

# Moral Philosophy - Spring, 2007

Christopher M. Young

## Course Information

**Course Code:** PHILO 244

**Instructor:** Christopher Young

**Prerequisites:** One course in philosophy and English 120

**Class time:** Tuesday and Thursday, 5:35pm to 6:50pm

**Office Hours:** Thursdays, 4:30pm to 5:30pm, and by appointment.

**Office Location:** Hunter West, Rm. 1447

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## Course Description

What is a good life for a human being? What ultimately justifies actions, characters, and ways of life? And how are these first two questions related? In this class, we will try to answer these questions for ourselves by way of the study of classic texts by Aristotle, the Epicureans, the Stoics, Hume, Mill, and Kant. We will pay special attention to the very different ways that these philosophers appeal to human nature and to reason in order to justify their claims. The class will conclude by briefly considering the continuing influence of these philosophers on contemporary philosophy.

## Required Texts

The required texts are available at *Shakespeare and Company*, on Lexington Ave. The ISBN number is provided in case you wish to purchase the books elsewhere. Students will find it very helpful to purchase *these* versions of the texts, especially Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Second Edition. (ISBN: 0-87220-464-2).
- Inwood and Gerson. *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings, Second edition*. (ISBN: 0-87220-378-6)
- Hume. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. (ISBN: 0-915145-45-6)
- Kant. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. (ISBN: 0-87220-166-X)
- Mill. *Utilitarianism*. (ISBN: 0-87220-605-X)

## Course Work

Course work will consist of:

1. Two short papers (20% each)
2. The best four quizzes out of five (5% each)
3. One final exam (30%)
4. A participation and attendance grade (10%)

You will have an option to write second drafts of the two short papers. This is strongly recommended. The grade for the second draft will replace the grade for the first draft, assuming it is higher (as it almost always is).

Please note that attendance is absolutely essential. There will be no opportunity to make up the quizzes.

## Statement on Academic Integrity

“Hunter College regards acts of academic dishonesty (e.g., plagiarism, cheating on examinations, obtaining unfair advantage, and falsification of records and official documents) as serious offenses against the values of intellectual honesty. The College is committed to enforcing the CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity and will pursue cases of academic dishonesty according to the Hunter College Academic Integrity Procedures.”

**There is a complete ban on research (library, internet, etc.) for this class. Plagiarism will be punished by automatic failure in the class, with the strong possibility of further disciplinary action.**

## Schedule of Readings

1. **Topic:** Introduction to “Moral Philosophy”  
**Reading:** None
2. **Topic:** Scepticism about ethics  
**Reading:** None
3. **Topic:** Aristotle and *eudaimonism*  
**Reading:** Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I (you can skip chapter 6)
4. **Topic:** Aristotle’s ethics: methodological issues and problems  
**Reading:** Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I (you can skip chapter 6)
5. **Topic:** How to write a good philosophy paper  
**Topic:** Avoiding plagiarism  
**Reading:** Handout - “A few tips for writing your philosophy paper”
6. **Topic:** Aristotle’s “function argument”  
**Reading:** Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapter 7
7. **Topic:** Aristotle on friendship and the self  
**Reading:** Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IX, chapters 4 and 8

**Deadline:** Assignment #1

8. **Topic:** Epicurus and Epicureanism  
**Reading:** *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, pp. 3-5, 28-45, 75-80, 95-102
9. **Topic:** Stoicism  
**Reading:** *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, pp. 103-110, 190-203, 232-260
10. **Topic:** Hobbes  
**Reading:** Selections from *Leviathan* (handout)
11. **Topic:** Hume  
**Reading:** Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Chapters I-IV
12. **Topic:** Hume, continued  
**Reading:** Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Chapters V-IX
13. **Topic:** Finishing Hume  
**Reading:** Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Appendices I-IV
14. **Topic:** An Introduction to Mill  
**Reading:** Mill's *Utilitarianism*, Chapters I and II
15. **Topic:** Justifying the principle of utility  
**Reading:** Mill's *Utilitarianism*, Chapters III and IV
16. **Topic:** An Introduction to Kant  
**Reading:** Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Preface.
17. **Topic:** Kant  
**Reading:** Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, First Section (Transition from the Ordinary Rational Knowledge of Morality to the Philosophical)
18. **Topic:** Kant, continued  
**Reading:** Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Second Section (Transition from Popular Moral Philosophy to a Metaphysics of Morals)  
**Deadline:** Assignment #2
19. **Topic:** Kant, continued  
**Reading:** Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Third Section (Transition from a Metaphysics of Morals to a Critique of Pure Practical Reason)
20. **Topic:** Is Kant's view implausible and inflexible?  
**Reading:** Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Supplement (On a Supposed Right to Lie because of Philanthropic Concerns)
21. **Topic:** Rawls  
**Reading:** Selections from *A Theory of Justice* (Handout)
22. **Topic:** Aristotle in contemporary ethics  
**Reading:** T.B.A. (and time permitting)
23. **Topic:** Hume in contemporary ethics  
**Reading:** T.B.A. (and time permitting)
24. **Topic:** Kant in contemporary ethics  
**Reading:** T.B.A. (and time permitting)

# Assignments

## General Instructions

- Your assignments should be no more than 2 pages long, double-spaced. Please do not attach a cover page. Be sure to staple the pages of your assignment together.
- Avoid quotation when you're explicating a text. I want to see you try to put the ideas in your own words. It is, however, very important to cite the particular passages that you are paraphrasing.
- These assignments are intended to focus your attention on the texts we're reading in class. No outside research is permitted for these assignments. This includes Internet resources, books and articles from the library, and so on. If you have used secondary sources or encountered this material in other classes, please indicate this in your paper.
- You may choose to write two drafts of the short assignments, and discard the lower of the two grades. Second drafts of the short assignments are due on the final day the class meets.
- I prefer that you submit assignments by email, though you may also submit paper versions. Accepted submission formats are: .rtf, .doc, .txt, .wpd, .tex and .odt. Please, please, please do not submit anything in .wps. If you email me an assignment, expect a response within 12 hours. If you don't receive a response, something may have gone wrong, so try again. **Please note: It is your responsibility to make sure that I have received your assignment by email.**

## Assignment #1 - Aristotle

**Reading:** Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books I and Book IX (chapters 4 and 8)

Aristotle opens his *Nicomachean Ethics* by declaring that the aim of action and decision is the good. He later claims that it is uncontroversial that the good is happiness (or *eudaimonia*), presumably meaning the agent's *own* happiness, not just anyone's. But then happiness turns out, on his telling, to consist in virtuous activity. This has puzzled many commentators: the claim that every action and decision is undertaken for an agent's own happiness certainly *appears* to suggest that Aristotle is recommending a selfish outlook. And yet (genuine) virtue, both on our own understanding and on Aristotle's, seems not to be selfish at all.

Calling an outlook "selfish" is a tricky matter, however, since the word can mean different things to different people. In Book IX, Chapters 4 and 8, Aristotle talks about the relationship between a good person and his own self. These passages—in particular those where Aristotle draws a distinction between two different types of "self-love"—have suggested to some a way to get around the impression that Aristotle's outlook is selfish.

Consider these texts and answer the following question: Is Aristotle's outlook in the *Nicomachean Ethics* selfish or not? Make sure to be clear what you mean by affirming or denying that Aristotle's outlook is fundamentally selfish. (Notice that you might end up saying that Aristotle's view is selfish in one sense but not another, or that it is or isn't selfish in several different senses. That's ok too.)

## Assignment #2 - Kant

**Reading:** Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, especially the Second Section

In the Second Section of his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant writes that the three versions of the categorical imperative are "at bottom only so many formulas of the very same law." What does Kant mean by this? Explain each of the formulations of the categorical imperative, and then explain why Kant might make this striking claim about them. Please note that this text is *extremely* difficult. Start early; ask for help when you need it; take the opportunity to rewrite the assignment; and rest assured that the final grade will take into account the difficulty of the assignment, as well as the effort you put into it.

# Final Take-Home Exam

## General Instructions

- You don't need to write more than 8 to 10 pages in total for the exam, but there is no length restriction.
- This exam is a chance to show off what you've learned in the class. Originality is good, but never pass up a chance to demonstrate your familiarity with the texts we've studied. About 30% of your grade is for originality and 70% for a demonstrated familiarity with the texts we've studied this semester.
- Because this is an exam, it is less formal than a paper. But you still need to include references to texts which you either paraphrase or quote. (Indeed, you should cite texts if only to help demonstrate that you've read and understood them.)
- Please submit your final exam by email. Accepted submission formats are: .rtf, .doc, .txt, .wpd, and .odt. Please, please, please do not submit anything in .wps.

## Exam Questions

Answer **both** of the following questions:

1. The Epicureans and the Stoics both appealed to the "cradle argument" in order to justify their ethical outlooks. Compare, contrast, and assess their approaches.
2. Hume and Kant made very different attempts to provide a foundation for morality. Choose **one** of these thinkers and explain and assess the attempt.