

I. Syllabus, Spring 2016

PHL 293: Wisdom and Virtue

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Course Description:

For many people, ‘virtue’ is an obsolete term. Yet the last 60 years have seen a revival of philosophical and popular interest in virtue ethics (Cf. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*).

The “classical” or cardinal Greek virtues are justice, moderation, courage, and wisdom (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Plato, *Republic*). Notice that the first three seem to us “moral” while the last seems more “intellectual”. For this reason, part of the re-invigorated conversation about virtue centers on the “intellectual virtues” (Cf. Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*).

This revival of interest is fitting, since philosophy has been closely associated with wisdom — φιλοσοφία (philosophía) means *love of wisdom* — and Peter commands Christians “add to your faith virtue” (2 Pet 1).

Wisdom and virtue, far from being old-fashioned or obsolete, are immortal. Some of the oldest surviving pieces of human civilization are books of wisdom (*Instructions to Shuruppak*, Proverbs, Job); one of the seven Biblical genres is “wisdom literature”. Wisdom and virtue talk has played a central role in ancient, medieval, early modern, and now contemporary discussions of how to live well.

So what exactly is wisdom? How is it different (if at all) from knowledge, science, sophistry, or skill? What is the relation between virtue and wisdom, between the excellence of heart and mind? Is wisdom one intellectual virtue or is it (*phronesis*, practical wisdom) the master virtue?

1. ???

In this course, we will attempt to answer these questions through a careful reading and discussion of primary sources from ancient and contemporary authors. Our aim will be both theoretical and practical; we shall aim to understand what wisdom is and aim to become more wise, with each other's help and by God's grace.

Course Goals:

Our governing questions are:

1. What is wisdom (and its opposite, foolishness)? Is it "epistemic humility, epistemic accuracy, knowledge, rationality," the fear of God, or a hybrid of these?
2. How does wisdom differ from sophistry or false wisdom? How does it differ from skill, and science?
3. How does wisdom relate to (other) moral virtues?
4. How do we become more wise?

To answer these, our goals are:

- To become familiar with the history of and various meanings of the terms 'virtue' and 'wisdom';
- To become familiar with and analyze dominant Greek accounts of virtue in Aristotle and Plato;
- To compare ancient Hebrew, Chinese, and Sumerian ideas of wisdom with the Greek ideas.
- To analyze recent Anglo-American accounts of virtue in Philippa Foot, Peter Geach, Rosalind Hursthouse, and others.
- To compare and contrast Biblical models of virtue with others;

Scope and Sequence: To accomplish these goals, this 16-week course is divided into into about 8 units of 2 weeks each. Unit work consists of three components: (a) readings and class preparation (b) participation in interactive lectures and discussion, and (c) disputation papers.

Course Outline (online)

(Subject to revisions due to snow days, instructor sickness, academic conferences, etc.)

Grading:

The class work consists of four components: reading, participating, and writing. You will be graded on each component.

Reading 25%
 Participation 25%
 Disputation Papers 50%

I typically do not round up. So 89.5 is a “B”

A = 99%-94%	A- = 90%-93%
B+ = 87%-89%	B = 84% - 86%
B- = 80% - 83%	C+ = 77%-79%
C = 74% - 76%	C- = 70% -73%
D = 69% - 60%	F < 59%

Books

(Readings are subject to slight changes.)

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachena Ethics*
2. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*
3. Crisp and Slote, *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford)

Handouts

1. Instructions to Shurappag
2. Tao Te Ching
3. Ecclesiastes
4. Plato, Alcibiades I
5. Evagrius Pontus, Eight Deadly Thoughts
6. Dante, The Banquet
7. SEP Wisdom
8. SEP Virtue
9. Thomas Aquinas
10. Kekes, Wisdom
11. Almond, Seeking Wisdom
12. Jay Wood, “Prudence”

The primary work of this class will be to read, understand, and critique these books and articles. This course is inspired by the “Great Books” approach. I am aware that reading primary sources can be more challenging than a textbook; it is also more rewarding. As this is an upper division

course, you should plan to be reading about 3-4 hours a week. Read well. Read every assignment entirely. Skimming is sometimes necessary, but don't skim every week.

Reading Tips

- Read ahead.
- Give yourself enough time to read carefully. You will get better and faster.
- *Try to understand* the book. What is the author's key terms? The author's main point?
- Dialogue with the book before class. Take notes. Email me. Talk with each other. Talk with other friends. Process your thoughts.
- Take notes on: Is the author correct? What confused you? What questions did you have? What does the book mean?
- The two most important questions for each reading 1. What is the main truth claim? 2. What is the evidence?
- Pay attention to what confuses you and what you disagree with. Bring your questions to class.
- Don't read the introduction for the book (which is often more confusing than the book). If you do want to read it, read it after reading the primary source — that may help.
- Use things like Sparknotes sparingly. I want you to have your own encounter with the text. Get your own first impression. Sparknotes can be pretty useful but don't rely on it and only read it after reading the primary source.

Quizzes

A short reading quiz is due almost every class day. These assess whether you read, and how well. They are mandatory and graded. You have 10 minutes for each quiz, and they are due at the beginning of class.

Participation:

To get the most out of this class, you must take responsibility for your own participation. Participation in this class takes two forms: discussing (external processing) and writing (internal processing). Everyone will participate in these two ways. But you get to pick your emphasis. Are you an internal or external processor?

Writing Emphasis: If you want to emphasize writing, to earn participation points, you will post class reflections online every week. You may elect to speak in class as well, and may be called upon.

Speaking Emphasis: If you want to emphasize talking, you will be on my “go to” team to talk in class (instead of posting reflections after class).

Attendance:

We need you here! Attendance is mandatory. Roll will be taken each class. (Being repeatedly or egregiously late will count as an absence.) 1 to 6 unexcused absences are freebies — no credit lost. 7 or more unexcused absences cause bigger and bigger deductions from your participation grade. (8 is a letter grade) You are paying for this education including this class, so why wouldn't you make the most of it?

Participation through dialogue/writing:

This is a dialogue-oriented class. Every person is responsible to participate.

Speaking Emphasis: “External processors” emphasize talking. You will be on my “go to” team to talk in class (instead of posting reflections after class).

Writing Emphasis: “Internal processors” emphasize writing. to earn participation points, you will post class reflections online every week. You may elect to speak in class as well, and may be called upon.

Everyone starts at an 80% for the discussion grade; you can move up from there or down, depending on whether you speak or write once per week, pay attention, and offer helpful contributions.

Come *prepared*. Read, take notes, reflect, and come ready to share your viewpoint, defend it, listen to others' viewpoints, and critique theirs.

A discussion is more than just sharing opinions; it is a friendly, eager, sincere search for truth. We can't judge each other, but we must judge each other's opinions, and test them for truth. We discuss because it is more interesting; it helps us retain the information; it challenges our own viewpoint; and because philosophy itself is a dialogue. Discussion ground rules are posted online.

Philosophical Disputation Papers:

At midterm and end of term, you will write a philosophical paper arguing a thesis and defending it against objections. Each paper is worth 25% of the semester grade. The instructions for these

assignments are on Discovery.

Miscellany

1. **Bring your** textbook every day.
2. **Participate.** Challenge yourself to talk. Taking short “mental breaks” is fine, but come back.
3. **No smartphones.** If you need to take a text message or phone call, step out, respond, and come back.
4. **Laptop/tablet users must sit in the front row.**
5. **Be respectful of others:** no teasing, and pay attention when a neighbor is talking. Don't pack up early. Don't come late. Don't talk while your neighbor is talking.
6. **Contact me.** Best method is to chat after class. I read every email but may not respond to every email. If I don't respond within three (3) business days, email again with the subject “nudge”.
7. For short, quick questions, use Twitter (²)
8. **I can accommodate you:** If you have a documented disability that might require academic accommodation, please make sure you are registered with the Academic Support Program. Contact Pam Downing (pamela.downing@asbury.edu / (859) 858-3511 x2283.
9. **Make up work** is not accepted after the due date. It must be submitted within a week of an excused absence, with written consent. Let me know if you are going to be absent for any reason.
10. **Enjoy philosophy.** We are not merely solving abstract puzzles here, but digging deeply into human thinking in a way that could change your life forever. The more you and your fellows allow yourselves to acquire a “taste” for the material, the more inclined you will be to give it the real effort required to master it.
11. Plagiarism has been an issue. Even unintentional plagiarism earns a zero for the assignment and, in intentional or egregious cases, failing the course and receiving a permanent mark on your academic record. You'll submit your papers to SafeAssign on Blackboard to help avoid accidental plagiarism. Don't even think about stealing someone else's thought/work.