PHIL 205: Ancient Philosophy

Syllabus

Instructor: Dr. Ashley McDowell

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Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays 9 – 10, Tuesdays and Thursdays 10:30 – 11:30
(unless a change is announced), and by appointment

Coffee hour discussions: Wednesdays after class – 4:00 – 5:00 (these are informal discussion sessions with me and others in the class, about course material and related topics)

Note: I will be sending announcements, handouts, assignments, and so forth to the class listserv. This listserv includes only your K email address, so make sure email sent there is forwarded to whatever email address you’re likely to check frequently.

Texts:
Christopher Biffle, A Guided Tour of Five Works by Plato: Third Edition
Robin Waterfield, transl., Plato’s “Gorgias”
Robin Waterfield, transl., Plato’s Republic
Christopher Biffle, A Guided Tour of Selections from Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics
Julia Annas, ed., Voices of Ancient Philosophy
Articles on reserve at the library

(note: there are also non-Biffle versions of Plato’s Dialogues and the Nicomachean Ethics available at the bookstore in case you want to have cleaner versions in addition.)

Course Description

In this class, we will study some of the thoughts of ancient Western philosophers. In particular, we’ll be focusing our attention on some central writings concerning the self, meaning, and morality. Ancient philosophers thought deeply about topics such as what it means to be a good or virtuous person, how we might be happy, and how we might lead meaningful lives. All of these concerns are important to us as well, of course, and there is much that we can learn from grappling with these arguments and theories.

This class is a history of philosophy course, rather than a history course. That means that we will be studying the ideas, arguments, and theories put forth by ancient philosophers, rather than biographical, cultural, anthropological, or historical issues about them or their time period. We will largely be trying to understand what these thinkers were trying to say, and why they thought what they did. In addition, we will be discussing the merits of the various positions and reasons offered. What philosophers are interested in is the truth, or at least greater understanding, and that is what we will be pursuing in this class.

Our methodology will be to study the works of the greatest of the ancients – Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle – in the most depth. We will work through several dialogues and works carefully and thoroughly, giving you the experience of really working hard on individual thinkers. We will read Plato/Socrates’s Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Gorgias, and parts of The Republic, as well as selections from Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics.

We will also spend some time focusing on topics rather than individual philosophers – in particular, we will read various ancient pieces about 1) praise, blame, and responsibility for our actions and 2) how one should live. Readings will come from philosophers such as Epicurus, Cicero, Herodotus, and Lucretius.

Along the way, you will read some contemporary nonphilosophical pieces to give perspective and new angles on the ancient texts on which we’re focusing.

In this class, there will be high expectations in terms of careful and thorough reading. You will be assessed on your grasp of the ideas and arguments studied, as well as on your ability to reflect on those ideas and arguments and contribute your own reasoned responses. Grading will be almost entirely on the basis of essays and papers.

Class Format

This class will consist of a combination of lecture and discussion. In general, I will spend time every day taking your questions about the reading and the previous class’s material, and we will then go over and talk about the current day’s material. I will sometimes have you break up into pairs or groups to work on an in-class assignment or discussion. Since philosophical learning is best done in an environment of discussion, attendance and participation are expected.

You will be responsible for completing the readings before each class, and being prepared to discuss those readings. You should be aware that some of the readings in this course will most likely be quite challenging for you. Give yourself plenty of time to do these readings carefully. Those who want to truly excel in this class will most likely want to read each assignment at least twice, and take notes on the readings. You must bring with you to class whatever text(s) we are working on for that day.

In this class, we will be discussing issues that most people find important, and on which many people have strong opinions. We will not be merely exchanging opinions, but will be seeking the truth. In that spirit, everyone’s contributions will be both respected and
open to thoughtful criticism.

Course Requirements and Grading Scheme

Response papers: 10%

Every Monday (excluding First Week), you will write a response paper on an assigned topic related to the material currently being covered. This will be a typed, double-spaced short essay, and it should be a page or two in length (a little over or under is okay). Response papers will generally involve you thinking about the material we’ve been discussing or reading in a personal way, either grappling with your own view on a topic or applying the ideas to things in your own life. These response papers might be shared with the class, unless you ask me (on the paper) not to do so – you may also ask me to only share your paper with the class anonymously, if you like.

I will be assigning these papers either ü+*, ü, or ü-. These correspond approximately to grades of A, B, and C, respectively. (Papers straddling the borders between these grades will have a grade indicating as much, such as “ü+ / ü-“). In extreme cases where the paper does not answer addressing the question asked, one may receive no credit for a reaction paper turned in (an “x”).

The point of the essays is to integrate your academic learning of the material into your personal life and thinking, and to have the experience of constructing statements of your own reactions to the topics studied. They are meant to help you see the material as relevant to your life, and to see yourself as able to take a place in the ongoing debate about philosophical issues. I will grade these on the basis of how well I see you trying to do those things, not on the basis of your ability to regurgitate facts from the readings, or parrot back to me thoughts I or the philosophers studied have expressed.

Long papers: 25% each

You will be writing three relatively long (about 8-page) papers for this course. The first two will be on topics of your choice (in consultation with me) relating to the readings by Socrates/Plato and by Aristotle. They will be due a week or so after we finish the material on each philosopher.

Your final paper will incorporate the readings from Plato and from Aristotle as well as the material covered at the very end of the class, from Voices of Ancient Philosophy, and will be due during exam week.

These papers will be assessed on the strength of your understanding of the philosophers, your exegesis of their positions, and your insights on the works studied. You will be expected to present arguments cleanly, clearly, and with reasons designed to convince any rational person.

Assignment responsibilities:

I will be able to look at rough drafts, either turned in or during office hours; I will let you know details as the time gets nearer. I also encourage you to run rough drafts by each other or your peers at the Writing Center. Whether I look at them or not, rough drafts and outlines of each of your long papers will be due along with the final drafts.

All assignments must be turned in as hard (paper) copies – no emailed assignments will be accepted except by special permission. It is your responsibility to retain copies of all assignments you turn in, in a reliable format. An assignment that is between one hour and 24 hours late will receive a ½ grade reduction. An assignment that is between one day and two weeks late will receive a full grade reduction. Assignments will not be accepted more than two weeks late.

You will be permitted one “freebie”: an assignment turned in as much as two days late, no questions asked, as long as you let me know you’re taking your freebie. Be mindful not to use it lightly.

The formal requirements for all assignments will be announced in detail well ahead of time in class, and most likely on the website and through the email listserv.

A note on changing grades: if you feel you have been assigned a grade unfairly or inaccurately, you should by all means talk to me about it. My only requirement is that you prepare an argument (a set of reasons and facts) before you do so.

A note on reading: don’t succumb to the misconception that in order to read something you only have to move your eyes over the lines, or “read it out loud in your head,” so to speak. What I expect is that you will read the material in a more sophisticated way, thinking as you go. You should be asking yourself the main points, making sure you understand the structure of the reading, thinking about how this reading relates to others you’ve done, and otherwise working to comprehend the material, not just to complete a technical “reading” of it. You might try highlighting, underlining, making marginal notes, or outlining – whatever helps you focus and understand.

Participation, class conduct, and other assignments: 15%

Participation is expected. In a philosophy class of this kind, discussion is absolutely essential, and may be the way you learn most about the material. I know that participation is difficult for some people, but you can consider this a safe place to practice contributing to a group discussion, which you will surely need to do throughout your life. I will require and ensure that conversation in class, although probably critical of ideas, will not be critical of people.

I will keep general track of your contributions in class. Keep in mind that contributions can take various forms, including asking for clarification, participation in group work, and giving helpful examples. Keep in mind also that more does not necessarily mean better: those who excessively dominate discussions, speak disrespectfully, or otherwise use their voices in a negative way may be penalized for doing so. If you are in doubt, ask me.

Your conduct in this class includes improvement and effort. It also includes issues of respectful behavior, such as tardiness, distracting behavior, or disrespectful behavior towards members of the class. We will go over this in class.

I will occasionally give you in-class or perhaps out-of-class assignments in addition to your papers and response papers. I may
have you turn in some of the exercises from the “Guided Tour” books, for example; or answer a short question in class to help me gauge the level of understanding in the class. These assignments will be included in this portion of the grade.

**Attendance:**
Attendance is expected: *three or more unexcused absences will result in a full grade reduction for the course*. Absences will only be excused for required sports activities or practices or for a dire personal circumstance.

**Grading scheme:**
Reaction papers (average of all): 10%
Long Papers, at 25% each: 75%
Participation, class conduct, and assignments: 15%
Academic integrity and the Honor System

“It is always important to think of the intellectual world as a community of mutual dependence, mutual helpfulness, mutual protectiveness, and common delight. We take ideas from others and we give them to others. We are indebted to others, and others are indebted to us. In sharing and acknowledging the community, we define ourselves more certainly as individuals. The ability to describe our sources is also an ability to define our own originality and our own selves. All communities depend on generosity, trust, definition, and the proper use of sources is part of the mortar that holds the community of the mind together.”

- Richard Marius, Expository Writing Program, Harvard University

In this class, as in all classes at Kalamazoo College, we will be operating under the Honor System. It is important that you familiarize yourself with that system. You should also familiarize yourself with proper procedures for collaborating, doing research, and citing sources. I expect each of you to visit my webpage and read the essay there called “Plagiarism and How to Avoid It” (http://kzoo.edu/~mcdowell/Academic_integrity_and_plagiarism.htm). Should you have any questions about citations, plagiarism, or honor system issues, please visit or contact me.

Any assignment you turn in that I find to violate academic integrity, either through dishonesty, plagiarism, lack of appropriate citations, or unauthorized collaboration, will receive a grade of 0. Any further instance of a violation of academic integrity will be punished by a failing grade in the class as a minimum sanction.[1]

Special needs

If you have any special needs that I can accommodate, please let me know as soon as possible.

Office hours

My office hours are posted above. They will be conducted on a first-come, first-served basis, and by appointment, with appointments taking precedence. You should feel absolutely free to come to them and discuss the course, the material, the assignments, or philosophy.

I request that each of you take a few minutes to visit me during my office hours sometime in the first week or two of classes. It will be an opportunity for us to chat one-on-one for the first time, and to get to know each other a bit more.
Schedule of Readings

This schedule is tentative. Any changes will be announced in class and by email. The reading assignments listed for each day must be completed before that class. All readings are found in your textbooks or are on reserve at the library.

WEEK ONE
M 1/3            Introduction to Class and Ancient Philosophy

PART ONE:
Plato

W 1/5            Plato: *Euthyphro* (Biffle)
F 1/7            Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Judge Not?” (on reserve at the library)

WEEK TWO
M 1/10           Plato: *Apology* (Biffle)
W 1/12           Plato: *Crito* (Biffle)
F 1/14           MLK teach-in: How our thinking leads to evil; can we dream to overcome?
Denise Cummins, “Minds in Groups: How Others Influence Our Behavior” and
Stanley Milgram, “An Experiment in Autonomy” and
John Jay Chapman, “Coatesville” (all on reserve at the library)

WEEK THREE
M 1/17           MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. HOLIDAY: NO CLASS
W 1/19           Gorgias and Irwin, pages TBA
F 1/21           Gorgias and Irwin contd.; pages TBA

WEEK FOUR
M 1/24           Irwin Ch. 8
W 1/26           *The Republic* Book 2
F 1/28           *The Republic* Book 6

WEEK FIVE
M 1/31           *The Republic* Book 9; look also at the margin exercises in Ch. 5, “Allegory of the Cave,” in Biffle
W 2/2            Selections from *The Republic* Book 12: 588b – end; and
Richard Wright, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” (online: http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/White/anthology/wright.html)
F 2/4            “Plato's Forms: For and Against” from *Voices of Ancient Philosophy* (pages 234 – 259)

WEEK SIX

PART TWO:
Aristotle

M 2/7            *Nicomachean Ethics*, Biffle’s Introduction and
Viktor Frankl, selections from *Man’s Search for Meaning* (on reserve in library)
W 2/9            *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I (Biffle)
F 2/11           *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II (Biffle)

WEEK SEVEN
M 2/14           Confucius, from *Analects* and
St. Mathew, “Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount” (both on reserve in library)
W 2/16      *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III (Biffle)
F 2/18      *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books IV – VI (Biffle)

**WEEK EIGHT**
M 2/21      *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books VII – IX (Biffle) and
Philip Hallie, “Goodness Personified in Le Chambon” *(on reserve in library)*
W 2/23      *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X (Biffle)
Voltaire, “The Good Brahmin,” and
Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, “The Four Noble Truths” *(all on reserve in library)*

**WEEK NINE**
M 2/28      “Fate and Freedom” – introduction and Section A *(Voices of Ancient Philosophy)*

**PART THREE:**
Topics

W 3/2       “Fate and Freedom” – Section B *(Voices of Ancient Philosophy)*
F 3/4       “Fate and Freedom” – Sections C and D *(Voices of Ancient Philosophy)*

**WEEK TEN**
M 3/7       “How Should You Live?” – Sections A and B *(Voices of Ancient Philosophy)*
W 3/9       “How Should You Live?” – Section C *(Voices of Ancient Philosophy)*
F 3/11      “How Should You Live?” – Section D *(Voices of Ancient Philosophy)*

[1] I owe some of the phrasing in this statement to Prof. Vaughn Maatman