

PHIL 161: Topics in the History of Ethics
Fall 2023; Topic: Greek Ethics
TTH 9:30-10:50am; Room: RAWC 0426
Professor David O. Brink

- **Office: Arts & Humanities 0480**
- **Office Hours: T 11am-noon in-person and by Zoom (<https://ucsd.zoom.us/j/97689691570>); and by appointment**
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This is a survey of some main issues, texts, and themes in ancient Greek ethics, focusing on Socrates (470-399 BCE), Plato (427-347 BCE), and Aristotle (384-322 BCE), with some attention to later Hellenistic schools of Epicurean and Stoic ethical thought.

Greek ethics is remarkable for its intellectual continuity. Socrates was Plato's teacher, and Plato was Aristotle's teacher. Each engaged his teacher and other predecessors and contemporaries. The Hellenistic schools (Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Skepticism) engaged both their predecessors and the other schools in vigorous debate. This means that there was considerable intellectual influence and interaction among the main figures and schools in Greek ethics and that their ideas were examined and tested within the tradition itself.

The course will begin with and be structured by Socratic themes. Socrates is generally regarded as the first systematic philosopher in the Western philosophical tradition, and he focused on ethical issues. Though his dialectical inquiries begin from the moral beliefs of his interlocutors and he professes his own ignorance, he defends revisionary and paradoxical claims.

1. *Virtue and Happiness*. The moral virtues must benefit the person who is virtuous; they must contribute to the agent's own *eudaimonia* or happiness (the eudaimonist assumption). Indeed, Socrates insists that the good or virtuous person cannot be harmed. The eudaimonist assumption might lead you to expect Socrates to recognize only self-regarding virtues, such as prudence. But he recognizes familiar other-regarding virtues (e.g. justice) as genuine virtues.
2. *The Unity of the Virtues*. Socrates denies that the virtues (e.g. courage, temperance, piety, and justice) are distinct; not only must a virtuous person have the other virtues in order to have any one of them, allegedly distinct virtues are really one single trait.
3. *Intellectualism*. Moreover, Socrates thinks that virtue is a purely cognitive state, which implies, among other things, that *akrasia* (weakness of the will) is not really possible. I can't know what virtue requires and fail to be moved to virtuous action.
4. *Democracy and Moral Experts*. Though his dialectical methods are democratic in character and he admires various aspects of Athenian democracy, he is also a critic of democracy and suggests that moral knowledge, like other forms of craft knowledge, would be possessed by specialists or experts.

Socrates's views are important not only in their own right but because they structured subsequent work in Greek ethics in important ways. Later philosophers in the tradition, including Plato and Aristotle, take each of these claims very seriously, and no one rejects all of Socrates's claims entirely. Indeed, it is quite common for subsequent philosophers to claim that they are preserving the most important part of Socrates's view.

We will focus on issues that Socrates raises that are recurrent themes in Greek ethics, and to which Plato and Aristotle, in particular, respond. We will examine the eudaimonist assumption that virtues must benefit the agent who has them, and see how this assumption structures views about the relationship between virtue and happiness (*eudaimonia*). How, if at all, does virtue contribute to happiness? Is it a reliable instrumental means to happiness, or is it a part of happiness? If a part of happiness, is it a proper part or is it the whole? How are the implications and plausibility of eudaimonism affected by different conceptions of happiness? What role does pleasure play in *eudaimonia*, and what attitude do various philosophers in the Greek tradition take toward hedonism? What role, if any, do "external goods" that are

outside the agent's control (e.g. wealth, health, loved ones) play in eudaimonia? If they have a role, how does this affect the role of virtue within eudaimonia? As eudaimonists, the Greeks must explain how familiar other-regarding virtues, such as justice, contribute to the agent's own happiness. The Epicureans understand and justify the requirements of justice in terms of mutual advantage. However, Plato and Aristotle both reject this instrumental understanding of the value of justice. Does either of them provide a more adequate eudaimonist defense of justice? How might Plato's account of love and Aristotle's account of friendship contribute to a eudaimonist defense of justice?

We will also examine different assumptions about the role of cognitive and affective factors in the specification of the virtues and what these assumptions imply about the relationship among the virtues and the phenomenon of akrasia. Is virtue a cognitive state, or is it (also) a matter of having noncognitive appetites appropriately trained? How do different conceptions of virtue affect whether and, if so, how it can be taught, and what do they imply about the inseparability and unity of the virtues? Is it really possible to know what virtue requires and act otherwise, or is putative akratic action really due to ignorance of what is best?

Our focus will be on Greek ethical theory. But there are interesting connections between Greek ethical and political theory, especially between assumptions about virtue and happiness and attitudes toward democracy and democratic participation. What is the basis for the authority of the state, and what are the obligations of citizens to the state? What is the best form of government for ideal theory and for non-ideal theory? What is the value of political community and activity, and how are the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and political rule best distributed? Though we will not be able to focus on Greek political theory in any detail, interested students will have opportunities to write on such issues.

FORMAT

Class meetings will involve lecture, seasoned with discussion. The lectures provide philosophical background and structure to the issues raised by the readings and will present and assess these issues in a systematic way. I hope and expect that students will be engaged by the material and ask questions and make comments. I'll use PowerPoint slides during class and will post those slides to the course website on Canvas after class.

Students are expected to come to lecture regularly and be prepared. Students who attend lectures and participate in discussion do better on class assignments, and attendance and participation play a role in one's overall grade.

REQUIREMENTS & GRADING

Work for the course will consist of five bi-weekly quizzes and two papers. There will be no final exam.

- **Quizzes.** The quizzes will be bi-weekly and administered online, through the Canvas website. They will take less than 10 minutes and consist of true/false and multiple-choice questions. The quizzes test basic comprehension of the readings, lectures, and class discussion. Quizzes can be taken within a 48-hour window after Friday 2pm and before Sunday 2pm. They are timed. Students are expected to prepare in advance. The quizzes are not open-book, and students may not collaborate in taking them. The quizzes will be Friday October 13, Friday October 27, Friday November 10, Friday November 24, and Friday December 8. Your quiz grade will be calculated based on your four best quiz scores (throwing out your lowest score). Collectively, the quizzes will be worth 45% of your overall grade.
- **Missed Quizzes.** There is more than adequate notice and opportunity for students to take the quizzes, and students can take the quizzes at their convenience during a 48-hour period. Since the lowest quiz score will be dropped, opportunities to make-up a missed quiz will be limited and exceptional. They are limited to unavoidable conflicts; they must be justified in writing with suitable documentation in advance or, where that is not possible, immediately after the administration of the quiz in question. Do not ask if you can make-up a quiz you forgot to take.

- **The Paper.** The paper should be 8-10 double-spaced pages. It will be due by 5pm, Wednesday, December 13th (during exam week) but can be submitted earlier. It will be worth 40% of your overall grade. Paper topics will be distributed well in advance of the due date.
- **Submission of Papers.** Students will be expected to submit papers electronically, via turnitin.com on the Canvas website.
- **Late Papers.** Since there is only one paper due during exam week, and students have ample time to submit the paper early, if needed, extensions will be granted only under exceptional circumstances and for limited periods of time. If students require an extension on the paper, they must request and justify an extension in advance via email. Late papers (for which an extension was not approved in advance) will lose one full grade for every day (24-hour period) late. For instance, a paper that would have received an A- if handed in on time will receive a C- if handed in two days late (more than 24 hours and not more than 48 hours). So, if you hand in an A- paper 25 hours late, that counts as two days late, and the paper will get a C-.
- **Plagiarism.** Students should note that plagiarism is a violation of the Principles of Academic Integrity (<https://senate.ucsd.edu/operating-procedures/senate-manual/appendices/2>). Anyone determined to have violated these principles will fail the assignment and the course and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity. If you have any doubts about what constitutes plagiarism or other academic misconduct, please consult with me *in advance*.
- **Attendance and Participation.** Students are expected to attend class and participate on a regular basis, and I'll take note of frequent absences. Attendance and participation will count for 15% of your grade. If you have a medical reason or unavoidable conflict that prevents you from attending one or more classes, it would be prudent to explain your absence to me by email.
- **Grade Breakdown.** As percentages of your total grade: the quizzes collectively = 45%, the paper = 40%, and attendance and participation = 15%.

BOOKS

Required readings will be drawn from five primary texts.

1. *Plato's Complete Works*, ed. J. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).
2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trs. T. Irwin, 3d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2019).
3. Aristotle, *Politics*, trs. CDC Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).
4. Cicero, *On Moral Ends*, ed. J. Annas, trs. R. Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
5. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Volume 1, ed. A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Students do not have to purchase these books. I will post pdfs of the required texts on the Canvas website. However, I have ordered copies of these books from the campus bookstore for students who would prefer to own a hard copy (perhaps cheaper copies could be found online). (I have not ordered Aristotle's *Politics* since we will read only a short excerpt, for which the pdf should suffice.)

Other editions and translations of some of these works may be acceptable. Please consult with me before using other editions and translations.

READINGS

The reading assignments are listed on the Syllabus. I will regularly indicate where we are on the Syllabus (remind me if I don't). It is very important to read the assignments on time.

WEBSITE

All course materials and handouts will be posted on the course website, available through Canvas on Course Finder (<https://coursefinder.ucsd.edu>). Students enrolled in the course should have automatic access to the website. You should check periodically to make sure that you have current versions of all the handouts, which are revised or updated periodically.

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

In addition to doing the readings and completing the assignments, students need to know and comply with the course policies and requirements described here. Exceptions to these policies and requirements will be made only in cases where the student had an unavoidable conflict, beyond their control, which they document in a timely manner. Exceptions will not be granted to accommodate student negligence.

YOUR INFO

Within the first week of class, I would like each student to send me an email providing a little background information about themselves.

1. Your year (senior, junior, sophomore)
2. Your major (and minor, if applicable)
3. Relevant prior coursework (other philosophy courses or other courses that strike you as potentially relevant)
4. Optional fun fact: Dog or cat person? Favorite hobbies? Favorite food? Least favorite food? A surprising fact about you?

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Syllabus

The required readings (A) can all be found in five texts.

1. *Plato's Complete Works*, ed. J. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).
2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trs. T. Irwin, 3d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2019).
3. Aristotle, *Politics*, trs. CDC Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).
4. Cicero, *On Moral Ends*, ed. J. Annas, trs. R. Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
5. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Volume 1, ed. A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

There are pdfs of these texts on the course website, and hard copies (of all but the *Politics*) are available for purchase at the campus bookstore (or could be found online). Other editions and translations may be acceptable. Please consult with me before using them.

I list a few recommended readings (B) here as well. For students who are interested in secondary literature on particular topics, I am happy to make recommendations upon request. Please do the readings in advance of class discussion.

0. GENERAL

- (B) Terence Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford, 1995) and *The Development of Ethics*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 2007), chs. 1-13.

1. SOCRATES

In the *Apology* we encounter Socrates the moral gadfly who was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death for impiety and corrupting the youth. In the *Crito* Socrates refuses the entreaties of his friends to escape, insisting that he has an obligation to submit to the state. In the *Euthyphro* we see Socrates at work trying to answer the "What is F?" question about the virtue of piety and raising the famous Euthyphro problem about the relation between piety and the will of the gods. In the *Laches* Socrates tackles the virtue of courage and ends with a puzzle about the unity of the virtues. The *Euthydemus* addresses issues about the difference between philosophy and eristic and about the relation between wisdom and happiness. The *Lysis* discusses friendship and appears to have surprising implications for how we value friends and virtue.

- (A) *Apology*, *Euthyphro*, and *Laches*.
- (B) *Crito*, *Euthydemus* esp. 278e-282e, *Lysis* esp. 219d-220b.

2. FROM SOCRATES TO PLATO

In the *Protagoras* Socrates encounters the sophist Protagoras. They discuss whether virtue is teachable, and Socrates appears to defend the unity of the virtues by appeal to hedonism. In the process, he defends a cognitive picture of the virtues and denies the possibility of akrasia. In the *Gorgias* Socrates encounters rhetoricians who raise the eudaimonist challenge about justice — how can an other-regarding trait such justice be a virtue if virtues must contribute to the agent's own eudaimonia (the eudaimonist assumption). In the process of defending justice, Socrates appears to express skepticism about the sort of hedonism defended in the *Protagoras*.

- (A) *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* 461b-509a.

3. PLATO'S REPUBLIC

The *Republic* is Plato's most comprehensive and influential work. Its ostensible focus is the eudaimonist defense of the virtue of justice, which requires Plato to argue that one is always better-off being just, no matter the cost. In particular, in a famous section of book II Plato articulates and accepts the demand that he must show

justice to be good both for its consequences and for its own sake. The *Republic* is a very wide-ranging work that tackles the defense of justice by an examination of the ideal form of government and a defense of rule by moral experts. This argument also takes Plato into elaborate discussions of the nature of forms and our knowledge of them and the nature and value of the arts. The result is a comprehensive philosophical system that outstrips in scope and substance anything we find in the Socratic dialogues. We will discuss the moral and political arguments (and some of these intersecting issues), but we will focus on the eudaimonist defense of justice and its adequacy. The eudaimonist defense of justice appeals in part to Plato's book IV tripartite division of the soul, which seems to defend the possibility of akrasia, in contrast with Socratic skepticism about akrasia. We will look at sections of the *Symposium* to see if Plato's views about love might strengthen the *Republic's* defense of justice.

- (A) *Republic* I-II, III-IV, V-VII, VIII-IX; *Symposium* 206e-212c.

4. ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* contains the fullest statement of his ethical theory, though we might supplement his claims there with claims he makes in other ethical works, including the *Politics*. Like other Greek ethicists (e.g. Socrates, Plato, the Epicureans, and Stoics), Aristotle takes the agent's *eudaimonia* or happiness to be the central ethical concept. Aristotle discusses happiness in Books I and X 7-8. Other ethical concepts, such as virtue, seem to be defined in relation to happiness. Aristotle treats virtue as the central and controlling element of happiness, but he also thinks that virtue is an incomplete good and needs the addition of goods of fortune (e.g. health, good luck, the happiness of friends) to secure a complete good. He recognizes both self-regarding virtues (e.g. temperance) and other-regarding virtues (e.g. courage and justice). He needs to explain how both self-regarding and other-regarding virtues are necessary for one's happiness, and his extended discussion of friendship (VIII-IX) may provide this explanation. For Aristotle, virtue involves control of the non-rational part of the soul by the rational part. In the *Politics* he commits himself to troublesome ideas about the distribution of capacities for virtue. He thinks that some people lack sufficient rational capacities in a way that makes them by nature fit for slavery. Though he has a higher estimate of women, he thinks that they too lack the capacity for complete virtue necessary for full citizenship.

- (A) *Nicomachean Ethics* I, X.7-8, II, III.5-12, IV, V.1-2, VIII-IX; *Politics* I.4-7, I.12-13.
- (B) *Nicomachean Ethics* V-VII, esp. V.1-2, V.7, V.10, VI.1-7, VII.

5. EPICUREAN ETHICS

The Epicureans are empiricists and materialists who defend hedonism forthrightly. They connect their hedonism with their overarching concern to address and remove the fear of death. For instance, they claim that the dead can experience no pain, that the dead do not exist to be harmed, and that postmortem non-existence is no worse than prenatal nonexistence. We will examine and assess their arguments for why death should be nothing to us. Their hedonism also leads them to defend the instrumental value of the virtues and adopt a social contract conception of justice, both of which contrast with Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic commitments. We should ask how, if at all, our assessment of these claims is affected by their puzzling distinction between kinetic and katastematic pleasures.

- (A) Cicero, *De Finibus* I-II; Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* §§21-25.

6. STOIC ETHICS

Like Aristotle, the Stoics think that happiness depends on our nature as rational animals. Like both Plato and Aristotle, and unlike the Epicureans, they think that virtue is a part of happiness, rather than an instrumental means to happiness. But whereas Plato and Aristotle see virtue as a proper part of happiness, the Stoics identify virtue and happiness, famously and paradoxically claiming that the goods of fortune that Plato and Aristotle think are necessary for a complete good are "preferred indifferents." We will try to reconstruct and assess these Stoic claims about virtue and happiness. We will also look at Stoic cosmopolitanism, which insists on ethical concern for any rational animal, contrasting with Aristotle's apparently more parochial conception of the scope of ethical concern, based on shared history.

- (A) Cicero, *De Finibus*, III-IV; Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* §§56-67.

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Schedule

This is a tentative class schedule that assigns topics and readings to class meetings. We'll try to adhere to it, but, if we fall behind (or get ahead), we may need to revise the schedule in minor ways. So check to make sure that you are operating with a current version of the schedule.

Week #0

- Thursday, September 28: Introduction; Socrates

Week #1

- Tuesday, October 3: Plato's *Euthyphro* I
- Thursday, October 5: Plato's *Euthyphro* II

Week #2

- Tuesday, October 10: Plato's *Laches*
- Thursday, October 12: Plato's *Protagoras* I
- Friday, October 13: **Quiz #1** (2pm, 10/13-2pm, 10/15)

Week #3

- Tuesday, October 17: Plato's *Protagoras* II
- Thursday, October 19: Plato's *Gorgias* 461b-509a

Week #4

- Tuesday, October 24: Plato's *Republic* I-II
- Thursday, October 26: Plato's *Republic* IV
- Friday, October 27: **Quiz #2** (2pm, 10/27-2pm, 10/29)

Week #5

- Tuesday, October 31: Plato's *Republic* V-VII
- Thursday, November 1: Plato's *Republic* VIII-IX; Plato's *Symposium* 206e-212c
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Week #6

- Tuesday, November 7: Aristotle's *Ethics* I
- Thursday, November 9: Aristotle's *Ethics* I, X 7-8
- Friday, November 10: **Quiz #3** (2pm, 11/10-2pm, 11/12)

Week #7

- Tuesday, November 14: Aristotle's *Ethics* II-IV
- Thursday, November 16: Aristotle's *Ethics* VIII-IX

Week #8

- Tuesday, November 21: Aristotle's *Politics* I 4-7, 12-13
- Thursday, November 23: **Thanksgiving Holiday**
- Friday, November 24: **Quiz #4** (2pm, 11/24-2pm, 11/26)

Week #9

- Tuesday, November 28: The Epicureans I (Cicero, *De Finibus* I-II; Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* §§21-25)

- Thursday, November 30: The Epicureans II (Cicero, *De Finibus* I-II; Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* §§21-25)

Week #10

- Tuesday, December 5: The Stoics I (Cicero, *De Finibus*, III-IV; Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* §§56-67)
- Thursday, December 7: The Stoics II (Cicero, *De Finibus*, III-IV; Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* §§56-67)
- Friday, December 8: **Quiz #5** (2pm, 12/8-2pm, 12/10)

Week #11 (Exam Week)

- Wednesday, December 13: **Paper due by 5pm**