

Government 90to (Spring 2011)

Wednesdays, 2–4 p.m., CGIS South #040

Nature, Virtue, and Happiness in Ancient Thought Philosophical Scholarship and Contemporary Theory

*Don Tontiplaphol**

Current as of April 6, 2011

(The schedule is set through Meeting 11.)

Course Description

The key concepts of ancient ethics include *nature*, *virtue*, and *happiness*. But what are the different ways in which Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics put these concepts into relation? And how do they rely on these concepts in evaluating political arrangements? This course explores the ethical foundations of ancient political thought by situating our thinkers in debates of philosophical scholarship and also by examining contemporary thinking inspired by reflection on ancient ethics.

Rationale

This seminar aims to do four things.

First, in connecting major texts explicitly to lively debates in interpretation, the course hopes to prepare undergraduate theorists interested in ancient thought for engagement in the controversies that animate scholarly research. Exposure to this kind of engagement is had usually just in graduate-level seminars; we should seek to bridge that gap.

Second, the course will bring out the ethical foundations that underwrite ancient political theories. I suspect that the quick pace of Government 10 or 1060 does not—and cannot, and should not—often afford a sustained treatment of these ethical, metaethical, and moral-psychological issues. But these foundational issues constitute, I think, the most interesting and challenging site of recent scholarship. Moreover, that ancient thinkers often linked their political theory to their ethical thought suggests that scrutinizing the shape of their ethics will yield new insights on their more direct discussions in political theory.

Third, it seeks to show how reflection on certain themes in ancient thought affect contemporary theorizing on welfare and well-being; so-called “virtue ethics”; democratic theory; and the justification of political practices and institutions. But how are we to spell out this connection between ancient thought and contemporary theory?

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I mentioned above the “shape” of ancient ethics, and, by extension, of ancient political theories. One way in which we can profitably approach ancient thought is to separate its *form* or *shape* or *structure* from its substantive commitments—from its *content*, so to speak. (Of course, there will be important differences in form and content both *across* and *within* different families of ancient thought.) If we may proceed in this fashion, we shall be able to explore and evaluate those *neo*-Platonist or *neo*-Aristotelian or *neo*-Stoic theories that, in our contemporary context, deserve further attention. Put perhaps over-ambitiously, we shall be in a position to see more clearly what is living and what is dead in ancient thought. (This explains the tripartite division that often characterizes the seminar’s weekly readings, readings that traverse primary, secondary, and contemporary material.)

Fourth, and finally, the course will, if interest permits, incorporate these aims into its schedule: students will be expected, for Meetings 12 and 13, to propose, explore, and defend lines of thought for further discussion. This will give students the opportunity to begin their senior-thesis projects in a constructive but critical context, or to bring out ideas they’ve so far found puzzling and worth pursuing more deeply.

Texts

Our material will revolve around three headings: *primary* readings; *secondary* works in philosophical scholarship; and *contemporary* theorizing inspired by ancient ethical and political thought. If some secondary or contemporary works are not electronically available through Hollis, I will post them to the course iSite, in PDF form. (Hint: If the schedule entry includes citation material, then it’s up to you to find the relevant reading.) As to our primary texts, most translations will do, so long as they supply the standard scholarly—Stephanus or Bekker—pagination.¹

Knowledge of ancient Greek is certainly not necessary for the course, though I will occasionally point out difficulties in the Greek, if they pose philosophical trouble. If anything, you should have some background in contemporary moral or political theory, whether through the Philosophy Department, Moral (or Ethical) Reasoning, or courses similar to Government 10. Government 1060 is not required, but acquaintance with the span of ancient thought would surely be useful.

Nonetheless, I should make some recommendations. Beware of online translations, since they tend to lack scholarly pagination; more importantly, they tend to employ antiquated language and controversial interpretations. For the cases of Plato and Aristotle, Cooper’s *Plato* (Hackett) and Barnes’s *Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton) are quite handy—they are both omnibus collections. But most paperback copies by respectable university presses will do just fine. Otherwise, if you have questions about which editions to get, please e-mail me. I will provide all of the readings for Meeting 2; this should give you time to find a few bargains.

Be sure to bring print versions of the week’s readings to class; I will not allow computers in seminar.

¹ When it comes to Meeting 11, I will provide the primary material.

Requirements

The requirements for this seminar come in either of two forms: first, a version for students interested in pursuing ancient thought in their senior theses or otherwise disposed to write a term paper (18–22 pp.); second, a version for those whose research interests do not directly touch on ancient thought or who may feel more comfortable with several shorter essays. On either version you choose, all assignments must be completed in order to pass the course.

The Long Version

Participation (20%): attendance and engagement, including one presentation on the fixed course material (Meetings 3 through 11).

Prospectus & Presentation (20%): a prospectus (6–8 pp., due March 30) of one’s senior-thesis or term-paper ideas, to be presented and discussed during Meetings 12 and 13 (depending on student interest), in consultation with me; presenters will choose the readings for those sessions, in light of their research aims.

Research Paper (60%): a research paper (18–22 pp., due May 4) on a topic related both to one’s senior-thesis ideas and to issues in ancient thought, or to a particular topic in ancient thought.

The Short Version

Participation (20%): attendance and engagement, including one presentation on the fixed course material (Meetings 3 through 11).

Short Essays (60% total): five short essays (4 pp. each) on topics that arise as the course proceeds; for these essays, there will not be paper prompts; the topics are up to you, but take note of the comment for Meeting 8 on the schedule below.

Final Essay (20%): a paper (8 pp., due May 4) on a given topic (from among a set of pre-circulated prompts, or in consultation with me).

Additional Remarks

Participation. Attendance is required; each student will be allowed one absence; every additional absence triggers a $\frac{1}{3}$ penalty against the attendance component of your grade. Needless to say, active participation in the seminar discussion is also expected. Presentations on the fixed course material (Meetings 3 through 11) should last between five and ten minutes.

Prospectus and short essays. Students who choose either the Long or Short Version of the seminar’s requirements must read aloud their prospectus or short essay at an appointed office hour, during which I will deliver my comments and begin a discussion of your ideas.

Paper submission. All written work must be submitted both in paper and in electronic form (in PDF form), by 5 p.m. on the due date; details to follow.

A.E.O. Students with accessibility needs should discuss their cases with me as soon as possible.

Schedule

Let me note that I reserve the right to make changes, additions, and subtractions to this schedule, as our interests and needs develop over the term.

Introduction

Meeting 1. January 26: Logistics and overview.

Syllabus.—Our bundle of key concepts: nature, virtue, and happiness.—Eudaimonism, perfectionism, “virtue ethics,” and “virtue theory.”—Prospects for a form of “virtue politics”?—And what is “philosophical scholarship,” anyway?

PRIMARY. Selections (to be discussed in class) from Plato’s *Meno*; Aristotle’s *Ethics* and his *Politics*.

SECONDARY. Selections (to be discussed in class) from Irwin’s *The Development of Ethics*; Charles’s *Aristotle’s Philosophy of Action*, on “philosophical scholarship.”

Meeting 2. February 2: Bearings.

PRIMARY. [As you prepare for Meeting 2, begin reading the primary material assigned for Meeting 3, since it may seem ambitious.]

SECONDARY. Everson’s “Introduction: Virtue and Morality”; Annas’s “Prudence and Morality in Ancient and Modern Ethics,” in *Ethics* 105.2, pp. 241ff.; Irwin’s “Prudence and Morality in Greek Ethics,” in *Ethics* 105.2, pp. 284ff.

CONTEMPORARY. Zagzebski’s “The Admirable Life and the Desirable Life”; McDowell’s “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 52, pp. 13–29 (McFetridge’s reply is optional); Foot’s “Rationality and Goodness.”

OPTIONAL. Thompson’s “Apprehending Human Form” (only if you have spare time—it is a long but very fun and provocative article; no rush, though, since we shall read it in earnest later on).

Socrates & Plato

Meeting 3. February 9: Articulating virtue.

PRIMARY. Plato’s *Meno* (entire) and his *Protagoras* (320d–end).

SECONDARY. Devereux’s “Nature and Teaching in Plato’s *Meno*,” in *Phronesis* 23.2 (1978), pp. 118ff.; Segvic’s “Protagoras’ Political Art,” in *Rhizai* 2 (2004), pp. 7ff.; Taylor’s “Platonic Ethics.”

CONTEMPORARY. McDowell’s “Virtue and Reason,” in *The Monist* 62.3 (1979), pp. 331ff.

Meeting 4. February 16: Justice and its critics. (Presentation: Adam.)

PRIMARY. Plato’s *Republic* I–II, IV.

SECONDARY. Cooper’s “Two Theories of Justice,” in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 74.2 (2000), pp. 5ff.; Williams’s “The Analogy of City and Soul in Plato’s *Republic*.”

CONTEMPORARY. Murdoch’s *The Sovereignty of Good* (selections); Wiggins’s “Glaucón’s and Adeimantus’ Interrogation of Socrates.”

OPTIONAL. Cooper’s “The Psychology of Justice in Plato,” in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14.2 (1977), pp. 151ff.

Meeting 5. February 23: Nature and moral knowledge.

PRIMARY. *Republic* V–VII.

SECONDARY. Annas's "Plato, *Republic* V–VII."

CONTEMPORARY. McDowell's "Virtue and Reason" [revisit from Meeting 3].

OPTIONAL. Fine's "Knowledge and Belief in *Republic* V–VII"; Sedley's "Philosophy, the Forms, and the Art of Ruling." [These are optional, but they are both very provocative and helpful.]

*Aristotle***Meeting 6. March 2:** Eudaimonism and virtue.

PRIMARY. *Nicomachean* I–II, X; and his *Protrepticus* (selections in bold, in Hutchinson & Johnson's "Provisional Reconstruction").

SECONDARY. McDowell's "The Role of *Eudaimonia* in Aristotle's Ethics"; Irwin's "Aristotle's Use of Prudential Concepts"; McDowell's "Response to Irwin"; Bobonich's "Why Should Philosopher's Rule?" in *Social Philosophy and Policy* 24.2, pp. 153ff.

OPTIONAL. Wilkes's "The Good Man and the Good for Man in Aristotle's Ethics," in *Mind* 87.348 (1978), pp. 553ff.

Meeting 7. March 9: Virtue, deliberation, and practical wisdom.

PRIMARY. *Nicomachean* III, VI–VII (but especially VI).

SECONDARY. McDowell's "Deliberation and Moral Development"; Burnyeat's "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good"; Wiggins's "Deliberation and Practical Reason," in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 76 (1975–76), pp. 29ff.

CONTEMPORARY. Hurka's "Virtuous Acts, Virtuous Dispositions," in *Analysis* 66.1 (2006), pp. 69ff.

OPTIONAL. McDowell's "Some Issues in Aristotle's Moral Psychology."

Meeting 8. March 23: Aristotelian naturalism.

PRIMARY. *Politics* I–III; *Nicomachean* I and X [revisit from Meeting 6].

SECONDARY. Everson's "Aristotle on Nature and Value"; Miller's "Naturalism," in the *Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, pp. 321ff. [available electronically via Hollis]; Annas's "Aristotle on Human Nature and Political Virtue," in *Review of Metaphysics* 49 (1996), pp. 731ff.

OPTIONAL. Lloyd's "The Idea of Nature in the *Politics*"; Everson's "Aristotle on the Foundations of the State," in *Political Studies* 36 (1988), pp. 89ff.

N.B. If you aim to choose the Short Version of the course requirements, this is the deadline to start turning in your short essays; if you have not turned in a short essay on (or before) this date (by 5 p.m.), the Short Version will be closed to you.

Meeting 9. March 30: Neo-Aristotelian naturalism. (Presentation: Yvette.)

SECONDARY. McDowell's "Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle's Ethics."

CONTEMPORARY. Dorsey's "Three Arguments for Perfectionism," in *Noûs* 44.1 (2010), pp. 59ff.; Thompson's "Apprehending Human Form" [revisit from Meeting 2] and his "Three Degrees of Natural Goodness"; Foot's "Rationality and Goodness" [revisit from Meeting 2].

Meeting 10. April 6: Democracy, liberty, and ideal theory.

PRIMARY. *Politics* VII–VIII, and III [revisit from Meeting 8].

SECONDARY. Nussbaum’s “Nature, Function, and Capability”; Charles’s “Perfectionism in Aristotle’s Political Theory.”

CONTEMPORARY. Nussbaum’s “Aristotle, Politics, and Human Capabilities,” in *Ethics* 111 (2000), pp. 102ff.

OPTIONAL. Barnes’s “Aristotle and Political Liberty”; Sorabji’s reply to Barnes; Keyt, “Aristotle and Anarchism,” in *Reason Papers* 18 (1993), pp. 133ff.; Waldron’s “The Wisdom of the Multitude,” in *Political Theory* 20 (1992), pp. 613ff.

*Stoicism***Meeting 11. April 13:** Stoicism. (Presentation: Duc.)

PRIMARY. Selections from Inwood and Gerson’s *The Stoics Reader*. [I will upload the PDF by 6 PM on Wednesday, April 6; note that these readings are meant to give a *taste*, so to speak, of Stoic thought. The fragmentary nature of our access to Stoicism makes it difficult to do more than that. Please read these selections *after* you’ve read Striker’s long article.]

SECONDARY. Striker’s “Following Nature”; Irwin’s “Socratic Paradox and Stoic Theory.” [These readings are now available on the iSite.]

OPTIONAL. Other sourcebooks on Stoicism include Long and Sedley’s *The Hellenistic Philosophers* and Inwood and Gerson’s *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*—these are available at Widener and Lamont.

*Presentations and Conclusion***Meeting 12. April 20:** Presentations. (Presentations: Yvette, Duc, and Adam.)

[At this session, prepare presentations on your research paper; each student will lead the session for 30 minutes; handouts would be helpful. Also for this session, each student must assign one or two readings (or re-readings), for the sake of framing the discussion; these assignments must be circulated at Meeting 11—if you wish to discuss material not previously assigned or distributed, you must copy and distribute these readings at Meeting 11 for each of us.]

Meeting 13. April 27: Conclusion. (Presentation: Don.)

[In this session, I will present some of my own work, and I shall try to recapitulate some of the themes that we’ve explored over the course of the semester.]

N.B. Between Friday, April 8, and Monday, April 18, each student must meet with me—one on one—for a maximum of 90 minutes, at an appointed office hour, to discuss your paper ideas. I will distribute an appointment schedule at Meeting 10.

	Fri., Apr. 8	Sat., Apr. 9	Mon., Apr. 11	Tue., Apr. 12	Mon., Apr. 18
9 AM	N/A			N/A	
11 AM	N/A				
1 PM					
3 PM				N/A	