

Beauty in Ancient Greek Philosophy

PHIL 105C/205C

Instructor: Willie Costello

Winter Quarter. 4 units. Prerequisites: None. WAYS Certification: Aesthetic and Interpretive Inquiry (AII). Meetings on Mondays and Wednesdays from 15:00 to 16:20 in Bldg 120 Rm 314. Office hours on Tuesdays from 13:30 to 14:30 in Bldg 100 Rm 102M, or by appointment (email williec@stanford.edu). Course readings available from <http://bit.ly/phil105c>. Course website available through <http://canvas.stanford.edu>.

Course description

Beauty occupies a peculiarly central place in ancient Greek philosophical thought. In the ethics of both Plato and Aristotle, the word ‘beautiful’ is virtually interchangeable with ‘[morally] good’, and used to describe both virtue and the virtuous person. In ancient epistemology, the ascent to the highest form of philosophical knowledge is said to begin with the apprehension of beauty. And in metaphysics, beauty is Plato’s go-to example of a Form – that is, of something objective, mind-independent, and ultimately imperceptible.

All these assumptions should strike us modern readers as odd. In its popular present-day usage, beauty is a paradigm of subjectivity – “in the eye of the beholder,” as the saying goes. In connection with knowledge, beauty is rarely if ever mentioned. And in ethics, the equation of beauty and moral goodness would seem like the simplest of errors, appealing to none but the most ardent aesthete.

Why this discrepancy between the ancient and contemporary conceptions of beauty? And what might the centrality of beauty in ancient thought reveal about ancient ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics? This course is an investigation into these questions, by means of a close reading of the major ancient texts in which beauty appears. We will look at works by Plato, Aristotle, and others, as well as recent pieces of secondary scholarship on these primary texts.

A closing, clarificatory note: ‘Beautiful’ is just one of several imperfect translations of the Greek word at issue – *kalon* (καλόν). Sometimes the word is translated instead as ‘fine’, ‘noble’, or ‘admirable’, and these alternative translations might suggest less of a conceptual discrepancy with

our modern notion. I do not wish to presuppose that ‘beautiful’ is the best of these translations, but it is important to remember that none of them is a perfect fit, and that, whatever else we make of it, something like (what we think of as) beauty is part of the Greek concept. Determining the exact nature of this concept of the *kalon* is one of the central aims of this course.

Course learning objectives

By the end of this course, you should be able to...

- explain the major features and presuppositions of ancient Greek philosophers’ conceptions of beauty
- identify these features and presuppositions as they appear in actual ancient philosophical texts
- relate ancient philosophers’ conceptions of beauty to other areas of their thought
- analyze and evaluate different ancient conceptions of beauty, both vis-à-vis one another and vis-à-vis our own
- research and defend an original thesis dealing with the above topics
- read ancient philosophical texts carefully, charitably, and critically
- critique others’ work with respect, charity, and encouragement
- cultivate a personally effective approach to academic research and writing

Course contract

This course is a collaboration between me, you, and your classmates. You will be regularly called upon to actively participate in class discussions and other activities, and your contributions will directly influence what we cover in seminar. **It is not necessary that you agree with everything I or anyone else says in this class, but it is necessary that you always listen and respond with respect.** With this in mind, I put forth the following “course contract”, applying to everyone in the class (students and instructor alike):

- we have the responsibility to **contribute** to the collective learning process (which includes asking questions when we’re not understanding something)
- we have the responsibility to **be receptive** to other points of view than our own
- we have the right to **dissent or differ** from the instructor and from others in the class
- we have the responsibility to **welcome challenges** to our own opinions, and be willing to support our claims with further reasons (or be honest when we don’t have any)
- we have the right to **personal dignity**, which at no point should be infringed upon in any way by the conduct of others

Texts

The required texts for this course are Plato's complete works and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics*. If you don't already own translations of these texts, I would recommend the following, which are available for purchase at the Stanford Bookstore:

- Plato, *Complete Works*, edd. Cooper & Hutchinson (Hackett, 9780872203495) – \$59.00
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Crisp (Cambridge, 9781107612235) – \$23.00
- Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, edd. Inwood & Woolf (Cambridge, 9780521121422) – \$22.00

In addition, as an optional text, you may consider purchasing this alternative translation of Plato's *Symposium*, which is in my opinion far superior to the translation in the *Complete Works*, and thus highly recommended, especially if you think you may write on this dialogue.

- Plato, *Symposium*, edd. Howatson & Sheffield (Cambridge, 9780521682985) – \$20.00

All additional readings can be downloaded from: <http://bit.ly/phil105c>

Evaluation – Undergraduate Students

If you are an undergraduate student, your grade for the course will be determined by the following components: in-class participation (in seminar discussions and activities); twice-weekly micro-reflections (informal brainstorming exercises, done at home before class); and a term paper on a topic of your choosing, preceded by a term paper prospectus and a peer review of another student's prospectus. The full grade breakdown is as follows:

<i>Component</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Due date</i>
In-class participation	10%	N/A
Micro-reflections	15%	by 1 p.m. before each class
Term paper prospectus (1000 words)	15%	February 26
Prospectus peer review (750 words)	10%	March 12
Term paper (3000–4000 words)	50%	March 24

- » **In-class participation:** You are expected to be an active participant in our seminar meetings. One (obvious) way to be an active participant is by asking questions and sharing your thoughts with the class; but this is not the only way, nor will it necessarily be the way that works best for you. Other ways to be an active participant include: attentively listening to classroom discussions; participating in break-out discussion groups with your peers; and/or coming to talk to me after class or during office hours. (You will receive a progress report on your in-class participation midway through the term, to let you know how you are doing, and if you could be doing anything any better.)

- » **Micro-reflections:** Before each class you are to submit a very short reflection piece responding to some part of the week's assigned readings – a “micro-reflection”. The purpose of these micro-reflections is: (a) to deepen your appreciation of the readings; (b) to enhance our classroom discussions of the readings; and (c) to help you come up with and develop ideas and material for your term paper.

Each **micro-reflection should be approximately 100 words in length** (i.e., one paragraph of about five or six sentences), though you are welcome to write more if you feel inspired. More important than length, though, is content: **each micro-reflection should clearly articulate a single, specific question / confusion / reaction / idea** you had in response to the day's assigned reading. **Micro-reflections should not be mere summaries** of any part of the reading; **you must do some analysis or synthesis of the assigned material**. This can be as simple as pointing out some part of the reading that confused you and explaining why it confused you. Or you may write about how some part of the reading reminded you of this other thing and explain why this connection is interesting. Or you may lay out an argument from the reading and explain why you think it's faulty. Or you may develop an objection to a claim made in the reading. Basically, just pick something from the day's assigned reading that struck you and explain why it struck you.

Micro-reflections must be completed and submitted on Canvas by 1:00 P.M. before each class meeting. Micro-reflections submitted after this deadline will receive no credit. **Each micro-reflection counts for 1% of your final grade, up to 15%.** You will have, in total, seventeen opportunities to submit micro-reflections over the course of the term. This means that **you can skip two micro-reflections without penalty.** (You do not need to tell me when you're choosing not to submit a micro-reflection.) Full credit for micro-reflections is awarded when the student has made a honest attempt to complete the task; determination of this criterion is at the discretion of the instructor.

- » **Term paper prospectus:** Midway through this course, between weeks seven and eight, you are to hand in a prospectus/“think-piece”: a preliminary investigation into the issue you intend to explore further in your term paper. Your prospectus should be at least 1000 words in length. **It should not be merely an outline of your term paper.** It should present an original and in-depth analysis of a particular idea, issue, or argument, which will serve as the basis for your eventual term paper. The purpose of this prospectus is: (a) to give you a head-start on your term paper; and (b) to give you some early feedback on your ideas, so that you have some guidance on how to develop them in the weeks to come.
- » **Prospectus peer review:** After submitting your own prospectus, you are to write an (anonymous) peer review of another student's (anonymized) prospectus. Your peer review should

provide constructive, formative feedback on the prospectus you have received, presenting two developed responses to the prospectus's thesis. It should be approximately 750 words in length. The purpose of this peer review is: (a) to develop your ability to charitably and constructively respond to others' ideas; and (b) to provide you, in return, with some ideas for how you might think to develop your own prospectus.

- » **Term paper:** The major assignment for this course is a term paper. This term paper is an opportunity for you to research a specific issue from the course in depth. This issue should be one of personal interest to you, and one which allows you to grow as a scholar. Your term paper should be a focused, argumentative essay, between 3000 and 4000 words in length, defending a specific and original thesis about some topic of relevance to the course.
- » **Your prospectus, peer review, and term paper must be submitted via Canvas by end of day on the day they are due** (or, for all you night owls, by 6 A.M. the following morning at the latest), preferably in PDF format. **Late papers will be docked 5% for each 24 hour period between the due date and when they are handed in** (unless accompanied by valid medical documentation). Late papers may be submitted up to 7 days after the due date; any papers not received by this time will automatically receive a 0. Formatting guidelines will be provided along with assignment prompt.

Evaluation – Graduate Students

If you are a graduate student, the bulk of your grade will consist in one final term paper. The remainder of your grade will come from participation in seminar meetings and a term paper prospectus.

<i>Component</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Due date</i>
In-class participation	10%	N/A
End-of-class recap(s)	10%	(to be arranged with student)
Term paper prospectus (1000 words)	20%	March 5
Term paper (4000 words)	60%	March 24

- » **End-of-class recaps:** A few times over the course of the term you will be called upon to provide a short, two to three minute recap of the day's discussion at the end of class. (The precise number of times you will do this will depend on the total number of graduate students in the class.) The days on which you will do this will be arranged with you in advance. I will model how to do these recaps at the end of our first few meetings, before passing the responsibility off to you and your peers. The purpose of these recaps is: (a) to give you some practice at

synthesizing a seminar discussion on the spot, an essential skill for any future professor to have; and (b) to give everyone the benefit of listening to a recap and synthesis of the day's discussion.

- » **Term paper prospectus:** Midway through this course, between weeks eight and nine, you are to hand in a prospectus/“think-piece”: a preliminary investigation into the issue you intend to explore further in your term paper. Your prospectus should be at least 1000 words in length. **It should not be merely an outline of your term paper.** It should present an original and in-depth analysis of a particular idea, issue, or argument, which will serve as the basis for your eventual term paper. The purpose of this prospectus is: (a) to give you a head-start on your term paper; and (b) to give you some early feedback on your ideas, so that you have some guidance on how to develop them in the weeks to come.
- » **Term paper:** The major assignment for this course is a term paper. It should be a focused, argumentative essay, defending a specific and original thesis about some topic of relevance to the course, sensitive to (though not defined by) the existing literature on the topic. It should be approximately 4000 words in length, and not much longer; I've set this word count deliberately low so as to challenge you to be concise and economical in your argumentation, and to leave you with a term paper which can more easily be submitted to conferences for presentation.
- » **Your prospectus and term paper should be emailed to me by end of day on the day they are due** (or, for all you night owls, by 6 A.M. the following morning at the latest), preferably in PDF format.

Honor Code

One of the aims of this (and really, *any* university-level) course is to develop your ability to express yourself intelligently and responsibly. Part of what expressing yourself intelligently and responsibly involves is situating your own views in relation to others'. Plagiarizing others' views, or failing to acknowledge views you are responding to, runs counter to this aim. Because of this, plagiarism and all other forms of academic dishonesty will be treated with the greatest severity in this course. You should make yourself familiar with the University's Honor Code; see <http://communitystandards.stanford.edu>.

Accessibility

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request

with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: <http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oea>).

Academic Resources

The Hume Center for Writing and Speaking offers support in any and all areas of both writing and speaking. Both scheduled appointments and drop-in tutoring are available and always encouraged. New, residence-based tutoring is also available in dorms.

- Writing Tutors: <http://undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center/writing>
- Speaking Tutors: <http://undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center/speaking>
- Academic Skills Coaching: <http://adinag.youcanbook.me>

Email

Questions should ideally be brought to me in person, either at lecture or during my office hours. If you would prefer to correspond via email, my email address is williec@stanford.edu. I will respond to emails within two business days.

Basic Schedule

Due dates listed below are for undergraduate students. Graduate students should refer to the due dates listed above, under “Evaluation – Graduate Students”.

DATE	TOPIC(S)	READING
1/9	Introduction	
1/11	Beauty in ancient Greek literature	selections (online); Plato, <i>Symposium</i> : start–198
1/16	NO CLASS: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., DAY	
1/18	Beauty & love in Plato’s ethics	Plato, <i>Symposium</i> : 198–206
1/23	Beauty & love in Plato’s ethics (cont’d)	206–212
1/25	Beauty & love in Plato’s ethics (cont’d)	212–end
1/30	Beauty & virtue in Aristotle’s ethics	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> : I
2/1	Beauty & virtue in Aristotle’s ethics (cont’d)	II, III.6–7, IV.1–2, IX.8
2/6	Beauty & virtue in Aristotle’s (other) ethics	<i>Eudemian Ethics</i> : I, VIII
2/8	Beauty in Aristotle, in general	selections (online)
2/13	Beauty, art, & politics	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> : x.9; Plato, <i>Republic</i> : 374e–403c
2/15	Beauty, art, & politics (cont’d)	Plato, <i>Laws</i> : 652a–671a
2/20	NO CLASS: PRESIDENTS’ DAY	
2/22	Beauty, art, & politics (cont’d)	Plato: <i>Republic</i> : 595a–608b
2/26	TERM PAPER PROSPECTUS DUE	
2/27	Beauty & knowledge	Plato, <i>Phaedrus</i> : 245c–257b
3/1	Beauty & metaphysics	Plato, <i>Republic</i> : 474c–480a, 504d–509b; <i>Philebus</i> : 50e–53b
3/6	Defining beauty	Plato, <i>Greater Hippias</i> : start–295
3/8	Defining beauty (cont’d)	295–end
3/12	PROSPECTUS PEER REVIEW DUE	
3/13	Ancient beauty, today	Iris Murdoch, ‘The Sovereignty of Good’ (online)
3/15	Ancient beauty, today	Alexander Nehamas, ‘A Promise of Happiness’ (online)
3/24	TERM PAPER DUE	