

PHIL 355: Aristotle

Instructor: Brandon Smith

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Location: Birks Building 205

Classes: Tuesdays/Thursdays 2:35 pm - 3:55 pm

Office hours: Tuesdays/Thursdays 1 pm - 2 pm or by appointment

In-person: Leacock 923

Zoom: <https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/85985989311>

TA: Alex Stooshinoff

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Office hours: TBA

Course Description:

In this course we will cover some of the key texts and ideas of the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle. Referred to as “the Philosopher” by many later thinkers, Aristotle is undoubtedly one of the greatest and most systematic lovers of truth in the history of philosophy. By “systematic” I mean that Aristotle offers a unified and comprehensive system of philosophy which brings together core disciplines, such as metaphysics or “first philosophy (the study of being qua being), physics (the study of the natural world and its substances), psychology (the study of the soul), ethics (the study of how we ought to live and act as human beings), and politics (the study of different kinds of states and how such states can be best structured). Of particular note is how the theoretical disciplines of his philosophy (e.g., metaphysics, physics, and psychology) crucially inform the practical disciplines (namely, ethics and politics), all for the sake of promoting the happy, flourishing (*eudaimon*) human life. Through his texts we are going to reflect on and discuss key questions like: what are the most fundamental ways of being, what are substances, are some substances material and perishable vs. immaterial and imperishable, is there change in the natural world and how do we account for it, what is the nature and relationship between the soul and the body, what does happiness as the highest good consist in, and what do we require socially and politically to promote happiness?

Learning Goals

By the end of this course, students will be able to (1) competently read and critically engage with a variety of Aristotelian texts, (2) outline Aristotle’s views on God, reality, the soul, the body, happiness, virtue, pleasure, and friendship, and (3) write finely structured and persuasive papers which make clear and detailed use of Aristotelian texts to both explain and evaluate his views on key philosophical themes.

Texts:

1. *Categories (C)* [Vol. 1]
2. *Physics* [Vol. 1]
3. *Metaphysics (Meta)* [Vol. 2]
4. *On the Soul (OS)* [Vol. 1]
5. *Nicomachean Ethics (NE)* [Vol. 2]

All these texts can be found electronically in *Intelex Past Masters: Aristotle: The Complete Works*, 2 vols., edited by Jonathan Barnes (the link can be found on MyCourses).

For those who would prefer hard copies, I recommend:

- *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Edited by Richard McKeon, The Modern Library, 2001.
- *Metaphysics*. Translated by C. D. C. Reeve, Hackett, 2016.
- *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin, Hackett, 1999.

Requirements:

1. **Participation (10%):** You will be evaluated on your consistent class attendance and active engagement with the material. I will take attendance each class. You will have a grace period of one missed class (excluding excused absences) after which you will lose 1/3 of a letter grade for each class missed (e.g., if you have an A, but missed two classes, your grade goes down to A-; three classes B+, etc.). You can show regular active engagement through asking/answering questions (1) during lectures, (2) on the weekly discussion boards on MyCourses, (3) through email, or (4) during my office hours.
2. **2 Short Papers (25% each):** You will write a short paper (approx. 1500 words). Potential topics will be posted on MyCourses.
3. **Take-Home Exam (40%):** You will write an argumentative paper (approx. 2000-3000 words) concerning a particular theme in Aristotle's philosophy (e.g., being, substance, mind, body, the soul, happiness, virtue, wisdom, pleasure, friendship, etc.). In this paper you will (i) present a clear thesis which explains your position on your chosen theme in Aristotle's philosophy, (ii) outline, with textual evidence, Aristotle's position on this theme, and (iii) evaluate Aristotle's account (i.e., do you agree/disagree with his account and why; what are the strengths and weaknesses of his account?). You may use the content from your short papers (with any necessary revisions based on feedback) for this assignment.

Guidance for the short papers and take-home exam will be posted on MyCourses, and I am always happy to answer questions before/during/after lectures, through email, or during my office hours. All assignments should be submitted on MyCourses as a **Word document (.doc or .docx)** by 11:59 pm on the day of the deadline, in the relevant assignment folder. Please submit your assignments **anonymously**, with only your student number in the document and file name.

Extensions: Extensions to deadlines set will be granted only in exceptional circumstances, appropriately documented. **Late work will be penalized at the rate of 1/3 of a letter grade per day (e.g., from A to A-, etc.).**

Schedule:

**Particular readings or content covered each class may change based on our present needs throughout the semester, but the central sources will remain the same.*

Week 1

Jan. 4: Introduction; Reading Philosophy/Aristotle

Week 2

The Basics of Science and Being

Jan. 9: - *Physics* I.1; II.1; *Metaphysics* [A] I.1-2; [E] VI.1; *Categories* 1-5

Jan. 11: *Categories* 1-5; *Physics* I.2, 6-9

Aristotle's Mature Account of Substance (Hylomorphism)

Week 3

Jan.16: *Physics* I.2, 6-9; II.1-2; *Metaphysics* [Δ]V.8; [H]VIII.1; [Θ] IX.8

Jan. 18: *Physics* II.2; *Metaphysics* [H]VIII.1; [Θ] IX.8; [Λ] XII

Week 4:

Jan. 23: *Physics* II.2; *Metaphysics* [H]VIII.1; [Θ] IX.8; [Λ] XII

The Four Causes

Jan. 25: *Physics* II.3, 7-8; VIII.6, 10; *Metaphysics* [Λ] XII

Week 5:

Jan. 30: *Physics* II.3, 7-8; VIII.6, 10; *Metaphysics* [Λ] XII

Feb. 1: *On the Soul* II.1-4; III.4-5

Week 6:

Feb. 6: *On the Soul* II.1-4; III.4-5

Ethics: The Science of Happiness

Feb. 8: *Nicomachean Ethics* I

Week 7:

Feb. 13: *Nicomachean Ethics* I – **Short Paper 1 due**

Feb. 15: *Nicomachean Ethics* II

Moral Virtue and Intellectual Virtue

Week 8:

Feb. 20: *Nicomachean Ethics* II-III

Feb. 22: *Nicomachean Ethics* III

Week 9:

Feb. 27: *Nicomachean Ethics* V

Feb. 29: *Nicomachean Ethics* V-VI

Week 10:

Winter Reading Break

Week 11:

March 12: *Nicomachean Ethics* VI

Pleasure

March 14: *Nicomachean Ethics* VII; X.1-5

Week 12:

March 19: *Nicomachean Ethics* VII; X.1-5

Friendship

March 21: *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII-IX

Week 13:

March 26: *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII-IX – **Short Paper 2 due**

Two Kinds of Happiness

March 28: *Nicomachean Ethics* X.6-9

Week 14:

April 2: *Nicomachean Ethics* X.6-9

April 4: Later Thinkers on Aristotle's Philosophy

Week 15:

April 9: General Discussion

Exam Period:

Take-Home Exam due

McGill Policy Statements

1. 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/integrity for more information).

2. In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

3. In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right, without seeking permission, to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

4. As the instructor of this course, I endeavor to provide an inclusive learning environment. If you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me or with Student Affairs, or with the Office for Students with Disabilities, <https://www.mcgill.ca/osd>, tel.: 514-398-6009.

5. McGill University is situated on the traditional territory of the Kanien'kehà:ka, a place which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst nations. We recognize and respect the Kanien'kehà:ka as the traditional custodians of the lands and waters on which we meet today.