

Syllabus: Happiness and the Good Life (PHIL 251)

Dr. David Morrow

No one should postpone the study of philosophy when he is young, nor should he weary of it when he becomes mature, because the search for mental health is never out of season. To say that the time to study philosophy has not yet arrived or that it is past is like saying that the time for happiness is not yet at hand or is no longer present. – Epicurus

Virtues [necessary for happiness] we acquire, just as we acquire crafts, by having first activated them. For we learn a craft by producing the same product that we must produce when we have learned it; we become builders, for instance, by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. – Aristotle

*If you end up with a boring miserable life because you listened to your mom, your dad, your teacher, your priest, or some guy on television telling you how to do your s***, then you deserve it. – Frank Zappa*

General information

Course title and number:	Happiness and the Good Life (PHIL 251)
Instructor:	Prof. David Morrow
Office location:	Robinson Hall B 442C
Email:	dmorrow2@gmu.edu
Twitter:	@climateMorrow
Office hours:	Monday and Wednesday, 11:00 am – noon, and by appointment
Meeting days and times:	Monday and Wednesday 1:30–2:45 pm
Classroom:	Planetary Hall 224
Prerequisites:	None

About the course

Course description: “How do I live a happy life?” The question might have occurred to you in some form or another. It is often described as the central question of the Western philosophical tradition. In this course, we address the question head on by taking advantage of 2,500 years of philosophical thinking as well as the much more recent science of happiness. Ultimately, you will be encouraged to develop your own answer. Along the way, we will examine possible answers to the following related questions:

- Do you have to be wise in order to be happy and live a good life?
- Do you have to be good?
- What is the role of the virtues – honesty, courage, kindness, and so on – in living the good life?
- Who is truly free, and what is the role of freedom in the good life?
- Are goods like health, money, friendship, etc. necessary for the good life? Are they sufficient?
- How should someone seeking the good life deal with things like death, bad luck, and malice?
- Is happiness something that just happens to you or is it something that must be achieved?
- What is the connection between living a happy life and living a meaningful life?
- What can science tell us about the good life? Is it a substitute for philosophy or a complement?

Course goals and objectives: The course will help increase your capacity for critical, analytical, and imaginative thinking and to make well-founded decisions about your own and other people's well-being. The course will also help you see how philosophy illuminates other areas of discourse, in particular economics and psychology.

For whom intended: As an introductory-level Philosophy elective, this course is open to all students. Questions about happiness and the good life are of interest to anyone who's breathing, but they are particularly relevant to those with an interest in moral, social and political philosophy; welfare economics; public policy; positive psychology; public health; and medicine.

Required readings: This is a list of the books we will use during the course. In order to refer to specific passages by page number, *you need these editions and you need them in hard copy*. I have made an effort to find authoritative but inexpensive editions.

- Plato, *Euthydemus*, trans. Rosamond Kent Sprague (Hackett Publishing Co., 1993). ISBN: 978-0872202344
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd ed., trans. Terence Irwin (Hackett, 1999). ISBN: 978-0872204645
- Epicurus, *The Art of Happiness*, trans. George K. Strodach (Penguin Books, 2012). Contains parallel readings by Diogenes Laertius and Lucretius. ISBN: 978-0143107217
- Epictetus, *Discourses and Selected Writings*, trans. Robert Dobbin (Penguin Books, 2008). ISBN: 978-0140449464
- Seneca, *Dialogues and Essays*, trans. John Davie (Oxford University Press, 2008). ISBN: 978-0199552405
- John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays* (Penguin Books, 1987). ISBN: 978-0140432725
- Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Hackett, 1981). ISBN: 978-0915145287
- Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The Myths of Happiness* (Penguin Books, 2014). ISBN: 978-0143124511

All these books are available in the GMU bookstore, located in the Johnson Center, both used and new. You should feel free to buy or rent them elsewhere (such as online), but do confirm that you get the right edition. Additional material will be distributed electronically.

Online resources: Various electronic resources will be used regularly in this course. You're responsible for figuring out, in a timely manner, how they work. It is a good idea to log into and familiarize yourself with these resources as soon as possible. You're also responsible for monitoring them regularly for information relevant to the course.

Blackboard <<http://mymason.gmu.edu/>> will be used to post updates, to distribute additional readings, to provide links to multimedia resources and simulation software, and to administer assignments. Blackboard can be accessed using a variety of devices, including computers in on-campus computer labs. The *Blackboard App*, which you can download for free, is very helpful if you have a phone that will run it. It integrates with your calendar and notifies you when new materials have been posted online and when assignments are due.

Campus resources: Please take a moment to review the resources provided by Mason's Center for the Advancement of Well-Being at <<http://wellbeing.gmu.edu/>>. The Center offers a rich range of activities aimed at helping individuals and organizations thrive in a world of complexity and uncertainty.

Grading and course requirements

Grades: Final grades will be based on five experience papers, participation, and a final exam. Each experience paper will count for 10% of the final grade, for a total of 50%; participation in the classroom and online for 20%; and the final exam for 30%.

Experience papers: Experience papers will require you to *live* the philosophy you are studying. Near the conclusion of each section of the course, I will identify one day as an “Experience Day.” During this day, you are expected to try to conduct your affairs in a manner that the specified author(s) could endorse; afterwards, you’ll write about your experiences. How you try to embody the philosophy is entirely up to you. That said, use your judgment; please stay on the right side of the law and standards of good taste, and don’t do anything that you will regret (too much) after the assignment.

Each experience paper has three parts. In the first part, you describe as accurately as you can some aspect of the relevant philosopher’s thought. Don’t forget to back all claims up with evidence from the readings. In the second part you spell out what you wrote in the first part means for how you should live your life. In the third part, you describe what you did in order to live the philosophy and how things went.

I will assign six experience papers, of which I expect you to complete five. Unless otherwise specified, each experience paper will be due by the beginning of the following class session. Late papers will be penalized. See the Experience Papers Assignment Sheet for details.

Participation: Attendance and active participation in classroom discussion is required. Before every class you will be provided a set of discussion questions, which you are expected to answer on Blackboard, based on your reading of the relevant materials, *before* coming to class. Most of the class time will be dedicated to a discussion of your answers to these questions. You will be graded on both your preparation for, and participation in, these discussions.

Final exam: An in-class, open-book (but closed-note) cumulative final exam will assess your understanding of the material.

Preliminary Schedule

August	31	Introduction
September	2	Plato, <i>Euthydemus</i> , pp. 3–22, 62–66 (Prologue, Scenes I & II, Epilogue)
	7	NO CLASS—LABOR DAY
	9	Cyrenaics [reading to be distributed on Blackboard]
	14	Epicurus, “Leading Doctrines,” “Vatican Sayings,” “Excerpts from Life of Epicurus” (pp. 173–183, 81–85, 89–90)
	16	Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus” (pp. 155–172)
	17	Experience day: Epicurus
	21	Evaluating Epicurus’s philosophy of the good life
	23	Epictetus, <i>Enchiridion</i> (pp. 219–245)
	28	Seneca, “On the Happy Life” (pp. 85–111)
	30	Seneca, “On the Tranquility of the Mind” (pp. 112–139)
	1	Experience day: Stoics
October	5	Evaluating the Stoics’ philosophy of the good life
	7	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , Books I, VII: 11–14, X (pp. 1–18, 114–119, 153–171)
	12	NO CLASS—COLUMBUS DAY
	13	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , Books II–IV (pp. 18–67) [TUESDAY SESSION!]
	14	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , Book V (pp. 67–85)
	15	Experience day: Aristotle
	19	Evaluating Aristotle’s philosophy of the good life
	21	Bentham, Ch. III–V (pp. 83–97); Mill, Ch. I & II (pp. 272–298)

	26	Mill, Ch. III–V (pp. 298–338)
	28	Sidgwick, Book I, Ch. 4 (pp. 30–42)
November	2	Sidgwick, Book II, Ch. 2–4 (pp. 112–145)
	4	Sidgwick, Book II, Ch. 5 & Book III, Ch. 14 (pp. 146–161, 367–378)
	5	Experience day: utilitarians
	9	Evaluating the utilitarians’ philosophy of the good life
	11	Wolf, “Moral Saints” [via Blackboard]
	16	Wolf, <i>Meaning in Life and Why It Matters</i> , Lecture 1 [via Blackboard]
	18	Wolf, <i>Meaning in Life and Why It Matters</i> , Lecture 2 [via Blackboard]
	19	Experience day: Wolf
	23	Evaluating Wolf’s philosophy of the good life
	25	NO CLASS—THANKSGIVING BREAK
	30	Lyubomirsky, Introduction & Ch. 1–4 (pp. 1–111)
December	2	Lyubomirsky, Ch. 5–7 (pp. 115–181)
	7	Lyubomirsky, Ch. 8–10 & Conclusion (pp. 185–251)
	8	Experience day: the happiness scientists [paper due Dec 11]
	9	Evaluating the happiness scientists’ view of the good life
DATE TBD FINAL EXAM		

Course policies

Warning: As any serious discussion about the human condition must, this course deals with adult content, including sex, violence, and death. Also, you’ll note that the language and contents of these texts sometimes reflect social attitudes that strike the modern reader as archaic and objectionable.

Reading: Be prepared to spend a lot of time reading, and to read actively. Most of these texts are old; all require serious effort. There will be words that are new to you. Get a good dictionary, or use a good online one; the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), available at <http://oed.com.mutex.gmu.edu>, is best. There will also be references you don’t understand. Here, use your judgment: you don’t have to look them all up, but sometimes you do. A quick web search is typically a good starting point, but you need to be careful where you end up; the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://plato.stanford.edu>, is very good, as is the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://iep.utm.edu>.

Respect: Please treat other students (and the instructor) with respect. In particular, be mindful of other people’s possible desire not to have their comments shared outside of class.

University requirements

Academic Integrity: The integrity of the University community is affected by the individual choices made by each of us. GMU has an Honor Code, available at <http://academicintegrity.gmu.edu/honorcode/>, with clear guidelines regarding academic integrity. Three fundamental and rather simple principles to follow at all times are that: (1) all work submitted be your own; (2) when using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, give full credit through accurate citations; and (3) if you are uncertain about the ground rules on a particular assignment, ask for clarification. No grade is important enough to justify academic misconduct. *Plagiarism* means using the exact words, opinions, or factual information from another person without giving the person credit. Writers give credit through accepted documentation styles, such as parenthetical citation, footnotes, or endnotes. Paraphrased material must also be cited, using proper format. A simple listing of books or articles is not sufficient. Plagiarism is both fraud

and the equivalent of intellectual robbery. It cannot be tolerated in the academic setting. If you have any doubts about what constitutes plagiarism, please see the instructor. You will never be penalized for asking *in advance* whether something constitutes plagiarism.

Disability accommodations: If you have a disability, you are not at a disadvantage. If you have a learning or physical difference that may affect your academic work, you will need to furnish appropriate documentation to the Office of Disability Services (ODS). If you qualify for accommodation, the ODS staff will give you a form detailing appropriate accommodations for your instructor. In addition to providing your professors with the appropriate form, please take the initiative to discuss accommodation with them at the beginning of the semester and as needed during the term. Because of the range of learning differences, faculty members need to learn from you the most effective ways to assist you. If you have contacted the ODS and are waiting to hear from a counselor, please inform the instructor.

Diversity statement: George Mason University promotes a living and learning environment for outstanding growth and productivity among its students, faculty and staff. Through its curriculum, programs, policies, procedures, services and resources, Mason strives to maintain a quality environment for work, study and personal growth. An emphasis upon diversity and inclusion throughout the campus community is essential to achieve these goals. Diversity is broadly defined to include such characteristics as, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, disability, and sexual orientation. Diversity also entails different viewpoints, philosophies, and perspectives. Attention to these aspects of diversity will help promote a culture of inclusion and belonging, and an environment where diverse opinions, backgrounds and practices have the opportunity to be voiced, heard and respected. The reflection of Mason's commitment to diversity and inclusion goes beyond policies and procedures to focus on behavior at the individual, group and organizational level. The implementation of this commitment to diversity and inclusion is found in all settings, including individual work units and groups, student organizations and groups, and classroom settings; it is also found with the delivery of services and activities, including, but not limited to, curriculum, teaching, events, advising, research, service, and community outreach. Acknowledging that the attainment of diversity and inclusion are dynamic and continuous processes, and that the larger societal setting has an evolving socio-cultural understanding of diversity and inclusion, Mason seeks to continuously improve its environment. To this end, the University promotes continuous monitoring and self-assessment regarding diversity. The aim is to incorporate diversity and inclusion within the philosophies and actions of the individual, group and organization, and to make improvements as needed.

Religious holidays: The instructor will make every effort to help minimize difficulties for students of different faiths in terms of scheduling course assignments. It is the student's responsibility to speak to the instructor in advance should their religious observances impact their participation in class activities and assignments.

Privacy: Students must use their MasonLive email account to receive important University information, including messages related to this class. See <http://masonlive.gmu.edu> for more information.