Living the Good Life: Greek and Jewish Perspectives  
FYSEM-UA 655  
Michah Gottlieb  
Mondays 9:30-12:00  
53 Washington Square South, Basement

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%), five one page reflection papers (15%) two short papers (5 pages) (40%) and final 8-10 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 that are part of the required or recommended readings for the course. The primary focus should be on explaining the arguments of the text through close reading. This should take the
bulk of the paper (around 3 pages). The last two pages or so should be devoted to an assessment or broader analysis of the argument as outlined by the topic questions which will be distributed.

The final paper will be a paper on a wider ranging theme that will involve either comparing two or more texts or analyzing and synthesizing different passages from one text. 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

*Note on readings*: These are philosophical works that must be read closely. Often the readings will be relatively short but you should expect to read them slowly and/or more than once.

**Tentative Schedule**

September 11—Introduction
Arnold, “Hebraism and Hellenism” (1869) on CLASSES
Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens” (1967) on CLASSES
Part I- Aristotelianism

September 18— 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
*First reflection due (1 page)*
*First paper topic distributed*

September 25— Aristotle

October 2- Aristotle
*First paper due (5 pages)*

October 9- No Classes

October 16- Maimonides
Maimonides, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, pp. 28-52, 60-95, 141-142
Maimonides, “Commentary on Avot 1:6” on CLASSES
Maimonides, “Commentary on Avot, 4:4” on CLASSES

Part II- Stoicism

October 23— Seneca
Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, 33-113, 124-144
Seneca, *On the Shortness of Life*, 1-33
*Second reflection paper due*

October 30- Seneca
Seneca, *On the Shortness of Life*, 68-106
*Third reflection paper due*

November 6— Rabbis, Maimonides, Spinoza
*Ethics of the Fathers* on CLASSES
Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part III, chapter 12 on CLASSES
Maimonides, “On the Management of Health” in *Ethical Writings of Maimonides* pp. 106-110
Spinoza, “A Portrait of the Philosopher as a Young Man”, in *A Spinoza Reader*, pp. 3-6
Spinoza, “A Critique of Traditional Religion” in *A Spinoza Reader*, 6-10
*Second paper topic distributed*
November 13- Spinoza

*Fourth reflection paper due*

November 20- Spinoza
Spinoza, *Ethics*, part IV and V, pp. 197-265
Spinoza, “A Worm in the Blood” pp. 82-84

*Second paper due (5 pages)*

*Part III- Platonism*

November 27 Plato

December 4- Plato

December 11- Maimonides and Conclusion
Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part I. 1 on CLASSES
Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part I. 54 on CLASSES
Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* Part III. 51-III. 54 on CLASSES

*Fifth reflection paper due*