

European College of Liberal Arts
Autumn 2011
BA Second Year Core Seminar
Syllabus
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CHARACTER

In coming to know another person, we often believe that we are getting to know his or her “character.” We seek the company of those with good or interesting characters, and try to avoid those who we think of as having bad character. In common speech, we might be told that something difficult or unpleasant is nevertheless good for us because it will be “character-building.” Many of us are seriously concerned with our own characters—as things to be discovered, perhaps, or developed, or accepted, or maintained, or improved . . . Some of us may even worry that changing circumstances or poor decisions may alter or corrupt our characters. In short, the idea of character seems to be crucial to how many of us think, judge, and act.

But what exactly is meant by “character”? Is it synonymous with other, related concepts such as a “self,” “subjectivity,” “personhood,” “individuality,” and “personality”? How is it related to the aspirations for “self-realization” or for “authenticity” that we might typically connect with some of these other concepts? What is the relation between character and virtue? “Character” used to mean good character; in modernity, however, the word is often used to refer to an interesting, unique, or idiosyncratic personality. Both senses of the word are still alive, though possibly in tension with one another. (We may say “He’s a person of character” as well as “He’s a real character,” but could we say both of the *same* person?). No matter which sense of the word we use, we speak as if we are laying hold of something real and, at least to some extent, stable.

In this core class, we examine and explore the idea of character through both contemporary and classical texts. In the course of our investigation, we expect to take up (but not to be limited to) questions such as the following: How is character, and good character in particular, acquired? To what extent is it given by nature or the product of circumstances? Can we be responsible for our own character? If not at all, how can we be praised or blamed for our good or bad character? If the formation or endurance of character depends on certain conditions, what are these? What role, if any, does having character have to play in our happiness? Would you be pleased or displeased if you seemed to others to be “acting out of character”? If the idea of character suggests stability, how does one distinguish between a “healthy” kind of stability and an “unhealthy” rigidity or senseless repetition?

How does one assess, grasp, or understand one's own character or the character of another person? What would it mean for a human being to have "no character"? What might be the role of philosophical and literary traditions in the cultivation of character? What role, if any, could our own activity in reading and discussing these texts play in the formation or alteration of our characters? [This course was developed for the 2010/11 academic year with Sophia Vasalou.]

Week 1

M 10/3: Holiday

W 10/5: Opening discussion, with Montaigne "Of the inconsistency of our actions"

Week 2

M 10/10: Doris *Lack of Character*, Chapters 1 and 2, pp. 1-27

W 10/12: Doris Chapter 3, pp. 28-61

Week 3

M 10/17: [AY/BA1 Core: Hesiod lecture] Reschedule (TBA)

Doris Chapter 4, pp. 62-91

W 10/19, 9am: Writing session

W 10/19: Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1

Week 4

M 10/24: Aristotle Book 1, continued

W 10/26: Aristotle Book 2

Week 5

M 10/31: Aristotle Book 3

W 11/2: Aristotle Book 4

Paper 1, due Sunday noon (1500-2000 words)

Week 6

M 11/7: Emerson "Character"

W 11/9: Freud "Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis"

Week 7

M 11/14: Freud

W 11/16: Winnicott "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" & "Playing: Creative Activity and the Search for the Self"

Week 8

M 11/21: Winnicott "The Development of the Capacity for Concern" & "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self"

W 11/23, 9am: Writing session

W 11/23: Austen *Pride and Prejudice*, vol. 1

Week 9

M 11/28: Austen, vol. 1 cont.

W 11/30: Austen, vol. 2

Week 10

M 12/5: Austen, vol. 3

W 12/7: Austen, vol. 3 cont.

Paper 2 due Week 11, Friday, 5pm (1500-2000 words) on a question of your own devising.

Writing sessions: In connection with this class, James Harker will be running two seminars on writing. In preparation for the first, mandatory session, please send James your "best paper" from last year. The second session will be on the subject of devising your own questions. This session is optional, but strongly encouraged as preparation for your final essay.

Absence policy:

Please be aware of the college policies as described in the student handbook. You cannot receive credit for a course if you have more than 30% absences, for any reason. More than 15% overall absences in the school will result in academic probation. Late arrival counts as an absence.

The policy for this class will be a reduction in the seminar grade of a third of a letter grade for each unexcused absence over 15%. The rationale is that one's capacity to make meaningful contributions to the seminar depends upon one's presence in prior sessions.

Grading:

Seminar grade: 25%

Please familiarize yourself with the guidelines in the student handbook.

Paper 1: 35%

Final Paper: 40%

Late policy for this course: I will grant extensions, as long as you ask at least 24 hours in advance of the deadline. Late papers will be penalized 1/3rd of a letter grade (e.g., from an A- to a B+) for every 24 hours beyond the deadline.