I. Purpose and Scope

What are the qualities, the virtues, that make a person excellent? Are all these qualities compatible with one another, or are some kinds of excellence incompatible with, maybe even opposed to, other kinds? Can the same person be civicly virtuous, morally virtuous, and intellectually virtuous; or does one kind of excellence preclude another? . . . How does a person become excellent? Can we cultivate the virtues in ourselves, or must we be educated to virtue by others? Do the virtues require or at least build upon certain innate dispositions? If so, which dispositions serve which virtues? What is possible for us if we haven’t been fortunate either in nature or in nurture? . . . Where does our responsibility for our actions begin and end? Our character may determine our actions, but what determines our character? To the extent that our character has been shaped by things beyond our control (e.g., early childhood environment), in what way and to what extent are we free, and how should we think about justice? . . . What is the relationship between virtue and friendship? Isn’t friendship about pleasure and shared inclinations—shouldn’t it be a judgment-free zone? And yet don’t we care about the well-being, and therefore the character, the virtue, of our friends? And doesn’t our choice of friends both reflect and help shape our own character? . . . What is the relationship between virtue and happiness? Is virtue necessary to happiness? Is it sufficient for happiness? Is happiness the reward and even the goal of virtue? Most of us like to think that virtue ought to be rewarded and that, somehow, in the end, it is rewarded. But then why do we consider virtuous those who are willing to sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of a larger good? . . . Finally, is it good to raise such questions as these, or does inquiry into virtue threaten to undermine the very thing it wants to understand?

Aristotle investigates each of these questions in intricate, illuminating, and sometimes startling detail in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, to which this entire course will be dedicated. Our whole task is to read this book with great care. You will find that Aristotle’s perspective is in some ways familiar to us and in other ways alien. Where it is familiar, it will help us articulate what we perhaps already know, but only inchoately or incompletely. Where it is alien, it will show us things that we don’t know and might never have been able to imagine. If there is one thing of which we can be certain, it’s that the questions treated in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are of the utmost importance to anyone who wishes to live well and to any society that wishes to flourish.

II. Course Requirements

By far the most important course requirement is that you read all assigned passages closely and before class. You should also read every assigned passage a second time, either before class or
after. The *Nicomachean Ethics* offers a great deal of insight to the first-time reader. But it offers even more insight to the persistent reader. You might wish to do your second reading from a second translation. (See section VI below.)

Students enrolled in POSC 354 will write two papers: The first is a five- to seven-page paper on a selected portion of the text, which you will *present in class*. This paper, which will count for 30% of your grade, will serve as the basis for some part of the day’s discussion. A twenty-page seminar paper will count for 60% of your grade. The seminar paper will be due on Monday, June 3. Seminar paper topics should be approved by me by Monday, May 20 (preferably earlier). The remaining 10% of your grade will be based on class participation, including your class presentation: since this is a seminar, your active and sustained participation is expected.

Students enrolled in POSC 254 will write three papers. One of these will be a five- to seven-page paper on a selected portion of the text, which you will *present in class*. This paper, which will count for 30% of your grade, will serve as the basis for some part of the day’s discussion. Additionally, students will write two seven- to eight-page papers on topics of their own choosing, though I am happy to suggest topics to you (30% each). One of these papers must be submitted by Friday, May 3, though you are welcome to submit it earlier than that. The other paper must be submitted by Monday, June 3, though, again, you are welcome to submit early. The remaining 10% of your grade will be based on class participation, including your class presentation: since this is a seminar, your active and sustained participation is expected.

All papers should be submitted by email as Word documents to <lcooper@carleton.edu>

**III. Academic Honesty**

Strict standards of academic integrity will be upheld in this class. Your submission of written work means that your work is your own, that it is in accord with Carleton’s regulations on academic integrity, and that you have neither given nor received unauthorized aid. Be sure you are familiar with Carleton’s principles and policies on Academic Honesty: if you haven’t done so already, review the website found at https://apps.carleton.edu/campus/doc/honesty/. I take academic honesty very seriously: students who are found to have violated these standards should expect severe sanctions.

**IV. Assigned Text**

The only required reading in this course is the *Nicomachean Ethics*. You should purchase the translation by Joe Sachs (Focus Publishing), which I selected for its literalness, which is the chief virtue for any translation of a philosophic work. But since no translation can be completely literal, it’s a good idea to consult other capable translations as well. One that I recommend is by Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins (University of Chicago Press).

**V. Secondary Reading**

You are not required to read anything but the assigned text, and you should always read Aristotle more than once before looking at any interpretive work. For those who do wish to consult secondary works, I would recommend the following:


Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins, Interpretive Essay, in *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*.


John M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*.


Carnes Lord and David O’Connor, eds., *Essays on the Foundations of Aristotelian Political Science*.


Lorraine Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*.

Amelie Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*.

Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*.

________, *Natural Right and History*.


**VI. Class Schedule**

All reading assignments are from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The *Ethics* is divided into ten numbered books, each of which is further divided into chapters. (It is believed that the book divisions were made by Aristotle himself and that the chapter divisions are the work of later scholars.) With the exception of books 8 and 9, our plan is to spend one week on each of the *Ethics’ 10 books.*
Note that this is an approximate schedule. If the past is any guide, there is a good chance that we’ll make adjustment as the term proceeds:

March 26: Course introduction—read book 1, chapters 1-5

March 28: book 1, chapters 6-13

April 2: book 2, entire

April 4: book 2, entire (again)

April 9: book 3, chapters 1-5

April 11: book 3, chapters 6-12

April 16: book 4, chapters 1-3

April 18: book 4, chapters 4-9

April 23: book 5, chapters 1-5

April 25: book 5, chapters 6-11

April 30: book 6, entire

May 2: book 6, entire (again)

May 7: book 7, chapters 1-10

May 9: book 7, chapters 11-14

May 14: No class—professor at a conference: we may schedule a weekend make-up class

May 16: book 8

May 21: book 9

May 23: book 10, chapters 1-5

May 28: book 10, chapters 6-9