

PHIL 187: The Pursuit of Happiness

Walsh 394

PHIL 187-01: T/H: 6:30-7:45

PHIL 187-02: T/H: 5-6:15

Instructor: Marcus Hedahl

Office: New North 237

Office Hours: T 3-4 or appointment

moh6@georgetown.edu

Course Description

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed ... with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”

These are, I am sure, very familiar words to us all. But today, many have a very different interpretation about what the term ‘Pursuit of Happiness’ than Thomas Jefferson might have intended when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. So, in this class, we will examine questions about what happiness is and how might we improve our pursuit of it.

Readings will include some precursors/influences to Jefferson on these questions including: Epictetus, Aristotle, and Rousseau. We will also read some of what Jefferson himself wrote on these questions. However, since we are not Greeks, Romans, or even living in the Enlightenment, we will also consider some modern discussions on Happiness including some recent psychological insights into the phenomenon.

Objectives

Through participation in this class, you will be able to engage in philosophical discussion about human happiness. This includes but is not limited to:

- Reflecting on the life worth living, and goods worth pursuing
- Questioning beliefs about the nature of happiness
- Interpreting canonical philosophical texts
- Critically evaluating philosophical positions and arguments
- Developing philosophical positions and arguments

Daily Class Expectations

I expect you to come to class prepared to have a vigorous discussion about the texts, the arguments within them, and most importantly the ideas they present. This means that I will expect you to:

- 1) Complete the assigned reading
- 2) Think about themes raised
- 3) Be open-mindedly opinionated
- 4) Come with questions and ideas
- 5) Come on time
- 6) Turn off any distractions
- 7) Treat everyone with respect

Honor Code

You are expected to uphold the GU honor code in all phases of this class (<http://gervaseprograms.georgetown.edu/honor/system/53516.html>).

Graded Events

1. Class Participation:

Discussion is a fundamental part of philosophy. Some, like Plato, might go so far as to say it is *the* constitutive element of philosophy. It is for that reason that class attendance is mandatory. However, there are, I am certain, many other interesting, significant and even perhaps obligatory conflicts one could have with a given class session. So everyone **is allotted three absences**, for any reason, **without penalty**. If you believe that you will miss more than three classes, please let me know as early as possible. The penalty for more than 3 absences is the forfeiture of all of your class participation points and some of your reflection points. Please come to class on time. If you enter the classroom after I have finished taking attendance (which is within the first five minutes of class), you will be considered late. Three minor lates equal an unexcused absence. If you are very late (more than 15 minutes), then you are considered absent from that day's class.

But don't just sit there – say something. *Remember that good questions are more important than good answers.* And good arguments are more important than simply remembering the facts. I expect every student to contribute to class every week in some way.

2. Class Blog

Pre-class questions – You should always come to class with questions. However, you **are required to complete ten (10) short sets of 2 questions** each about the reading for a given day before class on the **common class blog**. If you do more than ten (10), I will count your best ten (10). These must be completed **by noon the day of class**. Each post should be a critical first engagement with a text. It should contain two questions, be about 75-150 words, and it should not take you more than 10-15 minutes to complete (above and beyond the time reading of course).

Examples of Outstanding questions/topics:

- “On page 79, Mill states that a person who violates ‘a distinct and assignable obligation’ to others can be punished. However, this view does not seem consistent with his Harm Principle. I was hoping we could discuss what Mill means by this sort of obligation.” [refers to the text and offers a specific question about it]
- “I’d like to discuss Aristotle’s view of who can be virtuous. In arguing that a virtuous person must have moral exemplars to emulate, it might prove difficult to account for cases in which persons have difficult childhoods, but still manage to live exemplary lives.” [specific, and raises a *potential* (rather than a definitive) counterexample]

Examples of acceptable questions/topics:

- “I was wondering what people’s reactions are to Hobbes’s argument for an absolute sovereign.” [this is the start to a good question, but it needs more development. What are you wondering about? Is there a particular aspect of the argument that is strong or weak?]

Examples of Unsatisfactory Questions

- “What does Aristotle mean by ‘virtue’?”—questions that are too vague/large generally
- “I think Aristotle is an idealist, because all he talks about is virtue.”—statements that fail to engage the issues
- “Isn’t Aristotle just talking about the inherent metaphysical fallibility of the human condition” Be clear, do not try to show off in your questions

3. Personal Blog

A central goal in this class is to engender reflection about the happy and good life. Some of this critical enterprise will entail forming and defending arguments for particular theoretical conclusions (e.g. X is a sufficient but not necessary feature for happiness). But some critical reflection should be more personal. We are also trying to work toward a better understanding of ourselves, of our actions and commitments, and of our relation to the rest of the world. The personal blog is meant to give you a space to do this. The classes and other material hopefully provides you with some material to facilitate reflection. *It should **not** be written for me* but rather from a general audience – as if you were engaged on an extended personal reflection about happiness is. In fact, **you can make this blog as public as you would like** (I encourage but do not require you to make it public) and you should write it (with one exception that will be made explicit) *for someone with a similar education who is not in this class.* In other words, **you should write it as you would if you were a personal blog reflecting about happiness.**

This task shouldn’t be confused with contrived genuflection or fatuous navel-gazing, however. This is a forum for making connections between material from class, supplemental material, and aspects of your own life, other experiences you’ve had, other classes you’ve taken, other projects you’re involved with, etc. This is an opportunity to voice opinions and explore ideas that have arisen in the context of the work for this

course, to demonstrate learning through application and to interpret, critique and expand on ideas from class discussion and readings. You should **NOT** try to demonstrate knowledge of topics we've discussed in class – demonstrate that you've reflected about one or two things in particular instead.

- a. **Post-class blogs** - required to complete ten (10) short blogs about the reading for a given day before class on the common class blog. If you do more than ten (10), I will count your best ten (10). These must be completed **by noon the day of the next class meeting**. These should be 125-250 words, and it should not take you more than 15-20 minutes to write.
- b. **Supplemental blogs** – At the end of the three full months of the semester you must write a more substantial reflection post. There will be two tasks here (you can write them as one blog post or two). The first is to reflect on the book you are reading outside of class (options are available at the end of the syllabus). The second will vary based on the month and will be described in detail closer to the due date
- c. **Final Blog post** - will be described in detail closer to the due date.

2/3. Extra Credit – Often throughout the semester there will be opportunity for extra credit. These offer you the opportunity to lessen the number of required blog posts. [Your first extra credit fills in for a pre-class blog requirement, the second fills in for a post-class blog, your third fills in for a pre-class blog requirement, etc.] Once you have completed an extra credit assignment **you must email me so I have a record.**

4. Take Home Exams

The exams are meant to test your knowledge of the material, not of the mere facts that we cover in class but about the way the way the theoretical coherence of the theories we cover in class. I will be available to meet for any questions **before** the exam is made available but will be only able to answer questions about any ambiguities in the questions themselves once the exam period begins. Each exam will consist of 3 essays of 400-600 words (1.5-2 pp). The exams will be open book, open note, but you are not allowed to work together.

Each of your three answers should consist of a coherent essay that directly and fully addresses the question asked. A good answer will show evidence that you have read and understood the relevant material. *Please note, however, that you are being evaluated partly on whether you can identify which material is most relevant. There is no need (and for that matter, no space) to provide extended discussions of all the facts that pertain to a given question. I'm looking for recognition of which ideas and concepts are most essential to the answer you are giving to the question, and the ability to locate them in the reading. More does not always mean better!! – one reason well explained and defended will likely be better than six or seven given in a more list-like response.*

5. Dao Presentation will be described in detail closer to the due dates.

Books for Monthly posts – PICK ONE -- **NOT AT BOOKSTORE**

All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age

An unrelenting flow of choices confronts us at nearly every moment of our lives, and yet our culture offers us no clear way to choose. This predicament seems inevitable, but in fact it's quite new. In medieval Europe, God's calling was a grounding force. In ancient Greece, a whole pantheon of shining gods stood ready to draw an appropriate action out of you. Like an athlete in "the zone," you were called to a harmonious attunement with the world, so absorbed in it that you couldn't make a "wrong" choice. If our culture no longer takes for granted a belief in God, can we nevertheless get in touch with the Homeric moods of wonder and gratitude, and be guided by the meanings they reveal? *All Things Shining* says we can. Re-envisioning modern spiritual life through their examination of literature, philosophy, and religious testimony, Dreyfus and Kelly unearth ancient sources of meaning, and teach us how to rediscover the sacred, shining things that surround us every day.

Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry Into the Value of Work

Shop Class as Soulcraft brings alive an experience that was once quite common, but now seems to be receding from society—the experience of making and fixing things with our hands. Those of us who sit in an office often feel a lack of connection to the material world, a sense of loss, and find it difficult to say exactly what we do all day. Crawford makes a case for the intrinsic satisfactions and cognitive challenges of manual work. Such work ties us to the local communities in which we live, and instills the pride that comes from doing work that is genuinely useful. A wholly original debut, *Shop Class as Soulcraft* offers a passionate call for self-reliance and a moving reflection on how we can live concretely in an ever more abstract world.

Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life

An instructive and entertaining book that addresses basic life questions. Relating numerous personal anecdotes, incorporating, intriguing material from the films of Woody Allen and the journals of Leo Tolstoy, and using the writings of the seventeenth-century genius Blaise Pascal as a central guide, Morris explores the nature of faith, reason, and the meaning of life. His lucid reflections provide fresh, fertile insights and perspectives for any thoughtful person journeying through life.

Bel Canto

Somewhere in South America, at the home of the country's vice president, a lavish birthday party is being held in honor of Mr. Hosokawa, a powerful Japanese businessman. Roxanne Coss, opera's most revered soprano, has mesmerized the international guests with her singing. It is a perfect evening -- until a band of gun-wielding terrorists breaks in through the air-conditioning vents and takes the entire party hostage. But what begins as a panicked, life-threatening scenario slowly evolves into something quite different, as terrorists and hostages forge unexpected bonds and people from different countries and continents become compatriots. Friendship, compassion, and the chance for great love lead the characters to forget the real danger that has been set in motion and cannot be stopped.

Required Books

Czikzentmihalyi, Mihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics. ISBN: 978-0-06-133920-2.

Epictetus, *Handbook of Epictetus*, Trans. by Nicholas P. White, Hackett. ISBN: 978-0-872-200494.

Dao De Jing: The Book of the Way, Trans. By T. Ames and David Hall, Ballentine Books. ISBN: 978-0-345-444196.

Plato, *Plato's Symposium: A Translation by Seth Bernardete with Commentaries by Alan Bloom and Seth Benardete*, Trans. by Seth Bernardete, University of Chicago Press. ISBN: 978-0-226-04275-6.

Rousseau, Jean-Jaques, *The Basic Political Writings*, Trans. by Donald A. Cress, Hackett. ISBN: 978-0-872-2000470.

* Camus, Albert, *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays*, Vintage Books, 1991.

* Victor E Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Pocket Books, Revised and Updated Version, 1984.

* Not in Bookstore – so will be made available online – but I recommend you getting your own copy. *

Course Requirements and Grading

1. Class Participation – 10 %
2. Blogs – 30 %
3. Take Home Mid-Term – 25 %
4. DDC Group Presentations – 10%
5. Take Home Final – 25%

Due Dates

Sun Sep 30 – First Supplemental Blog

Tues Oct 23 – Open Book Take Home Due

Tues Oct 30 - Second Supplemental Blog

Thurs Nov 8 – Dao De Ching Group Presentations

Tues Nov 20 – Rough Draft of Last Post Due

Fri Nov 30 – Last Supplemental Blog

**Registrar Announced Final Day - Open Book Take Home Due

**Note: There are two sections of this course – To avoid any issues of cross contamination of the two sections the Take Home will be due on the later of the two Registrar announced final periods

SCHEDULE

Section I: Introduction: What is Happiness?

Thurs Aug 30

No Reading

Tues Sep 4

The story of Kirk Baines (BB)

Mill on Contentedness

vs. Happiness (BB)

Thurs Sep 6

Happiness Hypothesis, Sel. (BB)

The Examined Life, Sel. (BB)

Flow pp. 45-48

Section II - A Brief History of Happiness (in the “West”) [Hume, Jefferson]

Tues Sep 11

Hume *The Epicurean* (BB)

Thurs Sep 13

Hume *The Skeptic* (BB)

Tues Sep 18

Happiness: A History (BB)

Thurs Sep 20

Jefferson, “On Happiness and On Aspiration” (BB)

Jefferson et al, *Declaration of Independence* (BB)

Section III - The Problem: Why aren’t more of us (who live like kings) Happy?

[Rousseau, Camus]

Tues Sep 25

Rousseau “Discourse on the
Origin of Inequality” pp. 25-60

Thurs Sep 27

Rousseau “Discourse on the Origin
Of Inequality” pp. 61-81

Tues Oct 2

Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”
Part I (BB)

Thurs Oct 4

Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus” Part II (BB)
Seneca, *Letter XXVIII* (BB)

Section IV Killing the Buddha: Stop trying to be happy [Epictetus, Seneca, Gautama Siddhartha]

Tues Oct 9

Seneca, “On Tranquility” (BB)

Seneca Letter LXXXVIII (BB)

Epictetus *Discourses* Sel. (BB)

Thurs Oct 11

Epictetus, *The Handbook*

Cosmopolitan Fragment (BB)

Tues Oct 16

Seneca, “On Happy Life” (BB)

Epictetus *Discourses* Sel. (BB)

Thurs Oct 18

“*Samannphala Sutra*” (Ascetic Life) (BB)

“*Ariyapariyesana Sutra*” (Noble Search) (BB)

Tues Oct 23

NO CLASS-- Take Home Due

Section VI: Thanks - But Now what do I do? [Daodejing]

Thurs Oct 25
Daodejing 1-37
(Stanzas and Comments)

Tues Oct 30
Daodejing 38-81
(Stanzas and Comments)

Thurs Nov 1
Flow pp. 1-22, 48-67, 106-116

Tues Nov 6
Flow pp. 164-175
Shop Class as Soulcraft Sel. (BB)

Thurs Nov 8
Group Presentations

Section VII: Happiness transformed [Plato, Frankl, Heraclitus]

Happiness and Transcendence

Tues Nov 13
Plato Symposium
pp. 1-42

Thurs Nov 15
Symposium pp. 43-54
Happiness Hypothesis Sel.

Tues Nov 20
****NO CLASS****
Rough Draft of final post due

Thurs Nov 22
****NO CLASS****
Thanksgiving

Meaning and Happiness

Tues Nov 27
Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning
pp. 21-77

Nov 29
Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning
pp. 77-115, 119-123, 130-134, 161-163

Becoming and Enduring

Tues Dec 4
Miller Becoming God
Ch 2 Heraclites (BB)

Thurs Dec 6
The Happiness Paradox, Sel. (BB)
Stumbling on Happiness, Sel. (BB)
Blubberland, Sel. (BB)