of the following questions:

1. Most of the philosophers we've read this semester have touched on the subject of pleasure and its value. In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates and Callicles argue about the relation between pleasure and goodness. Aristotle discusses pleasure in connection with virtuous activity and happiness, declaring that pleasure isn't the good, though the good life is the most pleasant. Epicurus, by contrast, makes pleasure the good, though what he means by pleasure turns out to be a bit of a surprise. In elevating pleasure to the role of the good, Epicurus becomes a target of criticism from the Stoics, who claim that virtue is the good and that pleasure (and equally, pain) is in fact a matter of indifference to happiness.

Which of these views strikes you as *most* plausible? Why? Explain carefully what the view is, and why it strikes you as plausible. Why is it more plausible than the alternatives we've studied? (You'll need to explain carefully at least what at least one or two of those alternatives are.)

2. Most of the philosophers we've read this semester have touched on the subject of virtue and its relation to happiness. In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates suggests that virtue is a necessary, though perhaps not a sufficient, condition for happiness. Callicles, his interlocutor, thinks this is absurd. Aristotle, though, agrees, and develops a sophisticated account of the way that virtue fits into a good life. Epicurus believes that virtue is necessary for a good life, but only because it is instrumentally valuable. The Stoics, by contrast, insist that virtue is not merely necessary for happiness, but is sufficient. (Notice that all of these philosophers comment at one point or another on the question of whether the wise, i.e., virtuous, man would be happy on the rack. This gives one nice point of comparison.)

Which of these views strikes you as *most* plausible? Why? Explain carefully what the view is, and

why it strikes you as plausible. Why is it more plausible than the alternatives we've studied? (You'll need to explain carefully what at least one or two of those alternatives are.)

3. Most of the philosophers we've read this semester have attempted to justify claims about what is good for human beings by appealing in one way or another to nature. In the fragment of Antiphon, we find nature contrasted with convention or law, to the detriment of convention or law. In Plato's *Gorgias*, we find Antiphon's idea taken up and forcefully presented by Callicles - and equally forcefully rejected by Socrates. Aristotle offers us his so-called "function argument," - a sort of appeal to human nature - apparently in an attempt to justify his claims about happiness. And later, both the Epicurean and Stoic schools offer very different sorts of arguments about what is natural for humans.

Which of these views strikes you as *most* plausible? Why? Explain carefully what the view is, and why it strikes you as plausible. Why is it more plausible than the alternatives we've studied? (You'll need to explain carefully at least what at least one or two of those alternatives are.)