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**A**ristotle was a comprehensive and a systematic philosopher whom Dante famously called “the master of the men who know.” Part of what makes Aristotle so interesting is also what makes him so challenging: philosophy in the West has absorbed so many of his distinctions, his terms, and his prejudices that it is difficult to regain a sense of his masterful originality. We will try.

**T**he Aristotle seminar is exciting but it is also demanding. It moves at a pace that presupposes at least one previous course in philosophy, a commitment to staying abreast of both primary and secondary reading, active participation in discussions, independent oral presentations, and written argumentation at a high standard. Undergraduates are encouraged to undertake research for a term paper (required of graduate students), but may substitute a comprehensive final examination for the term paper if they prefer.

**I**n odd numbered years, the seminar addresses metaphysical issues in Aristotle. These are among the most fundamentally controversial areas of contention in ancient Greek philosophy today, so the available secondary literature is lively and constantly changing. Both Aristotle’s ontology (“being’ is said in many ways”) and his views on causality and explanation are fraught with intriguing questions. We will read at least his *Categories*, *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, and *De Anima*, making as much progress as we can toward understanding, appreciating, and criticizing his arguments.

**A**ristotle’s deft combination of homespun common sense and abstract theoretical system-building are evident in both his ethics and aesthetics. In even numbered years, we read his *Nicomachean Ethics* and — depending on interest — either his *Poetics* or his *Politics*. Anyone interested in politics (and not just Aristotle’s *Politics*) needs to understand Aristotle’s ethics. And anyone who’s ever wondered about the tragic flaw, or the tragic hero, or history-and-art, or catharsis through art— anyone who likes movies—should enjoy Aristotle. And, surprise! surprise! his ethics permeates his aesthetics.

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**ARISTOTLE**  
**Philosophy 411**  
**spring semesters**

# Philosophy 411: Aristotle Seminar

Bessey 220  
TTh 12:40–2:30 p.m.

<<http://angel.msu.edu>>  
<<http://www.msu.edu/~nails>>

Debra Nails, South Kedzie 518  
office hrs.: [check ANGEL]  
telephone 355-2348 (office, only during office hours)  
381-4494 (home, 6 a.m.–8 p.m.)  
nails@msu.edu

**Course description:** This course introduces the great philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) through two of his most influential treatises: *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Poetics*, supplemented with background information from other works by Aristotle and with important critical material from the secondary literature. Through Aristotle, students will also be introduced to the philosophical fields of ethics and aesthetics. Art, for the Greeks, was subordinate to ethics so, to identify *great art*, one might begin by asking whether the art makes people better. Hence we will look first at what Aristotle thinks makes people good and happy, then turn to the subject of how art might help in that process. Although both the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Poetics* grow out of Platonic/Academic philosophy of the late fourth century B.C.E., the attention paid to Aristotle by the influential Roman Catholic Church throughout the medieval and early modern periods of philosophy greatly magnified the influence of those two treatises.

**Goals of the course:** In the seminar setting, students will learn to identify, to clarify, to develop, to criticize, and to defend significant Aristotelian positions in ethics and aesthetics by practicing and refining their oral and writing skills.

## Required texts:

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. Christopher Rowe, introduction and commentary, Sarah Broadie. Oxford: Clarendon, 2002.  
Aristotle, *Poetics*, tr. Richard Janko. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Press, 1987.  
Anthony Weston, *A Rulebook for Arguments*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Press, 2002.

## Recommended texts:

Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.  
Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*. Philosophical Traditions Series II. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

## Optional text:

Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

## Reading for pleasure:

Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*. Various publishers. English translation, 1983.

**Schedule of assignments:**

<i>Tuesday 10 January</i>	introduction to the course, to ethics generally, and to Aristotle
<i>Thursday 12 January</i>	Aristotle's <i>Nicomachean Ethics (NE)</i> introduction and book I
<i>Tuesday 17 January</i>	NE I
<i>Thursday 19 January</i>	NE II
<i>Tuesday 24 January</i>	NE II
<i>Thursday 26 January</i>	NE III
<i>Tuesday 31 January</i>	NE III
<i>Thursday 2 February</i>	Aristotle, <i>Politics</i> and <i>Metaphysics</i> — <b>writing assignment 1 due</b>
<i>Tuesday 7 February</i>	NE IV
<i>Thursday 9 February</i>	NE V
<i>Tuesday 14 February</i>	NE VI
<i>Thursday 16 February</i>	I'll be at the Arizona Colloquium for Ancient Philosophy (Tucson).
<i>Tuesday 21 February</i>	NE VI
<i>Thursday 23 February</i>	
<i>Tuesday 28 February</i>	NE VII
<i>Thursday 2 March</i>	NE VII— <b>writing assignment 2 due</b>
<i>Tuesday 14 March</i>	NE VIII
<i>Thursday 16 March</i>	NE IX
<i>Tuesday 21 March</i>	NE X
<i>Thursday 23 March</i>	I'll be at the Pacific APA meeting (Portland).
<i>Tuesday 28 March</i>	NE conclusions— <b>if writing term paper, last day for approval of thesis</b>
<i>Thursday 30 March</i>	introduction to aesthetics and to Aristotle's <i>Poetics (Po.)</i>
<i>Tuesday 4 April</i>	<i>Po.</i> I.1
<i>Thursday 6 April</i>	I'll be at the Terry Penner Roundtable (Denver).
<i>Tuesday 11 April</i>	<i>Po.</i> I.2
<i>Thursday 13 April</i>	<i>Po.</i> I.3
<i>Tuesday 18 April</i>	<i>Po.</i> I.4
<i>Thursday 20 April</i>	<i>Po.</i> I.5–6— <b>writing assignment 3 due</b>
<i>Tuesday 25 April</i>	<i>Po.</i> II (Janko, tr. pp. 44–55)
<i>Thursday 27 April</i>	I'll be at the Central APA meeting (Chicago).

\*There are two films we *must* see or read: *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Adaptation*.

**Evaluation:** All students are expected to be prepared to discuss the readings in every class period. The readings are brief but dense. Each student will sign up for two oral presentations during the semester. In addition, everyone will submit writing assignments 1–3 (though the 3<sup>rd</sup> for term paper writers will be a literature review and abstract). Undergraduate students who miss more than three classes or who fail to submit one of the five assignments must take a comprehensive final exam *in lieu* of the term paper. Half the grade in the course will be the average of the five grades (two oral plus three written); half will be the term paper or final. Students missing one or more of the five grades must take the final exam, the grade on which will replace grades of 0, making the final worth more than 50%. Students who write the term paper can use it to replace any lower, earlier grade except 0.

**Policies:**

*Preparation for class:* read the assigned passage as many times as it takes to understand the material, and *always read the commentary as well as the passage*. It usually helps to look at secondary sources although those are provided primarily to aid research for term papers. *Write* something: questions, comments, a diagram of an argument, objections, elaborations, assumptions, implications —something that will make you more likely to participate in discussion.

*During class discussions:* Be civil. If you find yourself hogging the conversation, ask questions of your classmates to take the spotlight off yourself. The best discussions are ones that bounce around the room instead of ping-ponging back and forth from me all the time. Don't hesitate to tell me to lower my voice or that *I'm* talking too much. Please help me notice when class time is over.

*Make-ups:* Oral presentations must be made when scheduled, not when the class has moved on. The final exam serves as a do-all make-up, your insurer of last resort. In the event of illness or other emergency circumstances, a written assignment may be turned in within 48 hours of when it was due.

*Office hours:* I keep office hours from long practice, warning you in advance if I anticipate some unusual commitment that will keep me away; but I *enjoy* my office hours when students visit, so please don't hesitate to drop in. If the posted hours are inconvenient, please make an appointment with me by phone or e-mail.

*Your own work:* Do not submit for credit in this course any work completed for another course; and do not submit work that is not your own. A zero received for failure to cite your sources cannot be overcome by taking the final exam. You are strongly encouraged to study, discuss, and dispute with others everything we do in this course. Over the years, students who have performed best are those who meet together outside of class and share their written work.

# Aristotle Seminar

PHL 411:001  
220 Bessey TTh 12:40–2:30 p.m.

Prof. Debra Nails  
office: S. Kedzie 518  
office hrs.: 10:30–noon T,  
4:15–4:30+ Th, & also by appointment  
e-mail: nails@msu.edu  
telephone 355-2348 (during office hours)  
381-4494 (home, not after 8 p.m.)  
<<http://www.msu.edu/~nails>>

<<http://angel.msu.edu>>

**Required texts:** Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Anthony Weston, *A Rulebook for Arguments*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000); and secondary materials from the library and ANGEL.

**Recommended text:** *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) **Beware:** the Internet is full of pitfalls, and it will *not be okay* to use unapproved secondary sources. The only site I can recommend is *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <[plato.stanford.edu](http://plato.stanford.edu)> where Aristotle articles on metaphysics by S. Marc Cohen and on psychology by Christopher Shields are available. The most useful single book I know for the topics we address is Lloyd Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), \$49.00, which is not yet available at the library. Gerson, at University of Toronto, will be visiting the class Tuesday 19 April.

**Optional:** For bedtime reading, you might try Margaret Doody, *Aristotle Detective* (1978), recently reissued by Random House. See Aristotle as a character in the 2004 film *Alexander*.

**Course description and goals:** According to Aristotle, what people call god is really “thinking thinking of thinking”; and humans are most godlike when their intellects contemplate eternal truths. We will look critically at Aristotle’s ontology, cosmology and epistemology in his *Categories*, *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, and *De Anima*—with reference to several other dialogues in the *Complete Works* along the way—in an effort to clarify our own various positions on these topics. Members of the class should increase their knowledge of the issues Aristotle addresses, and their familiarity with his critics and defenders—all the while honing their skills at expressing complex issues clearly both orally and in writing.

## Schedule of readings to be completed *before class*:

1/11	introduction to one another, to the course, and to Aristotle
1/13	<i>Categories</i> in vol. 1 (focus on chs. 2–11)
1/18	<i>Categories</i> (focus on chs. 1 and 12–15)
1/20	<i>Physics</i> (in vol. 1) bk. 1
1/25	<i>Physics</i> bk. 2
1/27	<i>Physics</i> bks. 3 and 5.1–2
2/1	<i>Physics</i> bks. 7 and 8 <b>first writing assignment due</b>
2/3	<i>Metaphysics</i> 1 (in vol. 2, consult ANGEL for structure)
2/8	<i>Metaphysics</i> 3
2/10	<i>Metaphysics</i> 4 and 6.1
2/15	<i>Metaphysics</i> 5 and 6.2–4
2/17	I will be giving a paper, “Socrates in the Funhouse Mirrors,” at the tenth annual Arizona Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy: the Legacy of Socrates Tucson, Arizona.
2/22	<i>Metaphysics</i> 7
2/24	<i>Metaphysics</i> 7
3/1	<i>Metaphysics</i> 8
3/3	I will be chairing the final plenary session of a conference on Terry Penner’s interpretation of the Platonic form of the good in Edinburgh, Scotland.

<b>SPRING BREAK</b>	
3/15	information on Aristotle research <b>second writing assignment due</b>
3/17	<i>Metaphysics</i> 9
3/22	<i>Metaphysics</i> 12.1–5
3/24	<i>Metaphysics</i> 10
3/29	<i>Metaphysics</i> 13
3/31	<i>Metaphysics</i> 2 and 12.6–10
4/5	<i>Metaphysics</i> 14 <b>last day for thesis statement approval</b>
4/7	<i>De Anima (On the Soul, vol. 1)</i> 1.1–5
4/12	<i>De Anima</i> 2.1–4 <b>third writing assignment due</b>
4/14	I will be giving a plenary paper, “The Two Tragedies of <i>Theaetetus</i> ,” to the Ancient Philosophy Society conference in Eugene, Oregon.
4/19	<i>De Anima</i> 2.5–12 <b>LLOYD GERSON, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO, VISITS CLASS</b>
4/21	<i>De Anima</i> 3.1–6
4/26	<i>De Anima</i> 3.7–13 <b>distribution of final exam questions</b>
4/28	I will be giving a paper, “Fair Tenure Decisions: the Nature of the Problem,” at the APA-Central meeting in Chicago, Illinois.
FINAL EXAM in regular classroom as scheduled by MSU (papers due during this two-hour window).	

**Evaluation:** Each student will sign up for two brief oral presentations (10% x 2) during the semester. In addition, everyone will submit three writing assignments (10% x 3). Most students will also take a comprehensive final examination (50%).

Students who would prefer to write a term paper *in lieu* of the final exam should (a) attend class regularly, i.e., no more than three absences for any reason; (b) participate actively in discussion, and (c) receive approval of a thesis statement of the term paper topic at least one week in advance of the due date of writing assignment 3. (Students writing the term paper submit an abstract and literature review *in lieu* of an argumentative paper for writing assignment 3.)

### **Policies:**

1. *Preparation for class:* read the assigned material *as many times as it takes* to understand it. Look at any course notes posted on ANGEL. (It *may* help to look at one or more of the secondary sources identified on ANGEL; some are elementary enough to get you going, although others are provided primarily to aid research for term papers.) *Write or draw* something: questions, comments, the skeleton of an argument, objections, elaborations, assumptions, implications—something that will make you more likely to participate in discussion.
2. *During class discussions:* Be civil. If you find yourself hogging the conversation, ask questions of your classmates to take the spotlight off yourself. The best discussions are ones that bounce around the room instead of ping-ponging to-from me all the time. Don't hesitate to tell me to lower my voice or that *I'm* talking too much. Please help me notice when class time is over.
3. *Comprehensive final exam:* A set of questions will be distributed 26 April 2005, but the two of those questions on which students will write will be determined by fate on exam day.
4. *No make-ups:* Oral presentations must be made when scheduled, not when the class has moved on to new material. Due-dates on the syllabus are deadlines; you may turn the assignment in early, and you may send it by e-mail attachment by the deadline. In the event of illness or other *emergency* circumstances, you may grant yourself permission to submit a written assignment within 48 hours of its original due date.
5. *Office hours:* I keep office hours from long practice, warning you in advance if I anticipate some unusual commitment that will keep me away; but I *enjoy* my office hours when students visit, so please don't hesitate to drop in. If the posted hours are inconvenient, please make an appointment with me by phone or e-mail. *If you are waiting to see me and someone else is ahead of you, please walk in and make your presence known.*
6. *Do your own work cooperatively:* Do not submit for credit in this course any work completed for another course; and do not submit work that is not your own. You are strongly encouraged to study, discuss, and dispute with others everything we do in this course. Over the years, students who have performed best are those who met outside of class and shared their written work.