

Ancient Philosophy and Political Thought

Syllabus

Instructor: Prof. Jacob Stump (jacob.stump@northeastern.edu)

Overview

Corrupter of the youth (*Ap.* 24b); gadfly (*Ap.* 30e); the wisest and most upright man (*Phd.* 118b); impudent, contemptuous, and vile (*Symp.* 215b); a drinker, but seemingly never drunk (*Symp.* 220a); a soldier, but seemingly never scared (*Laches* 181a-b, *Symp.* 220d-e); so bizarre that no one was ever like him (*Symp.* 221d); barefoot (*Symp.* 200b), penniless (*Ap.* 23b), and notoriously ugly (*Theaet.* 143e); a husband (*Phd.* 60a) and a father (*Ap.* 41e); a gift from the god to the Athenians (*Ap.* 30e)—our first task in this course is to become acquainted with Socrates, whom Plato describes in these ways. Our starting point is Socrates' idea that taking care of one's soul is more important than anything else. Is that true? What even is one's soul? What is it like? If one were to live valuing one's soul more than money, power, and fame, what would that life look like? If one were to build a society that prioritized the health of the souls of its citizens, what would that society look like? Would it be just? Would we want to live in it?

In the second half of the term, we transition to Aristotle, Plato's top student. We will focus on Aristotle's ethics. We'll consider some of his most influential ideas, e.g., his argument that the good life for humans is determined by human nature and his doctrine that virtue is a mean. We will end the semester by considering three Hellenistic schools of philosophy: Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Skepticism. Our focus with each school will be on their conceptions of happiness.

One last point. For the ancient Greeks, philosophy was not merely a skillset (e.g., the skill of analyzing arguments), nor merely the study of certain topics (e.g., ethics, epistemology), but rather, properly conceived, a way of life. This way of conceiving of philosophy is largely out of vogue today. It is presupposition of this course that, to best understand and evaluate the ideas of ancient philosophers, we must, to some degree, actually live out those ideas. Thus, we will be concerned not only to analyze whether the arguments of Plato, Aristotle, and the Hellenistic schools support their central tenets: we will be concerned also to live according to those tenets, testing them by the trial of experience. In this way, we will gain experience not just in *thinking* about philosophy, but also in *living* it.

Texts

All texts are available on Canvas. If you want to purchase books, here are the ones to get. Our translations are from them.

Plato, *Laches and Charmides*, tr. Sprague. Hackett. ISBN: 9780872201347.

Plato, *Five Dialogues*, tr. Grube/Cooper. Hackett. ISBN: 9780872206335.

Plato, *Gorgias*, tr. Zeyl. Hackett. ISBN: 9780872200166.

Plato, *Republic*, tr. Grube/Reeve. Hackett. ISBN: 9780872201361.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. Irwin. Hackett. ISBN: 9780872204645.

Instead of the individual Platonic dialogues, you could buy the complete works of Plato.

Plato: Complete Works, ed. Cooper & Hutchinson. Hackett. ISBN: 0872203492.

Note that translation really matters. If you have these texts in alternative translations, you should not use them for this course. Use the translations posted above, which are also the ones on Canvas.

Course objectives

1. Learn to interpret texts charitably, i.e., in their strongest form.
2. Grow in intellectual courage, argumentative rigor, and curiosity.
3. Learn how to think about the world in collaboration with Plato, Aristotle, and the Hellenistic philosophers.
4. Understand the views of ancient Greek philosophers on the central issues of the course.
5. Gain experience in philosophy as a way of life, in the manner of ancient Greek philosophers.

Class

Most often class will be used for collaborative inquiry. We will be thinking together in an effort to clarify confusing ideas and construct and evaluate arguments. I will not really be expecting you to memorize and regurgitate any material, and you will not really be required to accept anything on my authority. In contrast, I will be trying to make my own reasoning as transparent as possible, and I will expect you to challenge me on it when you think that it is mistaken or confused. “Thinking together,” then, is not just a nice thing to say or promise. It is meant as the foundation of all that we do.

Once upon a time I used a large part of the class to explain the reading. That is not how this course will go. Instead of explaining the reading *during* class, I will be explaining it mostly *before* class. This will happen in google doc lectures. I am using google docs so that

the lectures are interactive. It allows you all to annotate the lectures, and thus for us to begin our inquiry together before we meet in class. I am making text-based lectures instead of video-based lectures for three main reasons. The first is that text-based lectures allow you to comprehend the material at your own pace (instead of having to comprehend it at the pace of the video). The second is that text-based lectures allow you to revisit certain parts of the material easily (instead of having to scroll through a video, which can be annoying). The third is that text-based lectures, when written in a google doc, allow the lectures to be interactive (whereas, with a video, there is not really a way for you to have a voice). I really think of them as conversations: I am prompting you to think about things in a certain way, and I am eager to have you respond to me and to each other in the margins.

So, this course is “flipped” in the sense that most of the core content will be delivered *before* class. This will allow us to maximize the time we spend on collaborative inquiry *during* class.

It will be useful for you to think of class in terms of a workflow.

For most classes, there will be three components: (i) the reading, (ii) a google doc lecture, to be annotated by you, and (iii) the class itself.

Here’s a way to go about it.

First, do the reading. Give yourself uninterrupted time when you are most alert, and go slowly. Think along with the author, trying to identify the main claims and the main reasons in support of those claims. If you find that your eyes are merely passing over the words, without any thought actually happening, stop and come back to it later. Note: Reading philosophy is difficult, and you should be prepared to read the texts more than once. *You will often be confused*—that is okay! Try to figure out why you are confused, and come to our meetings prepared with questions to help you understand.

Second, read the google doc lecture, and annotate it where you see fit. I say more about this below. The google doc lectures are meant to clarify the reading and prepare us for a productive discussion during class.

Third, attend class and participate. Be ready to talk about the reading and think together. I recommend doing something to get yourself into the proper mindset: go for a short walk before class, e.g., or make yourself a tea, or do five minutes of meditation—whatever is effective at preparing you to focus.

Often classes will end with us not having reached a final answer and desiring to investigate further. In some cases, we will do that in the next class. In others, we will move on, and you are encouraged to continue the inquiry by making new annotations on the google doc lectures.

Discussion. Philosophical discussion can go well or badly, depending on the behavior of the people doing it. Two common problems are talking too often and rambling. *If you find yourself talking too often, hold back and give others a chance to talk.* If, after a pause, no one

volunteers, then you can fill the gap. *To avoid rambling, clarify your question or comment in your mind before speaking. Make it concise.* Finally, note that you can expect disagreement. This is good—it is often the source of progress and clarification—so long as it is civil. **Remember that the goal is not to sound smart or to win the argument.** The goal is to figure out the truth (or what is likely to be true, or what is definitely false), and this happens best when we are all open to revising our claims and admitting when we are wrong. We want to think together so that, *together*, we can reach a better and more considered view. Again, the goal is not to be the person who is correct or wins the argument. That is not important.

Preparation. In order to participate in class meaningfully, you should arrive having read and thought about the day's text. You should also have the text available so that, if I make reference to it, you can look at the appropriate passage.

Devices. No laptops (and obviously no cellphones) are allowed during class. Your task is to show up and be fully present. If you think that you have a good reason for an exception, come talk to me.

Assignments

[You will find instructions to the Assignments in this document.](#) The document is available also on Canvas under 'Logistics' and then 'Assignments.'

Here is a short overview of the assignments (alphabetical order).

Annotations

Annotations (each 1% for a total of 10%) are your adding comments to the google doc lectures. You need to make at least 1 thoughtful Annotation on at least 10 different google doc lectures (so, 10 overall), but you are encouraged to make more. There are roughly 15 google doc lectures. Make annotations either by (i) highlighting some text and using the "Add a comment" function, or (ii) by replying to an annotation. The most common sorts of annotations are questions, objections, or responses to the questions or objections of other students, but really anything is welcome here, so long as it advances our understanding of the text.

Argument Analysis Worksheets

There is an important skill to doing philosophy at the undergraduate level, and it is analyzing arguments for validity and soundness. I will be teaching you all that skill. Two

Argument Analysis Worksheets (first is 5%, second is 10%, for a total of 15%) will require you to extract an argument from a text, communicate it in a premise–conclusion form that is valid, and analyze it for soundness.

Attendance

I expect you to attend each class.

Bonus

There are three options for a Bonus Assignment (2%) in the course. You can do only one of the options. The first option is to design and run an Exploration assignment on living as a Cynic. You should design a Cynic regimen for yourself and live according to it for at least two days. The second and third options are to do a report on a chapter from the following books. The book *Courtesans and Fishcakes* by the classicist James Davidson depicts the liveliness and cultural uniqueness of classical Athens. The book *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* by the historian Perry Anderson describes the economic structures of ancient Greece and Rome (among other societies). You have the option of writing a 500–750 reflection on one chapter of either book, in which you consider some particular feature of classical Athenian society that (i) is different than anything present in our society and EITHER (ii) makes sense, i.e., is something that, if we *were* to have it in our society, plausibly would improve it OR (iii) makes you see something in our own society in a new and possibly more accurate way. You will be given up to two bonus points towards your final grade, depending on how thoughtful and well written your reflection is on living as a Cynic or on a chapter from one of the books.

Class-Facing Assignment

The Class-Facing Assignment (5%) is to give you all increased ownership of the course. You have three options: (a) leading discussion for one day, (b) producing a one-page document on something that connects in interesting and important ways to our class material, or (c) producing a one-page reflection on our in-class discussion that advances our inquiry to new and exciting places.

(a) *Leading discussion option.* This is to give you all practice in guiding a philosophical discussion. The goal is guide us away from confusion and boredom and towards clarity and intellectual excitement. It is not really to lead us to some previously identified spot. So, it will require you to improvise. You will need to sign up for one of the designated classes, along with three or four of your peers. Your group will

then be responsible for (a) sending me, at least before 12pm on the day of class, a sketch of what you want to focus on, and (b) guiding discussion during class. Note that you will be guiding discussion only during the “lingering questions” part of the designated classes. So, if you will be guiding discussion for an upcoming class, it will be very important for you to listen closely to the discussions in the previous few classes, so that you can then remind us of the lingering questions that we have had during those discussions and motivate our further inquiry into a selection of them of your choosing (or further inquiry into some lingering question that your group has that has not come up so far in discussion). Please see the further instructions in the Assignments document.

(b) *Connections option.* Often our course content will connect in important ways to other material, e.g., to some notion or concept from a discipline other than philosophy, to something in the news, to some social phenomenon, to some book or movie or podcast or whatever else. It will be interesting for everyone to know about that! This option is to give you the opportunity to write a one-page document that explains what this other material is and how it connects to our course content (most likely to our readings or to something that comes up in class discussion). Keep in mind that you are writing this for your peers. It is to educate your peers about this cool thing that connects to our course material. So, feel free to write it in a casual (but still clear and straightforward) style. This is not a mini-essay. It's sort of like a public service announcement: *Hey everyone, look at this really cool thing that connects to our course material! Isn't that interesting?* Note that you do not sign up for this option. You simply promise to do it at some point before the last week of the semester (though please, everyone, do not wait until the very end of the semester to do it!). Please see the further instructions in the Assignments document.

(c) *Reflection option.* Often our inquiry in class will not conclude, and there will be so many fun and exciting ways to continue it. You might find yourself after class still thinking about our discussion. This option is to give you the opportunity to write up your reflections on our discussion in a one-page document. The goal is to continue our in-class inquiry in whatever direction you think is cool, exciting, fun, worthwhile, thought-provoking, useful, etc. Keep in mind that you are writing this for your peers. It is to invite your peers to join you in continuing to think about something. So, feel free to write it in a casual (but still clear and straightforward) style. This is not a mini-essay. It's sort of like a public service announcement: *Hey everyone, here's what I kept thinking about after class! What do you all think about it?* Note that you do not sign up for this option. You simply promise to do it at some point before the last week of the semester (though please, everyone, do not wait until

the very end of the semester to do it!). Please see the further instructions in the Assignments document.

Explorations

Philosophy can be thought of as a skill (e.g., the skill of analyzing arguments). It can also be thought of as a particular subject matter (e.g., ethics, epistemology). To ancient Greek philosophers, however, it was in the first place a way of life. Explorations (five are 3%, one is 5%, for a total of 20%) are out-of-class exercises that will have you actually trying out living philosophically, in the manner of the ancient Greek philosophers. There will be six of these over the semester: two on Plato, one on Aristotle, and one on each of our three Hellenistic schools. You are welcome to communicate your Explorations in whichever media format you prefer: written documents, voice recordings (nb: the library has resources for making podcasts), video diaries, a blog, a Twitter (X) feed, visual art—any format, really, so long as it allows you to communicate your thoughts on your experiences. The main thing is to be honest (sincere, genuine, candid).

In-class Game

We will be conducting an In-class Game (5%) in our final two classes. I will be explaining the game during class on November 21, but for now I can tell you the following: most of you will be placed in teams; the best way to prepare yourself to perform well during the game is to ensure that you understand our material well; some of you will be graded based on your performance during the game, while others will be graded based on a short report that you write after the game is completed; and the game is of course not *just a game*—in fact, it might happen that, more than anything else in the course, the game will teach us what living today as a Platonist, Aristotelian, Epicurean, Stoic, or Skeptic might look like. **Important:** you must be in class on November 21, December 2, and December 4 to receive credit for participating in the game.

Oral Exam

In the Oral Exam (10%), you will be asked a series of questions. I will give you some idea of what the questions will be. You will be assessed based on whether your responses to the questions are accurate and well-reasoned. The exam will be 10 minutes. It will be scheduled outside of class time during the last two weeks of the semester.

Self-assessments

Participation increases learning. So, I want you all to participate: the more, the better. One way to do so is to contribute to our in-class discussions. However, this is not the only way, and grading participation based only on verbal, in-class participation can be exclusionary. So, we will use self-assessments to explore and communicate your engagement with the course in general. Four Self-assessments (10%) are due in the term. The highest you can assess yourself on each one is 3%, and the self-assessments in total will count for 10% of your final grade. Thus, you are able to receive full credit even without engaging at the highest level over the entire term. I typically give you whatever grade you have given yourself. Examples of engaging with the course include the following: contributing to class discussions; engaging with the contributions of others in a charitable manner; talking about course material with family, friends, or others who might be interested outside of class; learning from articles, podcasts, lectures, blogs, etc. and sharing your findings with others; being active on the course GroupMe; sharing your learning and research strategies, skills, and habits with other people in the course; creating and/or sharing comics, poems, videos, paintings, podcasts, or other artistic objects; asking, answering, and reflecting on questions in the google doc lectures or other spaces; raising conversations related to class discussion on social media; sharing relevant news or examples with classmates; translating or simplifying course materials so they can be more accessible to people outside of the university or in other disciplines; suggesting and discussing with me ways to improve the course at any point in the term; and so on (this list is not exhaustive).

Socratic Dialogue Group Project

The Socratic Dialogue Group Project (5%) is an opportunity for you to collaborate with your peers in writing a Socratic dialogue. The dialogue should feature Socrates and at least two other characters. Its main topic should be a question in the form of ‘What is x ?’, where ‘ x ’ is some term that is of particular importance today, ideally of particular importance to people at your stage of life. It might be useful then to reflect on the slang words that are popular in your social groups. These words often pick out topics of special importance. As with Plato’s Socratic dialogues, the non-Socratic characters should be people who, given their social role or way of life, really should know what x is, and Socrates should sort of trick them into a conversation about it. The dialogue should end in *aporia* (‘confusion’), such that the reader of your dialogue is motivated to think on their own about what exactly ‘ x ’ is. There is a strict word limit of 1200–1400 words (no shorter, no longer).

Trip to the MFA

The Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) is a five-minute walk from campus. You get free admission with your Husky card. Go to the MFA (5%), and visit the ancient Greek and

Roman section. Spend at least an hour in this section. Write a report on your visit. What'd you see? Any connections to class content? You are encouraged to visit the MFA with some of your classmates, making it into a group field trip, but you are welcome to go on your own, too.

Writing Exercises

This course counts for NUPath Writing Intensive. So, we will practice different styles of writing philosophy. The purpose of the ten Writing Exercises (each 1.5% for a total of 15%) is to give you experience in using different styles of writing to develop your thoughts. Each week you will have a writing exercise that prompts you in some way to develop your thoughts in response to class discussion from that week. The writing is welcome to be exploratory and unpolished. It is for the sake of developing your thoughts – *not* for the sake of producing something perfect.

Due dates. **Annotations:** before 11:59pm on the day of class. **Argument analysis worksheets:** February 3, March 11. **Bonus:** April 20. **Class-Facing Assignment:** if leading Lingering Questions, due on that day; if writing Reflections or Connections document, due before April 10. **Explorations:** February 9, February 23, March 9, March 23, March 30, April 9. **In-class Game:** April 14 and April 17. **Oral exam:** by appointment during the last week of classes. **Self-assessments:** January 30, February 20, March 20, April 17. **Socratic Dialogue Group Project:** February 18. **Trip to the MFA:** sometime before February 27. **Writing Exercises:** due most Thursdays between January 15 and March 19.

Late policy. Late submissions will be deducted 1/3 of a letter grade per day (weekends count as one day), unless you have contacted me prior to the due date or there is an emergency. Note that late submissions of Reading Questions and Annotations will not be accepted.

Grade conversion.

A:	93-100 (4.0)
A-:	90-92 (3.7)
B+:	87-89 (3.3)
B:	83-86 (3.0)
B-:	80-82 (2.7)
C+:	77-79 (2.3)
C:	74-76 (2.0)
C-:	70-73 (1.7)
D+:	67-69 (1.3)

D: 64-66 (1.0)
D-: 60-63 (0.7)
F: 59 or below (0.0)

How to succeed in this course. Do the readings twice before class: once quickly, solely to get a sense of things (this should take no longer than five minutes); once slowly, pausing where you are confused (this should take no longer than three hours). Mark your text while you read. Identify key claims (e.g., premises and conclusions of arguments), perhaps with a checkmark or by underlining them. Identify also questions that you have, perhaps with a question mark or the actual question written in the margins. Then do the Reading Questions for that reading, submitting them on Canvas. Come to class prepared to be attentive (get good sleep, put away your cell phone, quiet your mind). You might very quickly review the reading right before class (this should take no longer than five minutes). During class, focus. I'll be doing my best to clarify all of my claims and to make all of my reasoning transparent. If something that I say seems wrong or confusing, I want to hear about it. So, please speak up. You might consider taking notes during class, but, if so, do so sparingly. Don't try to capture everything I say. Instead quickly jot down any important ideas that occur to you. The goal during class is to think together, and it is hard to do that while taking lots of notes. (Also, I'll be providing google doc lectures for most classes. You can think of these as a set of notes that communicate the main ideas from the readings. I make them in part because I want you to be free to think along with me during class. That really is the goal.) After class, stew on our discussion. Call it to mind while doing other things (e.g., walking around). Talk to your friends about it. Then, when you have something to add, add it as an annotation on the google doc lecture. Check the google doc lectures frequently to see what other people are saying, and respond to their contributions when you feel inclined. Other than all of that, do the assignments. It is a good rule to finish the Explorations and Argument Analyses a few days before they are due, so that, after completing a first draft of it, you can set it aside, allowing your mind to clear, then reviewing it once more with fresh eyes before submitting it, revising any mistakes that you find. Finally, come to office hours when you want to talk. I am happy to think through things with you.

Contact

If you e-mail me, put the course code (2325) in the subject line; otherwise your e-mail may get lost. I will try to respond to e-mails within a day or two (no promises on weekends). Note that e-mail is not the right format for philosophical questions; please come to my office hours to discuss philosophical material, or e-mail me to set up a meeting. Also, my responses

to your e-mails may be terse. Don't be offended. It's simply the effect of having lots of e-mails to respond to.

ChatGPT

You are forbidden from using ChatGPT or other LLMs for any assignment in the course. You are forbidden from using them in any way. **If I think that you have used ChatGPT or another LLM on an assignment, I will give you a grade of 0. I will not notify you about it.** If you did not use ChatGPT or another LLM, you can email me to set up a meeting to explain yourself. During this meeting, I will present the evidence for thinking that you did use ChatGPT or another LLM. You will be given the opportunity to respond. If I do not judge your response to be adequate, the 0 on the assignment will remain. In certain cases, I might escalate the incident to the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution. Note that, while I might not catch each incident during the semester, I will be reviewing all assignments prior to giving final grades. If I catch an incident then, I will do as I described above: I will give the assignment a 0, and I will not notify you about it. It will be your responsibility to respond from that point if you so choose.

Disclaimer

I may change the details above at any point in the course. If I do so, I will always let you know via an announcement on Canvas, and I will have the changes be in your favor.

Optional, useful philosophical resources

1. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (online). Useful as a starting point for research or to teach yourself the basics of some topic (a philosopher's Wikipedia, but more reliable).
2. Philpapers (online). A good collection of philosophy papers online.
3. Perseus (online). The largest collection of Ancient Greek and Latin texts online, in their original languages.

Policies & university resources

Accessibility. Students with diverse learning styles are welcome in this course. Please feel free to approach me or the Disability Resource Center (www.northeastern.edu/drc) so that we can assist you in achieving academic success.

Writing help. If you want help with your writing, you are encouraged to contact the Northeastern writing center (www.northeastern.edu/writingcenter). I am also happy to consult with you about your writing in office hours or by appointment.

FACT (Faculty Advisor Communication Tool). I will be using this tool to alert advisors of any students who are having difficulty meeting the expectations for the course as described in the syllabus. This is intended to help students who may benefit from additional support. A fact report is not punitive in any way. It does not affect your grade and does not go on your transcript. It only alerts you and your advisor that you might need some additional support. If you think you might need extra help, please talk to me and/or your college advisor.

Plagiarism. Don't do it (it's *really* easy to catch). If you do, the university's disciplinary measures will be taken. If you have questions about what counts as plagiarism, visit <https://osccr.sites.northeastern.edu/academic-integrity-policy/> or talk to me. All submitted work must be your own, and you should attribute the ideas and language of others properly, in accordance with university and course guidelines.

Counseling. You are very encouraged to prioritize your mental health. Northeastern offers you two main sources of confidential support: www.northeastern.edu/uhrs/counseling-services and <https://we-care.studentlife.northeastern.edu/>. Please feel welcome to use them however you may want or need.

Title IX. Title IX Policy prohibits sexual harassment, sexual assault, relationship or domestic violence, and stalking. This applies to the entire Northeastern community, including students, faculty, and staff, of all genders and all sexualities. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, *confidential* support and guidance can be found at the University Health and Counseling Services (www.northeastern.edu/uhrs/) and the Center for Spiritual Dialogue and Service (www.northeastern.edu/spirituallife/). Violations can be reported *non-confidentially* to the Title IX Coordinator in the Office for Gender Equity and Compliance (titleix@northeastern.edu) or through NUPD (emergency: 617-373-3333; non-emergency: 617-373-2121). Reporting prohibited offenses to NUPOD does not commit the victim / affected party to future legal action. Note that faculty (such as me) are considered "responsible employees" at Northeastern, meaning that they are required to report all allegations of sex- or gender-based discrimination to the Title IX Coordinator (in other words, I am not a confidential resource here). A complete list of reporting options and resources both on- and off-campus can be found at www.northeastern.edu/titleix.

Concerns about the course. You are encouraged to discuss concerns about the course with me. I am always interested in how to improve the learning environment. If you would like to discuss a concern about the course with someone else, you can contact Rory Smead, Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion. Information about formal academic appeals

can be found at

www.catalog.northeastern.edu/graduate/academic-policies-procedures/appeals/.