

PHIL454: Ancient Moral Theory

Term: Fall 2022

Course schedule: TR 4:05–5:25pm

Location: 688 rue Sherbrooke Ouest, #295

Instructor: Jean-François Rioux

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Office hours: by appointment

Course description:

There are many different ways to introduce ourselves to ancient moral theories. This semester, we will take our cue from Paul Ricœur's *Oneself as Another*. In this book, Ricœur relies heavily on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to develop what he calls a 'little ethics' (OAA, p. 290). With the help of Aristotle, Ricœur shows that the ultimate end of human action is the good life and that the good life requires relations to other people and to just institutions. In his view, the ethical intention thus has primacy over moral norms. However, an ethics devoid of moral norms remains too naive, since it provides no answer to evil and violence. Ricœur then turns to Kant in order to complete Aristotle's project. Unfortunately, moral norms themselves lead to dilemmas that cannot be solved from their sole standpoint. According to Ricœur, the best tools we have to give these dilemmas some answers are public debates and shared convictions. At this point of his reflection, Ricœur surprisingly identifies Aristotle's *phronésis* (prudence) with Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life).

Here is how we will proceed in this course. We will first get familiar with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* by reading it closely and by discussing most of its concepts and arguments. We should then be better prepared to engage with the ethical thought of one of his heirs: Paul Ricœur. Notably, we will examine Ricœur's critiques of Aristotle's ethics. To grasp their full scope, we will also have a brief look at the moral thoughts of Kant and Hegel. This course will thus offer us a good introduction to Aristotle's ethics as well as an overview of its presence in modern western philosophy.

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:

- What are virtues?

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- Can moral theories get rid of 'happiness' as a core concept?
- What kind of conflict separates ethics from morality?

Course pre-requisites

Ancient Moral Theory is a 400-course. This course has no pre-requisite *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 as well as learning activities in smaller groups.

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 should work as well.)

Other required course materials (on *myCourses*):

- Hegel, G. W. F. (2002). *The Philosophy of Right*. Focus Pub./R. Pullins.
- Kant, I. (1998). *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. (2012). *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. (2015). *Critique of Practical Reason* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Ricœur, P. (1992). *Oneself as Another*. University of Chicago Press.
- Etc.

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

| Week | Date | Description | Course materials | Other information |
|------|-------|----------------------------|---|--|
| 0 | 09-01 | Introduction | | |
| 1 | 09-06 | Aristotle | <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> (NE), Book I | |
| | 09-08 | Aristotle | NE, Book II | |
| 2 | 09-13 | Aristotle | NE, Book III | |
| | 09-15 | Aristotle | NE, Book IV | |
| 3 | 09-20 | Aristotle | NE, Book V | |
| | 09-22 | Aristotle | NE, Book VI | |
| 4 | 09-27 | Aristotle | NE, Book VII | |
| | 09-29 | Aristotle | NE, Book VIII-IX | |
| 5 | 10-04 | Aristotle | NE, Book X | |
| | 10-06 | Aristotle | TBD | |
| | 10-11 | | | No class |
| | 10-13 | | | No class |
| 6 | 10-18 | Midterm exam Part 1 | | |
| | 10-20 | Midterm exam Part 2 | | |
| 7 | 10-25 | Ricœur | <i>Oneself as Another</i> , 1 st study | |
| | 10-27 | Ricœur | <i>Oneself as Another</i> , 7 th study | ½ group activity Short paper 1 |
| 8 | 11-01 | Ricœur | <i>Oneself as Another</i> , 7 th study | ½ group activity Short paper 1 |
| | 11-03 | Kant | TBD | |
| 9 | 11-08 | Kant | TBD | |
| | 11-10 | Ricœur | <i>Oneself as Another</i> , 8 th study | ½ group activity Short paper 2 |
| 10 | 11-15 | Ricœur | <i>Oneself as Another</i> , 8 th study | ½ group activity Short paper 2 |
| | 11-17 | Hegel | TBD | |
| 11 | 11-22 | Hegel | TBD | |
| | 11-24 | Ricœur | <i>Oneself as Another</i> , 9 th study | ½ group activity Short paper 3 |
| 12 | 11-29 | Ricœur | <i>Oneself as Another</i> , 9 th study | ½ group activity Short paper 3 |
| | 12-01 | Concluding remarks | TBD | |
| | TBD | Final exam | | |

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Assessments:

- Midterm exam: Part 1 (15%)

The first part of the midterm exam will evaluate your understanding of the first five books of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. You will have an hour and a half 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 organization.

- Midterm exam: Part 2 (15%)

There will be no difference with Part 1, except that Part 2 will focus on the last five books of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

- Short papers (3 x 10% = 30%)

In these short papers (500–700 words each), you will have to explain what you think is the upshot of each of the three studies of *Oneself as Another*. You will also have to clarify Ricœur's relation to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. These papers will have to be submitted on *myCourses* one hour before our lecture. During the lecture, only half of the group will meet to participate in a learning activity (e.g., a discussion). You will then have 48h to submit on *myCourses* an updated version of your paper in which you discuss how your original view has evolved (+100–300 words). Grading criteria: accuracy, clarity, organization, originality and critical thinking. Late work without approved extension will be penalized at the rate of 5% per calendar day past the due date.

- Final exam (40%)

The final exam will be cumulative. You will have three hours to respond to one question. The exam will take place in class during McGill's Final Exams period (Dec. 7–Dec. 21). You will have access to your books and your notes. Grading criteria: accuracy, clarity, organization, originality and critical thinking.

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)

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« 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](#).)