

# Happiness and the Meaning of Life

## Philosophy 3331

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Section: TR9  
Code: 1865

Semester: Fall 2012  
Classroom: 4117 Boylan Hall  
Meeting time: T/Th 9:30-10:45am  
Credits: 3.0

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Philosophy Department: 3308 Boylan Hall  
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Department Secretary: Linda Dwyer

### SYLLABUS

#### Introduction

This class will focus on two of the oldest philosophical topics, happiness and the meaning of life. The first two-thirds of the course will focus on the concept of happiness, where we will examine its nature, source and value. We begin by considering the role happiness plays in the history of ethics, and then we explore how it continues to play a role in contemporary philosophical debates. We will discuss various philosophical questions about happiness, including: What, after all, is happiness? Is it necessary for a worthwhile life? Is it sufficient? Does happiness depend on one's state of mind, one's circumstances, or both? Can a person be immoral, yet happy? We will also review and discuss some of the current empirical research on happiness.

The final third of the course will examine questions relating to what makes life meaningful or worthwhile. As Albert Camus explains, "Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy...I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them reason for living...I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions."<sup>1</sup> We will investigate this topic by considering several different approaches to the question of what gives life meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 3-4.

## Course Objectives

1. Students will improve critical thinking by developing skills of explaining, critically examining, and responding to contemporary philosophical theories relating to happiness and the meaning of life.
2. Students will improve writing skills by explaining, exploring, and critically examining philosophical theories and arguments.
3. Students will improve communication skills by explaining orally philosophical theories and arguments.
4. Students will develop an openness to having their beliefs challenged, and learn to comprehend and appreciate the beliefs of others.

## Required Text

There are two required texts that will supply all the readings for this course. The textbooks have been ordered at the Brooklyn College Bookstore (located in the basement of Boylan Hall). They are also available at large retail bookstores, and internet bookstores.

*Happiness: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Philosophy*  
Steven M. Cahn and Christine Vitrano (Editors)  
Oxford University Press, 2008  
ISBN: 978-0-19-532140-1

*The Meaning of Life: A Reader*  
E.D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn (Editors)  
Oxford University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2008  
ISBN: 978-0-19-532730-4

**Note:** Used copies of both books are available online at internet bookstores and are considerably cheaper. However, be sure to purchase the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the Meaning of Life reader, because substantial changes occurred between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> editions. Both books will be placed on reserve in the library.

## Course Requirements and Grading

**Exams: 75%** There will be three in-class exams, two during the semester and one final during finals week. All three exams will focus on the material we go over in class and will be based on the readings. They will be closed-book, closed-note exams with short essay questions. There will be a review session prior to each exam. Each exam will be worth 25% of your final grade.

**Writing Assignments: 25%** There will be 12 short writing assignments based on the readings for the week. The assignments are designed to help you critically examine what you have read and develop your writing skills. I will hand out topics for each writing assignment, and they will

focus on some issue raised in the reading. You are free to ask questions, raise objections or offer your opinion in these writing assignments. Most importantly, the assignments must show me that you have completed the reading and given it some critical thought.

The assignments must be typed, double-spaced, and should be approximately 1-2 pages in length. Hand-written assignments will not be accepted – no exceptions. The assignments will not receive letter grades, but will be graded on a pass or fail basis. Unacceptable assignments will not receive credit, but you will have the opportunity to redo the assignments and resubmit them for credit.

You are permitted to skip two writing assignments without penalty. You must complete 10 assignments to receive full credit (equal to an A for 25% of your final grade). Students who complete 12 assignments will receive extra credit. Anyone who completes less than 10 assignments will be penalized one-third of a letter grade for each missed assignment (meaning, 9 assignments = A-, 8 assignments = B+, 7 assignments = B).

The writing assignments must be submitted in class each week. Assignments will not be accepted by email – no exceptions. The due dates are listed on the reading schedule. If you miss class when an assignment is due, you may submit the assignment when you return to class. Otherwise, late assignments will only be accepted with my permission.

**Class Participation and Attendance:** Attendance will be taken at the start of each class by means of a sign-in sheet. Please do not email me missed assignments; I will not accept them. Also be aware that the readings may change, and I will make the announcements about such changes in class each week.

Please be aware of the NY State Education Law, which provides that:

1. Any student in an institution of higher education who is unable, because of their religious beliefs, to attend classes on a particular day or days shall, because of such absence on the particular day or days, be excused from any examination or any study or work requirements.
2. It shall be the responsibility of the faculty to make available to each student who is absent from school, because of religious beliefs, an equivalent opportunity to make up any examination, study or work requirements which they may have missed because of such absence on any particular day or days
3. Any student who is aggrieved by the alleged failure of any faculty or administrative officials to comply in good faith shall be entitled to maintain an action or proceeding in the supreme court of the county in which such institution of higher education is located for the enforcement of their rights

## **Course Expectations**

To do well in this course, you are expected to attend class, do the readings, take the exams, complete the paper and do the required writing assignments.

You are strongly encouraged to participate in class discussions, and to bring with you any questions or comments you have about the readings. I will go over all of the reading material in lecture, but you do not have to bring your textbooks to class each week.

Be aware that some of the readings are quite dense and may take some time (and effort) to get through. Please allow yourself sufficient time to read through all of the articles and to think through the relevant issues.

Your final grade for this course will be calculated according to the percentages listed above and will not be based on a curve. Be aware that I do not offer or accept additional extra credit assignments. Please do not ask if you can do extra work to elevate your grade.

If you arrive late to class or you must leave early, please be discreet and try to minimize the disruption. Excessive lateness will not be tolerated. Eating and drinking during class is permitted if done quietly, but try to be courteous to those around you. Cell phones must be turned off and put away during class.

If you have a disability or there is some reason you may not be able to complete your course work, please let me know as soon as possible. Do not wait until the end of the semester.

If you miss an exam without notice, it is your responsibility to contact me about making it up. However, if I have already handed back the exam to the class and you still haven't taken it, you will not be permitted to do a make-up. If you foresee any conflicts, please contact me as soon as possible.

## **CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity**

The faculty and administration of Brooklyn College support an environment free from cheating and plagiarism. Each student is responsible for being aware of what constitutes cheating and plagiarism and for avoiding both. The complete text of the CUNY Academic Integrity Policy and the Brooklyn College procedure for implementing that policy can be found at this site: <http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/bc/policies>. If a faculty member suspects a violation of academic integrity and, upon investigation, confirms that violation, or if the student admits that violation, the faculty member MUST report the violation.

## CUNY Policy on Disability Services

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations, students must first be registered with the Center for Student Disability Services. Students who have a documented disability or suspect they may have a disability are invited to set up an appointment with the Director of the Center for Student Disability Services, Ms. Valerie Stewart-Lovell at 718-951-5538. If you have already registered with the Center for Student Disability Services, please provide me with the course accommodation form and discuss your specific accommodation with me immediately.

## Reading Schedule

This list is only tentative and it is your responsibility to keep up with any changes. It is expected that you will have completed the reading by the date listed. The readings from *Happiness: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Philosophy* are abbreviated **HCC** and those from *The Meaning of Life: A Reader* are abbreviated **ML**. Due dates for the writing assignments (WA) are listed.

August 28	Introduction to the course
August 30	HCC: Nettle's Introduction and a <u>handout</u> <b>(WA#1 due)</b>
September 4	HCC: Aristotle, <i>The Nicomachean Ethics</i>
September 6	HCC: Aristotle, <i>The Nicomachean Ethics</i> <b>(WA#2 due)</b>
September 11	HCC: Epicurus, <i>Letter to Menoeceus</i> <u>and</u> <i>Leading Doctrines</i>
September 13	HCC: Seneca, <i>On the Happy Life</i> <b>(WA #3 due)</b>
<b>September 18</b>	<b>No Class</b>
September 20	HCC: Hume, <i>The Skeptic</i> <b>(WA #4 due)</b>
<b>September 25</b>	<b>No Class</b>
September 27	HCC: Richard Kraut, <i>Two Conceptions of Happiness</i> , <b>(WA #5 due)</b>
October 2	HCC: Richard Kraut, <i>Two Conceptions</i>
<b>October 4</b>	<b>Exam #1</b>
October 9	HCC: Wayne Davis, <i>Pleasure and Happiness</i>
October 11	HCC: Daniel Haybron, <i>Why Hedonism is False</i> <b>(WA#6 due)</b>
October 16	HCC: Robert Nozick, <i>The Experience Machine</i>
October 18	HCC: W. Tatarkiewicz, <i>Happiness and Time</i> <b>(WA#7 due)</b>

October 23	HCC: W. Tatarkiewicz, <i>Happiness and Time</i>
October 25	HCC: John Kekes, <i>Attitudinal and Episodic Happiness</i> <b>(WA #8 due)</b>
October 30	HCC: John Kekes, <i>Attitudinal and Episodic Happiness</i> ,
November 1	HCC: Julia Annas, <i>Happiness as Achievement</i> <b>(WA #9 due)</b>
November 6	HCC: Richard Taylor, <i>Virtue Ethics</i>
November 8	HCC: S. Cahn and J. Murphy, <i>Happiness and Immorality</i> <b>(WA #10 due)</b>
November 13	HCC: S. Cahn and J. Murphy, <i>Happiness and Immorality</i>
<b>November 15</b>	<b>Exam #2</b>
November 20	ML: Albert Camus, <i>The Myth of Sisyphus</i>
<b>November 22</b>	<b>College Closed – Happy Thanksgiving!</b>
November 27	ML: Richard Taylor, <i>The Meaning of Life</i> <b>(WA#11 due)</b>
November 29	ML: Thomas Nagel, <i>The Absurd</i>
December 4	ML: Joel Feinberg, <i>Absurd Self-Fulfillment</i> <b>(WA#12 due)</b>
December 6	ML: Susan Wolf, <i>Meaning in Life</i>
December 11	ML: S. Cahn, <i>Meaningless Lives?</i>

**Final Exam: Tuesday, December 18, 8:00 – 10:00 AM**