

Happiness and the Pursuit of the Good Life

**RELS 0010
CRN 26894**

Fall, 2023

What is happiness, and how does it relate to the "good life," or a life well-lived? This is an age-old question, and in this course we will investigate religious and philosophical answers alongside insights drawn from modern positive psychology. A major goal of the course is to give you intellectual tools that will help you to construct a meaningful life. Areas of study will include value determination; gratitude; status and wealth; and mindfulness.

The course has three major parts:

In the first part, we consider issues of definition: What is “happiness,” “flourishing,” and “the good life”? This is a higher-level exploration of the basic problem of how we might live our lives and find meaning (if meaning is to be found) in the world and our role within it.

The second part focuses on the human. Who are we? In these classes we focus more on a range of psychological issues. We are “wired” in ways that often get in the way of our ability to be happy. Following the metaphor used by some of the writers that we will be reading, we will refer to this as our “elephant,” the great and complex mass of biological, psychological, and barely-changeable components that drive us.

Finally, we focus on the “rider” of the elephant, those things that we can control to deliberately move our elephants so that we can live the kind of life that we desire. This section is more oriented toward specific techniques and exercises that help us to better train our elephants.

Course Goals

By the end of this course, you should:

1. Have acquired a range of approaches that religious thinkers and philosophers through the ages have grappled with the question of life’s purpose, and how to live in accordance with it;
2. Have acquired a basic knowledge of the tenets of positive psychology, in both its applied and scientific aspects;
3. Have the ability to develop your own connections and applications between these two domains of knowledge;
4. Have a much richer intellectual toolbox for increasing your own happiness and sense of emotional and psychological well-being

Instructors

Professor Michael Satlow, Religious Studies and Judaic Studies.

Resources

You should buy a blank journal and bring it to every class. Most classes you will be asked to make an entry; sometimes more than once. You should also use this journal to reflect on your own. We will occasionally make journal checks, but if there are parts of the journal that you prefer to keep private we can figure out a way to accommodate that.

While much of what we read will be available online through our Reserve system, there are a few books that we'll be reading in their entirety (or close to it). If you should thus consider making the following purchases:

1. Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (Basic Books, 2006; 978-0465028023)
2. Martin Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (Atria, 2012; 978-1439190760)
3. Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Beacon, rpt 2006; 978-0807014271)
4. Terese of Avila, *Interior Castle* (Dover; 978-0486461458)

Requirements and Evaluation

1. Attendance in lecture, prepared with journals (10%);
2. Attendance and participation in section (10%);
3. First written assignment, due **February 25**. This will take the form of writing (1) a letter to your future self; and (2) a paper, to the course instructors, unpacking what you have written and justifying it in the readings. Each will be about 3 pages (20%);
4. Second written assignment, due **March 24**. This will be a 4-5 page paper about your "elephant." What are your strengths and weaknesses? (20%);
5. Third written assignment, due **May 7**. A 1500 word final essay in which you engage a single religious text; put it into dialogue with positive psychology (as we have done throughout the semester); and reflect on how you might use its insights productively in your own life (30%);
6. A final, reflective, paper of about 500 words (10%).

As you will see in this course, overly focusing on grades will make you less happy, impede your actual learning, and simply undermine your quest for a better and more purposeful life.

Section

Every other week, you will have an hour-long Section meeting with a TA. You may have a light assignment or reading to prepare for your section meeting (e.g., a video), but mainly they are an opportunity to continue discussion of class material in smaller groups. Attendance at, and participation in, these Sections is mandatory.

On the alternative weeks, Professor Satlow will hold an optional group meeting, also for an hour. The structure will be similar to a section, where you have a chance to pose questions and develop ideas in greater depth. You may attend any, all, or none of these, but if you do attend please arrive on time and stay through the entire session.

More details about the timing of these meetings will be forthcoming after Shopping Period.

Additional Policies

1. Class will actually begin at 2:35, giving you an extra 5 minutes to get to class and get settled. We will begin at 2:35 sharp, and no latecomers will be admitted for the first 15 minutes of class, at which time we will work on some focus exercises (including journaling). When those exercises are completed, latecomers can enter and sign in. For purposes of maintaining eligibility in the alternative grading plan, coming late is equivalent to an absence.
2. Research shows that the use of electronic devices in class impairs learning. Accordingly, unless you specifically receive an exemption, the use of all such devices is prohibited, except when expressly allowed (e.g., if we do a poll on Kahoot I might have you use your phone). If you feel that this policy presents a major impediment to your learning, please come and see Professor Satlow at the beginning of the semester.
3. Because you will access most of your readings online but will not have access to them online during class, you will want to print them out and bring them to class and section. Note that there is a Brown University program to assist eligible students for paying for this. More details are available [here](#).
4. It is a bit hard in a course like this to know what cheating would look like, but if you have any question or suspicions about an act, don't do it. This includes use of ChatGPT and other AI tools. Cheating is not just bad generally, but flies in the face of everything that this course is about. Any case of cheating or violation of course policies will result in an automatic NC for the course and possibly referral to the Dean.
5. I believe strongly that this should be a space accessible to all. We seek to cultivate an atmosphere that is fully inclusive and open to all kinds of diverse viewpoints; it should be both safe and challenging. If anything, at any time, is hindering your learning, please let us know immediately and we will seek to make whatever adjustments are required.

Wellness

One of the most important components for happiness is health, both physical and mental. I expect that by signing up for this class you are committing to take care of yourself: eat (and drink) healthily; get enough sleep; and exercise. If in order to do so you need to change the way that you are living, be reflective (in your journal) about the process and results.

If you are sick, take care of yourself and do not come to class (but do let us know through an email to your TA). Documented absences for health reasons will not have an impact on your grade.

Tentative Schedule

Note that this schedule may, and probably will, be adjusted as the semester progresses. Please consult our Canvas site for the most up-to-date information. When there is a conflict between the syllabus and Canvas, Canvas takes precedence.

January 26	Introduction
January 31	What is Happiness? (1) <i>Reading:</i> Seligman, <i>Flourish</i> , Chapter 1 Deresiewicz, “Don’t Send Your Kid to the Ivy League” L. Davis, “The Ivy League, Mental Illness, and the Meaning of Life”
February 2	What is Happiness? (2) <i>Reading:</i> Aristotle, <i>Nichomachean Ethics</i> , Books 1, 7, and 10
February 7	Flourishing <i>Reading:</i> R. Harris, <i>The Happiness Trap</i> , pp. 1-18 Besser and Oishi, “The Psychologically Rich Life”
February 9	The Purposeful Life <i>Reading:</i> Excerpts of Aquinas, <i>Summa</i> (Read the biographical introduction in the packet and pp. 19-32 M. Joshanloo, “A Comparison of Western and Islamic Conceptions of Happiness” First Section Meeting View: Randy Pausch, “The Last Lecture”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ji5_MqicxSo
February 14	A Life of Purpose <i>Reading:</i> Ecclesiastes (biblical book) Victor Frankl, <i>Man’s Search Meaning</i>
February 16	Happiness and Purpose <i>TBD</i>

	Optional Group Meeting
February 23	The Self: A Psychological Overview <i>Reading:</i> Haidt, <i>The Happiness Hypothesis</i> , pp. 1-44 Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh, part 1
February 28	The Primal Self <i>Reading:</i> Haidt, <i>The Happiness Hypothesis</i> , pp. 45-80 D. Ariely and G. Loewenstein, “The Heat of the Moment: The Effect of Sexual Arousal on Sexual Decision Making,” <i>Journal of Behavioral Decision Making</i> 19 (2006): 87-98 D. Kahneman, Nobel Lecture
March 2	The Religious Self <i>Reading:</i> Genesis, 1-4 M. Satlow, “Talmud Torah and Rabbinic Asceticism” P. Brown, <i>The Body and Society</i> , Chapter 19 Second Section Meeting For Section: Dan Gilbert: The surprising science of happiness TED Talk
March 7	Elephantial Differences <i>Reading:</i> Seligman, <i>Flourish</i> , Chapter 3 Nes and Roysamb, “Happiness in Behavior Genetics”
March 9	Religion and Gender <i>Reading:</i> A. Fausto-Sterling, “On the Critiques of the Concept of Sex” S. Guimond, “Psychological Similarities and Differences between Women and Men across Cultures” J. Dahlgvig and K Longman, “Influences of an Evangelical Christian Worldview on Women’s Leadership Development” Optional Group Meeting
March 14	Money <i>Reading:</i> Seligman, <i>Flourish</i> , chapter 10 Catapano, et al., “Financial Resources Impact the Relationship between Meaning and Happiness”

March 16	<p>Money <i>Reading:</i> Maimonides, <i>Mishneh Torah</i>, “Gifts to the Poor,” chapter 10 <i>The Zakat Handbook</i></p> <p>Third Section Meeting Watch video on “aliefs”: https://www.wi-phi.com/videos/cognitive-biases-alief/</p>
March 21	<p>The Rider <i>Reading:</i> Haidt, <i>The Happiness Hypothesis</i>, pp. 81-106 R. Thaler and C. Sunstein, <i>Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness</i>, pp. 1-104</p>
March 23	<p>Meditation <i>Reading:</i> S. Young, “How Meditation Works” A. Newberg and G. d’Aquilio, “The Neuropsychology of Religious and Spiritual Experience”</p> <p>Optional Group Meeting</p>
April 4	<p>Love and Community <i>Reading:</i> Haidt, <i>The Happiness Hypothesis</i>, pp. 107-134 Dorff, “Loneliness, Family, and Community During the Pandemic” A. Piwko, “Islam and the COVID-19 Pandemic”</p>
April 6	Canceled
April 11	<p>Values <i>Reading:</i> Haidt, <i>The Happiness Hypothesis</i>, pp. 135-79 Harris, <i>The Happiness Trap</i>, pp. 167-79</p>
April 13	<p>Developing the Virtues <i>Reading:</i> <i>Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh</i>, Second part</p> <p>Fourth Section Meeting Assignment TBD</p>
April 18	<p>Gratitude <i>Reading:</i> Wood, et al., “Gratitude and Well-Being: A Review and Theoretical Integration”</p>

	Take the Gratitude Survey, available at: https://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/testcenter
April 20	Gratitude <i>Reading:</i> S. Schimmel, “Gratitude in Judaism” Psalms 6, 9, 10, 13, 18, 22, 28, 30, 31, 34, 36, 40, 41, 66, 67, 111, 118, 138, 144 Optional Group Meeting
April 25	Transcendence <i>Reading:</i> Haidt, <i>The Happiness Hypothesis</i> , 181-211 J. Shook, “Are People Born to be Believers”?
April 27	Transcendence <i>Reading:</i> Teresa of Avila, <i>Interior Castle</i> Fifth Section Meeting View: https://www.ted.com/talks/barry_schwartz_using_our_practical_wisdom?language=en