

PHIL 356 | The Concept of Life in Ancient Greek Philosophy and its Relevance Today Spring 2025

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Course Description

During this course we will explore the concept of life in ancient Greek philosophy and its relevance to contemporary philosophical debates. In the first part of the course we will examine the notion of life in the context of Plato's and Aristotle's metaphysical, psychological, political and ethical writings. Our primary aim will be to understand how Aristotle's explicit treatment of life challenges Plato's dualistic, metaphysical theory of Forms and leads to a distinct conception of ethics and politics. Through the comparison of the relevant doctrines and views we will seek to get a better understanding of the crucial role that the concept of life plays in the formation of the ancient Greek philosophy of ethics, politics and culture. In the second part of the course we will try to appreciate the extent to which this philosophy of life informs the inception and critique of modern thought, while also providing a potential alternative to the challenges it faces. By studying modern and contemporary thinkers, we will see how the treatment of the concept of life by ancient Greek philosophers has become a primary focus in contemporary debates concerning pressing ethical and political challenges posed by late modernity, notably those pertaining to totalitarianism, the Holocaust and the issue of animal rights.

Course Approach

This course takes an interactive approach, using as minimal lecturing as possible to promote hands-on engagement with philosophical ideas. Through class discussions and group activities, students will explore ancient and modern texts, assess arguments, and debate key philosophical questions, while weekly reading and writing assignments will reinforce both analytical and academic writing skills. In-class assignments, including group assessment of philosophical perspectives and analysis of specific arguments, artistic representations of ideas and structured debates will allow students to collaboratively examine and understand complex concepts. Mid-term and final essays, tailored to students' interests, will provide an opportunity for deeper exploration, while the course's inclusive approach aspires to make it accessible to both students with a background in philosophy and newcomers eager to engage with the discipline.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the course the students will be able to:

- Identify, understand, and reflect on the ethical and political issues and challenges raised within the context of philosophy of life.
- Discuss and interpret key concepts and aspects of classical ancient Greek philosophy.
- Critically compare the different views held by ancient, modern and contemporary philosophers on the nature and logic of life and its ethical and political implications.
- Analyze, compare and contrast the logical structure of philosophical arguments.
- Apply and deepen the acquired understanding, knowledge and skills by compiling two well-balanced and theoretically informed academic essay which clearly articulate and critically analyze issues of their interest.

Course Requirements

Successfully completing this course involves class participation, reading and written work:

Class Participation: In this class, philosophy is being taught as an activity and not a mere body of doctrine. As a consequence, we will all try to engage in dialogue with each other, starting from what we know and experience and moving on to a philosophical understanding of each of the concepts and problems we will be reading about in class. Class Contribution includes physical and mental presence in the classroom, arriving on time, preparation, participation in class discussions. Reading assignments are to be completed before each class session. Students are expected to come prepared, engage in our discussions, ask questions, and voice their opinions in class. If someone feels extremely uncomfortable speaking in front of a large group of students, they should consult me in order to discuss alternative options for participation.

Reading: Students are expected to complete on average 30-60 pages of weekly reading. The reading assignments will consist of a selection from ancient Greek, modern and contemporary philosophy texts and optional reading of secondary literature. The texts will be either available at the CYA library or accessible in PDF form on Moodle.

Written work: Students are expected to submit weekly informal (1-2 pages long) reflections based on the week's readings delivered to my email one day before the first class or second class of the week. The reports will not be graded separately. The grade will be calculated based on their timely submission and overall quality. Additionally, you are expected to submit on specified dates a 3-5 pages long mid-term paper and a 5-8 pages long final paper, the guidelines for which will be discussed in class.

Evaluation and Grading

The evaluation of the students' overall academic performance will be based on:

- Class participation and attendance.
- Commitment to the reading assignments.
- The timely submission and overall quality of the weekly reports.
- Development of research and writing skills.
- The quality of the mid-term and final paper.

Your grade for this course will be based on the following distribution:

Class participation:	15%
Weekly reports:	25%
Mid-term essay:	25%
Final essay:	35%

Evaluation Criteria - Course Assignments

Class participation and weekly reflections: comprehensive and clear presentation of arguments, solid understanding of the readings, respectful and productive engagement in discussion.

Mid-term and final essay: originality of ideas, well defined thesis, straightforward structure, clearly elaborated and logically structured arguments, serious consideration of secondary sources, writing style (flow, clarity, transitions, grammar, paragraph and sentence structure etc.).

CYA Regulations and Accommodations

Attendance Policy

CYA regards attendance in class and on-site (in Athens or during field study trips) as essential. Absences are recorded and have consequences.

ePolicy on Original Work

Unless otherwise specified, all submitted work must be your own original work. Any ideas taken from the work of others must be clearly identified as quotations, paraphrases, summaries, figures etc., and accurate internal citations and/or captions (for visuals) as well as an accompanying bibliography must be provided.

Use of Laptops

In-class or onsite use of laptops and other devices is permitted if this facilitates course-related activities such as note-taking, looking up references, etc. Laptop or other device privileges will be suspended if devices are not used for class-related work.

Class Schedule

Week	Day/Date/Place (if applicable)	Topic / Readings / Assignments Due
1	M 01/27 W 01/29	Introduction Everything is full of Gods: The ensouled cosmos of the early Ionian thinkers
2	M 02/03 W 02/05	The private and public life in Plato's <i>Crito</i> Justice in the soul in Plato's <i>Republic</i> (Bk I)

3	M 02/10 W 02/12	Justice in the City in Plato's <i>Republic</i> (Bk II) The division of the soul in Plato's <i>Republic</i> (Bk IV)
4	M 02/17	The Good in Plato's <i>Republic</i> (Bk VI, VII)
5	M 02/24 W 02/26	Nature in Aristotle's <i>Physics</i> (Bk I, II) Form in Aristotle's <i>Physics</i> (Bk II) and actuality in Aristotle's <i>Metaphysics</i> (Bk IX)
6	W 03/05	Soul as the actuality of the body in Aristotle's <i>On the Soul</i> and the human and the animal in <i>The Movement of Animals</i> Email me your suggested midterm essay topic by Friday Mar. 7th @ midnight
7	M 03/10 W 03/12	Course overview and discussion of midterm paper topics Watch Robert Bresson's film <i>Au Hasard Balthazar</i> Midterm essays due Mar. 14 @ Midnight
8	W 03/17	The good life as the excellent activity of the soul in Aristotle's <i>Nicomachean Ethics Book I</i>
9	M 03/24 W 03/26	The human excellences/virtues in Aristotle's <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> Book III and the life of the citizen in Aristotle's <i>Politics Book I, III</i> The human and the animal in Descartes' <i>Meditations</i> and <i>The Passions of the Soul</i>
10	M 03/31 W 04/02	The affirmation of life, the overman and life as will to power in Nietzsche's <i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i> and <i>Will to Power</i> Life as existence in M. Heidegger's <i>Being and Time</i>
11	M 04/07 W 04/09	Vita activa in H. Arendt's <i>The Human Condition</i> Iris Murdoch, <i>The Sovereignty of the Good</i>
12	M 04/23	Biopolitics in M. Foucault's <i>Society Must Be Defended</i>
13	M 04/28 W 04/30	Giorgio Agamben, <i>Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life</i> Jonathan Coetzee's <i>The Lives of Animals</i> and Jacques Derrida's <i>The Animal that Therefore I am</i> (following) Email me your suggested final essay topic by Friday May 2nd @ midnight
14	M 05/05 W 05/07	Becoming-animal in G. Deleuze's and F. Guattari's <i>Thousand Plateaus</i> and D. Haraway's <i>When Species Meet</i> Final discussion
15	05/12-16	Final Exam Week Final papers due May 16th @ Midnight

Course Bibliography

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