

Course Syllabus

Classes: M/W/F 11:35-12:25

Location: Strathcona Anatomy & Dentistry M-1

Instructor: Carlos Fraenkel (carlos.fraenkel@mcgill.ca)

Office Hours: M/W 12:40-13:40 in LEA 914

Teaching Assistants: Jessica Baptista (jessica.baptista@mail.mcgill.ca)

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TA Office Hours: TBD

Course Description

At the center of this course is the most basic human question: How should we live? “Everyone,” Socrates says, “takes this question more seriously than anything else.” If we boarded a time machine to take a tour of ancient Athens, all philosophers we would meet there—Socrates, the Cynics, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Skeptics—would try to lure us into their schools by advertising their philosophy as the gateway to “*eudaimonia*”: a happy and flourishing life.

“Sign me up!” you will exclaim. Who doesn’t want to be happy and flourish? But once the old bearded men in tunics start lecturing, you may be in for a shock. They turn everything you think about happiness and flourishing on its head. Good looks, cool friends, Instagram-ready children, wealth, status, fame, an Ivy league degree, a stellar career? None of this matters. Even in the “bull of Phalaris” (a hollow bronze bull devised by the tyrant Phalaris to burn his victims alive) we can be happy with the right attitude, some contend.

This class has two core goals:

1) An introduction to philosophy and its history: You will study the works of a diverse group of philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Epicureans, al-Ghazâlî, Maimonides, Mill, and Sartre. Though we will focus on concepts of the good life, you will quickly realize that you cannot understand these without also thinking through numerous other philosophical questions spanning metaphysics, epistemology, psychology, ethics, and politics. If you inhabit the Stoic universe, for example, where everything unfolds according to God’s plan, your outlook on life will contrast sharply with that in the Epicurean universe which is a random configuration of atoms, indifferent to human concerns.

2) Critical self-examination: At the same time, the class also introduces you to a wide range of unconventional philosophical experiments in living that challenge societal norms both ancient and modern—from Socrates’s relentless questioning and Diogenes’s case for living in a

barrel to Sartre's notion that we are "condemned" to freedom. The texts take on the role of the Socratic gadfly, jolting you to re-examine your own beliefs about happiness and success.

This class, then, emphasizes the unfamiliar and contentious, steering clear of a self-help approach. At a time when you are defining the shape of your personal and social life, pondering decisions about education, work, love, family, relationships, politics, and religion, the course provides a space to discuss fundamental moral and existential questions in dialogue with the philosophical tradition: What things really matter? Does it pay to be virtuous? Is it up to you if your life goes well or badly? What constitutes a good society? How do nature and nurture influence life outcomes? Can you escape the roller coaster of your emotions—fear, frustration, anger, envy, grief? Is freedom a blessing or a burden?

The authors we will study disagreed a great deal with each other. They left us a debate, not a monolithic doctrine. Among the most valuable things you can learn from this debate is a *philosophical ethos*: the skill to think through rival ideals of life and society and rival views of the world before making up your own mind.

Course Format

The course has two main components: (i) lectures; (ii) tutorial TA conferences.

(i) On Mondays and Wednesdays I will give a lecture in which I discuss the assigned readings with you and connect them to the core questions of the class. Each lecture will include 2 to 3 **polls** for which we will use **Slido**, McGill's web-based polling system. Make sure that you can access Slido (via your smart phone, laptop etc.). All polls will be **anonymous**, so you can be completely honest!

(ii) Starting in **Week 3**, the Friday lectures will be replaced with tutorial conferences, led by the TAs, with ca. 40 students per conference. **Please sign up for one conference section for the entire semester. You cannot switch conference sections.** The TA conferences are the main space for **active discussion**, based on the readings, the lectures, and 2 pre-circulated questions related to the course material: Are moral norms relative or universal? Does it pay to be good? Are we greedy by nature? Are we responsible for our choices or are they determined? Are democracies ships of fools? Through a Slido poll you will be asked to take a position on these questions and then argue for it in the discussion. At the end of the discussion a second Slido poll will ask if the discussion (a) changed your mind, (b) strengthened your initial view, or (c) didn't make a difference.

Reading load: In preparation for each lecture you must read about 10 to 15 pages from the course reader. In most weeks the total reading load will be 20 to 30 pages.

Throughout the semester the expectation is that you attentively read all assigned texts before the lecture, attend all lectures, and actively participate in the TA conferences.

Course Requirements

Participation: Attendance in this class is **mandatory** and will be verified in both lectures and TA conferences via Slido, starting after the add/drop period, i.e., on Wednesday, **September 11**. You are entitled to **2 unexcused absences**. After that each unexcused absence will be penalized by a deduction of **1 point from your final grade** (i.e. 89 instead of 90 etc.). Absences **only** count as excused if you present a doctor's note, observe a religious holiday, or have a significant and documented disruption.

20% 4 replies of ca. 300 words to 1 of the pre-circulated questions of the week, starting in week 3. You may choose the question and one of the following two sequences: (i) **Weeks 3, 5, 7, 11** or (ii) **Weeks 4, 6, 10, 12**. Each reply will be worth 5% of the grade. Your task is to defend one of the positions elicited by the question (e.g. moral norms are universal; being good doesn't pay) with reference to the relevant course materials. **The purpose of the replies is to monitor your engagement with the course content. They will not be graded for content.** You will receive 2% for submitting the replies on time and with the right length; and 3% for coherently discussing the right topic. Replies must be submitted **by the end of Thursday**.

30% 3 Surprise quizzes: The quizzes will each consist of 10 multiple choice questions covering the texts and lectures. They will be administered in a TA conference and take 20 minutes. The questions will be straightforward, so if you do the readings and pay attention in the lectures, you should do well. Each question is worth 1%.

50% 3 papers of ca. 900 words (the first 2 worth 15%, the third 20%). In these papers, you are not just a **student** of the debate about the good life; you are also a **participant** in it. Develop your own stance on a crucial question, but don't just express an opinion. Engage in critical dialogue with the philosophers you have studied, and discuss at least two objections to the view you ultimately champion. This is **your view** in the sense that you have carefully thought it through and made up your mind after careful deliberation. You're not required to reinvent the wheel—your view can align with one we've studied if you truly find it compelling. Alternatively, it can incorporate elements from one or more approaches, or it can be original. Don't worry about what the instructors think; we will evaluate the sophistication of your argument, not the content of your conclusion. If you make a strong case for the claim that morality is for losers, you will do well. However, this isn't just an intellectual exercise. You should stand behind the view you defend.

Paper 1 is due on **October 11** (15%). Topic: You are entirely content with your life. You are enjoying your studies, have a good group of friends, no financial problems, and the prospect of a prestigious job if you continue working hard. Your heart is in the right place: you help out when you can and avoid harming others. You're also someone who goes with the flow without thinking much about the right way to live. One day, Socrates comes to your dorm and starts asking you questions. Is this a good thing? Should you embrace the "examined life"?

Paper 2 is due on **November 20** (15%). Topic: Imagine you are under intense pressure to get into medical school (your parents have always wanted you to become a doctor and in your

community it's considered the ultimate proof of success). You almost have the grades to get in, but you're struggling in one class, and if you don't do well, you won't make it. The only way to turn it around is by letting ChatGPT write your final essay. You feel deeply torn. Should you disregard principles like honesty and fairness? You really want to succeed, but is it worth compromising your integrity for that? What should you do and why?

Paper 3 is due on **December 9 (20%)**. Topic: Imagine a perfect liberal society: your freedom to live as you please is secured; you have the same opportunities to advance in society as everyone else; and you receive a fair share of material resources. The state neither prescribes the goals citizens pursue nor the tools they use to choose and achieve those goals. Now, imagine a benevolent dictatorship where wise rulers, assisted by advanced data processing technology, guide all citizens to fulfilling lives. The citizens live wisely, but they have no choice. You want to attain a good (happy, flourishing) life. Where would you rather live—in the liberal society, the benevolent dictatorship, or a third option that incorporates other features supporting citizens in achieving good lives?

Papers should remain **within 20 words** of the indicated word count (i.e. minimum 880 and maximum 920 for a 900-word paper)

Papers **submitted late** will be penalized by 1/3 grade per day (e.g. A- instead of A if the paper is one day late).

Use of AI Tools

The purpose of the assignments is to give you an opportunity to think through the questions we are discussing in class, articulate your answers, develop arguments to support them, and apply the tools and concepts you are learning by studying philosophical texts. It's your chance to find out where you stand on key existential and moral questions. If you let ChatGPT or another AI tool do the work for you, you won't achieve any of these goals. You're not just deceiving the instructors, but, worse, sabotaging yourself.

If, on the other hand, you engage AI tools creatively—to bounce back ideas, get feedback on your arguments, conduct Socratic debates etc.—that's acceptable (though try do these things with your friends as well!). In this case, please add a note to your assignment, acknowledging which AI tool you used and briefly describing how. This note will not affect your grade or be part of the word count.

Submission of Assignments

All assignments must be submitted **electronically** as a **Word document** via MyCourses in the designated Assignment Submission Folder (Paper 1 etc.).

To ensure unbiased assessment of your work, please submit the 3 papers **anonymously**. Please include (1) the **name of the assignment** (e.g. Paper 1), (2) your **student number**, and (3) the

first name of your TA both in the **file name** and in the **body of the assignment** (note that this information is not part of the word count).

Course Materials

1) All **required readings** will be included in a McGill course reader (PHIL 202 The Good Life) that you must either purchase at the Le James McGill bookstore on 680 Sherbrooke St. West or order online. The readings for Lecture 1-5 will also be made available on MyCourses, but after the end of the add/drop period you are expected to own the course reader.

2) All **optional readings** will be made available electronically on MyCourses or via the McGill library.

3) A list of **suggested further readings** will be included in the McGill course reader.

Use of Electronics

I will not prohibit the use of laptops and other screens as long as you use them **exclusively for class-related matters** (e.g. taking notes, participating in polls etc.). You may **not** use them for social media, checking emails, reading the newspaper and the like.

Course Outline

1. How Should We Live? And Can Philosophers Help Us Figure It Out?

Week 1

W/ Aug 28 (a) Course introduction
(b) Explanation of the syllabus

2. The Crisis that Left Plato “Dizzy” And the Quest for the Good Life

F / Aug 30 Lecture 1: Moral crisis and the relativism of the Sophists

(a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 1”, pp. 13-21 [Course Reader]
(b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “The Sophists” [MyCourses]

3. Is Morality for Losers?

Week 2

M / Sept. 2 NO CLASS – Labor Day

W / Sept. 4 Lecture 2: The Immoralists

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 2”, pp. 22-29 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: R. Barney, “Callicles and Thrasymachus” [MyCourses]

4. Socrates: Wisdom to Die For

F / Sept. 6 Lecture 3: Socrates

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 3”, pp. 30-44 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “Socrates”; J. Cooper, “The Socratic Way of Life” [MyCourses]

Week 3

M / Sept. 9 Lecture 4: Socrates (continued)

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 4”, pp. 45-59 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “Socrates”; J. Cooper, “The Socratic Way of Life” [MyCourses]

W / Sept. 11 Lecture 5: Socrates (continued)

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 5”, pp. 60-69 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “Socrates”; J. Cooper, “The Socratic Way of Life” [MyCourses]

[Mandatory attendance begins]

F / Sept. 13 TA Conference: Discussion of weekly questions

5. The Cynics: Punks of the Ancient World

Week 4

M / Sept. 16 Lecture 6: The Cynics

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 6”, pp. 70-81 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “The Cynics”; C. Fraenkel, “Outrageous Behaviour”; K. Setiya, “Philosophy Could Have Been a Lot More Fun” [MyCourses]

6. Plato: It Takes a Revolution

W / Sept. 18 Lecture 7: Plato

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 7”, pp. 82-97 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “Plato”; D. Dunn, “Was He Apollo’s Son?” [MyCourses]

F/ Sept. 20 TA Conference: Discussion of weekly questions

Week 5

M/ Sept. 23 Lecture 8: Plato (continued)

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 8”, pp. 98-109 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “Plato”; D. Dunn, “Was He Apollo’s Son?” [MyCourses]

W/ Sept. 25 Lecture 9: Plato (continued)

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 9”, pp. 113-122 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “Plato”; D. Dunn, “Was He Apollo’s Son?” [MyCourses]

F/ Sept. 27 TA Conference: Discussion of weekly questions

7. Aristotle: Live Up to Your Potential

Week 6

M/ Sept. 30 Lecture 10: Aristotle

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 10”, pp. 123-139 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “Aristotle”; J. Cooper, “Aristotle: Philosophy as Two Ways of Life”; J. Krishnan, “Aristotle’s Rules for Living Well”; A. Callard, “Should We Cancel Aristotle?” [MyCourses]

W/ Oct. 2 Lecture 11: Aristotle (continued)

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 11”, pp. 140-153 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “Aristotle”; J. Cooper, “Aristotle: Philosophy as Two Ways of Life”; J. Krishnan, “Aristotle’s Rules for Living Well”; A. Callard, “Should We Cancel Aristotle?” [MyCourses]

F/ Oct. 4 TA Conference: Discussion of weekly questions

Week 7

M/ Oct. 7 Lecture 12: Aristotle (continued)

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 12”, pp. 154-166 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “Aristotle”; J. Cooper, “Aristotle: Philosophy as Two Ways of Life”; J. Krishnan, “Aristotle’s Rules for Living Well”; A. Callard, “Should We Cancel Aristotle?” [MyCourses]

8. The Stoics: Blissful on the Rack

W/ Oct. 9 Lecture 13: The Stoics

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 13”, pp. 167-177 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “The Stoics”; J. Cooper, “Stoicism as a Way of Life”; Gregory Hays, “Tune out & Lean In” [MyCourses]

F/ Oct. 11 TA Conference: Discussion of weekly questions
[Paper 1 due]

Week 8

M/ Oct. 14 NO CLASS – Thanksgiving

W/ Oct. 16 NO CLASS – Fall reading break

F / Oct. 18 NO CLASS – Fall reading break

Week 9

M/ Oct. 21 Lecture 14: The Stoics (continued)

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 14”, pp. 178-186 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “The Stoics”; J. Cooper, “Stoicism as a Way of Life”; Gregory Hays, “Tune out & Lean In” [MyCourses]

9. The Epicureans: Purge the Soul

W/ Oct. 23 Lecture 15: The Epicureans

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 15”, pp. 187-196 [Course Reader]

- (b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “Epicureanism”; J. Cooper, “The Epicurean and Skeptic Ways of Life” (pp. 226-276); J. Baggini, “Living for Pleasure” [MyCourses]

F/ Oct. 25 TA Conference: Discussion of weekly questions

Week 10

M/ Oct. 28 Lecture 16: The Epicureans (continued)

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 16”, pp. 197-204 [Course Reader]
(b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “Epicureanism”; J. Cooper, “The Epicurean and Skeptic Ways of Life” (226-276); J. Baggini, “Living for Pleasure” [MyCourses]

10. The Skeptics: Question Everything

W/ Oct. 30 Lecture 17: The Skeptics

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 17”, pp. 205-214 [Course Reader]
(b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “Skepticism”; J. Cooper, “The Epicurean and Skeptic Ways of Life” (pp. 276-304) [MyCourses]

F/ Nov. 1 TA Conference: Discussion of weekly questions

11. Review: Back to the Ancients?

Week 11

M/ Nov. 4 Lecture 18: Philosophy as a Way of Life? Pierre Hadot

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 18”, pp. 215-223 [Course Reader]

12. God and the Good Life

W/ Nov. 6 Lecture 19: Al-Ghazali

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 19”, pp. 224-228 [Course Reader]
(b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “Al-Ghazali” [MyCourses]

F/ Nov. 8 TA Conference: Discussion of weekly questions

Week 12

M/ Nov. 11 Lecture 20: Maimonides

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 20”, pp. 229-237 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: P. Adamson, “Maimonides”; D. Nirenberg, “Double Game” [MyCourses]

13. Freedom and Authenticity

W/ Nov. 13 Lecture 21: John Stuart Mill

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 21”, pp. 238-247 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: J. Skorupski, “John Stuart Mill”; J. B. Schneewind, “Making Our Lives Our Own” [MyCourses]

F/ Nov. 15 TA Conference: Discussion of weekly questions

Week 13

M/ Nov. 18 Lecture 22: John Stuart Mill (continued)

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 22”, pp. 248-255 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: J. Skorupski, “John Stuart Mill”; J. B. Schneewind, “Making Our Lives Our Own” [MyCourses]

14. Becoming Superman

W/ Nov. 20 Lecture 23: Friedrich Nietzsche

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 23”, pp. 256-266 [Course Reader]
- (b) *Optional Readings*: M. Clark, “Friedrich Nietzsche”; E. R. Dodds, “Socrates, Callicles, and Nietzsche”; R. Monk, “The agony and the destiny: Friedrich Nietzsche’s descent into madness” [MyCourses]

[Paper 2 due]

F/ Nov. 22 TA Conference: Discussion of weekly questions

15. Freedom and Revolution

Week 14

M/ Nov. 25 Lecture 24: Karl Marx

- (a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 24”, pp. 267-282 [Course Reader]

(b) *Optional Readings*: M. Rosen, “Karl Marx”; G. A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* [MyCourses]

16. Condemned to Freedom

W/ Nov. 27 Lecture 25: Jean-Paul Sartre

(a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 25”, pp. 283-297 [Course Reader]

(b) *Optional Readings*: S. Richmond, “Jean-Paul Sartre”; S. Bakewell, “Sir, What a Horror, Existentialism!” [MyCourses]

F/ Nov. 29 Final TA Conference: Discussion of weekly questions

17. The Meaning of Life?

Week 15

M/ Dec. 2 Lecture 26: Susan Wolf

(a) *Required Readings*: “Lecture 26”, pp. 298-312 [Course Reader]

18. Can Philosophers Help Us Figure Out How to Live?

W/Dec. 4 Course Conclusion

M/ Dec. 9 **Paper 3 due**

Mandatory Components of the Course Syllabus

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”

(see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).

Language of Submission:

“In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any 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.”