

PHIL 161: Topics in the History of Ethics
Fall 2015; Topic: Greek Ethics
Professor David O. Brink
Syllabus

The required readings (A) can all be found in the four required texts, which should also be available on hard reserves.

- *Plato's Complete Works*, ed. J. Cooper (Hackett, 1997).
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trs. T. Irwin, 2d ed. (Hackett, 1999).
- *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1, ed. A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley (Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- Cicero, *De Finibus [On Moral Ends]*, ed. J. Annas, trs. R. Woolf (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Other editions and translations of some of these works are acceptable, but please consult me before relying on other versions of these texts. I list a few recommended readings (B) here as well. For students who are interested in secondary literature on particular topics, I am happy to make recommendations (a more comprehensive Syllabus for Greek Ethics, including more extensive recommended readings, can be found here <<http://davidobrink.com/course/seminar-greek-ethics>> or just ask me for suggestions). Please do the readings in advance of class discussion.

0. GENERAL

- (B) Terence Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford, 1985) and *The Development of Ethics*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 2007).

1. SOCRATES

In the *Apology* we encounter Socrates the moral gadfly who was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death for impiety and corrupting the youth. In the *Crito* Socrates refuses the entreaties of his friends to escape, insisting that he has an obligation to submit to the state. In the *Euthyphro* we see Socrates at work trying to answer the "What is F?" question about the virtue of piety and raising the famous Euthyphro problem about the relation between piety and the will of the gods. In the *Laches* Socrates tackles the virtue of courage and ends with a puzzle about the unity of the virtues. The *Euthydemus* addresses issues about the difference between philosophy and eristic and about the relation between wisdom and happiness. The *Lysis* discusses friendship and appears to have surprising implications for how we value friends and virtue.

- (A) *Apology*, *Euthyphro*, and *Laches*.
- (B) *Crito*, *Euthydemus* esp. 278e-282e, *Lysis* esp. 219d-220b.

2. FROM SOCRATES TO PLATO

In the *Protagoras* Socrates encounters the sophist Protagoras. They discuss whether virtue is teachable, and Socrates appears to defend the unity of the virtues by appeal to hedonism. In the process, he defends a cognitive picture of the virtues and denies the possibility of akrasia. In the *Gorgias* Socrates encounters rhetoricians who raise the eudaimonist challenge about justice -- how can an other-regarding trait such justice be a virtue if virtues must contribute to the agent's own eudaimonia (the eudaimonist assumption). In the process of defending justice, Socrates appears to express skepticism about the sort of hedonism defended in the *Protagoras*.

- (A) *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*.

3. PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

The *Republic* is Plato's most comprehensive and influential work. Its ostensible focus is the eudaimonist defense of the virtue of justice, which requires Plato to argue that one is always better-off being just, no matter the cost. In particular, in a famous section of book ii Plato articulates and accepts the demand that he must show justice to be good both for its consequences and for its own sake. The *Republic* is a very wide-ranging work that tackles the defense of justice by an examination of the ideal form of government and a defense of rule by moral experts. This argument also takes Plato into elaborate discussions of the nature of forms and our knowledge of them and the nature and value of the arts. The result is a comprehensive philosophical system that outstrips in scope and substance anything we find in the Socratic dialogues. We will discuss the moral and political arguments (and some of these intersecting issues), but we will focus on the eudaimonist defense of justice and its adequacy. We will look at sections of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* to see if Plato's views about love might strengthen the *Republic's* defense of justice.

- (A) *Republic* i-ii, iii-iv, v-vii, viii-ix; *Symposium* 206e-212c; *Phaedrus* 237e-257b, 276a-278d.

4. ARISTOTLE'S *ETHICS*

Aristotle begins the *Ethics* in book i with an elaborate discussion of eudaimonia or happiness, apparently defending a pluralist conception of happiness including intellectual and practical virtues and goods of fortune. However, book x appears to defend a monistic theory that focuses on contemplation. How, if at all, can these two different conceptions of eudaimonia be reconciled? The central books of the *Ethics* (ii-vii) discuss the nature of virtue in general and various specific virtues, along the way offering an interesting conception of akrasia that claims to find truth in both Socratic and Platonic accounts. We'll conclude by looking at Aristotle's discussion of friendship (viii-ix), which is interesting in its own right but also plays a potentially significant role in the eudaimonist defense of justice.

- (A) *Nicomachean Ethics* i, x, ii-vii, viii-ix.

5. EPICUREAN *ETHICS*

The Epicureans are empiricists and materialists who defend hedonism forthrightly. They connect their hedonism with their overarching concern to address and remove the fear of death. For instance, they claim that the dead can experience no pain, that the dead do not exist to be harmed, and that postmortem non-existence is no worse than prenatal nonexistence. We will examine and assess their arguments for why death should be nothing to us. Their hedonism also leads them to defend the instrumental value of the virtues and adopt a social contract conception of justice, both of which contrast with Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic commitments. We should ask how, if at all, our assessment of these claims is affected by their puzzling distinction between kinetic and katastematic pleasures.

- (A) Cicero, *De Finibus* i-ii ; Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* §§21-25.

6. STOIC *ETHICS*

Like Aristotle, the Stoics think that happiness depends on our nature as rational animals. Like both Plato and Aristotle, and unlike the Epicureans, they think that virtue is a part of happiness, rather than an instrumental means to happiness. But whereas Plato and Aristotle see virtue as a proper part of happiness, the Stoics identify virtue and happiness, famously and paradoxically claiming that the goods of fortune that Plato and Aristotle think are necessary for a complete good are "preferred indifferents." We will try to reconstruct and assess these Stoic claims about virtue and happiness. We will also look at Stoic cosmopolitanism, which insists on ethical concern for any rational animal, contrasting with Aristotle's apparently more parochial conception of the scope of ethical concern, based on shared history.

- (A) Cicero, *De Finibus*, iii-v; Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* §§56-67.