

## Introduction to Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy: Human Being and Human Good

---

Instructor: Rory Hanlon

E-mail: [rhanlon11@uchicago.edu](mailto:rhanlon11@uchicago.edu)

### Course Description

This course offers an introduction to the main achievements of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, of interest both for their influence over the development of Western thought and for the profound and perennial questions that they addressed. Yet it also offers an introduction to philosophy itself—a word originally coined (‘the love of wisdom’) to describe the peculiar intellectual activities of Greek thinkers who rationally and critically examined themselves, their political communities, and nature as a whole. Through reading their texts closely, we will reflect with these thinkers on what it means to think and live philosophically.

We will take as our starting point the idea that, for the Greeks and Romans, philosophy was ‘a way of life’—even their most abstract and theoretical inquiries (e.g., about the nature of the cosmos) were inextricably connected to a view of how one should live. We will focus on two interconnected themes: the various Greek conceptions of the *human being* (a theoretical question about what sort of thing a human or their soul is) and the *human good* (a practical question of what a human being should do with their life). The philosophers to be discussed are Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicureans (Epicurus and Lucretius), Stoics (Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius), and Skeptics (Sextus Empiricus). Students will be expected to engage with the texts and ideas of these thinkers critically, through close reading, argumentative writing, and lively in-class discussion.

### Course Objectives

Together, we will closely read the primary texts of central ancient Greek philosophers, identifying and evaluating the reasons they offer in support of their views. First, this will allow you to gain familiarity with the central metaphysical, psychological, and ethical doctrines of the major ancient Greek and Roman philosophical traditions. Second, this will allow you to learn what it is to do philosophy. This involves acquiring and practicing various skills: critical thinking, composing argumentative prose, engaging in thoughtful dialogue, and assessing and reconstructing arguments. More generally, we will practice what the ancient philosophers themselves did: to *live philosophically*, by critically examining our most strongly held beliefs, and reflecting on how they should or could influence our lives.

### Pre-requisites:

There are no pre-requisites for this class. This class is designed not only as an introduction to Ancient Greek philosophy, but also to philosophy itself—how to read, think, converse, and write deliberately, carefully, and clearly. Moreover, no prior knowledge of ancient Greek, or ancient Greek culture is expected (though there will be engagement with the language and culture in class, when helpful).

### Course Assignments

Students are expected to show up to lecture having done all of the required reading. In addition, each week I will recommend one or two pieces of secondary literature. Reading the secondary literature is *not* required for the course—our goal is to learn how to directly engage with the primary material. Nonetheless, the secondary articles are recommended if you want to dig deeper into a particular thinker or topic, or plan to write a paper on a relevant related topic.

The central assignments for the course will be three papers:

- (1) An ‘argument reconstruction’ paper (2-3 pages) on a passage from Plato’s texts. You should describe the steps (premises) of the argument and explain how they work together to support the conclusion. Often this requires clarifying the premises and explaining why they seem plausible. You should also support your claims about the argument with quotations from the text. Finally, you should make at least one observation about the argument, e.g. raise an objection; point out an unarticulated assumption; point out an interesting implication of the argument; raise a question about the argument and explain why the question is worth pursuing.
- (2) A midterm paper (5-7 pages), responding to and defending an answer to one of a series of prompts about the texts of Plato.
- (3) A final paper (6-9 pages), responding to and defending an answer to one of a series of prompts about the texts of Aristotle, the Epicureans, or Stoics. You are also required to submit a paper proposal (one paragraph) one week before the final paper is due.

Additionally, you are required to post biweekly reading responses, in which you pose a one question or observation (e.g., an objection, an implication) you have about the reading for that class. These are meant to be low-stakes and are not graded (beyond them being submitted).

### Assessment

Participation (Reading Responses, Attendance, Discussion): 20%

Argument Reconstruction: 20%

Midterm Paper: 25%

Final Paper: 35%

### Midterm Course Evaluations

During week 5, I will ask you to complete an anonymous evaluation about the course. Please take a few minutes that week to think honestly about the course thus far—what you have found to be valuable and helpful, as well as deficient and unhelpful. The opportunity to get your feedback at this point is invaluable. You should also feel welcome throughout the quarter to let me know any concerns or problems you are having in the course, especially during my office hours.

### Schedule

	Themes and Questions	Reading
1	Historical and cultural context of Greek Philosophy and its rivals (sophistry, poetry, religion): In what way was philosophy a ‘way of life’ for ancient philosophers? How did this differ from other ancient ways of life?	“Philosophy as a Way of Life”, Pierre Hadot
2	Plato’s Socrates: what does it mean to live an examined life and why is it so important to Socrates? How does this examined life relate to the broader political community?	<i>Apology</i>
3	Plato: What is the relationship between soul and body? How is philosophy a preparation for death?	<i>Phaedo</i> , 57a-80b
4	Plato: why should we think that the soul is immortal?	<i>Phaedo</i> , 80b-118a
5	Plato: Why does the soul have parts? How do we achieve the proper and virtuous relation between these parts?	<i>Republic</i> , IV & X

6	Plato: What is the nature of human reason? What is its relationship to Being?	<i>Republic</i> , VI & VII
7	Plato: What is the nature of love? What is its relationship to the predicament of human life?	<i>Symposium</i>
8	Aristotle: What is Aristotle's conception of nature? How does this relate to his understanding of cause, form, and substance?	<i>Physics</i> , II.1-3; <i>Metaphysics</i> VII (Selections)
9	Aristotle: What does it mean that the soul is the nature and substance of a living thing? How does this relate to a living thing's body?	<i>De Anima</i> , II.1-4
10	Aristotle: What is the highest good for a human being? What is <i>Eudaimonia</i> , or happiness? How does the nature of the human being or soul determine what the human good is?	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , I
11	Aristotle: Moral Virtue; Why does Aristotle think that virtue is a 'mean state'? How is such a mean state brought about?	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , II.1-6; III.1-3
12	Aristotle: Intellectual Virtue; why do we need to think well to be good people?	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , VI
13	Aristotle: Why does the virtuous person need friends? What's the difference between better and worse forms of friendship?	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , VIII-IX (Selections)
14	Aristotle: Why does Aristotle think that the contemplative life is the best life? Is the contemplative life a <i>human</i> life?	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , X.6-9; <i>De Anima</i> , III.5 <i>Metaphysics</i> , I.1-2; <i>Parts of Animals</i> , I.5
15	Epicureanism: how does the cosmic order affect and reflect the human order? How does learning atomic theory make us happier?	<i>Letter to Herodotus</i> , Epicurus
16	Epicureanism: why is pleasure the human good? What are the kinds of pleasures, and which ones should we pursue?	<i>Letter to Menoeceus</i> , Epicurus
17	Epicureanism: how does understanding the nature of the human soul allow us to escape the fear of death?	<i>De Rerum Natura</i> , III, Lucretius
18	Stoicism: what is the relationship between the human soul, freedom, and the good? How should we relate to things beyond our control?	<i>Enchiridion</i> , Epictetus
19	Stoicism: how is Stoic thinking implemented into everyday living? How does it become a way of life?	<i>Meditations</i> (Selections), Marcus Aurelius
20	Skepticism: why must we suspend judgment? Why is this suspension of judgment to be sought? How could one actually live a Skeptic's life?	<i>Outlines of Pyrrhonism</i> , 1-34; 187-209, Sextus Empiricus