Course Description

In the 4th century, Aristotle became the last person to know everything. That is, he was the last person who was the leading expert on every single topic or discipline that his society engaged with. Aristotle (and his mentor, Plato) became the basis for much (if not most) of intellectual life and history in what is now called the Western world for the next two thousand years. Basically, any intellectual living in the Christian or Muslim world was some kind of Aristotelian or Platonist (or was at least deeply involved in responding to them). This was also true for ethics. Aristotle’s approach to ethics, which centered around *eudaimonia* (happiness or flourishing) and *arete* (virtue or excellence), was more or less standard orthodoxy in the Western world. Much of the debate around moral philosophy centered merely on how to understand those two words.

However, beginning with Copernicus in the sciences and Descartes in philosophy, Western intellectual currents moved away from Aristotle after the high water mark of his influence in Western Europe during the high and late Middle Ages. These trends were present in ethics and politics, where thinkers like Hobbes, Locke, and Hume gave rise to modern theories of ethics and politics. Aristotle and his approach to ethics were more or less relegated to mere historical interest in the intellectually vibrant centers of scientific and Enlightenment thought.

Until about the middle of the twentieth century, that is. Elizabeth Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre forcefully argued for a return to Aristotle’s approach to ethics, or Virtue Ethics, as a panacea or response to modern ethical theories and problems. This course will explore Aristotle’s approach to ethics and some of his most important acolytes in the English-speaking philosophical tradition, today. Virtue Ethics has become one of the standard ethical theories along with Deontology and Utilitarianism in contemporary analytical philosophy, and we will do our best to unpack some of the most serious examples of this kind of moral philosophy.

Instructor

Michael Otteson

Email: all contact with me should occur over the Canvas messaging system.

Required Texts

*Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle

*Intention*, G.E.M. Anscombe

*After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre

*Intelligent Virtue*, Julia Annas

In the case of Aristotle, I have assigned a specific translation that I especially like. However, provided your translation has line numbers, you can use whatever translation you would like.

Grading

*Response Papers: 20%*
Engaging with difficult and sophisticated texts in writing is a difficult but extremely important skill. My goal in this course is to help you learn to better read, comprehend, and discuss the writing of other people. This is a skill that goes far beyond understanding Aristotle or Anscombe. No matter what you do, being able to extract and explain the ideas and arguments that other people put forward is a key life skill. It is about becoming a better, more careful thinker who is actually capable of engaging in substantial dialogue with others without misunderstanding or misrepresenting them.

To that end, the first few weeks of the course will focus on extracting and explaining key passages from *Nicomachean Ethics* as a way of practicing this skill. The first four weeks of the semester will involve responding to four prompts available on Canvas (one for each week). They will be entirely exegetical. That means that your job in the response papers is to explain what Aristotle says (nothing more). To do that effectively, you will need to find key passages where Aristotle presents one of his key concepts or arguments. You must quote it in the paper, explain the passage in your own words, and then explain what he is driving at. If you are wondering, we are focusing on Aristotle because he is foundational to everything else that happens in the course and represents the text furthest removed from (and thus probably the most difficult for) us to read in 2021.

The response papers will be at least one and no more than two pages long. If you turn in anything remotely resembling an answer to the prompt, you will get full credit. However, I will give you feedback on each of your response papers with regards to how well you understood and explained Aristotle’s writing. If you want to improve as a thinker and writer (and to get a good grade on the more substantive papers), then you will do your best to incorporate my feedback into your writings going forward. This, in other words, is me giving you feedback on your writing so that you can do better on later assignments.

*Reading Questions: 20%*

The academy (including and especially the literal Academy where Aristotle studied and helped give birth to the Western intellectual tradition) is about the intellect. It is about the mind’s ability to grasp and comprehend truth and goodness (and beauty). To this end, the three questions of academia are as follows:

“Huh?”

“Really?”

“So what?”

“Huh?” is about what someone has said. It is the ability or process of understanding what another person has tried to communicate. This is an act of interpretation. Whenever someone says something, it is always a separate process for the listener(s) to determine what the person said. This may seem trivial, but it is not (especially in a field like philosophy). Interpreting what other people have said is often ambiguous, difficult, or contested. This does not mean there are not right answers, or that some answers are not better or more plausible than others.
However, it does mean that a simple question like “huh” is actually an exercise or activity of the intellect, not a matter of vain or rote repetition or regurgitation.

“Really?” is about justification or reasons. That is, it is about determining why someone believes or defends something that they have said. It is the process of both understanding why another person holds the position that they do and evaluating for yourself whether or not those reasons or arguments are satisfactory. This is also an exercise of the intellect. Rationality is about the search for reasons. Why do we believe as we do? Why should we act or behave in a certain way?

“So what?” is about why something matters. It is determining the value or importance of information, concepts, ideas, or arguments within a human life. Why does something matter to us? Should we care about something? How does it make us wiser, more thoughtful, or better?

For every day that we assigned readings in class, you will need to send to me your answers to these questions in regards to the readings for the day. You will take no more than three sentences (for each question) to explain about each reading the “Huh,” the “Really,” and the “So What.” In other words, you will briefly explain what the author said, why the author said it, and why it matters or potentially matters for their larger project, ethics, or human life generally. Your answers to these questions will be due thirty minutes before the beginning of class. I will use them (as should you) to facilitate class discussion. It will prepare you to engage in a rigorous examination and consideration of the text in conjunction with myself and your classmates.

This is a lot of work. However, it is work that is essentially for developing critical thinking skills that you will use everywhere. As Aristotle and the other virtue ethicists know, any skill requires practices to master. There is no way around improving other than doing it over and over again with an eye towards improvement. Furthermore, I will not grade these responses on content. If you have made a good faith effort to do them, then you will get your points for the day. However, I will give you seven days during the semester where you don’t have to turn in questions. That is to say, of the days where we have assigned readings, if you respond to the questions above on all of those days except seven, you will get full credit for the semester.

I will also say that if you do these reading questions consistently, you may very well have written your long papers by the time we are done.

Ask a Question: 10%

In the context of most papers in college, you argue for and defend a thesis. That is, you argue for a positive answer to some question or topic. This assignment will focus on asking, rather than answering, a question. Being able to ask good questions is an underrated yet critical part of developing as a thinker. It is not possible to find serious answers without first identifying serious questions. Thus, this question must be more than just clarification. This question will first ground itself in an understanding of the text. It will show that the student comprehends key aspects of the author’s perspective. Through it, the student should demonstrate that they grasp the contours of the theory in question and can find rough edges or material for further discussion or thought. This question will be substantive in the sense that it will deal with a key aspect of the
text and suggest avenues or pathways for further work or analysis. The goal of this assignment is for you to think about the substantive aspects of the text in an important way. This, again, is a transportable skill that will serve you no matter what you have to read or respond to your life and career. As such, this is another opportunity for me to give you feedback that will hopefully help you refine your engagement with difficult and sophisticated texts. As with the response papers, I will give you full credit for good faith participation. However, if you want to improve as a thinker and a writer, you should do your best to incorporate the feedback you get into your later projects for the course. The Ask a Question assignment will be due at least a week before the first long paper is due.

Two Long Papers: 50%

These two papers will, unlike the response papers, Ask a Question, and reading questions, be graded for content. They represent the substantive assignments of the course. I will give you latitude in determining your topic, but both papers should do two things: 1) explain a key argument or concept from one (or two) of the books we are reading, and 2) offer a substantive evaluation of the text. You can do this by either writing about one author or comparing/contrasting two of them when they write about the same topic. The goal of this assignment is to put together the skills in both exegesis (interpretation) and critical engagement that we have developed throughout the course of the semester into a refined and polished project. Again, I care about the content of the paper as a philosopher, but nonetheless this is supposed to be a portable skill that will serve you well no matter what discipline or field you go into in your life. Your first paper will be due in the middle of the semester and must be on Aristotle, MacIntyre, or both. Your second paper must be on Anscombe, Annas, or both.

Policies

Late Work

In normal circumstances, I only accept late work in conjunction with an academic or other medical/emergency related excuse (the bar is pretty high here). Furthermore, I am far more sympathetic to requests for extensions in advance of deadlines rather than after them. However, we are not living in normal circumstances, and I understand that this semester poses unique challenges to both instructors and students. The standard is still that work be turned in on time, and at the end of the semester my hands are tied. However, if students have an emergency and/or contact me in advance, I want to be as accommodating as I can be with deadlines. Please reach out to me if you are going to have problems getting assignments in on time.

Class Decorum

It is crucial that we treat each other with respect during these class discussions. We are covering material that is both difficult to understand and that has potential bearing on some sensitive subjects. As such, we must be civil to each other if this class is to succeed. If you are disrespectful towards others, I will dock your final grade.
**Attendance Policy**

Students are expected to regularly attend class on the days that they are required to be in-person and to Zoom in to class discussions at the time they occur otherwise. However, this is college, and as a rule I don't think it is my job to make you come to class every day. Class lectures and discussion will be the main engine of this course, so if you want to do well in the course, you will need to make an effort to regularly participate in and contribute to class discussions. Answering the reading questions will help you do this.

**Changes to the Syllabus**

This syllabus and the course schedule are subject to change. Please make note of any changes to it in class. I will post updated versions of the syllabus from time to time (as needed).

**Covid**

This is obviously an unusual time to hold class. I designed the assignments and this course so that you could complete any and all assignments if you have to quarantine. If you illness becomes severe enough that you cannot complete the assignments as they are listed, please contact me and the university’s Covid office in order to receive extensions on assignments.

**Course Schedule**

**Week 1**

1/19 Introduction
1/21 Nicomachean Ethics (NE) I.1-7

**Week Two**

1/26 NE I.8-13 Response Paper 1 Due
1/28 NE II

**Week Three**

2/2 NE III Response Paper 2 Due
2/4 NE IV

**Week Four**

2/9 NE V.1-6 Response Paper 3 Due
2/11 NE V.7-11

**Week Five**

2/16 NE VI Response Paper 4 Due
2/18 NE X.7-8, Discussion Day

**Week Six**
2/23 Intention 1-25
2/25 Intention 26-50

*Week Seven*
3/2 Intention 51-75
3/4 Intention 76-103

*Week Eight*
3/9 After Virtue (AV) 1-35 Must Complete Ask a Question by this date
3/11 AV 36-61

*Week Nine*
3/16 AV 62-87 First Paper Due
3/18 AV 88-120

*Week Ten*
3/23 AV 181-203
3/25 AV 204-226

*Week Eleven*
3/30 AV 227-263
4/1 Intelligent Virtue (IV) 1-15

*Week Twelve*
4/6 IV 16-52
4/8 Friday Schedule

*Week Thirteen*
4/13 IV 52-83
4/15 IV 83-119

*Week Fourteen*
4/20 IV 119-146
4/22 IV 146-176

*Week Fifteen*
4/27 Discussion Day
4/29 Finals Week

*Week Sixteen*
5/3 Second Paper Due