

What is the Life Worth Living? Ancient Ethics in Athens

PHIL 3019, 3039 or 5050 Ancient Ethics – What is the Life Worth Living?
PHIL 1512 Global Arts/Humanities: Ancient Ethics – What is the Life Worth Living?

May 9-19, 2026



Course Description

What is a truly excellent, outstanding, amazing human life? What is the life that is really worth living *for the person living it*?

These and related questions (Of what does an excellent human life consist? How can one achieve such a life? Does a good life require living a morally praiseworthy life?) consumed the study of moral philosophy in the Ancient world, especially the Classical Athenian moral philosophy of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. These questions about human flourishing have also enjoyed a contemporary revival in moral philosophy and, now, psychology. And in an ideal world, everyone would have the time, space, and resources to thoughtfully answer these questions for themselves. Our eleven day study abroad course, developed in coordination with Hellenic American University (Athens), is designed to do just

that, all while experiencing the intoxicating culture and people of Greece, where these systematic, philosophical investigations began over two thousand years ago!

So safeguard Athens with Athena from atop the Acropolis and worship your own way in the Parthenon. Trace the footsteps of Socrates in the Ancient Agora and savor souvlaki in the new agora. Consult an Oracle at Delphi and savor the sea-going life in enchanting Nafplio. Harmonize with Plato at the ruins of his Academy and argue with Aristotle at the remains of his Lyceum. Delight in combinations of olive, feta, tomato, and phyllo at a taverna. And all the while, consider the life worth living!

I hope that fifty years from now, you will you have lived a truly excellent, outstanding, amazing human life *for you*. And I would consider it a personal victory if your study abroad experience will have been a part of it.

Guiding Questions

The following questions will drive our course, including your course objectives, goals, activities, and resources.

- What is a truly excellent, remarkable human life *for the person living it*? What is the life that is really worth living?
- Of what does the truly excellent life consist?
- Can everyone achieve such a life?
- How can one achieve such a life?

Objectives

You have three objectives:

- develop your own reasoned answers to our questions
- create a plan for living a truly excellent human life. At this stage, your plan will likely be somewhat general, but it should be personal and revisable and allow for later specifics.
- gain confidence as an international traveler and consciousness as a world citizen

Goals

You will achieve your objectives, in large part, by accomplishing the following goals:

- explain and evaluate some historically important and contemporary answers to our questions, especially "perfectionist" answers, such as those argued for by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and "objective list" answers, such as those argued for by contemporary positive psychologists
- explain the philosophical, cultural, political, geographical, and religious contexts that made these questions, and their perfectionist answers, so pressing in Ancient Athens, especially during its Classical period;
- use your study abroad experiences—site visits, day trips, everyday interactions with locals—to reflect on your own way of life and on the power, for good and ill, of enculturation;
- personalize the course. That is, use your evaluations, study abroad experiences, and reflections to work out your own reasoned answers to our questions

Activities

The following activities, most required and included, will help you accomplish your goals:

- Course paper, due after we return from Athens
- Daily readings, seminar discussion, and journal entries (approximately four hours/day)
- Historical site visits and tours of the Acropolis, including the Parthenon, The Acropolis Museum, Ancient Agora, Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum, National Archeological Museum, or the Temple of Zeus
- Three days in the enchanting seaside harbor of Nafplio
- Day trips to ancient Mycenae and Epidavros and the mountain region of Delphi
- Walking tour of Athens and its neighborhoods
- Plenty of Free time enjoying the local culture and people
- Informal chats under the floodlights of the Acropolis
- Pre-trip orientation and post-trip meetings about course paper (voluntary)

Grading

Course Paper (40%)	One course paper, roughly 12-20 pages, answering our four guiding questions.
Journal entries—Pre-departure (15%)	Series of journal entries designed to give you some background knowledge of Greek history, theories of well-being, elements of Greek hospitality, and to help you discover (and let me know) what you would most like to get out of the program.
Journal entries—Onsite (25%)	Series of journal entries designed to help you consider and evaluate the elements of the various theories of well-being, especially perfectionism and objective list theories. There are also a set of entries designed to help you reflect on your experiences upon our return.
Positive energy, engagement, and professionalism (20%)	My evaluation of your positive energy, thoughtfulness, interaction, respect, and professionalism for our team and for each of our respective goals. Were your journal entries thoughtful, or did you just write something to get them done? Did we have to drag thoughts out of you during our discussion seminars, or were you actively engaging with others' thoughts and questions? Were you happy to be with us, or were you mentally somewhere else. Did you ask our tour guides any questions, or did you not ask any at all? Did you form a small clique, or did you interact with get to know everyone well? You get the idea.
Group activities—all required	Attending all group meetings, site visits, excursions, etc. is a necessary condition for passing the course.

Learning Resources

Your main learning resources, all required and most included, are the following:

- Greece itself! Especially Athens, Delphi, Hydra and the fabulous, welcoming Greek people!
- Each other
- Tour guides
- E-Course pack of academic readings
- Courage to Adventure Safely!—Try it the Greek way, engage the locals, inquire about different ideas and practices, go with the flow when faced with the unexpected, decide to remain safe
- Time on task
- Physical and mental stamina to endure long days while being rested and ready for the next

Other Important Resources

- Generosity, kindness, and respect—toward the Greek people, history, and culture and toward each other so that everyone feels welcome, encouraged, safe, and part of our team
- Some means to work with electronic material, take notes, etc.
- Working phone with international service (can't rely only on wi-fi) and good battery, so you can always contact someone, take pictures, etc.