

# Classical Greek Philosophy - Fall, 2007

Christopher M. Young

## Course Information

**Course Code:** PHILO 212

**Instructor:** Christopher Young

**Prerequisites:** One course in philosophy and English 120

**Office Hours:** Thursday, 6:00-7:00pm, and by appointment.

**Office Location:** Hunter West, Rm. 1447

**Email:** cmy5@cornell.edu

**Home phone:** (718) 871-4546, between 10am and 9pm

**Course website:** [www.chrisyoung.net/teaching](http://www.chrisyoung.net/teaching)

## 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.

You should leave this class with a solid grasp of several foundational texts in the tradition of Western Ethics. It is doubtful whether this, by itself, can make you a better person. However, given a desire to become a better person, this class may help you to become more thoughtful about your life as a whole, about your friendships, and about the place of virtue within a good life.

In this class you will also receive extensive feedback on your written work. This is intended to help you become a better writer, both of philosophical prose and more generally.

Your grade in this class should reflect the quality of your writing and thinking about the philosophical texts and subjects we will examine.

## Required Texts

The required texts are available at *Shakespeare and Company*, at 939 Lexington (at 69th St.). The ISBN number is provided in case you wish to purchase the books elsewhere. Students will find it very helpful to purchase *these* versions of the texts, since the translations do sometimes make quite a difference. Please consult with me if you wish to use an alternative translation of any text.

- Plato. *Gorgias*. (translated by Donald J. Zeyl) (ISBN: 0872200167)
- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics, Second Edition*. (Translated by Terence Irwin) (ISBN: 0872204642).
- Inwood and Gerson. *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings, Second edition*. (ISBN: 0872203786)
- Cicero. *On Moral Ends*. (edited by Julia Annas, translated by Raphael Woolf) (ISBN: 0521669014)

## Course Work

Course work will consist of:

1. Two short papers (20% each)
2. The best four quizzes out of five (5% each)
3. One final exam (30%)
4. A participation and attendance grade (10%)

You will have an option to write second drafts of the two short papers. This is strongly recommended. The grade for the second draft will replace the grade for the first draft, assuming it is higher (as it almost always is).

The second drafts of the short papers will be due on December 11th, 2007.

Please note that attendance is absolutely essential. There will be no opportunity to make up the quizzes.

## 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. Plagiarism will be punished by automatic failure in the class, with the strong possibility of further disciplinary action.**

## Statement on the American Disabilities Act

“In compliance with the American Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Hunter College is committed to ensuring educational parity and accommodations for all students with documented disabilities and/or medical conditions. It is recommended that all students with documented disabilities (Emotional, Medical, Physical and/or Learning) consult the Office of AccessABILITY located in Room E 1124 to secure the necessary academic accommodations. For further information, please call (212-772-4857)/TTY (212-650-3230).”

## Schedule of Readings

1. **Topic:** Introduction to “Classical Greek Philosophy”  
**Topic:** What is Ancient Philosophy?  
**Topic:** Course work and expectations  
**Topic:** An overview of the class  
**Topic:** Discussion of the Sophists: Protagoras, Gorgias, Antiphon, Critias (pay special attention to Antiphon and to Gorgias’ fragment on Helen)  
**Reading:** Presocratics handout
2. **Topic:** Who was Socrates?  
**Topic:** Who was Plato?  
**Topic:** Plato’s life and work  
**Topic:** An Introduction to Plato’s *Gorgias*  
**Reading:** *Gorgias*, 447a-455a
3. **Topic:** Writing a good philosophy paper  
**Topic:** Avoiding plagiarism  
**Reading:** Handout - “A few tips for writing your philosophy paper”
4. **Topic:** Socrates and Gorgias begin to argue  
**Reading:** *Gorgias*, 455a-466a
5. **Topic:** Socrates and Polus  
**Reading:** *Gorgias*, 466a-481a  
**Deadline:** Assignment #1 due
6. **Topic:** Socrates and Callicles  
**Reading:** *Gorgias*, 481a to the end
7. **Topic:** An introduction to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*  
**Reading:** *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I (you can skip chapter 6)
8. **Topic:** The human function  
**Reading:** *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I (you can skip chapter 6). Focus especially on chapter 7  
**Deadline:** Assignment #2 due
9. **Topic:** Virtues of character  
**Reading:** *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, chapter 13, Book II, and Book IV, chapter 1
10. **Topic:** The Intellectual virtues  
**Reading:** *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI
11. **Topic:** Human action and decision  
**Reading:** *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, chapters 1 to 5
12. **Topic:** Weakness of will  
**Reading:** *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII, chapters 1 to 10

13. **Topic:** Friendship  
**Reading:** *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII
14. **Topic:** Friendship, continued  
**Reading:** *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IX
15. **Topic:** Pleasure  
**Topic:** The coherence of the *Nicomachean Ethics*  
**Reading:** *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X
16. **Topic:** The Presocratics: Democritus  
**Reading:** Handout on Democritus  
**Topic:** Background on the Epicureans  
**Reading:** *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, pp. 3-5, 28-45, 75-80, 95-102
17. **Topic:** An introduction to Cicero's *On Moral Ends*  
**Topic:** Torquatus defends Epicurus  
**Reading:** *On Moral Ends*, Book I
18. **Topic:** Cicero criticizes Epicurus  
**Reading:** *On Moral Ends*, Book II
19. **Topic:** Background on the Stoics  
**Reading:** *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, pp. 103-110, 190-203, 232-260  
**Reading:** Stockdale handout (optional)
20. **Topic:** Cato expounds Stoicism  
**Reading:** *On Moral Ends*, Book III
21. **Topic:** Cicero criticizes Stoicism  
**Reading:** *On Moral Ends*, Book IV
22. **Topic:** Plotinus  
**Reading:** Handout (Selection from The *Enneads*)

## Assignments

### General Instructions

- 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. It is, however, very important to cite the particular passages that you are paraphrasing.
- 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. If you have used secondary sources or encountered this material in other classes, please indicate this in your paper.

- 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, .tex and .odt. Please, please, please do not submit anything in .wps. If you email me an assignment, expect a response within 12 hours. If you don't receive a response, something may have gone wrong, so try again. **Please note: It is your responsibility to make sure that I have received your assignment by email.**

## Assignment #1 - Plato

**Reading:** Plato's *Gorgias* (especially 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 - Aristotle

**Reading:** Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I (especially, Chapter 7)

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.

## Final Take-Home Exam

### General Instructions

- The take-home exam is due on December 20th, 2007.
- You don't need to write more than 12 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.

### Exam Questions

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—or something like it—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 similar arguments about what is natural for humans with strikingly different conclusions.

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.)