

PL120 Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

Seminar Leader: Dr. David Hayes
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Office Hours: by appointment

Course Description

How should a person live? Instead of applying universal principles of reason (deontology) or maximizing benefit (consequentialism), Aristotle argues that we should strive to become persons who possess numerous social, political, and intellectual virtues. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is an account of what these virtues are, how to acquire them, and why they lead to happy lives. While this class is a close reading of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in its entirety, supplementary material from psychoanalytic theory, literature, painting, and film will be offered in order to see what it would be like to fill in what Aristotle suggests can only be given "in outline." Additionally, we will consider a contemporary philosophic challenge (John Doris) to the viability of any virtue-ethical project.

Requirements

Texts:

- 1) Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins. University of Chicago Press.
- 2) Course Reader

It is required to purchase the Course Reader and the indicated translation.

Preparation

In the seminar, you must always have in your possession a **hard copy** of the text(s) for the day. The reading assignments for this class are relatively short. It is therefore expected that students will begin the seminar already having good mastery of the text for the day, and already having given some thought to it. You are strongly advised to read with a pen or pencil in order to make marginal notes and underline as you go. Making physical contact with a physical text is surprisingly helpful for making intellectual contact.

Use of Electronics

In the seminar, you must always have in your possession a **hard copy** of the assigned text(s) for the day. The use of electronic devices during class time is only allowed for disability accommodation. If you have a disability accommodation, please inform me

at the beginning of the semester. Please put away and do not use your smartphones during the seminar. These devices undermine the effort to forge and sustain a common conversation.

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the staunchest regard for academic integrity and expects good academic practice from students in their studies. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook. **Your work should always result from your own personal engagement with the texts and artworks. Anything is better than turning in work that is not your own. If you are having difficulties with any assignment, please let me know.**

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences will not affect the participation grade or require documentation. Beyond that, I may excuse absences due to unavoidable circumstances (e.g., appointments at government bureaus) or significant life events. However, be aware that I consider attending class to be a serious obligation at the heart of a liberal arts education. It is not superseded by employment, casual events, or extracurricular activities.

Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences, whether excused or unexcused. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR FALL 2020: All students must refrain from in-person attendance if they are feeling ill or for COVID-19 related reasons.

Recorded Sessions. With permission of the participants, I will make an audio recording of class sessions so that students unable to attend can listen. To get credit for attendance, the student should submit a 1-page response to the session. In his or her response, a student should be sure to directly reference the class discussion. Alternatively, if there are multiple students who missed the session, they may choose to record and submit their own online discussion of the session (again, with direct referencing).

Written Assignments

Short paper assignment: Consider only one book and chapter of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In one paragraph (only), present what Aristotle is saying as concisely and accurately

as possible in your own words. Then in one paragraph (only) write what you think about what Aristotle is saying.

Ethical virtue papers: This is an exercise in the imitation of Aristotle's method of articulating a virtue. In the presentation (also graded), you concisely explain your work to the rest of the class.

Final paper topics will be distributed. You may also devise your own topic in consultation with me. This class is devoted to the close examination of a single text. Your written work should reflect your own personal engagement with this text. Students are strongly advised to avoid secondary material and internet sources in their written work. If you are nevertheless seeking secondary material, please consult with me for guidance.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

According to the policies of the college, essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment.

Participation Assessment

I will evaluate class participation according to the following criteria:

- 1) Preparation. Is the student ready to discuss the reading assignment from the beginning of each class?
- 2) Consistency. Is the student a consistent contributor or does he or she take classes "off?"
- 3) Continuity. Is the student able to connect the discussion in the current class with the discussion in previous classes?
- 4) Conviviality. Is the student able to converse with other students about those others' concerns and contribute to lines of discussion that other students have initiated? Is the student able to participate consistently without dominating the discussion?
- 5) Quality. Does the student make interesting or important observations?
- 6) Questions. Does the student raise good questions? A good question is an excellent contribution to a discussion – often even better than a good point!

Grade Breakdown

Seminar grade: 30%

Ethical virtue paper: 20%

Ethical virtue presentation: 5%

Short paper: 15%

Final essay (2500 words): 30%

Schedule

Week 1 M (Aug 31) 1.1-5

Week 1 W (Sept 2) 1.6-8

Week 2 M (Sept 7) 1.9-13

Week 2 W (Sept 9) 2.1-7

Sunday, September 13, before midnight: Short paper due: 1 page on 2.8-9; 3.1-5

Week 3 M (Sept 14) 2.8-9; 3.1-5

Week 3 W (Sept 16) 3.6-9

Week 4 M (Sept 21) Filling in courage: “High Noon” (1952) (dir. Zinnemann)

Week 4 W (Sept 23) 3.10-11, 4.1

Week 5 M (Sept 28) 4.2 & Filling in magnificence: Mansfield, “The Garden Party”

Week 5 W (Sept 30) 4.3-4

Week 6 M (Oct 5) 4.5-9

Week 6 W (Oct 7) 5.1-6

Saturday, October 10, before midnight: Ethical Virtue Paper due

Week 7 M (Oct 12) 5.7-11

Week 7 W (Oct 14) Ethical virtue presentations

Fall Break

Week 8 M (Oct 26) 6.1-7

Week 8 W (Oct 28) 6.8-13

Week 9 M (Nov 2) Other virtues: selection from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*;
Winnicott, “The Development of the Capacity for Concern”

Week 9 W (Nov 4) Other virtues: *The Analects of Confucius*, Books 1-4

Week 10 M (Nov 9) 7.1-7

Week 10 W (Nov 11) 7.8-14

Week 11 M (Nov 16) A challenge to Aristotle: Doris, “Persons, Situations, Virtue Ethics”

Week 11 W (Nov 18) 8.1-8

Week 12 M (Nov 23) 8.9-14

Week 12 W (Nov 25) 9.1-7

Week 13 M (Nov 30) 9.8-12

Week 13 W (Dec 2) 10.1-5

Week 14 M (Dec 7) What is “contemplation?” Paintings with Geoff Lehman

Week 14 W (Dec 9) 10.6-9

Completion Week: Dec 14-18

Friday, December 18, before midnight: Final papers due

Because final grades for senior students are due December 18, 2020, the final papers for seniors will be due before midnight on December 16.