Course Description

Thematic focus: happiness and ethics

The objectives of this course are to help you develop critical thinking, reading, and argumentative writing skills. In order to do that, we will read, analyze, and critique documents from numerous sources, both scholarly and non-scholarly. We’ll consider reasoning of a wide variety of types, as well: scientific, moral, political, statistical, etc.

To give the course a specific content, I have chosen to direct our attention to different ways of understanding what happiness is, how we can become happy, and how being happy relates to various ethical questions.

What exactly is happiness? What is necessary for a human being to become happy? The philosopher Aristotle understood happiness to have many dimensions, including ethical and political dimensions. We’ll read his *Nicomachean Ethics* and consider it in a contemporary context throughout the semester.

Required Texts

Other texts to be determined

Course Requirements

1. Regular, informed, active class participation. / 10%

   Participation is much more than simply showing up to class. The course is discussion-based as well as text-based. Reading the assignments for each class is a must. Participation in small-group and full-class discussions will be judged not just according to its frequency, but more importantly also on its relevance, informativeness, and insightfulness. Participation will also include brief, informal writing tasks. Please note that chronic absence may significantly lower your participation grade.

2. Four response papers. / 25%

   These papers will always be due on the day we discuss the assigned reading, at the beginning of class. Late response papers will be accepted for half-credit only within two class sessions. In your response papers, you should present your own thoughtful, insightful response to the author’s central point or points. The response can include brief summary, analysis, criticism, relation to personal experience, or exploration of the ideas presented. The overall score for response papers will be based on a scale in which full credit is 4 points; however, papers submitted on-time will be assigned a grade from 1 to 5 points (the 5th point being extra credit) as follows:

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<th>Fails to Meet Criteria</th>
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3. Two formal papers. / 20% each

Brief argumentative essays on assigned topics related to course discussion material. One of these short papers can be on the same topic as your term paper (see next).

4. One term paper. / 25%

A sustained argumentative essay related to a theme in the course and involving some independent research work. It will also involve a semi-formal in-class small-group presentation on your group’s theme. More details on this forthcoming.

Grading Criteria for Formal Papers

Formal papers will be assessed according to a 100-point scale divided into the following areas:

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<td>A. Up to 20 points for argument. Good arguments are clear, concise, lead from point to point, and give cogent reasons for a conclusion.</td>
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<td>C. Up to 20 points for establishing and articulating the context of the discussion.</td>
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<td>R. Up to 20 points for responding relevantly and accurately to assigned readings, and other resource material.</td>
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<td>G. Up to 20 points for grammatical clarity, including paragraph structure. Grammatical errors and poor paragraph structure make papers difficult to understand.</td>
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Overall Course Grade Calculation

I will assign grades on a +/- scale, as follows (percentages are always rounded up): A=91% or more; A-=90%; B+=89%; B=81-88%; B-=80%; etc.

Some general rules

1. Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated! Cheating or plagiarizing in the fulfillment of an assignment will result in failure of the assignment, and probable failure of the course. I will also, at my discretion, report your act of academic dishonesty to appropriate university officials.
2. Late assignments will be subject to penalty, 5 percent per class day for the first week, 10 percent per day thereafter.
3. Courtesy is expected. Avoid interrupting fellow classmates; listen carefully to their arguments and respond thoughtfully. However please do feel free to make your own arguments in turn. I try to keep class informal and discussion open, but talking out of turn or dominating discussion, or making irrelevant comments, is not permissible.
4. Tardiness to class is strongly discouraged.
5. Missing classes is also discouraged. If you know you must miss a class, kindly contact me beforehand. At my discretion, I may excuse you when an absence is unavoidable and legitimate. In any event, it would be helpful to know if there were any announcements made in class (these will also usually be posted on my web page). Remember that scheduled class discussion days are mandatory; if you must miss a class discussion day you must explain your absence ahead of time to request not to lose credit for that day.
6. Electronic communication is not acceptable during class. This means no cell phones, text-messaging, emailing, etc. Accessing course materials on Blackboard is acceptable.
7. Audio- or video-recording class sessions is prohibited without permission of the instructor.
8. Beverages are acceptable in class (in case you were wondering). Please avoid eating in class; popcorn is expressly forbidden.
Student rights, responsibilities, and expectations

You have the right:
• to have and to express your own opinions on issues discussed in class
• to your own interpretation of texts
• to ask questions
• to think critically
• to fair evaluation of your performance in the course, according to the grading criteria specified

You have the responsibility:
• to give a rational account for your opinions
• to read and be prepared to discuss assigned texts and course issues
• to seek answers to questions
• to be reflective (that is, to be self-critical)
• to stay up-to-date on assignments, their due dates, and material missed due to absences
• to fulfill assignments as specified (and to ask questions if you do not understand the assignments)

You are expected:
• to be honest regarding your opinions and reasoning
• to come to understand the assigned texts
• to enter into the search for answers to questions (i.e., to take part in discussions)
• to be critically rigorous (i.e., to subject opinions, interpretations, and answers to rational scrutiny, regardless of whose they are)
• to engage in class discussion in a spirit of mutual respect and open dialogue

Course Outline

While we’ll be reading Aristotle for a lot of the semester, we’ll also work on additional material and topics. Dates will vary, and I’ll keep you updated about reading assignments as we go.

Part One: Some basics of critical thinking
Part Two: Critical thinking about happiness in the modern world
Part Three: Special project on happiness, ethics, and Aristotle

Important Dates

Spring Break: April 9-13
TERM PAPER DUE: Tuesday, May 17

Troubles? Difficulties? Problems?

With disturbing frequency and regularity, students in my classes get into difficulties completing course requirements. Whatever the cause of these difficulties — language barriers, personal or work commitments, conflicts with other students, lack of clarity about requirements or standards, or just plain difficulty with comprehending the (sometimes very intellectually demanding) course material — please, please, please, a thousand times please consult with me about it. Do it early and often. Really. I mean it. I do my best to make my course intellectually demanding, provocative of personal reflection, and manageable for all my students to succeed on their own terms. I want to help you succeed. Obviously, there are some things I can’t personally help you with, but in those cases, I can and will refer you to resources available to you at the university. And if your life goes spectacularly kablooey during the semester, I will make any reasonable effort to find a way to help you successfully complete the course.