

**Department of Philosophy**  
**Aristotle: 107-355A/2018**  
**Professor A. Laywine**  
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**Office Hours (tentatively): Wednesday 14:30-16:00**

**Please note: I do not allow the use of notebook computers in the classroom.**

The purpose of this course is to introduce students to the philosophy of Aristotle (384-321BCE). We will read and discuss in a careful and critical way a range of selections from his works. But these works are very difficult. They make use of a technical vocabulary that isn't always explained; the motivations for addressing certain questions in certain ways are not always clear. Our task will be, among other things, to figure out which philosophical debates Aristotle saw himself engaged in, with which philosophical competitors and allies, and what he took to be his contribution. So we will supplement our Aristotle readings, as the need arises, with selections from the surviving works of other philosophers – notably Plato's.

We will find that Aristotle apparently believed that developing our rational capacities by seeking knowledge is a good in itself that we seek for its own sake and for no other reward beyond it. There does not seem to be some one particular question or subject matter that human beings should investigate. That seems to imply that we can develop our rational capacities by enquiring into everything: from plant-life, to the nature of the gods, the political constitutions of historical human communities, and so forth. But Aristotle, like Plato, denies that all forms of enquiry count as philosophy. He takes the view that philosophy as such must be explanatory in some very strong sense. Depending on the emphasis, that means giving a proper definition to explain what the object of enquiry is. Arriving at such a definition will be the outcome of finding the first principles governing the object of enquiry, i.e., the cause that makes the object of enquiry the sort of thing that it is and that makes it possible for us to know that object as the sort of thing that it is. Plato too thought something like this. But there are some differences. For one thing, Aristotle thinks that we can philosophically enquire into certain things that Plato seems to exclude from philosophy in the strict sense. Plato denies notably that any genuinely philosophical account of the material world is possible. At best, a philosopher can tell a 'likely story' about material things. But a likely story isn't philosophy. Aristotle is optimistic that a rigorous philosophy about such things is possible. For another thing, Aristotle thinks that Plato got important details wrong in areas like psychology and cosmology. These points of difference will give us a way into Aristotle's philosophy and help us appreciate what makes it distinctive and fruitful.

I am not willing to break this course down into week-by-week topics and readings. But it will be useful to us to break it down into units on different topics that will each last for a few weeks, depending on the pace of classroom discussion. The break-down looks like this:

**Unit One:** on the value and purpose of doing philosophy. Our reading will be from the surviving fragments of Aristotle's 'Protrepticus' (the exhortation to philosophy), and we will compare Aristotle's exhortation with something like it in Plato's *Euthydemus*.

**Unit Two:** what are some of the intellectual resources available to us for doing philosophy? In particular, what can we learn, if anything, from the 'sophists' about philosophical enquiry? What is dialectic? Can it help philosophers test definitions that are already on offer? Can it help them formulate a definition that can pass philosophical testing? Can dialectic help philosophers find principles? If so, how? Does dialectic need to be supplemented? What are 'analytics', and what can they give us that we can't get from dialectic? Our readings will be from the *Topics*, the *Sophistical Refutations* and the *Posterior Analytics*. There will be complementary readings from Plato yet to be determined.

**Unit Three:** putting ideas from Unit Two to the test. Can dialectic, as Aristotle conceives it, help us clarify what can and cannot be said about the soul? Can it help us develop a definition? Suppose that it does, then what? The readings will be from Aristotle's *De anima* and Plato's *Phaedrus*.

**Unit Four:** Aristotle on motion – as such and in animals. Our readings will be from the *Physics*, the *Motion of Animals*, the *Progression of Animals* and *De caelo*.

**Unit Five:** what is metaphysics? Is it the title of a book? If so, what does it mean? Is it also a philosophical discipline in its own right? What are its aims? Does it aim at knowledge of the gods? Is it theology? What are its relations to the other philosophical disciplines?

I have ordered one book for this class. It is available for purchase at the Word Bookstore on Milton: the *Basic Works of Aristotle*, edited by Richard McKeon. Supplementary readings will be made available as PDF documents. Students who take this course will be expected to keep up with the readings. **They will be expected to come to class prepared to discuss the readings constructively. They are also required to bring the book and supplementary readings to class.** 10% of the final grade will be for constructive participation in classroom discussion (and hence being properly prepared for such discussion by really doing the readings.) It is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for getting any credit for this component of the grade that students attend class regularly. In fact, it is a necessary condition for passing the course that students attend the class regularly. 25% will be for a short paper due some time during the term. 40% will be for a final paper due on the last day of this class. 25% will be for a formal, closed-book exam – on the readings. McGill University does not tolerate plagiarism. If you have any questions about academic integrity at McGill, please check the following link: <https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/academicrights/integrity>. Les étudiant(e)s à l'Université McGill ont le droit de soumettre leurs devoirs en français s'ils le veulent: <https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/academicrights/course/french>.