

PHL401H1S Seminar in the History of Philosophy: Beauty in Ancient Greek Philosophy

Instructor: Willie Costello

Winter Session (S). Prerequisites: PHL200Y1/PHL210Y1 + 4.0 credits in Philosophy. Distribution Requirement Status: Humanities. Breadth Requirement: None.

Lectures on Wednesdays from 18:00 to 21:00 in Lash Miller 123. Office hours on Tuesdays from 13:00 to 14:00 in Jackman Humanities Building 432, or by appointment.

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 rather 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. We still may say that beautiful things are also good, but what we typically mean by this is that they are good to see, to hear, or to possess – not that they are morally good, or that they will make us more virtuous. At any rate, there is nothing contradictory to our ears in calling something both beautiful and bad (just think of the figure of the femme fatale).

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, Plotinus, 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 philosophers’ actual remarks and arguments about beauty
- analyze and evaluate different ancient conceptions of beauty, both vis-à-vis one another and vis-à-vis our own
- relate ancient philosophers’ conceptions of beauty to other areas of their thought
- research and defend an original thesis dealing with the above topics
- 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

You will need a copy of the complete works of Plato and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The following editions are available for purchase at the Bob Miller Book Room (180 Bloor West (downstairs); M–F 9:00–18:00, SA 10:00–17:00). You need not acquire these exact versions, but they are good, affordable translations, and the translations I will be referring to in class.

- Plato, *Complete Works* (edd. Cooper & Hutchinson). Hackett, 1997. (ISBN 9780872203495)
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (ed. Sachs). Focus, 2002. (ISBN 9781585100354)

In addition, as an optional text, Bob Miller has copies of 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, 2008. (ISBN 9780521682985)

All readings not found in these two texts will be freely available through the course website.

Evaluation

Your grade for the course will be determined by the following four components: participation, in the form of weekly “response pieces” (1 page each); a term paper (12–16 pages), preceded by a preliminary “think piece” (4 pages) and a peer review of another's student think piece. The term paper will ask you to research a specific issue from the course in-depth. The responses pieces, think piece, and peer review, in turn, are intended to prepare you for the term paper and help you develop your research throughout the term. The full grade breakdown is as follows:

<i>Component</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Due date</i>
Response pieces (10 total)	20%	each lecture except first (1/7) and last (4/1)
Term paper think piece	15%	February 27
Term paper peer review	15%	March 13
Term paper	50%	April 2

- » **Your term paper, think piece, and peer review must be emailed to me, in PDF format, at willie.costello@mail.utoronto.ca, by 11:59 P.M. on the day they are due.** Late papers will be docked 10% if handed in within the first 24 hours after the due date, and 5% for each subsequent 24 hour period after that (unless accompanied by valid documentation, found here: www.illnessverification.utoronto.ca). 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.

- » **Response pieces must be completed and submitted on Blackboard by 6 P.M. the day of each lecture.** Responses submitted after this deadline will receive no credit. There will be ten response pieces in total over the course of the term, and each response piece counts for 2% of your final grade. Full credit for responses is awarded when the student has made a honest attempt to respond intelligently to the assigned readings. Determination of this criterion is at the discretion of the instructor.

- » **You have one “get out of response piece free” card.** At the end of term I will give you full credit for one (and only one) response piece which you did not submit. You do not need to tell me when you’re choosing not to submit a response piece; the credit will be awarded automatically.

On plagiarism and academic dishonesty

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, run 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 Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters; see www.artsci.utoronto.ca/osai/students.

Accessibility

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have a disability and/or health consideration that may require accommodations, or any accessibility concerns about the course, classroom, or course materials, please contact Accessibility Services at 416-978-8060 or accessibility.utoronto.ca.

Email policy

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 willie.costello@mail.utoronto.ca. I will respond to emails within two business days.

Schedule

In addition to the assignments listed below, one response piece is due each week (excluding Jan. 7 and Apr. 1). Generally, these pieces should be written in response to the week's assigned reading; but check the course website for more specific assignment instructions.

Date	Topic	Readings
1/7	Introduction	selections from Greek literature
1/14	Defining beauty	Plato: <i>Greater Hippias</i>
1/21	Beauty in Platonic ethics	Plato: <i>Symposium</i> start–198
1/28		Plato: <i>Symposium</i> 198–end
2/4	Beauty in Aristotelian ethics	Aristotle: <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> I & II
2/11		Aristotle: <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> III.6–7, IV.1–2, IX.8, X.9
2/18	Reading Week – no class!	
2/25	Beauty & politics	Plato: <i>Republic</i> II & III 374e–403c, <i>Laws</i> II 652a–671a
2/27	DUE BY MIDNIGHT: Think Piece	
3/4	Beauty & politics	Plato: <i>Republic</i> X 595a–608b
3/11	Beauty & knowledge	Plato: <i>Phaedrus</i> 245c–257b, <i>Meno</i> 79e–86c
3/13	DUE BY MIDNIGHT: Peer Review	
3/18	Beauty & metaphysics	Plato: <i>Republic</i> V & VI 474c–480a, 504d–509b
3/25	Neoplatonic beauty	Plotinus: <i>Enneads</i> I.6, V.8
4/1	Scepticism about beauty	anonymous: <i>Dissoi Logoi</i>
4/2	DUE BY MIDNIGHT: Term Paper	

As a supplement to the assigned readings, a collection of relevant secondary literature is freely available on the course website.