

LIVE LIKE A PHILOSOPHER:
ETHICS AND CIVICS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD
PHIL 207 - FALL 2025



Origami paper bust of the Greek philosopher Socrates

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Course Description

What does it mean to live a well-lived life? Philosophy in the ancient world was viewed not simply as an academic discipline or set of doctrines, but as a way of life itself. In this project-based learning course, we will study and put into practice the views of four distinct approaches to the good life from Greek and Roman philosophy, drawn from the writings of Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans, and the Stoics. The course falls into four core units. In each of these units, after some preliminary work studying the theories associated with each philosopher/school, you will “live like a philosopher” by incorporating these theories into your daily lives. The aims of this course are to test the viability of these philosophical views, consider how they may be put into practice, and explore how they may illuminate for us what it means to lead a well-lived life. By the end of the semester, you will not only have gained insight into some of the most enduring and influential ideas about the good life from the Greco-Roman world but will also have navigated through fundamental questions in the study of human psychology, ethics, politics, epistemology, metaphysics, and logic that continue to occupy philosophers today.

Course Components

This course begins with a two-week **intro period** during which you'll be introduced to the practice of philosophy and to the notion of philosophy as a way of life through the figure of **Socrates**. The rest of the course is composed of **four units**, each of which will focus on a different view of the good life developed by a philosopher or philosophical school from the Greco-Roman world: **Plato**, **Aristotle**, **Epicureanism**, and **Stoicism**. We will study these views during the semester by critically examining them through close reading and analysis, and by putting them into practice through a series of philosophical exercises.

There are a number of key components of this course and several assignments that you'll need to complete at specific points during the semester. Here are the most important ones:

- **Perusall Assignments:** Videos lectures and readings this semester will be assigned and completed through Perusall, an online social annotation platform that allows interactive commentary on video and textual material with your peers. You'll be expected each week to provide your own annotations on the video lectures and readings in discussion threads, and to respond to other students' comments. This will deepen everyone's engagement with the ideas and enhance your class time by letting your High School Teacher and your Wesleyan Teaching Fellow (TF) know what sorts of questions you have about the material and what you found engaging or worthy of more discussion.
 - **Video Lectures:** These are meant to provide you with an initial point of entry to the views of the philosopher or school you're studying in each unit and their approach to the good life. You'll be expected to watch these videos on Perusall outside of class and should also feel free to re-watch them.
 - **Readings:** Texts on the syllabus for this course will also be assigned through Perusall. Readings should be completed before the week when they are assigned and prior to your discussion sections with your Wesleyan TF.
- **"Live Like a Philosopher" Exercises:** Beginning in the second week of each of the core units of this course, you'll be assigned a set of philosophical exercises to complete. Some of these exercises will ask you to reflect on a few questions or engage in a thought experiment. Others will involve forming habits, changing your behavior with others in a certain way, or going about your everyday routine differently. There will be four "Live Like a Philosopher" weeks during the semester: see Weeks 4, 7, 10, 12 below. All the instructions for the exercises each week will be available online on Canvas for completion on a specific day and you will need to engage in them daily during the week for full credit.

- **Journal Entries:** After each “Live Like a Philosopher” exercise, you will need to write a short two-paragraph journal entry (usually daily) on your experiences, which you will submit online on Canvas. A high-quality journal entry will be one that reveals the care and reflectiveness with which you complete your daily exercises.
- **“Check Your Understanding” Quizzes:** These quizzes should be taken at the end of each unit. All that’s required for full credit is that you complete them by the deadline. You will automatically get full credit for each quiz after turning it in on Canvas.
- **Craft Project:** Around the middle of the semester you’ll be asked to develop some skill in a craft that’s meaningful to you over the course of a week: see Week 6 below.
- **Debates:** There will be two structured debates between teams of students during the semester that address the pros and cons of different views of the good life that you’ll have studied up to that point.
- **In-Class Discussion:** You should come prepared to class each week having completed the assigned lecture videos and readings. Some of the class periods with your High School Teacher and the online discussion sections with your Wesleyan TF will be devoted to preparing for debates or sharing your experiences and reflections from the assigned “Live Like a Philosopher” exercises.
- **Meet the Professor:** You’ll have at least two synchronous, live meetings online with Professor Irani during the semester (dates to be announced). Attendance at these meetings will provide you with bonus points toward your final grade in the course.
- **Mini Essay:** There will be a 1-page mini reflection essay to submit at the end of the intro period of the course in Week 2.
- **Comparative Essays:** You’ll have two 1000-1500 word essays to write, one after Unit 2 (on Plato and Aristotle), the other after Unit 4 (on Epicureanism and Stoicism).

Points-Based Grading System

Your final grade in this course will be determined using a points-based system designed to give you a clear and incremental understanding of your progress throughout the semester. Each assignment, activity, and participation opportunity is assigned a specific point value that contributes to your overall grade. By earning points steadily over time, you can track your progress and achievements, and ensure you’re on track for success.

How It Works

- **Completion-Based Assignments:** Several assignments in this course have been designed to award full credit just for completing the work. For example, every time you complete a **Perusall Assignment** and annotate the video lectures and readings,

and for every **Journal Entry** submission for the “Live Like a Philosopher” Exercises, you will earn points — whether or not your work is perfect. The key here is participation and engagement. By consistently completing these two components of the course, you can earn nearly 125 points over the semester, which is more than the total points available for the two major graded essay assignments combined.

- **Graded Assignments:** While completion-based assignments make up a crucial part of your final grade, there are also important graded assignments, such as the **Comparative Essays** and **Debates**. These assignments will be evaluated more on the quality of your work and your writing, your ability to engage philosophically with the material, and the depth of your critical thinking. Success in these graded assignments will be directly correlated with the completion of other assignments. By staying on track with the completion-based tasks, you’ll be better prepared to write excellent philosophy essays and perform well in the two debates.

Benefits of This System

1. **Success Through Effort:** This grading approach emphasizes that your intellectual growth and success in the course are directly tied to the effort you put in. By staying consistent with assignments that reward completion, you can accumulate points steadily and avoid the pressure of relying only on high-stakes assessments.
2. **Track Your Progress:** You will be able to track your progress gradually. As you earn points throughout the semester, you’ll have a clear view of how much work you’ve accomplished and how it contributes to your final grade. This will allow you to assess where you stand at any point and adjust your efforts as needed.
3. **Building Toward Mastery:** Tasks like watching/reading and annotating the Perusall Assignments and completing the “Live Like a Philosopher” exercises are not just about fulfilling a requirement. They’re opportunities for you to engage deeply with the material, practice philosophical thinking, and prepare for your more formal written essays and debates. This system recognizes steady, thoughtful work, reinforcing that consistent effort will be central to your success.

Keys to Success

- **Engage Consistently:** Completing the Perusall Assignments and Journal Entries is a straightforward way to earn nearly half of the points available in this course. The more you engage, the more you gain.
- **Use Feedback:** For the graded assignments like essays and debates, take feedback from your Wesleyan TF seriously. Use it to improve and to build on your strengths.

By focusing on both the completion of consistent work and quality in graded assignments, the points-based system in this course is designed to foster your development and help you succeed. The structure encourages continuous effort, giving you multiple avenues to earn points and consider your progress throughout the semester.

Grade Breakdown

Course Component	Available Points
<i>Completion-Based Assignments</i>	
Perusall Assignments – video lectures (20 videos x 3 points each)	60
Perusall Assignments – readings (12 readings x 3 points each)	36
“Live Like a Philosopher” Exercises (28 journal entries x 1 point each)	28
“Check Your Understanding” Quizzes (5 quizzes x 1 point each)	5
<i>Graded Assignments</i>	
Craft Project	6
Debates (2 debates x 5 points each)	10
Attendance and Participation in weekly Teaching Fellow (TF) sessions	50
Mini Essay	5
First Comparative Essay	50
Second Comparative Essay	50
Total	300

Grading Scale

A+: 100.0–96.6 | A: 96.5–93.3 | A-: 93.2–90.0 | B+: 89.9–86.6 | B: 86.5–83.3 | B-: 83.2–80.0 | C+: 79.9–76.6 | C: 76.5–73.3 | C-: 73.2–70.0 | D+: 69.9–66.6 | D: 66.5–63.3 | D-: 63.2–60.0 | E+: 59.9–56.6 | E: 56.5–53.3 | E-: 53.2–50.0 | F: 49.9–0.0

Example Grade Calculation

A student who earns 270 points out of 300 and no extra credit points during the semester would receive a final grade of:

$$(270/300) \times 100 = 90\% \text{ (A-)}$$

Course Policies

Late Policy for Assignments

All assigned work must be submitted on time to receive full credit. Completion-based assignments must be submitted on the day they are due for credit. Essay assignments submitted up to 24 hours late will receive a 50% deduction in points. Essay assignments submitted over 24 hours late will not receive points. If you need to request an extension on an essay assignment based on extenuating circumstances, you should reach out to your TF with your request by e-mail at least three days before the deadline.

Academic Accommodations

Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, its programs and services. To receive accommodations, a student must have a disability as defined by the ADA. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact your High School Teacher as soon as possible.

Course Drop Policy

Scholars who start this course (log in and complete at least one assignment) are eligible to drop the course without penalty up until December 12. Scholars who drop the course before this date will receive no grade or transcript from Wesleyan University.

Attendance and Participation Policy

Attendance and participation give you 50 points toward your final grade in this course and you can achieve a perfect score easily: just turn up and speak up! To get perfect attendance, you'll need to attend all your in-person classes with your High School Teacher and all your online discussion sections with your Wesleyan TF. When you meet with your TF, you should have your camera on for full participation credit.

You have several ways to satisfy the participation requirement for this course: through oral participation in class and discussion section; through online participation in the comments and annotations you write up for Perusall assignments; and in the debate activities. If by nature you tend to be quiet in class or section, please use the Perusall assignments to have your voice heard by raising questions and expressing your ideas about the readings.

Consistent participation in the "Live Like a Philosopher" weeks is essential. You should "check in" online on Canvas each morning when you have an assigned exercise, and your Wesleyan TFs will be monitoring the site to ensure you're participating at an adequate standard.

Academic Integrity Policy

All students enrolled in Wesleyan University courses are responsible for knowing and adhering to the [Honor Code](#) of the institution. Violations of this policy may include: cheating, plagiarism, aid of academic dishonesty, fabrication, lying, bribery, and threatening behavior. Further guidance can be found through Wesleyan's [Office of Student Affairs](#).

Course Schedule

Intro

WEEK 1. Introduction to the Course

Video Lectures

- ☐ Lecture 1.1: outline of course; introduction to philosophy as a way of life
- ☐ Lecture 1.2: introduction to reading Plato; the figure of Socrates; Plato's *Apology*; the Socratic method

Readings

- ☐ Plato, *Apology*
- ☐ John Cooper, "Ancient Philosophies as Ways of Life" (Lecture I on Socrates)

WEEK 2. Socrates on Philosophy as a Way of Life

- ☐ Survey

Video Lectures

- ☐ Lecture 2.1: Socrates's heroism; the Socratic method in action; Plato's *Apology*, cont'd
- ☐ Lecture 2.2: Plato's *Symposium*; Socrates's refutation of Agathon; Diotima's speech on love; "giving birth in beauty"; seeing the beauty in Socrates

Readings

- ☐ Plato, *Symposium* (excerpts)
- ☐ Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (Introduction and Chapter 3)

 **Mini Essay:** did Socrates corrupt the youth?

Unit 1 – Plato: The Life of Reason



WEEK 3. Plato on the Good Life

Video Lectures

- ☐ Lecture 3.1: Plato's *Gorgias*; Callicles's challenge to the philosophical life; Socrates's cross-examination of Callicles; Callicles's hedonism; rhetoric vs. philosophy
- ☐ Lecture 3.2: introducing Plato's *Republic*; Glaucon's challenge; Plato's tripartite theory of human psychology; the just life as the happy life

Readings

- ☐ Plato, *Gorgias* (excerpts)
- ☐ Plato, *Republic* (excerpts from Books 2 and 4)

WEEK 4. Live Like a Platonist (daily exercises on Canvas)

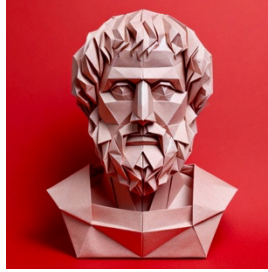
Video Lectures

- ☐ Lecture 4.1: problems for Plato's view of the just life; the role of reason in the good life; knowledge vs. belief
- ☐ Lecture 4.2: Plato's theory of forms; the cave allegory; the importance of mathematics; the form of the good

Readings

- ☐ Plato, *Republic* (excerpts from Book 7)

Unit 2 – Aristotle: The Life of Virtue



WEEK 5. Aristotle on the Good Life

Video Lectures

- ☐ Lecture 5.1: the distinctiveness of Greco-Roman approaches to ethics; Aristotle's metaphysics; potentiality and actuality; Aristotle on the human good
- ☐ Lecture 5.2: happiness as *eudaimonia*; Aristotle on what the human good is not; the function argument; reason and virtue

Readings

- ☐ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (excerpts from Book 1)

WEEK 6. Aristotle on the Good Life, cont'd

- ☐ **Craft Project:** develop skill in a craft that matters to you (instructions on Canvas)

Video Lectures

- ☐ Lecture 6.1: Aristotle on the fragility of the good life; the need for politics and external goods; the importance of habituation; Aristotle's particularism
- ☐ Lecture 6.2: three criteria for virtuous action; *phronēsis* as a master virtue; the role of friendship in the good life; blindspots/challenges for Aristotle's ethical theory

Readings

- ☐ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book 2)

WEEK 7. Live Like an Aristotelian (daily exercises on Canvas)

Readings

- ☐ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (excerpts from Books 3, 8, and 9)

Interlude

WEEK 8. Review Period

🗣️ **Debate:** Plato vs. Aristotle

📄 **First Comparative Essay:** Plato or Aristotle?

Unit 3 – Epicureanism: The Life of Pleasure



WEEK 9. Epicurus on the Good Life

Video Lectures

- ☐ Lecture 7.1: introduction to Hellenistic philosophy; background to Epicureanism; Epicurean physics; a materialist cosmos; atoms and void; “the swerve”
- ☐ Lecture 7.2: Epicurean psychology; the *tetrapharmakon*; Epicurus on the gods and death

Readings

- ☐ Testimonia from Diogenes Laertius; Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*; testimonia from Cicero and Lucretius

WEEK 10. Live Like an Epicurean (daily exercises on Canvas)

Video Lectures

- ☐ Lecture 8.1: Epicurean ethics; an argument for ethical hedonism; Epicurus’s analysis of desires; static vs. kinetic pleasures; the value of friends
- ☐ Lecture 8.2: Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* and its influence; virtue and pleasure in Epicurean ethics; problems for Epicureanism

Readings

- ☐ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* and *Principal Doctrines*; Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* (excerpts)

Unit 4 – Stoicism: The Life of Freedom



WEEK 11. The Stoics on the Good Life

Video Lectures

- ☐ Lecture 9.1: situating Stoicism in its time and place; the development of Stoicism; a misconception about Stoicism; Seneca on the happy life
- ☐ Lecture 9.2: the Stoic system; connecting physics, logic, and ethics; “living in agreement with nature”; Stoic cosmopolitanism; Stoic activism

Readings

- ☐ Seneca, Letter 44 and *On the Happy Life* (excerpts)

WEEK 12. Live Like a Stoic (daily exercises on Canvas)

Video Lectures

- ☐ Lecture 10.1: Stoic freedom; Epicureanism vs. Stoicism; a “cognitivist” view of the emotions; summary of the Stoic Sage
- ☐ Lecture 10.2: the Sage vs. the Progressor; cultivating indifference; problems for Stoicism; Modern Stoicism

Readings

- ☐ Epictetus, *Encheiridion* and *Discourses* (excerpts); Seneca, Letter 9

Outro

WEEK 13. Review Period

💬 **Debate:** Epicureanism vs. Stoicism

📄 **Second Comparative Essay:** Epicureanism or Stoicism?