In this first year course we are going to immerse ourselves in a number of years of philosophical thought about happiness. The goal is to let philosophical questions about happiness serve as a wide-angle lens through which you can gain three things. The first is some insight into questions philosophers ask about happiness and their responses to these questions. The second is a greater understanding of the dimensions of philosophy as an activity—or what it is to “do philosophy”—beginning with the formation of a philosophical question and arriving at the structured presentation of philosophical ideas. The third is an increased capacity for close reading, innovative and critical thinking, written expression, and the use of library and internet resources in support of your research.

Long ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle defined happiness as the best and ultimate goal of human existence. But was he right? What role does happiness
play in the good life? Is there a relationship between happiness and ethical action, between being happy and being good? What are some reasons for thinking there might not be such a relationship? Is it possible to design one’s life so as to maximize one’s chances for being happy? Is happiness even attainable? And what do we mean when we talk about “happiness” anyway? At the center of our exploration of these questions will be three approaches to normative ethical theory that have played a key role in the development of ethics within the Western philosophical tradition: virtue-based ethics (as represented by Aristotle), consequentialism (as represented by Bentham and Mill), and deontological ethics (as represented by Kant). Complementing our exploration will be other readings in the history of philosophy as well as contemporary work on happiness both by and influenced by philosophers, including work drawn from the emerging field of happiness studies. We will conclude the course by further opening the aperture of our reflection to consider some questions related to happiness and morality with respect to non-human animals and robots.

Learning goals

There are multiple learning goals for this course, organized around the themes of substance, skills, and self-awareness.

With respect to substance, this course is designed to help you acquire a critical understanding of: (a) philosophical Q&A—questions and answers/arguments—related to happiness; (b) three major traditions within normative ethical theory: virtue ethics, consequentialism, and deontological ethics; and (c) contemporary work on happiness by and influenced by philosophers.

This course is also intended to help you develop key skills associated with philosophy in particular and the liberal arts in general. By the end of this semester, you should (a) be able to read and analyze philosophical writing with an inquisitive and thoughtful mind; (b) be more experienced in “doing” philosophy, including forming philosophical questions and constructing philosophical lines of thought; (c) be more adept in your writing; and (d) know how to use the library and the internet to support your philosophical explorations.

Self-awareness as a philosophical learning goal has its roots in Socrates’ dictum that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” I hope this course will expand your own capacities for (a) ethical reasoning; (b) understanding what assumptions and predispositions you bring to the consideration of ethical questions; and (c) respecting well-reasoned views even when they disagree with your own. I also
hope it will help you to see the positive value of being confused and inspire you to take risks in your own thinking.

Required Texts


Articles on library e-reserve

Recommended Reading


Academic Integrity

In reviewing your work, I will adhere to the College’s *Academic Integrity Policy* as published in the *Student Handbook*.

Through the gift of your attention, you also help support the integrity of the academic environment. For your own sake and for the sake of others when we are in class together please refrain from texting, tweeting, and the like.

Coursework

For this course, you will be writing three 5-7 page papers, and complete and present a group research project on a philosophical question related to happiness.

In the first paper you will be asked to respond to Daniel Gilbert’s *Stumbling on Happiness*. In the second paper you will be asked to write on topic related to our readings on normative ethical theory. The third paper (due at the time of the final exam) will invite you to present and defend your own view on a question related to happiness and ethical theory. More information, including a list of suggested topics for the second paper, will be available in class.
You will get your first and second papers back with a penciled-in grade and comments on both content and expression. You will then be expected to revise your paper and turn in a final version. The final version will be due one week after you get back the comments on your drafts.

Late papers will be accepted without penalty if you have a good reason for turning it in late and you let me know in advance. Unexcused first paper drafts and final versions, and unexcused second paper drafts, will be accepted up to one week after the due date, but you will lose half a grade (e.g. A- to B+) on the first day your paper is later, and every two days thereafter. Unexcused second papers may not be resubmitted for an improved grade.

For the group research project, you will be divided into teams of three to come up with a happiness-related question, related to our readings in ethical theory, and a proposal for how it might be tested. (You won’t have to actually run an experiment or conduct a survey.) In your write-up of your project, you’ll be asked to consider why you believe the question is interesting and worth considering and to describe and comment on research (if any) related to the question you select. At the end of the semester, each group will get 30 minutes to present their project and answer questions about it.

**Coursework evaluation**

Your final grade for this class will be based on the following percentages:

- First paper: 20%
- Second paper: 20%
- Third paper: 20%
- Group research project: 30% (including 10% for oral presentation)
- Class participation: 10%

By “class participation” I mean active engagement during class meetings: raising questions, taking part in discussions, etc. In this context, it is not how often you speak but what you say that matters.

**Schedule of Topics, Readings, and Paper Due Dates**

*Please come to class meetings prepared to talk about the reading assignment for that particular day. Any changes to this schedule will be announced in class and e-mailed to the class distribution list.*

**Week One**

- 8 September: Happiness and Robert Nozick’s experience machine Cahn and Vitrano (CV), pp. 236-237
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| 10 September| The desire-satisfaction theory of happiness; introduction to Aristotle.  
 Begin reading Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* in CV, pp. 19-23.        |
| **Week Two**| **Virtue ethics: Aristotle**                                         |
| 15 September| Book II in CV, pp. 23-27 (middle of page); Book III in NE, pp. 132-141. |
| 17 September| Class discussion of *Stumbling on Happiness*                         |
| **Week Three**|                                                                  |
| 20 September| Book IV in NE, pp. 141-158                                           |
| 22 September| Book VIII and IX in NE, pp. 57-65, 208-218, 236-241.                  |
| 24 September| Today we will gather in the library’s instruction room (2nd floor) for an introductory session in library research. |
| **Week Four**|                                                                  |
| 27 September| Book X in NE, pp. 74-81, 241-254                                      |
| 29 September| In class, we will look at a sampling of work in happiness studies.    |
| **First Paper Due**|                                                              |
| 1 October   | No class meeting. Use the time to think about your group question for your research project. |
| **Week Five**| **Contemporary reflections on virtue ethics**                      |
| 4 October   | Peter S. Wenz, “Synergistic Environmental Virtues: Consumerism and Human Flourishing” (on e-reserve)    |
| 6 October   | Julia Annas, “Happiness as Achievement,” CV, pp. 238-244             |
| 8 October   | Richard Taylor, “Virtue Ethics,” CV, pp. 222-235                      |
| **Week Six**| **The ethics of duty: Kant**                                        |
| 11 October  | ….but first, for the sake of background…some David Hume, The Skeptic,” CV, pp. 86-99. |
15 October  More discussion of work in happiness studies. We will read and talk about an article by M. Steger (a Mac grad), TB Kashden, and S. Oishi, “Being good by doing good: Daily eudaimonic activity and well-being” (2008). You will find this on e-reserve in the library.

**Week Seven**

18 October  Kant, Section II, CV, pp. 108-112

20 October  Kant, Section II, CV, pp. 108-112, cont’d.

22 October  Philippa Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” p.556-561

**Week Eight**  Consequentialist ethics: Bentham and Mill


27 October  John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, CV, Chapter II, pp.121-133

Group research project questions and preliminary bibliography due

29 October  Fall break—no class meeting

**Week Nine**

1 November  Mill, CV, Chapter III, pp.134-139

3 November  Mill, CV, Chapter IV, pp.139-143

5 November  Contemporary reflections on utilitarianism
Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism,” (on e-reserve)

Second Paper Due

**Week Ten**

8 November  Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (on e-reserve)

10 November  Singer, cont’d

12 November  Happiness Studies discussions continue. I hope we will be able to watch and talk about one of the presentations at the happiness conference at St. Ben’s/St. John’s earlier this term.

**Week Eleven**

15 November  Can immoral people be happy? A view from both sides
Stephen Cahn & Jeffrie Murphy, “Happiness and Immorality,” CV, pp.261-266
17 November

Contemporary philosophical scholarship on happiness
Daniel Haybron, The Pursuit of Unhappiness, Part I, pp.3-42

19 November

Haybron, Part II, pp.79-91; 142-151

Week Twelve

22 November

Heybron, Part IV, pp.225-251

24 November

Heybron, Part IV, pp.253-279

26 November

Thanksgiving break--no class meeting

Week Thirteen

Happiness beyond the realm of the human

29 November

Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Intelligence of Dolphins”
(on e-reserve)

1 December


3 December

Selection from Wendell Wallach and Collin Allen, Moral Machines: Teaching Robots Right from Wrong (on e-reserve)

Group Projects Due

Week Fourteen

6 December

Group project oral presentations

8 December

Group project oral presentations

10 December

Group project oral presentations

Week Fifteen

13 December

We will wrap up the course by looking at Julie Annas’s article contrasting ancient and modern concepts of happiness: “Virtue and Eudaimonism,” CV, pp.245-261

17 December

Please turn in your final papers to me in my office during our final exam time, 1:30-3:30 pm