

PHIL GU4089

Location: TBA

Time: Fall 2019, Monday 2:10-4pm

Office hours:

Teaching Assistants: TBA

Aristotle

1. Course description

The course offers an advanced introduction to key themes in Aristotle's philosophy. It is open to undergraduate and graduate students and does not presuppose prior study of Aristotle. We focus on three related sets of themes, where Aristotle's arguments and proposals have lasting influence:

- (1) Aristotle's conception of vice, akrasia, control, and virtue.
- (2) Aristotle's conception of decision-making, agency, causation, the future, and ignorance in action.
- (3) Aristotle's conception of thinking and the virtues of thinking.

For Aristotle, akrasia (lack of control, sometimes discussed as "weakness of will") is better than vice, but worse than control and much worse than virtue. We examine this scale, asking: What precisely is the failure that Aristotle calls akrasia? Why is it better than vice? Why is akrasia worse than control? Why is control less than virtue and why is it inherently deficient? The course starts with a look at some key selections on akrasia and decision-making. For a deeper exploration, it turns out, we need to read widely, covering themes in physics, metaphysics, and the philosophy of psychology.

The nature of akrasia is much-debated. Philosophers find it puzzling that, seemingly, we act against our own decision. They focus on examples such as eating another piece of cake, *against* one's own decision that one shouldn't have another piece of cake. Philosophers invoke Aristotle's view, either to agree with him or to depart from him. Davidson famously complained that Aristotle's view is "moralizing," because for Aristotle akrasia involves that the agent, overwhelmed by desire, acts contrary to her correct judgment. Two ideas are especially contentious: the distinction between two faculties, reason and desire, and the question of whether akrasia must involve a *correct* judgment as opposed to, simply, the agent's best or all-things-considered judgment.

We deepen our study of decision-making by looking more broadly at how Aristotle conceives of human thinking, the sphere of action, and our relation to the future. We ask questions such as: are we and our actions fully situated in the sphere of physics, characterized by change? What kinds of causes are operative in this sphere? Is luck a cause? Are *we* the causes of our actions? What kinds of thinking are involved in decision making? These are perennial questions in philosophy of mind, ethics, metaphysics, and the philosophy of action. Some contemporary readings are used to get clear about the influence of Aristotle's views as well as the differences between his proposals and positions today.

2. Readings

To explore Aristotle's proposals, we read selections from the *Topics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Eudemian Ethics*, *Physics*, *De anima* (= *On the soul*), *De interpretatione*, *Metaphysics* and *Posterior Analytics*, as well as seminal contemporary contributions in scholarship on Aristotle and in action theory.

Most readings will be available online through Butler Library and the course website.

Two editions of the *Nicomachean Ethics* will be ordered at BookCulture. Please make sure that you have access to one of these editions.

Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002 (paperback).

C.D.C. Reeve, *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2014 (paperback).

Recommended introductory articles on SEP:

"Aristotle" by Christopher Shields: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle/>>

"Aristotle's Ethics" by Richard Kraut: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/>>

"Ancient Theories of Soul" by Hendrik Lorenz: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ancient-soul/>>

"Aristotle's Psychology" by Christopher Shields: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-psychology/>>

A subsection of "Aristotle's Logic," namely "Premises: the Structures of Assertions," by Robin Smith: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-logic/#PreStrAss>>

3. Week-by-Week Plan

Additional specifics about primary and secondary literature will be announced prior to each class meeting.

Week 1, 09/09: Introduction—Aristotle on Virtue, Control, Akrasia, Vice
Nicomachean Ethics (NE) I.12, II.1-6, VII.1; selections from *Topics* I

Week 2, 09/16: Aristotle on Voluntary Action and Akrasia
NE III.1 and NE VII.2-10

Mehmet Erginel, "Akrasia and conflict in the *Nicomachean Ethics*" *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 2014

Week 3, 09/23: Aristotle on Becoming Bad

Guest speaker: Rachel Barney, University of Toronto

Reading: Rachel Barney, "Aristotle on Becoming Bad"

Commentators: Molly Gurdon (Columbia), Francey Russell (Barnard/Columbia)

This visit is part of the Workshop in Ancient & Contemporary Philosophy

Week 4, 09/30: Aristotle on Decision and Deliberation

NE III.2, 3, 4 and 5 (first sentence), NE VI.1-2

Week 5, 10/07: Aristotle on Nature, the Four Causes, Fate and Chance
Metaphysics A.1-3, Physics II.1-6

Week 6, 10/14: Aristotle on Necessity, Contingency, and the Future
Physics II.7-9, Nicomachean Ethics I.4, selections from *Posterior Analytics* and *De interpretatione*, chapters 1, 4, 9, 10

Week 7, 10/21: The Excellences of Thinking
Nicomachean Ethics VI.3 and 6 on *epistêmê* (systematic knowledge), *7* on *sophia* (accomplishment/theoretical wisdom) *5* on *phronêsis* (excellence in deliberation/practical wisdom), *11* on other excellences of practical thinking.

Week 8, 10/28: Aristotle on Virtue and Contemplation
Guest speaker: Sukaina Hirji, University of Pennsylvania
Reading: Sukaina Hirji, "Virtue and Contemplation"
Commentators: Giulia Bonasio (King's College/Dalhousie University), Natalie Hannan (CU)
This visit is part of the *Workshop in Ancient & Contemporary Philosophy*

NO CLASS

Week 9 11/11: Aristotle, Davidson, and Holton on Akrasia
NE VII.2-10. Donald Davidson, "How is Weakness of Will Possible?" In Joel Feinberg (ed.), *Moral Concepts*. Oxford University Press (1969); Richard Holton, "How is Strength of Will Possible?" In *Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality*, eds. Sarah Stroud and Christine Tappolet, OUP (2003).
Additional readings: Michael Frede, *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought. Sather Classical Lectures*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press (2011).
Richard Holton, "Intention and Weakness of Will," *Journal of Philosophy* 96 (1999).

Week 10, 11/18: The Puzzle of Addiction
Guest speaker: Hanna Pickard, Johns Hopkins University
Reading: Hanna Pickard, "The puzzle of addiction," in Pickard and Ahmed (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Science of Addiction* (2018).
Commentators: Justin Clarke-Doane (CU), Helen Zhao (CU).
This visit is part of the *Workshop in Ancient & Contemporary Philosophy*

Week 11, 11/25: Tripartition, Bipartition, Unity of the Soul
Plato, *Republic IV* (selection), Aristotle selections from *NE* and *On the Soul*.
Additional readings: Jeremiah Carey, "Akrasia, practical reason, and the diversity of motivation: A new defense of tripartition," *European Journal of Philosophy* (2019):1-11; Myles Burnyeat, "The Truth of Tripartition."

Week 12, 12/02: Akrasia and Addiction
Can Plato and Aristotle accommodate addiction, compulsion, eating disorders, etc.?
Plato, *Republic VIII-IX*.

Additional reading: Jay R. Wallace, "Addiction as Defect of the Will: Some Philosophical Reflections," *Law and Philosophy* (1999) 18: 621-654.

Week 13, 12/09: Action and Knowledge

Selection from *NE III*, *NE VI*, and the *Eudemian Ethics* on knowledge, belief, and ignorance in action.

4. Requirements

Outlines

Undergraduate students must submit outlines of portions of the assigned readings at the beginning of class. Typically, one chapter in an Aristotelian text is suitable. When preparing for class, read the entirety of the assigned text and choose a chapter that seems especially interesting to you. Secondary readings tend not to be required. In general, primary readings are preferable for outlines.

Graduate students are encouraged to also come to class with an outline of the reading, though they are not expected to submit it. The point of these outlines is to practice the kind of analytical reading that is needed for philosophical engagement with the text. The outlines also serve as preparation for in-class discussion. They should have two parts (roughly half a page each):

1. Make a bullet-point list of what you take to be important steps in the argument.
2. Pick two terms that come up in the text and explain how, according to the reading, we should understand these terms (for example, if the notion of action comes up, try to explain in one or two sentences what, according to this specific text, action is).

For undergraduates, the outlines count for 30% of the grade. You can skip two outlines per semester; in other words, you need to submit a total of 10 outlines.

Papers

Graduate students: One 15-page term paper, or two 7-page papers. 7-page papers are response papers to the weekly readings, including secondary readings.

- You should decide whether you write two 7-page papers or one 15-page paper by the first week of October. Please consult with me in office hours and/or let me know by email.
- If you write two 7-page papers, at least one paper must be submitted by 11/11, and the second paper on the last day of classes.
- If you write a 15-page paper, please submit a brief outline or abstract by mid-November.

Undergraduate students: One 8-page paper, or two 4-page papers. 4-page papers are response papers to the weekly readings, including secondary readings.

- You should decide whether you write two 4-page papers or one 8-page paper by the first week of October. Please consult with me in office hours and/or let me know by email.
- If you write two 4-page papers, at least one paper must be submitted by 10/28, and the second paper must be submitted at the latest on the last day of classes.
- If you write an 8-page paper, please submit an abstract by mid-November.

The 8-page paper or two 4-page papers count for 60% of the grade.

Participation

All students are expected to come to class prepared for in-class participation. For undergraduates, in-class participation counts for 10% of the grade.

5. Academic Integrity and Honor Code

Please consult Columbia University's policies on academic integrity as well as Columbia's honor code:

<http://www.college.columbia.edu/academics/academicintegrity>

<https://www.college.columbia.edu/ccschonorcode>

<http://bulletin.columbia.edu/general-studies/undergraduates/academic-policies/academic-integrity-community-standards/>

These policies explain Columbia University's academic regulations and how you can safeguard the integrity of your original work. Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are serious offenses. Please take the time to familiarize yourself with the details of what constitutes plagiarism and academic dishonesty. You are expected to confirm to these policies in your academic work. It is important that you understand that academic dishonesty can lead to disciplinary action, including failure in the course and suspension, or even expulsion, from the University.

6. Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations, students must first be registered with Disability Services. More information on the Disability Services registration process is available online at www.health.columbia.edu/ods. Registered students must present an Accommodation Letter to the professor before an exam or other accommodations can be provided. Students who have, or think they may have, a disability are invited to contact Disability Services for a confidential discussion at (212) 854-2388 (Voice/TTY) or by email at disability@columbia.edu.