

PHI 2835.20 Fall 2012
 Tues-12:30-4:10 Lib 0001; Fri 12:30-2:10 NS 1029
 Screenings: Selected Tuesdays 2:10-4:10

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Happiness: Philosophy, Literature, Cinema 9/28/12

What—or how many things— is happiness? This ancient question is enjoying fresh attention from a wide range of disciplines today. Using materials from philosophy, psychology, cinema, and literature, this course provides tools for thinking about this subject in freshly critical and historically aware ways.

Traditionally, happiness is regarded as a philosopher's topic, but it is equally a subject, in one way or another, of all of the arts, especially those—such as cinema and literature—which explore the human condition through stories and images. Some of the questions that will frame our discussions of philosophical, literary, and cinematic texts include: Is “happiness” best understood in terms of our experiences of immediately felt *pleasure*, or might it also apply to the larger *unfolding narrative of a person's life*? Is it possible to have a good or happy life yet also be a bad person (in the sense of being a person lacking in moral sensitivity or virtue)? Need happiness take the same form for men and women? For people in Western and non-Western cultures? Is the flourishing of human beings further connected to that of *nonhuman* living things?

The course's main aim is to encourage you to further develop your own critical and creative thinking about such questions, and the more actively we can discuss and debate them in class, the better. Be forewarned that this isn't a course on “how to become happy” after the fashion of the many self-help books and therapies which, for better and for worse, fill our popular culture (including our advertising culture). And although much can be learned from the literature of “positive psychology” (including books like Jonathan Haidt's *The Happiness Hypothesis*), a premise of the course is that the idea of happiness, however further defined, can have serious meaning only in a world where pain, conflict, and tragedy are everyday realities. For this reason our subject has always, for all cultures and periods, possessed a political as well as a personal dimension. At semester's end we'll return to this point in a discussion of how philosophy and arts like cinema and literature might contribute to the search for creative and sustainable forms of the good life in the twenty-first century.

Required texts (available in Purchase Bookstore)

Steven M. Cahn and Christine Vitrano, *Happiness: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Philosophy*
 Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*
 Additional readings on Moodle reserve

Course Requirements and Grading Policy (Read carefully.)

There are no formal prerequisites, beyond regular attendance and seriousness about participating in a reading-, writing-, and discussion-intensive class. (This also includes being able to keep up with the film viewing schedule.)
 Written assignments: (i) four short response papers (4 page minimum) over the course of the term, each dealing with specific questions about the relationship between two or more readings and/or screenings; (ii) a midterm and final in-class exam on basic details of the texts and arguments studied; (iii) a longer final paper (7 page minimum) on a topic chosen by the student in consultation with me. In the final weeks, students will give short presentations on their final paper topics to the class, with opportunities for class discussion. All papers must be submitted in *hard copy* for purposes of grading. It is your responsibility to ensure that I receive your papers in timely fashion and to always keep a backup copy for yourself. I evaluate all writing with an eye to grammar and general readability as well as to content. *Regular attendance* is required, and attendance will be called periodically. It is your responsibility to let me know you are present on any days that you miss the roll call. Non-emergency early departures from class will be counted as absences. To pass the course, you may have no more than four unexcused absences. *Classroom etiquette* includes being on time and awake for all classes, as well as refraining from such behaviors in class as eating, sleeping, leaving and returning to the classroom for non-emergency reasons, reading non-class materials during class, etc. The use of laptop computers and cellphones (for any purpose, including texting) is not allowed in class; anyone who engages in such use will be asked to leave. *Makeups, Extensions, & Incompletes* permitted only with a medical excuse. Late papers are downgraded one letter grade for every day late. Two practices which are not permitted: submitting a paper done for another class in this class, and plagiarism in any form. Doing either can result in failure of the course and, in the case of plagiarism, expulsion from the College.

Schedule of Readings and Discussions

All readings are required unless listed as recommended. I may adjust/correct some dates and readings in the course of the semester. (If you find a mistaken date or can't find a reading on Moodle, let me know.) In addition to the items expressly so listed, I strongly recommend the rest of the Cahn and Vitrano and Haidt books, as well as all of Darren

McMahon's fine book *Happiness: A History* If you wish recommendations for further readings (or films) on any course-related topic, feel free to ask.

September

I. Introductory Themes

4 Introduction to course

7 Discussion of etymological origins of the word "happiness." 1. Philip Moeller, "Why Seeking More Money Hurts Happiness" [<http://money.usnews.com/money/personal-finance/articles/2012/04/09/why-seeking-more-money-hurts-happiness>] 2. Excerpt from Andrew Weil, Spontaneous Happiness [<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/10/30/andrew-weil-s-spontaneous-happiness-our-nature-deficit-disorder.html>] 3. Three "levels" of happiness, as reflected in traditional discussions of the subject. Daniel Nettle, "Introduction" in Cahn & Vitrano, eds., *Happiness: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Philosophy* (hereafter, "C&V")

11 1. Barbara Erhenreich, *Introduction to Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America* (Moodle) 2. Robert Nozick, "The Experience Machine" (in C&V); 3. Darrin McMahon, "The Tragedy of Happiness" (Introduction to his excellent book *Happiness: A History*; on Moodle);

14 1. Lydia Davis, "Happy Memories" (short story; on Moodle) 2. Some ancient and modern perspectives on the psychology of happiness. Readings: (1) Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*. "Introduction: Too Much Wisdom" (note especially Haidt's discussion of the "rider and the elephant" problem); 3. Plato, selection from *The Republic* (in C&V)

18 Readings: (1) Lydia Davis, "Happy Memories" (short story; on Moodle) **In-class screening and discussion of Kore-Eda Hirokazu's *After Life***

First short paper assignment on *After Life*, "Happy Memories" and "The Experience Machine" (due by end of day Thursday Sept 27) distributed by email.

21 Some ancient and modern perspectives on the psychology of happiness. Readings: (1) Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, ch 1 ("The Divided Self"); (2) Plato, selection from *The Republic* (in C&V)

25 Psychic conflict, and the Elephant-and-Rider relationship. Haidt, ch.5, "The Pursuit of Happiness"

28 More on Aristotle's philosophy of happiness (*eudaimonia*, better translated as "flourishing") and the good life. Eudaimonia as an alternative to modern utilitarian and consumerist "smiley-face" views of happiness. (1) Selections from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (pp. 19-34 in C&V) (2) Casey Haskins, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia" and "Two Conceptions of Happiness" (Moodle)

October

2 Continue to discuss Aristotle reading. Also, read Julia Annas, "Happiness as Achievement" (in C&V) **In-class screening: Marilyn Agrelo's *Mad Hot Ballroom***

5 Happiness and the narrative of a human life. Why do we like—or need—stories about human experience? Barbara Rosenstand, "Seeing Life as a Story" [Read the two items from her on Moodle] Why we need some "bad" experiences to have a good life. Haidt, ch. 7. "The Uses of Adversity" **In-class screening: Marilyn Agrelo's *Mad Hot Ballroom***

9 Two life stories. (1) Richard Russo, "The Whore's Child"; Yiyun Li, "Kindness" (Moodle)

II. The Tragicomedy of Human Desire

12 Plato on the metaphysics of *eros* and beauty. Selection from Plato, *The Symposium* [on Moodle]

16 Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, ch. 6 (“Love and Attachments”) **Midterm exam study questions distributed.**
In class screening: Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire* (In German w/subtitles.)

19 Continue discussion of Plato and Haidt readings. Also, read Darrin McMahon, “The Birth of Ultimate Desire” [Moodle]

23 Happiness, desire, and pleasure. Wayne Hebron, “Why Hedonism is False” (in C&V) .
Second short paper topic distributed (topic TBA)

26 in class midterm exam

30 The Critique of Worldly Desire : Buddhist Perspectives. Readings: (1) selected texts of early Buddhism (from The Buddha’s First Sermon, and the *Dhammapada* (both on Moodle) (2) Lydia Davis, “New Year’s Resolution” (short story; Moodle)

November

2, 6 The Critique of Worldly Desire: Stoic Perspectives. Seneca, “On the Happy Life” (in C&V) Recommended: excerpt from Bill Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life : The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* (Moodle)
Second short paper due Wednesday Nov 7 by end of day. Extra credit paper topics distributed this week.

III. The fragility of human existence: tragedy, danger, and death

9 Happiness and immorality. Do we have to be virtuous to be happy? Steven M. Cahn and Jeffrie G. Murphy, “Happiness and Immorality” (C&V, 261-272)

13 **In class screening and discussion : Woody Allen’s *Crimes and Misdemeanors***

Extra credit papers due by end of day, Monday Nov 18.

You should now be thinking about possible topics for your final paper and short (5 minute) class presentation . Final paper instructions and final exam study questions distributed by Nov 20.

16, 20 Happiness and tragedy. Sophocles, *Antigone* (in Bookstore) Discussion of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. Leo Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” Further recommended readings on the meaning of death: Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus” (on the significance of death; in C&V); Sögyal Rinpoche, “Death in the Modern World” (Moodle)

23 no class (Thanksgiving)

27 Haidt, ch. 8, “The Felicity of Virtue”

In-class screening: Akira Kurosawa’s *Ikiru*

30 Haidt, ch 10, “Happiness Comes from Between.”

December

4 In class screening and discussion: Patrick Shen’s *Flight From Death: The Quest for Immortality* (One of my favorite documentary films, based on the themes of Ernest Becker’s classic book *The Denial of Death*. It features interviews with assorted psychologists, anthropologists and others.)

IV. Happiness in the 21st Century

7 Martin Seligman, excerpt from *Flourish: A: Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well Being* (Moodle) Class presentations (cont.)

11 Reading TBA. Class presentations (cont.)

14 Wrapup discussion and review. Class presentations (cont.)

21 Final exam. Library classroom, 12-2:30

Final papers due in hard copy by the end of the day, Friday, 12/21.

Supplementary links (Of interest in connection with this course's subjects.)

- World Database of Happiness. (Contains a massive and continually updated amount of information on the state of human beings around the world, as examined by various disciplines.) <http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/>
- jThe Happy Planet Index. A compilation of information about the conditions for and obstacles to human flourishing within the larger context of the current prospects for and challenges and threats to the 21st century global ecology. <http://www.happyplanetindex.org/>
- **Jonathan Haidt's home page** has a number of interesting links pertaining to *The Happiness Hypothesis* and to other areas in his main research area of moral psychology: <http://people.virginia.edu/~jdh6n/>
- New York Times "Happy Days" Blog
- Eric G. Wilson's blog "Against Happiness." Named after Wilson's 2006 book, which takes an intelligently skeptical (and romantically melancholy) look at the current American vogue for happiness studies and "positive psychology." I recommend the blog and the book (which should shortly be in the Purchase library) to anyone seeking further critical perspectives on our subject. <http://againsthappiness.blogspot.com/>
- The Journal of Happiness Studies web page <http://www.springer.com/social+sciences/quality+of+life+research/journal/10902>