

Weekend Courses 2024-25

Philosophy as therapy: from good counsel to consolations

Start date: 13 June 2025 **End date:** 15 June 2025

Venue: Madingley Hall
Madingley
Cambridge
CB23 8AQ

Tutor: Dr Alex Carter **Course Code:** 2425NRX050

Tutor biography

Alex Carter is Academic Director for Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Cambridge, Institute of Continuing Education where he has designed and delivered courses in philosophy, ethics and creativity theory. He also oversees the Institute's undergraduate research courses. Alex is also a fellow at Fitzwilliam College where he supports students' study skills.

His own research interests are diverse and include Wittgenstein's later philosophy, the theology of Simone Weil and the philosophy of humour. Alex's PhD thesis explored some of the surprising aspects of Wittgenstein's views concerning freedom and fatalism. Alex is currently researching the relationship between humour and creative practice via the concept of 'serious play'.

Summary of content

By exploring the philosophical foundations of traditional therapeutic approaches, we will ask several key questions, such as “What does it mean to ‘better’ one’s self?”, “Does the Universe prefer sane humans to insane ones?”, “Is an unexamined life really ‘not worth living’?” Notably, there is one important difference between i) these philosophers’ attempts to improve our understanding of self and ii) therapeutic practice: namely, philosophers are free to *conclude* that insanity is the appropriate response to the world. That is, philosophy does not need to make us “better”. But *can* it? Several philosophers think it can, but they have different views about how this is to be achieved.

We will begin with Aristotle’s account of ‘flourishing’ as a loosely defined aim for humanity. We will ask what it might mean for an individual, society or idea to ‘flourish’; and what role, if any, philosophy plays in bringing this about. Other ancients, including the stoics and Boethius, make similar appeals to the consolations offered by philosophy, and several make specific claims about why true tranquillity derives from our reconciling ourselves to an indifferent world.

Moving on, we will turn to religious thinkers to determine if fate, or rather God, plays an *active* role in reconciling us to life’s harshness. Augustine and Kierkegaard both maintain that true flourishing is a progress towards God. We will consider what relevance, if any, this might have to those engaged in a largely secular therapeutic practice. Moreover, do appeals to a ‘Higher Power’ (for example, in rehabilitation settings) miss the point made by these two Christian thinkers?

In the penultimate session, we will turn to the 20th century philosopher Wittgenstein who said that the aim of philosophy is to have one’s “thoughts at peace”. But is the tranquillity being sought here about accepting one’s limits, or is it a call to action? In particular, we will consider how Wittgenstein’s philosophy relates to contemporary psychological practice. Wittgenstein was an avid reader of both William James and Sigmund Freud.

In closing, we will reflect more generally on the therapeutic benefits (and harms) of an examined life. We will ensure we have plenty of time to reflect and ask any remaining questions.

Aims

The course will allow you to:

- engage practically with philosophical ideas related to self, sanity and betterment
- identify similarities and differences between philosophical approaches to self-improvement
- reflect critically about philosophy’s role in evaluating and developing therapeutic practices

Course sessions

Friday

Please plan to arrive between 16:30 and 18:30. You can meet other course members in the Terrace Bar which opens at 18:15. Tea and coffee making facilities are available in the study bedrooms.

19:00	Dinner
20:30 – 22:00	Aristotle on Flourishing
22:00	Terrace Bar open for informal discussion

Saturday

07:30	Breakfast (for residents only)
09:00 – 10:30	Epicureanism, Stoicism and the Love of Fate
10:30	Coffee
11:00 – 12:30	The Consolations of Boethius
13:00	Lunch
14:00 – 16:00	Free time
16:00	Tea
16:30 – 18:00	Augustine's <i>Confessions</i>: Therapy of the Heart
18:00 – 18:30	Free time
18:30	Dinner
20:00 – 21:30	Kierkegaard on Indirect Communication
21:30	Terrace Bar open for informal discussion

Sunday

07:30	Breakfast (for residents only)
09:00 – 10:30	Wittgenstein's Therapeutic Project
10:30	Coffee
11:00 – 12:30	The Re-Examined Life
12:45	Lunch

The course will disperse after lunch

Presentation of the course

The course will be delivered via a mix of informative lectures and structured discussion. In groups, and as a cohort, we will reflect on selected passages from philosophical and psychological sources as well as seek solutions to specific problems. Consequently, whilst familiarity with the ideas will be desirable, it will not be required for discussion to take place.

Learning outcomes

As a result of the course, you will gain a greater understanding of the subject and you should be able to:

- identify the underlying, philosophical assumptions made in therapeutic practice
- speak in general terms about how Western philosophy has influenced therapeutic approaches to mental health, wellness and well-being
- make connections and draw conclusions about the validity of certain philosophical approaches to self and sanity
- offer criticisms of established viewpoints on the above themes

Reading and resources list

There are no compulsory readings for this course. However, you may find the below recommended reading list of interest to supplement your course.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics*, (Hackett Publishing, (Irwin, T trans. 2019)

Bazzano, M, ed, *Re-visioning existential therapy: Counter-traditional perspectives*, (Routledge, 2020)

Boethius, *Consolation of philosophy*, (Hackett Publishing, 2001)

Botterill, G, and Carruthers, P, *The philosophy of psychology*, (Cambridge University Press, 1999)

Bretherton, R, *Existential dimensions of positive psychology. Positive psychology in practice: Promoting human flourishing in work, health, education, and everyday life*, pages 47-60 (Wiley, 2015)

Fischer, E, *How to practise philosophy as therapy: Philosophical therapy and therapeutic philosophy*, *Metaphilosophy*, Volume 42, Issue 1-2, pages 49-82 (2011)

Nussbaum, M C, *The therapy of desire: Theory and practice in Hellenistic ethics*, (Princeton University Press, 2013)

Oxley, J, C, ed, *Experiential learning in philosophy*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015)

Phillips, D Z, *Philosophy's cool place*, (Cornell University Press, 1999)

Online resources:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/enhancement/>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein/#LateNatuPhil>

Note: Institute of Continuing Education (ICE) students are entitled to 20% discount on books published by Cambridge University Press (CUP) which are purchased at the Press bookshop, 1 Trinity Street, Cambridge (Mon-Sat 9am – 5:30pm, Sun 11am – 5pm). A letter or email confirming acceptance on to a current ICE course should be taken as evidence of enrolment.

(Information correct as of April 2024)