

## POSC 254: FREEDOM, EXCELLENCE, HAPPINESS—ARISTOTLE'S *ETHICS*

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Office hours: T 3:15-5, F 1:30-4  
and by appt.

### I. Purpose and Scope

What are the qualities, the *virtues*, that make a person excellent? Are all these qualities compatible with one another, or are some kinds of excellence incompatible with, maybe even opposed to, other kinds? Can the same person be civically virtuous, morally virtuous, and intellectually virtuous; or does one kind of excellence preclude another? . . . How does a person *become* excellent? Can we cultivate the virtues in ourselves, or must we be born with certain dispositions and/or be educated to virtue by others, beginning with early education? What possibilities remain to us if we haven't been fortunate either in nature or in nurture? . . . If virtue does depend on something beyond our own efforts, to what extent can we take credit for the good we do and accord credit to others for the good they do? And to what extent can we take or assign responsibility for the *bad* things that we or others do? For that matter, if our characters are shaped by forces beyond our control, in what way can we consider ourselves to be free? And what are the implications of this question for how we should and shouldn't think about justice? . . . What is the relationship between virtue and friendship? Isn't friendship about pleasure and shared inclinations—shouldn't it be a judgment-free zone? And yet don't we care about the well-being, and therefore the character, the virtue, of our friends? And doesn't our choice of friends both reflect and help shape our own character? . . . What is the relationship between virtue and *happiness*? Is virtue necessary to happiness? Is it sufficient for happiness? Is happiness the reward and even the goal of virtue? Most of us, it seems, would like to think that virtue both ought to be rewarded and somehow *is* rewarded. But then why do we admire as virtuous those who are willing to *sacrifice* their own happiness for the sake of a larger good. . . Is it good to raise such questions as these, or does inquiry into virtue threaten to undermine the very thing it wants to understand? . . .

Each of these questions is addressed by Aristotle in intricate, illuminating, and sometimes paradoxical detail in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which we will attempt to study with great care. Aristotle's perspective is in some ways familiar and in other ways alien to us. Where it is familiar, it will help us articulate what we perhaps already know, but only inchoately or incompletely. Where it is alien, it will show us things that we barely know or perhaps don't know at all. If there is one thing we can be certain of, it's that the questions treated in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are of the utmost importance to anyone, and to any society, that wishes to flourish.

### II. Course Requirements

By far the most important requirement is that you read all assigned passages **closely** and **before class**. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is one of those great philosophic works which, although difficult

to penetrate to its innermost depths, nevertheless offers much to the first-time reader. But it offers even more to the persistent reader, so you are advised to read the assignments more than once. Grades will be based on three 6-8 page papers (30% each) and class participation (10%).

### **III. Academic Honesty**

Strict standards of academic integrity will be upheld in this class. Your submission of written work means that your work is your own, that it is in accord with Carleton's regulations on academic integrity, and that you have neither given nor received unauthorized aid. Be sure you are familiar with Carleton's principles and policies on Academic Honesty: if you haven't done so already, review the website found at <https://apps.carleton.edu/campus/doc/honesty/>. I take academic honesty very seriously: students who are found to have violated these standards should expect severe sanctions.

### **IV. Assigned Text**

The only required reading in this course is the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Be sure to purchase the translation by Joe Sachs (Focus Publishing), which is available at the bookstore. I selected the Sachs translation for its literalness, which is the primary virtue for any translation of a philosophic work. Another translation well regarded for its literalness is by Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins (Chicago). Ambitious students are encouraged to purchase the latter translation as well, which also comes with valuable ancillary material, including an interpretive essay.

### **V. Secondary Reading**

You are not required to read anything but the assigned text, and you should always read Aristotle before looking at any interpretive work. For those interested, however, I have made the following studies available. Each is on Closed Reserve, with the exception of Bartlett's article, which is on eReserve:

G. E. M. Anscombe, "Thought and Action in Aristotle." in Jonathan Barnes, Malcolm Schofield, and Richard Sorabji, eds., *Articles on Aristotle. Vol. 2: Ethics and Politics*.

Robert Bartlett, "Aristotle's Introduction to the Problem of Happiness: On Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*." *American Journal of Political Science* 52:3 (July 2008): 677-687.

Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins, Interpretive Essay, in *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*.

Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins, eds., *Action and Contemplation: Studies in the Moral and Political Thought of Aristotle*.

Richard Bodéüs, *The Political Dimensions of Aristotle's Ethics*.

Ronna Burger, *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*.

Susan Collins, *Aristotle and the Rediscovery of Citizenship*.

John M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*.

Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*.

Carnes Lord and David O'Connor, eds., *Essays on the Foundations of Aristotelian Political Science*.

Lorraine Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*.

Amelie Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*.

Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Natural Right and History*.

Aristide Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle's Ethics: Virtue, Rhetoric, and Political Philosophy*.

## **VI. Class Schedule**

All reading assignments are from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The *Ethics* is divided into ten books, each of which is further divided into chapters. (The book divisions were made by Aristotle himself; the chapter divisions were the work of later scholars.) With the exception of books 8 and 9, we will be spending one week on each of the *Ethics*' 10 books. Although in most cases I've specified particular chapters to read for particular sessions, the optimal approach would be to read the entirety of the week's book (e.g., book 3) first and then re-read the chapters listed.

Note that this is an *approximate* schedule. If the past is any guide, we are likely depart from it if and when class discussion so requires.

April 1: Introduction—read book 1, chapters 1-5

April 3: book 1, chapters 6-13

April 8: book 2

April 10: book 2

April 15: book 3, chapters 1-5

April 17: book 3, chapters 6-12

April 22: book 4, chapters 1-3

\*\*April 22, special event: a public talk by Eva Brann of St. John's College (Annapolis, Maryland)—“Momentary Morality and Extended Ethics”: 7:30 PM in the Gould Library Athenaeum (attendance is mandatory)

April 24: book 4, chapters 4-9

April 29: book 5, chapters 1-5

May 1: book 5, chapters 6-11

May 6: book 6

May 8: book 6

May 13: book 7, chapters 1-10

May 15: book 7, chapters 11-14

May 20: book 8

May 22: books 8 and 9

May 27: book 9

May 29: book 10, chapters 1-5

June 3: book 10, chapters 6-9

## **VII. Due dates**

Papers should be submitted via email <lcooper@carleton.edu>, either as Word attachments or as PDF files.

First paper due **Friday, April 18**, 5:00 PM.

Second paper due **Friday, May 16**, 5:00 PM

Third paper due **Monday, June 9**, 9:30 PM