

PHIL454: Ancient Moral Theory

Term: Winter 2023

Course schedule: MW 4:05–5:25pm

Location: BIRKS 205

Instructor: Jean-François Rioux

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Office hours: by appointment on Zoom or in LEA 940

Course description:

This course will focus on the moral theories of two Greek philosophers: Plato and Aristotle. As we shall discover, their reflections about the nature of the good (and the way of reaching it) included various dimensions of human existence. In Plato, knowledge takes central stage: no one can be just until the rational part of the soul governs. A close reading of Plato's work will also reveal that he does not univocally reject pleasure as the enemy of the good life. On his side, Aristotle develops an account of virtue that responds to what he saw as shortcomings in Plato's thought. For Aristotle, virtues are cultivated through habits and fostered by true friendships. But while Aristotle nuances the importance of knowledge in morality, he undeniably remains influenced by his predecessor. Ultimately, the opposition between the views of Plato and Aristotle can be treated as an open question.

Here is how we will proceed in this course. We will begin by reading key excerpts of Plato's work (*Protagoras*, *Republic*, *Phaedo* and *Philebus*). We will then get familiar with Aristotle's main ethical contribution, the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Throughout these lectures, we will also use one of Martha Nussbaum's book, *The Fragility of Goodness*, to challenge and confirm our understanding of both philosophers. Finally, we will evaluate the impact of Plato and Aristotle's moral theories on 20th-century philosophy. A selection of texts from Taylor, Anscombe, Ricœur and virtue ethicists will guide us.

Our path might seem focused on the history of philosophy, but we will tackle along the way a set of genuine philosophical questions, such as:

- Can 'happiness' be defined?

- What are virtues?
- Is morality independent from politics and metaphysics?

Course prerequisites

Ancient Moral Theory is a 400–course. This course has no prerequisite *per se*, but if you have never succeeded a philosophy course before, please let me know as soon as possible. All of you can also benefit from reviewing this brief writing guide: <https://bit.ly/3JSna79>

Instructional method:

This course will be held in person twice a week and will require your active participation. Most sessions will consist of a presentation by the instructor.

This course will be reading intensive. The assigned materials should be read before attending the relevant lectures. Please bring your own paper copies of the required course materials to the relevant lectures.

The lectures will not be recorded. Please do not record the lectures without my explicit consent.

Please turn off your cellphones while in class. Even small vibrations can distract you, your peers and the instructors. If you use a computer, do so without distracting anyone.

Required course materials (at The Word bookstore, cash only):

- Aristotle (2019). *Nicomachean Ethics* (3rd ed.). Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. The second edition is also allowed.

Other required course materials:

- <https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org:443/list/20480249>
- On *myCourses*.

Schedule (subject to change at the instructor's discretion):

Week	Date	Description	Course materials	Other information
1	01-08	Introduction		
	01-10	Nussbaum	The Fragility of Goodness (FG)*	p. 89-106
2	01-15	Plato	Protagoras* FG	351b-362a p. 106-120
	01-17	Plato	Republic*	580d-588b
3	01-22	Plato	Republic Phaedo*	439b-444e 61e-69e
	01-24	Nussbaum	FG*	p. 136-164
4	01-29	Plato	Philebus*	To be determined (TBD)
	01-31	Plato	Philebus*	TBD
5	02-05	Plato	Philebus*	TBD
	02-07	Exam 1		
6	02-12	Aristotle	Nicomachean Ethics (NE), Book I*	
	02-14	Aristotle	NE, Book II*	
7	02-19	Aristotle	NE, Book III*	
	02-21	Aristotle	NE, Book IV*	
8	02-26	Aristotle	NE, Book V*	
	02-28	Exam 2		
9	03-04			No class
	03-06			No class
10	03-11	Aristotle	NE, Book VI*	
	03-13	Aristotle	NE, Book VII*	
11	03-18	Aristotle	NE, Book VIII-IX*	
	03-20	Aristotle	NE, Book X*	
12	03-25	Nussbaum	FG*	
	03-27	Exam 3		
13	04-01	Taylor	The Sources of the Self	TBD
	04-03	Anscombe	Modern Moral Philosophy	TBD
14	04-08	Virtue Ethics	TBD	TBD
	04-10	Ricœur	Oneself as Another, 7 th study	p. 169-202
15	04-11	Concluding remarks		Oral Exam: April 18 and 19

Assessments:

- Questions (15%)

After completing the readings marked with an asterisk on the schedule, you may submit a question to me. The nature of the question has to be philosophical. By the end of the course, you should have sent me up to 18 (but no fewer than 15) questions. Grading criteria: relevance and clarity.

- Exam 1 (20%)

This exam will evaluate your understanding of Plato's moral theory. You will have seventy minutes to respond to two or three questions (TBD). The exam will take place in class and you will not have access to your books or your notes. Grading criteria: accuracy, clarity and structure.

- Exam 2 (20%)

This exam will be similar to Exam 1, except that it will focus on the first five books of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

- Exam 3 (20%)

This exam will be similar to Exams 1 and 2, except that it will focus on the last five books of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

- Oral exam (25%)

You will be asked to answer a question orally. The question will focus on the impact of Plato and Aristotle's moral theory on the works of Taylor, Anscombe, Ricoeur and virtue ethicists. The exam will take place in class and you will not have access to your books or your notes. Grading criteria: accuracy, clarity, structure and originality.

Language of submission:

"In accord with McGill University's [Charter of Student Rights](#), students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives." (Approved by Senate on 21 January 2009)

« Conformément à [la Charte des droits de l'étudiant](#) de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté, sauf dans le cas des cours dont l'un des objets est la maîtrise d'une langue. » (Énoncé approuvé par le Sénat le 21 janvier 2009)

Academic integrity:

“McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the [Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures](#).” (Approved by Senate on 29 January 2003) (See McGill’s [guide to academic honesty](#) for more information.)

« L'Université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon [le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et procédures disciplinaires](#). » (Énoncé approuvé par le Sénat le 29 janvier 2003) (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le [guide pour l'honnêteté académique de McGill](#).)