

POSC 254/354

FREEDOM, EXCELLENCE, HAPPINESS:

ARISTOTLE'S *ETHICS*

Professor Laurence Cooper

Fall 2020

****SPECIAL MIXED MODE EDITION****

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 educated to virtue by others? Do the virtues require or at least build upon certain innate dispositions? If so, which dispositions serve which virtues? What is possible for us if we haven't been fortunate either in nature or in nurture? . . . Where does our responsibility for our actions begin and end? Our character may determine our actions, but what determines our character? To the extent that our character has been shaped by things beyond our control (e.g., early childhood environment), in what way and to what extent are we *free*, and how should we 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 like to think that virtue ought to be rewarded and that, somehow, in the end, it *is* rewarded. But then why do we consider virtuous those who are willing to *sacrifice* their own happiness for the sake of a larger good? . . . Finally, is it good to raise such questions as these, or does inquiry into virtue threaten to undermine the very thing it wants to understand?

Aristotle investigates each of these questions in intricate, illuminating, and sometimes startling detail in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, to which this entire course will be dedicated. Our whole task is to read this book with great care. You will find that Aristotle's perspective is in some ways familiar to us and in other ways alien. 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 don't know and might never have been able to imagine. If there is one thing of which we can be certain, it's that the questions treated in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are of the utmost importance to anyone who wishes to live well and to any society that wishes to flourish.

II. One Course, Two Systems

More precisely, we have *two* courses with *two* systems. The two courses are POSC 254 and POSC 354. The only difference between them concerns the assigned writing. This will be addressed in section III, below. Our two systems are face-to-face learning and online learning.

The two groups will meet separately.

The **face-to-face group** will convene outdoors (location TBD) whenever the weather permits. When the weather is bad, we will meet online, in my Zoom room:

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Always assume that we'll be meeting outdoors unless you receive a message to the contrary. On days with uncertain weather, be sure to check Moodle and your email frequently.

The **online group** will meet on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 7:00-8:45 CST in my Zoom room: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

III. Course Requirements

By far the most important course requirement is that you read all assigned passages **closely** and **before class**. You should also read every assigned passage a second time, either before class or after. The *Nicomachean Ethics* offers a great deal of insight to the first-time reader. But it offers even more insight to the persistent reader. You might wish to do your second reading from a second translation. (See section VI below.)

Students enrolled in POSC 354 will write two papers: The first is a five- to seven-page paper on a selected portion of the text, which you will *present in class*. This paper, which will count for 30% of your grade, will serve as the basis for some part of the day's discussion. A twenty-page seminar paper will count for 60% of your grade. The seminar paper will be due on Monday, November 23. Seminar paper topics must be approved by me by Monday, November 9 (preferably earlier). The remaining 10% of your grade will be based on class participation, including your class presentation: since this is a seminar, your active and sustained participation is expected.

Students enrolled in POSC 254 will write three papers. One of these will be a five- to seven-page paper on a selected portion of the text, which you will *present in class*. This paper, which will count for 30% of your grade, will serve as the basis for some part of the day's discussion. Additionally, students will write two seven- to eight-page papers on topics of their own choosing, though I am happy to suggest topics to you (30% each). One of these papers must be submitted by Friday, October 16, though you are welcome to submit it earlier than that. The other paper must be submitted by Monday, November 23, though, again, you are welcome to submit early. The remaining 10% of your grade will be based on class participation, including your class presentation: since this is a seminar, your active and sustained participation is expected.

All papers should be submitted by email as Word documents to <lcooper@carleton.edu>

IV. Office Hours

Office hours will normally be conducted by appointment online, though at times we may meet outdoors. I will be available most afternoons.

V. 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.

VI. Assigned Text

The only required reading in this course is the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Since translations vary in quality, and since it's important that we all have the same translation before us, you should purchase and read from the translation by Joe Sachs (Focus Publishing). I selected the Sachs translation for its literalness, which is the chief virtue for any translation of a philosophic work. I also *recommend* that you purchase a second translation, which is also quite literal: this one by Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins (Chicago). You might wonder why we need two translations if both are literal. The answer is that no translation can be completely literal. Every translation involves a degree of interpretation by the translator. It will be helpful in some cases to think about the subtle but meaningful differences between the Sachs translation and the Bartlett-Collins translation. Also, the Bartlett-Collins translation includes valuable ancillary material, including an interpretive essay.

VII. Secondary Reading

You are not required to read anything but the assigned text, and you should always read Aristotle more than once before looking at any interpretive work. For those who do wish to consult secondary works, I would recommend the following:

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*.

VIII. Class Schedule

All reading assignments are from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The *Ethics* is divided into ten numbered books, each of which is further divided into chapters. (It is believed that the book divisions were made by Aristotle himself and that the chapter divisions are the work of later scholars.) With the exception of books 8 and 9, our plan is to spend one week on each of the *Ethics'* 10 books.

Note that this is an *approximate* schedule. If the past is any guide, there is a good chance that we'll make adjustment as the term proceeds.

September 15: Course introduction—read book 1, chapters 1-5

September 17: book 1, chapters 6-13

September 22: book 2, entire

September 24: book 2, entire (again)

September 29: book 3, chapters 1-5

October 1: book 3, chapters 6-12

October 6: book 4, chapters 1-3

October 8: book 4, chapters 4-9

October 13: book 5, chapters 1-5

October 15: book 5, chapters 6-11

October 20: book 6, entire

October 22: book 6, entire (again)

October 27: book 7, chapters 1-10

October 29: book 7, chapters 11-14

November 3: book 8

November 5: books 8 and 9

November 10: book 9

November 12: book 10, chapters 1-5

November 17: book 10, chapters 6-9