Freshman Seminar
Living the Good Life: Greek and Jewish Perspectives
Michah Gottlieb

The course will examine Greek and Jewish perspectives on the important question: What makes a life well lived?

Matthew Arnold famously presented Hellenic and Hebraic answers to this question as opposed: While Hellenes saw the good life as a life of inquiry and philosophy, Hebraic thinkers saw the good life as dedicated to obedience to God. This course will complicate this picture.

Through a close reading of primary sources we will explore how Jewish thinkers from the ancient rabbis through 19th century thinkers like Hermann Cohen both appropriated and critiqued three main schools of Greek thought: Aristotelianism, Stoicism and Platonism.

The aim is not merely historical but to think about big questions from two intellectual streams that have been central to shaping the American cultural psyche—Athens and Jerusalem.

Central questions to be explored include: Does living well require acquiring knowledge and wisdom? What is the place of moral responsibility in the good life? Is the good life, a happy life or does it require sacrificing happiness? Does religion lead to living well or does it hinder it? What is friendship and how does it contribute to the good life?

Assessment

Grades will be based on class participation (10%), six response papers (15%) two short papers (5 pages) (40%) and final 10 page paper (35%).

Class participation will involve attendance as well as contributing to class discussion. Students are permitted no more than 2 absences over the semester aside from legitimate excuses (e.g. severe sickness, family tragedy etc.).

The first two papers will involve careful analyses of arguments in primary texts. Topics will be distributed.

The final paper will be a paper on a wider ranging theme. A list of possible topics for final papers will be distributed, but students can also select their own topic after first clearing it with me.

Late papers will be deducted one half letter grade per day late. So, for example, a B+ paper due Monday which is handed in on Tuesday will be marked a B.

All papers must be submitted to pass the course.
A strict policy will be maintained on plagiarism. For NYU regulations on plagiarism see:

http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity

Required Texts:

Texts posted on NYU CLASSES

Tentative Schedule

Week 1—Introduction

Week 2—Jerusalem and Athens
Arnold, “Hebraism and Hellenism” (1869) on CLASSES
Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens” (1967) on CLASSES

*Part I- Aristotelianism*

Week 3—Aristotle
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, sections 1-5 (pp. 3-7), sections 7-12 (pp. 10-19)
section 13 (pp. 19-22) Book II, sections 1-3 (pp. 23-27), sections 5-9 (pp. 28-37)
Recommended:
Book III, 38-74

Week 4—Aristotle

Week 5—Aristotle

Week 6—Maimonides
Maimonides, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, pp. 28-52, 60-83, 141-142
Maimonides, “Commentary on Avot 1:6” on CLASSES
Maimonides, “Commentary on Avot, 4:4” on CLASSES
(First paper due)

*Part II- Stoicism*

Week 7—Seneca
Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic* (all)
Seneca, “On the Shortness of Life” (on CLASSES)

Week 8 Rabbis, Maimonides, Spinoza
*Ethics of the Fathers*, Chapters 1-5
Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part III, chapter 12 on CLASSES

Week 9—Spinoza

Week 10- Spinoza
Spinoza, *Ethics*, part IV, pp. 197-222

Week 11- Spinoza
(Second Paper due)

*Part III- Platonism*

Week 12- Plato
Plato, *Republic*, Book 1, 1-102

Week 13- Plato
Plato, *Republic*, Books 4-7, pp. 103-237

Week 14- Plato

Week 15- Maimonides and Cohen
Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part I. 54; Part III. 51-III. 54 on CLASSES
Cohen, “The Social ideal as seen by Plato and the Prophets” on CLASSES
Cohen, *The Ethics of Maimonides*, ch. 1, 1-22 chs. 2-3, 23-75 on CLASSES