Value, Motivation, and Agency in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*

1. Course Description

The course explores central themes in Aristotle’s ethics: happiness, motivation, agency, excellence, deliberation, and the nature and subject matter of ethics.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle asks “what is the good?”. He approaches this question from the perspective of agency. From this perspective, the good is the end, that which motivates action. Activities such as going to the market or studying or swimming aim at some good. They also aim, or so Aristotle argues, at *the* good: the good life. Aristotle envisages agents who are already on board with wanting to get things right. When they aim for a good life, they aim for a life that really is good, not only good by their lights. The task of ethics is to figure out what a good life looks like and what is needed to attain it.

As one thinks through these questions, puzzles about the nature of agency, psychology and motivation, and the sphere in which we act may arise. One may wonder what decisions and pursuits are, and even more basically, what actions are. One may wonder whether the goings-on in human life are necessary or contingent. One may ask to what extent excellence in thinking matters to leading a good life, and how it relates to more familiar excellences, such as justice, courage, and moderation. Along these lines, the course focuses on *Nicomachean Ethics* I, II.1-6, III and VI, combined with some attention to additional sections from the *NE*, other works by Aristotle, and selections from Plato.

Some of the working hypotheses of the class are that *NE* I is under-appreciated by philosophers interested in Aristotle’s views on motivation; that Aristotle responds not only to the Plato of the *Republic*, but also engages with the *Philebus*; and that action theory that is inspired by Aristotle focuses too much on small-scale, particular actions, rather than pursuits and aiming to have one’s life go well.

2. Requirements

For each class meeting, there’s an assigned primary reading as well as recommended secondary literature. Please consult the bibliography at the end of this syllabus for further reading.
Students will have access to chapter drafts of a book I am currently writing, entitled *Desiring the Good: Ancient Proposals and Contemporary Theory.*

Some contemporary readings in ethics and theory of action will be recommended, either because they have shaped scholarship on Aristotle, or because they are inspired by Aristotle.

Students will be given the chance to give brief presentations of 10-15 minutes.

Please consult with the instructor if you are interested in writing a paper.

3. Week-by-Week Plan

**Week 1: Agency and the good**
*NE* I.1, selections from Plato on the Socratic Paradox: *Meno* 77a-87c and *Symposium* 199-207.

**Week 2: What is the good?**
*NE* I with special attention to *NE* I.6.
Heda Segvic, “Aristotle on the Varieties of Goodness.”

**Week 3: What is the good?—continued**
*EE* I.1 (beginning), Plato's *Philebus* 11a-14b and 64a; selections from Herodotus's *Histories*; *NE* I.9-12.
Katja Maria Vogt, “A Blueprint for Ethics,” “The Good is the Good Life.”

**Week 4: The function argument, finality and self-sufficiency**
*NE* I.7, I.13; Plato, *Republic* 1.335b-335e and 352e-354b; *Meno* 71b-73c, *Philebus* 20b-23b.
Rachel Barney, “Aristotle's Argument for a Human Function.”
John Cooper, “Plato and Aristotle on Finality and Self-Sufficiency.”

**Week 5: The virtues of character**
*NE* II.1-6 and *NE* VII.1; *NE* VI.13 on ‘natural’ virtue.
Myles Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Learning to be Good.”

**Week 6: Character virtue and conceptions of the good life**

*NE* II.1-6 (again) and *NE* X.6-8.
John McDowell, “Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle’s Ethics.”

**Week 7: What are actions?**

*NE* III.1
Ursula Coope, “Aristotle on Action.”

**Week 8: What deliberation is about**

*NE* III.2, 3, 4 and 5 (first sentence)

**Week 9: Excellent deliberation**

*NE* VI.5, 8, 9

**Week 10: The virtues of thought**

*NE* VI (now all of it); discussion of the excellences of thinking, the role of *techne* (expertise, skill), the relationship between excellent deliberation and other kinds of excellent thinking.

**Week 11: An inquiry that aims at leading a good life**

*NE* I.1, *NE* VI.8, *NE* X.9 and *Politics* I.1-2

**Week 12: Contingency and the material of ethics**

*NE* I.3, *De interpretatione* 9 on future contingents; *Posterior Analytics* 1.30, *Prior Analytics* 1.13 (32b4-23), and *Metaphysics Theta* 4 on contingency; *Poetics* IX on history and poetry.
Marko Malink, selections from *Aristoteles Handbuch* on relevant texts and notions from Aristotle’s *Organon*.
Katja Maria Vogt, “The Subject-Matter of Ethics.”
4. Readings

Primary Texts
— Other selections from Plato will be supplied on handouts.

We will work closely with the following monographs and collections of papers:

Introductory articles on SEP:
“Aristotle” by Christopher Shields (not much on ethics): <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle/>
“Ancient Theories of Soul” by Hendrik Lorenz: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ancient-soul/>

Secondary literature (including the papers mentioned on the week-by-week schedule):
Shields, Christopher. “Goodness is Meant in Many Ways”. In G. Rudebusch and J. Hardy (eds.) *Grundlagen der Antiken Ethik / Foundations of Ancient Ethics* (Göttingen: Vanderhoek & Ruprecht, 2012) 185–199.
Vogt, Katja Maria [Draft/Manuscript], chapters from *Desiring the Good: Ancient Proposals and Contemporary Theory*. 