



PHIL*4340 Current Debates in Ethics

Fall 2018

Section(s): C01

Department of Philosophy

Credit Weight: 0.50

Version 2.00 - August 28, 2018

1 Course Details

1.1 Calendar Description

This course offers an advanced study of problems in ethical theory. This course will examine contemporary and perennial issues in ethics through recent or historical texts. Texts and topics will vary with the instructor; students are advised to consult the Philosophy department's website.

Pre-Requisite(s): 1.00 credits in Philosophy at the 3000 level or 12.50 credits

1.2 Course Description

One of the most recent developments in ethics is a return to one of the most ancient ethical theorists, Aristotle. Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics advocates a return to some of Aristotle's core views in ethics, moral psychology, and, at times, metaphysics. The project of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is partly a project of renewing our efforts to interpret Aristotle. It is also a project that involves taking up novel philosophical views with an Aristotelian approach to philosophical questions. Our course, therefore, will consist of reading Aristotle, reading contemporary Aristotelians who interpret Aristotle, and reading contemporary philosophers who draw their inspiration from Aristotle.

This course will be centrally concerned with one thread of the neo-Aristotelian debate: neo-Aristotelian metaethics. Metaethics is the area of philosophy concerned with questions about the meaning of moral judgments and their metaphysical implications, Do moral judgments describe the world, or do something different, like express our attitudes? If they are descriptive, what are they descriptive of? Neo-Aristotelians answer as follows: moral judgments are descriptive of general norms that apply to human beings; they are natural norms for the sort of creature we are. Our course will seek to understand what that means: how can moral judgments be so understood? How do natural norms for humans relate to our thinking and motivation? What implications (if any) does thinking of morality in this way have for the content of morality?

1.3 Timetable

Timetable is subject to change. Please see WebAdvisor for the latest information.

1.4 Final Exam

There will be no final exam, but rather a final paper - see "Assessments."

2 Instructional Support

2.1 Instructor(s)

John Hacker-Wright

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Telephone: +1-519-824-4120 x56765
Office: MCKN 330
Office Hours: Wednesday 11:00-12:00

3 Learning Resources

We will be reading a variety of content this semester. I will make everything available on CourseLink/ARES reserve, but also recommend a couple of editions of Aristotle for purchase. If you have different editions, feel free to use those. I will always use Book and Chapter numbers, and, when greater specificity is required, Bekker numbers which are found in most editions of Aristotle.

3.1 Recommended Resource(s)

Aristotle, De Anima, Translated by C.D.C. Reeve, Hackett 2017 (Textbook)

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Translated by C.D.C. Reeve, Hackett, 2014 (Textbook)

4 Learning Outcomes

Learning Objectives: We will aim to achieve the following goals in this course, which fit within a framework for the Bachelor of Arts approved by the University of Guelph Senate. By the end of this course you will be able to:

4.1 Course Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

1. ...identify, comprehend, analyze and evaluate sophisticated arguments about theoretical issues in ethics in ancient and contemporary texts (literacy).
 2. ...better understand and articulate your ethical commitments (professional and ethical behavior).
 3. ... arrive at your own reasoned evaluation of the views that we will be discussing (creative and critical thinking).
 4. ...communicate your philosophical views on these issues to others clearly and concisely (communication).
 5. ...thoroughly understand key issues in ethics (depth and breadth of understanding).
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5 Teaching and Learning Activities

This section outlines the semester reading and assignment schedule class by class. It would be good to print it separately can keep handy for reference.

5.1 Seminar

Fri, Sep 7

Topic(s): Course Introduction: Review Syllabus, Introduce Topic

Mon, Sep 10

Topic(s): The Fundamentals of Aristotelian Naturalism:

Read Aquinas' "On the Principles of Nature " Chapters 1-3, and Aristotle, Physics, Book II, Chapter 1-3 (see Courselink/Ares for all readings)

In these first few classes, we will explore the Aristotle conception of nature. What does it mean to say something has a nature? This will be important for understanding what Aristotelians mean when they discuss human nature. This component will also introduce some central ideas in the Aristotelian understanding of nature, especially the four causes, which are the underlying principles of change.

Wed, Sep 12

Topic(s): The Fundamentals of Aristotelian Naturalism:

Read Aquinas, "On the Principles of Nature" Chapters 4-6; Aristotle, Physics, Book II, Chapters 7-9.

We will extend our discussion of the previous class especially focusing on the notion of teleology in nature. How does Aristotle conceive teleology in nature? Why is end-directedness on his

view an ineliminable facet of nature? How do formal and final cause relate to each other and relate to material and efficient causality?

Fri, Sep 14

Topic(s):

The Fundamentals of Aristotelian Naturalism:

Read Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, pp. 88-105

In this class we will examine the work of a contemporary metaphysician who advocates Aristotelian views about nature, in particular, Aristotelian views about the nature of causality. Does efficient causality depend on a notion of finality? What distinguishes intrinsic and extrinsic finality? Might there be finality in non-living things?

Mon, Sep 17

Topic(s):

The Fundamentals of Aristotelian Naturalism:

Read De Anima, Book I, Chapter 1

This meeting we will discuss how the teleology addressed in our previous meeting applies to the Aristotelian science of the soul. This science is often treated under the heading 'psychology,' since the topic is *psûche*. But since even plants have souls, it is misleading to call it that. Part of what is exciting about this science is that it understands the lives of animals with intellects as having very much in common with plants and non-human animals - we are special, but having some fundamentals (growth, nutrition, reproduction) that are quite alike. Hence, it combines

what we separate as botany, zoology, and psychology into one overarching science.

Why must a proper natural scientific understanding of living things include considerations of form? Does it play a distinctive role in understanding things with a soul versus things without a soul?

Wed, Sep 19

Topic(s): Aristotelian Views of Living Things

Read Aristotle's De Anima, Book II, Chapters 1-4

This session will introduce Aristotle's fundamental views on the nature of the soul, as the form of a natural body which potentially has life. What does this mean? How does it help us to understand living things (if it does)? We will see how Aristotle develops a view of the soul's different functions. The souls of animals have a more complex, functionally differentiated structure that includes the distinctive capacities of sensation and locomotion.

Fri, Sep 21

Topic(s): Aristotelian Views on Living Things: Aristotle on Imagination and Thinking.

Read De Anima Book III, Chapters, 3-8

Animals have distinctive capacities, including imagination. Human beings have an additional capacity for understanding and thinking. What are these capacities and how do they relate to our bodies?

Mon, Sep 24

Topic(s): Aristotelian Views of Living Things: Aristotle on Animal Motivation and Deliberation

Read De Anima, 9-13

Animals move and change in distinctive ways, beyond growth and reproduction. How does this happen? What roles do the different capacities of the animal soul play in such movement, both for animals with intellects and without?

Wed, Sep 26

Topic(s):

Aristotelian Views of Living Things:

Read Garreth Matthews, "De Anima 2.2-4 and the Meaning of Life"

In this session we will step back and consider how Aristotle conceives of life in terms of the functioning of different capacities. How does this impact our understanding of life?

Fri, Sep 28

Topic(s):

Aristotelian Views of Living Things:

Read Michael Thompson, The Representation of Life: Chapters 1-2

Can life be given a definition? Didn't Aristotle do that? Is there anything wrong with defining it in terms of growth, metabolism, complexity? If it cannot be defined, then how should we think about it?

Mon, Oct 1

Topic(s): Aristotelian Views of Living Things:

Read Michael Thompson's "The Representation of Life" Chapters 3-4

What does it mean to say that claims about living things have a distinctive logical form? What implications does this have for how we think about living things?

Wed, Oct 3

Topic(s): Aristotelian Views of Living Things: The Rational Animal

Read Matthew Boyle, "Essentially Rational Animals"

How are human beings distinct amongst other animals? Is it correct to say, on an Aristotelian view, that we are essentially rational animals?

Fri, Oct 5

Topic(s): Aristotelian ethics

Read Nicomachean Ethics, Book I, Chapters 1-7

Book I of the Nicomachean Ethics investigates the structure of human action; it is oriented toward apparent and, sometimes, real goods. Why should we think of human action as oriented toward an overarching goal? What is the nature of the end of human action?

Wed, Oct 10

Topic(s): Aristotelian Ethics:

Read Nicomachean Ethics Book I, Chapters 8-13; Book X Chapters 6-8

We will extend our understanding of the end of human action, eudaimonia. What characteristics does it have? How does it relate to the human soul?

Fri, Oct 12

Topic(s): Aristotelian Views of Happiness and Human Nature

Read John McDowell "The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle's Ethics"

It may seem fishy when Aristotle states that we always act in view of some good, and even fishier that there is some one good at which all actions aim. But what does this claim mean? Here we will take up some different interpretations of this claim.

Mon, Oct 15

Topic(s): Aristotelian Views of Happiness and Human Nature:

Read, Christine Korsgaard, "Aristotle's Function Argument"

In this session we will attempt to understand the so-called "function argument" in greater detail. This argument is found in Book I, Chapter 7, and it consists of the appeal to the idea that human being has a function ("ergon" -- characteristic activity). What does this argument show?

Wed, Oct 17

Topic(s): Aristotelian Views of Happiness and Human Nature:

Read Gavin Lawrence "Human Good and the Human Function"

Aristotle seems to advocate two distinct visions of happiness. How do these relate? What do we make of Aristotle's conception of happiness in relation to our contemporary ideas about living well?

Fri, Oct 19

Topic(s): Aristotle on the Nature of Virtue:

Read Nicomachean Ethics, Book II (complete)

Book II covers a lot of ground. Aristotle discusses the nature of moral virtue and how we acquire it. He also introduces the famous Doctrine of the Mean. What is a moral virtue? Notice the careful definition in terms of genus and species. What sort of thing is a virtue? What differentiates virtue from other things of that sort?

Mon, Oct 22

Topic(s): Aristotle's View of Virtue Acquisition:

Read Myles Burnyeat's "Learning to Be Good"

Aristotle packed in a lot of material in Books I and II; there are glancing references to how virtue is acquired. Can we fill that picture out? What is habituation? How is a virtue like or unlike a mere habit?

Wed, Oct 24

Topic(s): Aristotelian views on the nature of virtue

Read Rosalind Hursthouse "The Central Doctrine of the Mean"

As it is ordinarily understood, the Doctrine of the Mean seems to oversimplify morally good action. Is there another way of understanding the Doctrine of the Mean? Is it a useful doctrine to describe good character?

Fri, Oct 26

Topic(s): Aristotle on Deliberation and Choice:

Read Nicomachean Ethics, Book III Chapters 1-5

What is choice and how does it relate to the voluntary? What is deliberation and how does it relate to action?

Mon, Oct 29

Topic(s): Aristotle on Courage and Temperance:

Read Nicomachean Ethics, Book III 6-12

In this session we will discuss two examples of moral virtues that are arguably virtues on a contemporary understanding as well. How does Aristotle understand them?

Wed, Oct 31

Topic(s): Aristotle on Practical Wisdom:

Read Nicomachean Ethics, Book VI

Book VI of the Nicomachean Ethics treats intellectual virtues; one of these, practical wisdom or phronesis, is of central importance to acting well. What does phronesis consist of, according to Aristotle?

Fri, Nov 2

Topic(s): Aristotelian Views of Practical Wisdom:

Read Rosalind Hursthouse, "Practical Wisdom: A Mundane Account"

How should we understand Aristotle's teachings on phronesis? Is it recondite sagacity or something more mundane? How should we understand the components of practical wisdom that Aristotle mentions?

Mon, Nov 5

Topic(s): Neo-Aristotelian Ethics:

Read Philippa Foot, Natural Goodness, Chapters 2 & 3

Can we take up Aristotle's naturalism in a contemporary context and apply it to moral philosophy? What is the neo-Aristotelian understanding of moral judgments?

Wed, Nov 7

Topic(s): Neo-Aristotelian Ethics:

Read Philippa Foot, Natural Goodness Chapters 4 & 5

What is the human good on a neo-Aristotelian account? What is required to be a virtuous human being?

Fri, Nov 9

Topic(s): Neo-Aristotelian Ethics:

Read Philippa Foot, Natural Goodness, Chapters 6-7

How do virtue and happiness relate on a neo-Aristotelian understanding? Can we respond to Nietzsche's claims about virtue?

Mon, Nov 12

Topic(s): Research Presentations

See "Assessment" for further information about these.

Wed, Nov 14

Topic(s): Research Presentations

Fri, Nov 16

Topic(s): Research Presentations

Mon, Nov 19

Topic(s): Research Presentations

Wed, Nov 21 - Fri, Nov 23

Topic(s): No meetings for this class Wednesday and Friday.

Mon, Nov 26

Topic(s): Research Presentations

Wed, Aug 29

Topic(s): Research Presentations

Fri, Nov 30

Topic(s): Research Presentations

6 Assessments

6.1 Assessment Details

Critical Reading Responses (25%)

Date: Weekly

Each week, you will submit a one or two page response to the reading to the Courselink dropbox. These are due no later than class time on Monday, Wednesday, or Friday. The paper must do the following:

1. Pick a sentence or two of particular philosophical importance in the reading for that class meeting.* Quote the material at the beginning of your paper. Be sure to note the page number.

2. Explain what it says.

3. Explain why it is of particular importance. In this context, "important" means that it makes a claim that is philosophically important – e.g., an argument, a philosophical distinction, or a statement of methodology.

*Note that you cannot submit a paper on a reading for a previous class meeting. If you are submitting on Friday, it should concern the reading for that day's class, not the preceding Wednesday.

I will automatically drop two of these grades. I will grade them out of ten points, based on the extent to which they (a) pick out something of genuine philosophical importance, (b) cogently defend that importance, and (c) demonstrate a good faith effort to explain the meaning of the passage.

NOTE: for the weeks of the research presentations (see "Activities"), your attendance at all of those meetings will count for a 10/10 for that week's critical reading response.

Seminar Presentation (20%)

You will each give one presentation of a reading. The presentation should consist of an explanation of some important point from the reading for that day. For instance, it might focus on a paragraph or (at most) a couple of pages, or a significant argument or claim, from one of the readings assigned for that day (at the time of signing up for the presentation, you should select both the date and the text you will be presenting on, if there is more than one text). The aim is **not** to be comprehensive (this would significantly detract from the quality of the presentation, in my view), but rather to clearly expound and to stimulate a good general discussion of a philosophically important section of the reading. The presenters should speak for 15-20 minutes (no longer).

Your grade on each presentation will be broken down as follows (rubric from Humboldt State University):

Rubric for Grading Oral Presentations				
	Below Expectation	Satisfactory	Exemplary	Weight
Organization	No apparent organization. Evidence is not used to support assertions.	The presentation has a focus and provides some evidence which supports conclusions.	The presentation is carefully organized and provides convincing evidence to support conclusions	30%
Content	The content is inaccurate or overly general. Listeners	The content is generally accurate, but incomplete.	The content is accurate and complete.	

	are unlikely to learn anything or may be misled.	Listeners may learn some isolated facts, but they are unlikely to gain new insights about the topic.	Listeners are likely to gain new insights about the topic.	50%
Delivery	The speaker appears anxious and uncomfortable, and reads notes, rather than speaks. Listeners are largely ignored.	The speaker is generally relaxed and comfortable, but too often relies on notes. Listeners are sometimes ignored or misunderstood.	The speaker is relaxed and comfortable, speaks without undue reliance on notes, and interacts effectively with listeners.	20%

Research Presentation (15%)

I will ask you to present a draft of the paper that you will be handing in at the end of the semester. The class as a whole will give feedback. It should be a concise 10-minute presentation of your topic and thoughts.

Final Research Paper (40%)

At the end of class you will submit a final research paper, incorporating feedback from the research presentation.

You should aim for a topic that can be treated well in 15-20 pages. I expect that your paper will reflect that you have taken into account anything relevant from course readings and, in addition, that you will investigate relevant peer-reviewed literature on

your topic.

Here are the criteria that I will employ in assessing your paper (rubric from SUNY-Buffalo Department of Philosophy):

	Fails Completely	Unsatisfactory	Needs Improvement	Competent	Exemplary
Thesis 15%	No identifiable thesis or thesis shows lack of effort or comprehension of assignment.	Difficult to identify, inconsistently maintained, or provides little around which to structure paper.	Unclear, buried, poorly articulated, lacking in insight and originality.	Promising, but may be unclear or lacking insight or originality.	Easily identifiable, interesting, plausible, novel, sophisticated, insightful, clear.
Structure and style- 20%	No evident structure or organization. No transitions between major points.	Unclear, unfocused, disorganized, lacking in unity, transitions abrupt or confusing, context unclear.	Generally unclear, unfocused, often wanders or jumps around. Few or weak transitions. Does not provide sufficient information, explanation, and context for readers.	Generally clear and appropriate, though may wander occasionally. May have some unclear transitions or lack of coherence. Does not fully appreciate reader's need for information, explanation, and context.	Evident, understandable, appropriate for thesis. Essay is focused and unified. Words chosen effectively. Excellent transitions between points. Anticipates reader's need for information, explanation, and context.
Use of sources (when applicable)- 20%	No attempt made to incorporate information from primary and secondary	Very little information from sources. Poor handling of sources.	Moderate amount of source information incorporated. Some key	Draws upon sources to support most points. Some evidence may not support	Draws upon primary and secondary source information in useful and

sources.

points supported by sources. Quotations may be poorly integrated into paragraphs. Some possible problems with source citations.

thesis or may appear where inappropriate. Quotations integrated well into paragraphs. Sources cited correctly.

illuminating ways to support key points. Excellent integration of quoted material into paragraphs. Sources cited correctly.

Logic and argumentation -35%

No effort made to construct a logical argument. Failure to support thesis.

Little attempt to offer support for key claims or to relate evidence to thesis. Reasons offered may be irrelevant. Little to no effort to address alternative views.

Arguments of poor quality. Weak, undeveloped reasons offered in support of key claims. Counter-arguments mentioned without rebuttal.

Argument is clear and usually flows logically and makes sense. Some counter-arguments acknowledged, though perhaps not addressed fully.

Arguments are identifiable, reasonable, and sound. Clear reasons are offered in support of key claims. Author anticipates and successfully grapples with counter-arguments.

Mechanics - 10%

Difficult to understand because of significant problems with sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Several problems with sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Some problems with sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Sentence structure, grammar, and spelling strong despite occasional lapses.

Correct sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

7 Course Statements

7.1 Late Policy

All assignments should be submitted to me through the Courselink dropbox. Please submit a file in Word or Rich Text Format (no .pdf files please).

All late assignments will be assessed a 10% penalty for every 24 hours late, except in cases of illness or family emergency

8 University Statements

8.1 Email Communication

As per university regulations, all students are required to check their e-mail account regularly: e-mail is the official route of communication between the University and its students.

8.2 When You Cannot Meet a Course Requirement

When you find yourself unable to meet an in-course requirement because of illness or compassionate reasons please advise the course instructor (or designated person, such as a teaching assistant) in writing, with your name, id#, and e-mail contact. The regulations and procedures for [Academic Consideration](#) are detailed in the Undergraduate Calendar.

8.3 Drop Date

Courses that are one semester long must be dropped by the end of the fortieth class day; two-semester courses must be dropped by the last day of the add period in the second semester. The regulations and procedures for [Dropping Courses](#) are available in the Undergraduate Calendar.

8.4 Copies of Out-of-class Assignments

Keep paper and/or other reliable back-up copies of all out-of-class assignments: you may be asked to resubmit work at any time.

8.5 Accessibility

The University promotes the full participation of students who experience disabilities in their academic programs. To that end, the provision of academic accommodation is a shared responsibility between the University and the student.

When accommodations are needed, the student is required to first register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS). Documentation to substantiate the existence of a disability is required, however, interim accommodations may be possible while that process is underway.

Accommodations are available for both permanent and temporary disabilities. It should be noted that common illnesses such as a cold or the flu do not constitute a disability.

Use of the SAS Exam Centre requires students to book their exams at least 7 days in advance, and not later than the 40th Class Day.

More information: www.uoguelph.ca/sas

8.6 Academic Misconduct

The University of Guelph is committed to upholding the highest standards of academic integrity and it is the responsibility of all members of the University community – faculty, staff, and students – to be aware of what constitutes academic misconduct and to do as much as possible to prevent academic offences from occurring. University of Guelph students have the responsibility of abiding by the University's policy on academic misconduct regardless of their location of study; faculty, staff and students have the responsibility of supporting an environment that discourages misconduct. Students need to remain aware that instructors have access to and the right to use electronic and other means of detection.

Please note: Whether or not a student intended to commit academic misconduct is not relevant for a finding of guilt. Hurried or careless submission of assignments does not excuse students from responsibility for verifying the academic integrity of their work before submitting it. Students who are in any doubt as to whether an action on their part could be construed as an academic offence should consult with a faculty member or faculty advisor.

The [Academic Misconduct Policy](#) is detailed in the Undergraduate Calendar.

8.7 Recording of Materials

Presentations which are made in relation to course work—including lectures—cannot be recorded or copied without the permission of the presenter, whether the instructor, a classmate or guest lecturer. Material recorded with permission is restricted to use for that course unless further permission is granted.

8.8 Resources

The [Academic Calendars](#) are the source of information about the University of Guelph's procedures, policies and regulations which apply to undergraduate, graduate and diploma programs.
