

## **Happiness and the Pursuit of the Good Life**

**RELS 0010**  
**Spring, 2025**

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 or even train our elephants so that we can live the kind of life that we desire. This section is more oriented toward specific techniques and exercises.

Note also what this class is not:

- A psychology class. We will read and engage with some psychological texts but will do so as humanists.
- A therapy session. We will discuss some deeply important and individual issues, and you may decide to share personal details with the class. That's fine. In no way, though, should what we are doing be considered "therapy," or engage with issues of mental health. Should you feel that such avenues would benefit you, please reach out to CAPS ([caps.brown.edu](http://caps.brown.edu)).
- A tour of all the world's religions. My own expertise is, alas, limited. This class will center mainly on Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources, with limited attention to sources from the East. No judgement is intended; this is simply a reflection of what I feel competent providing for you at this moment.

There are no prerequisites for this class. It is mandatory S/NC.

### **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 about the question of life's purpose, and how to live in accordance with it.
2. Have the ability to put the insights of positive psychology and religious texts into conversation with each other, so that they are mutually illuminating.
3. Have a much richer intellectual toolbox for increasing your own happiness and sense of emotional and psychological well-being

## **Instructor**

Professor Michael Satlow, Religious Studies and Judaic Studies.

I would like to get to know and interact with you more informally and help you meet each other in a smaller group, so I will be hosting lunches in the Ratty. Lunches are limited to eight students. Please sign up in advance through Canvas (go to the Calendar tab). If you see me eating alone in the Ratty, please come and join me!

I am working on expanding my LinkedIn network in order to help you connect with previous students in my classes and to give you an opportunity to help future ones as well. Find me there and request to link, and I'll say yes.

I strongly advise you to come see me early in the semester, even if you think that you have nothing to discuss. You will be more engaged in the course, and I will be more effective if we have had at least one private conversation. If you are uncomfortable meeting with your professors, don't be! You might want to read this article about getting the most out of college: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/17/opinion/college-students.html>.

## **Resources**

You must acquire a blank journal and then bring it to every class. Most classes you will be asked to make an entry. You should also use this journal to reflect on your own.

While much of what we read will be available online through our Reserve system, there are two books that we'll be reading in their entirety (or close to it). 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. Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Beacon, rpt 2006; 978-0807014271)

In many of our classes, I will be asking you to discuss a page or two of primary texts. I will make these available in the appropriate class Module on Canvas. You are responsible for printing them out, reading them, and bringing them with you to class.

Course materials will cost about \$30.

## **Requirements and Evaluation**

Note that this course is mandatory S/NC and I will not give grades of S with distinction (S\*). I will explain further in class my approach to grading at Brown, which continues to evolve. In any case, in order to pass the class with an S you must:

1. Have no more than two unexcused and two excused absences from class. I explain below what I mean by “unexcused” and “excused.” In exceptional circumstances, I may allow more absences. This policy goes into effect on January 30, and missing the last day of class will count as an unexcused absence. Use your unexcused absences prudently.
2. Have no more than one unexcused and one excused absence from section.
3. Submit a short discussion post (about 300 words) each week prior to your section meeting. These posts are generally meant to help you prepare for section and they will be read by everyone in your section. They must be submitted on time. You may miss up to two posts (a late post is a missed post). An unexcused absence from section does not excuse you from completing the post.
4. Write three short (1200 words) papers, spaced evenly throughout the semester. These papers will be given comments by the TA and may be read and discussed by all the students in your section. They must be of passable quality. If they are not, your instructor may ask you to rewrite it.
5. A one-on-one meeting with your TA about at least one of these papers.
6. A group project (about 2500 words) to be presented in section and then submitted.
7. Learning self-assessment. This is a required, 500-word essay in which you evaluate your own learning in the class. It is due at the end of the semester.

Each of these assignments is meant to help you learn to build a happy and “good” life; they are not hoops to jump through. I will strive to create an atmosphere in which you can focus on your learning rather than an outcome.

### **Attendance, Tardiness, and Late Work**

Attendance, in both lecture and section, is an essential part of the learning experience for this class. As noted above, an absence from class can be either “excused” or “unexcused.” Those terms have specific meanings:

For an absence to be “excused,” you must submit a synthetic essay dealing with the material that you missed within 72 hours of the class that you missed. The essay should be about 1,000 words; engage seriously with the assigned reading for the class as well as the lecture, which is available on lecture capture; be in .doc or .docx format; and be centered around a single insight or argument. If you miss a Tuesday class, the paper will be due on Friday at 4 PM. If you miss a Thursday class, the paper will be due on Sunday at 4 PM. Papers should be submitted to your TA as an email attachment and will be marked as sufficient/insufficient (an “insufficient” mark will convert the absence into an “unexcused” one).

Any other absence is “unexcused.” This is an absence for any reason and that is not made up with the essay described above.

Note that there is no need to submit Dean's or Health notes, unless we specifically tell you otherwise. You are expected to manage these absences responsibly and in ways that will advance your learning. The absences are meant to help you navigate difficult conflicts, such as illnesses, emergencies, and interviews. If you use them early in the semester without good reasons and then find yourself ill later in the semester, do not expect that you will be granted more absences. In exceptional circumstances, please come and meet with the instructor.

Attendance policies like this sometimes have the perverse effect of encouraging students to come to class when sick. Please don't. Take care of your health and body and be courteous to your classmates. The attendance policy should be sufficient to deal with routine illnesses.

Try not to be late to lecture or section. We understand that things happen that once in a rare while that will make this unavoidable, but we have the right to count any late arrival or early departure as an absence. We will exercise this right judiciously, but we will not hesitate to do so should we feel that you are repeatedly abusing it. Should you anticipate being late for a section meeting, contact your TA directly. We begin on time, and late arrivals are disruptive and impede the ability of students to maximize their learning. Be courteous.

We expect all work to be submitted in a timely fashion. We have the right to reject any late work, even if it is by a minute (in which case you would risk receiving an NC for the course). That said, we are not ogres and want to work with you should you have a truly extenuating circumstance. Should you have a question, contact your TA (before the assignment is due!).

## **Course Delivery**

The two lecture periods each week will employ a range of modalities. We will usually begin with a short focus exercise; move to 5-10 minutes of journaling on an assigned prompt; do some live polling; have a lecture; break out into short, small group discussions (time permitting); and then have a full class discussion. At the end of each class, you will complete an exit ticket with your major takeaway and lingering question. My goal is always to maximize student learning, so if I see that some things are working better than others, I will change formats accordingly.

Talking in a class of this size can be daunting. This is why I especially encourage you to do it! Articulation is always good for learning, no matter what the size. Furthermore, though, you will want to develop some comfort with speaking in a large group, or at least experiment doing so in the kindest environment possible. Moreover, other students want to hear you! Past students consistently noted their appreciation of hearing a diverse range of views. This is a gift everyone can give.

Two tricks for lessening your anxiety for participating are (1) attend a class lunch or meet with me privately, to increase your comfort level in the class; and (2) sit near the front of the room. Your perception of the class size will dramatically shift.

Please do not eat during lecture. It's distracting to other students and creates more work for the staff.

## **Sections (Conferences)**

You will have a mandatory, weekly section meeting led by a graduate TA. We will announce their start date in class and on Canvas. You may take one unexcused absence and one excused absence without penalty. For instructions on the essay for an excused absence from sections, contact your TA in a timely fashion. You generally may not attend any section other than the one for which you are registered.

Sections are fun! A brief amount of time will be spent going over any questions you might have from the lecture, but most of the time will be devoted to exercises that complement the week's topics. They will give you an opportunity to extend and deepen your personal reflections.

For all class logistic related questions, your TA is your first stop (after Canvas and Ed Discussion).

## **Electronic Resources and Devices Policy**

We will heavily use Canvas, and nearly all readings from outside of our books are available online through Course Reserves.

Technological devices have been an extraordinary boon to the learning of some. For most, though, they have served as impediments. They tempt us to multitask (which, research has shown, we almost all do badly despite believing that we do it well); they can distract us; and they distract the people around us. Moreover, for most people, writing notes by hand tends to improve knowledge retention. For your own good, then, I aim to keep the use of technology to a minimum. That means that with two important exceptions, this is a technology-free class.

Exception 1: You will need a device (a smartphone is fine) for the online polling at the beginning of the class and the exit ticket at the end. Obviously, use during those times is permitted.

Exception 2: You are the best judge of your own learning (although, if you are like most people, you also are good at fooling yourself about what really serves you best). If you feel that using a device will further your education, you may opt-in. Instructions on how to do so are posted on Canvas. You need not justify this request. All students who opt in to device usage will sit in a designated part of the classroom. You may only use laptops or tablets (no phones!), and only for class related activities (of which we are the final arbiters). Violation of these guidelines can result in revocation of your right to use electronic devices. About midway during the semester, we will open the opt-in period again. At any point, those who opted-in may return to the non-device part of the room (as long as they don't use devices when they shouldn't be!).

Violations of this policy will result in a warning and/or an NC in the course, at our discretion.

Note that all lectures are recorded, all slides are posted on Canvas, and there are no exams. Hence, there may be less reason than you think to use devices. Fully engaging, participating, and taking notes by hand – which after class you can spend ten minutes transcribing into your device – will usually help you to get more out of the class.

## **Accessibility and 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, do not come to class, and follow the attendance policies noted above.

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.

Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me early in the term if you may require accommodations or modification of any of course procedures. You may speak with me after class, during office hours, or by appointment. If you need accommodations around online learning or in classroom accommodations, please be sure to reach out to [Student Accessibility Services \(SAS\)](#) for their assistance ([seas@brown.edu](mailto:seas@brown.edu) , 401-863-9588).

Undergraduates in need of short-term academic advice or support can [contact an academic dean in the College](#) by emailing [college@brown.edu](mailto:college@brown.edu). The class is designed to already take into account most common accommodations: there are no exams; paper prompts are posted far enough in advance so that there will be no need for extra time; and there is an opportunity to use transcribing software and whatever technology you need. Nevertheless, we cannot think of everything and should you have any accessibility concerns, please do see us early in the semester.

## **Academic Integrity**

"A student's name on any exercise (e.g., a theme, report, notebook, performance, computer program, course paper, quiz, or examination) is regarded as assurance that the exercise is the result of the student's own thoughts and study, stated in his or her own words, and produced without assistance, except as quotation marks, references, and footnotes acknowledge the use of printed sources or other outside help." (*Academic Code*, p. 5).

I have no tolerance for academic dishonesty. Any violations whatsoever will result in an automatic NC for the course and a referral to the Dean of the College for further disciplinary action.

## **Artificial Intelligence**

Like all emerging technologies, AI creates new opportunities as well as potential dangers.

In this class, you are not to submit anything that you generated from AI as your own. It is that simple. Not only would doing so undermine your learning in the course, but it would also constitute a grave infraction of the academic code. Should you be caught doing so (it turns out

that catching AI generated writing is not very difficult) you will receive an automatic NC for the course and be referred to the Dean of the College for further disciplinary proceedings.

There is, however, no reason that you cannot use AI to help you to learn. AI tools such as ChatGPT, Claude, or Co-pilot are most likely here to stay, so it is in your interest to learn to use them productively. These tools are not good for creating the kinds of reflective assignments that you must write for this class, nor are they good for discovering sources and references (they sometimes simply make things up – see <https://www.ibm.com/topics/ai-hallucinations>.) Their facts must always be double-checked.

There are areas, though, where they may be quite useful:

- Understanding difficult texts. In this class, we move quickly through texts of many different types. We'll give you guidance about how to read some of these texts, but you may sometimes still find yourself puzzled. You may want to try uploading (or pasting) a text into one of these tools and asking it to summarize or analyze the text. See what it says and whether it is helpful for your own understanding of it. Sometimes you may disagree, and that's fine! You can continue to probe the AI tool for further information, for example the intellectual or social context in which a text was produced or its logical flaws. Again, it may not always be correct, but it should help you to form opinions about the text. Note that as of now, AI tools have a tendency to drift away from the text under question and wander into other knowledge. You can keep trying to bring it back to your text with more pointed questions.
- What I have described in the above paragraph is, essentially, a conversation. You will have certain ideas as you go through the course. Some of them you may want to discuss at section; others you will share in your paper. Some, though, are more exploratory and tentative. Think of AI as a conversation partner to explore such ideas. It can be helpful (if you can keep it on topic) for your own intellectual development. Ask it to take a role, such as contrasting Freud and Aristotle on the value of pleasure, and then pressing it to see how one side might answer an objection from the other.
- Edit. You must create your own paper, but AI can sometimes be helpful telling you how you can improve it. Paste the paper in and ask for suggestions. Then feel free to use or incorporate those suggestions. If you do incorporate suggestions, add a line to the end, "I used AI to help me edit this paper and it gave me the following idea....".

## **Time Expectations**

The following “good faith” estimate of time expectations is required on all Brown syllabi by the Dean of the College:

*Our accrediting agency requires a minimum expectation of 180 hours of coursework in order to receive four credit hours. This figure will be reached in this class through the following expectations:*

- (1) *Class meeting: 37.5 (25 lectures X 1.5 hours), plus 11 section meetings: 48.5 hours*
- (2) *Reading for class (7 hours/week \* 13 weeks): 91 hours*

(3) Writing assignments: 41 hours

### Tentative Schedule

*This schedule can change. Please plan on meeting during the Reading Period (last class on May 6), although this might also change. If there are discrepancies between this schedule and what is noted on Canvas, the Canvas assignment takes precedence.*

<b>January 23</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
<b>January 28</b>	<b>Where We Are</b> <i>Are you happy? How does your happiness compare to those of your peers? Can we identify some of the conditions that make us unhappy?</i>  <i>Reading:</i> J. Twenge, " <a href="#">The Sad State of Happiness in the United States and the Role of Digital Media</a> " W. Deresiewicz, "Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League" L. Davis, "The Ivy League, Mental Illness, and the Meaning of Life" <a href="#">The Global Loss of the U-Shaped Curve of Happiness</a>
<b>January 30</b>	<b>Is there a Purpose to Life?</b> <i>Is there a difference between living a "happy," "meaningful," or "flourishing" life? How do we identify our purpose, and how we are to direct our lives?</i>  <i>Reading:</i> Aristotle, <i>Nichomachean Ethics</i> , Book 1
<b>February 4</b>	<b>Pleasure</b> <i>Over the next four classes we are going to explore four approaches to the good life. "Happiness" is generally measured as subjective well-being. So should one focus one's activities on "feeling good," including maximizing pleasure?</i>  <i>Reading:</i> Ecclesiastes Sigmund Freud (1989 [1930]). <i>Civilization and its Discontents</i> . Translated by James Strachey, Book 2
<b>February 6</b>	<b>Virtue</b> <i>Many thinkers believe that "subjective positive affect" is not the goal of the meaningful life, but rather a cultivated life of virtue driven by reason.</i>  <i>Reading:</i> Aristotle, <i>Nichomachean Ethics</i> , Book 10 N. Halim, "The Views of al-Farabi and al-Ghazali on Achieving Happiness"



<p><b>February 11</b></p>	<p><b>Service</b>  <i>Usually overlapping with the “life of virtue” orientation is that of a “life of service,” that we find our ultimate fulfillment in service to something greater.</i></p> <p><i>Reading:</i>          Genesis 1-4          Schwartz, “Self Determination: The Tyranny of Freedom”          Interview with Mother Teresa</p>
<p><b>February 13</b></p>	<p><b>Acceptance and Suffering</b>  <i>Maybe the goal is to not have a goal. Stoicism and Buddhism advocate for acceptance of the (often miserable) human condition with equanimity.</i></p> <p><i>Reading:</i>          Wong, “The Meaning of Detachment in Daoism, Buddhism, and Stoicism”          Seneca, Letter 13          R. Harris, <i>The Happiness Trap</i>, pp. 1-18</p>
<p><b>February 20</b></p>	<p><b>Who We Are (1)</b>  <i>We have evolved with a set of largely shared psychological systems that impact on our happiness and often cause us to do things that subvert our own well-being. Over the next three classes, we explore these systems from psychological and religious perspectives.</i></p> <p><i>Reading:</i>          Haidt, <i>The Happiness Hypothesis</i>, pp. 1-80          Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh, 29-53</p> <p><i>Assignment due:</i>          First paper</p>
<p><b>February 25</b></p>	<p><b>Who We Are (2)</b>  <i>Reading:</i>          Augustine, <i>Confessions</i>, Book 2          Kahneman, <i>Thinking Slow, Thinking Fast</i>, chapter 1</p>
<p><b>February 27</b></p>	<p><b>Who We Are (3)</b>  <i>Reading:</i>          TBD</p>
<p><b>March 4</b></p>	<p><b>Sex and the Body</b>  <i>Most of us experience sexual desire. How does this desire effect our sense of well-being, and add to or detract from our ultimate goals?</i></p> <p><i>Reading:</i></p>

	<p>M. Satlow, “Talmud Torah and Rabbinic Asceticism”  P. Brown, <i>The Body and Society</i>, Chapter 19  D. Ariely and G. Loewenstein, “The Heat of the Moment: The Effect of Sexual Arousal on Sexual Decision Making”  NYTimes article, “Sex on Campus”</p>
<b>March 6</b>	<p><b>Food</b>  <i>We all eat. Food and eating, though, are fraught. Do you eat simply to fuel your body, or as a source of pleasure? Do you sometimes feel bad about what and/or how much you eat? Why?</i></p> <p><i>Reading:</i>  Miles, “Religion and Food: The Case of Eating Disorders”  Hausman, “Holy Food”</p>
<b>March 11</b>	<p><b>Status</b>  <i>Where do you stand in comparison to others? We are finely calibrated to think about our own relative status. Why? How can this trait bring us to great unhappiness?</i></p> <p><i>Reading:</i>  Vogel, et al. “Social Media”  C. S. Lewis, <i>Mere Christianity</i>, chapter 8</p>
<b>March 13</b>	<p><b>Money</b>  <i>How important is money to you? How much is enough? How does the way that you think about money impact your sense of well-being and help or hinder you from living the good life?</i></p> <p><i>Reading:</i>  Seligman, <i>Flourish</i>, chapter 10  Catapano, et al., “Financial Resources Impact the Relationship between Meaning and Happiness”  Maimonides, <i>Mishneh Torah</i>, “Gifts to the Poor,” chapter 10  Obituary of Charles Feeney, <i>New York Times</i>, October 13, 2023 (updated)</p>
<b>March 18</b>	<p><b>The Rider</b>  <i>We now enter the third unit of the course: how can we “ride our elephant”? What practical techniques can we employ to help us to lead a happier life more attuned to our goals?</i></p> <p><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>

	<p><i>Assignment due:</i> Second Paper</p>
<b>March 20</b>	<p><b>Meditation</b> <i>Throughout this course we have repeatedly touched on meditation. In this class we look in more depth at the theory of meditation and how it might work.</i></p> <p><i>Reading:</i> S. Young, “How Meditation Works”</p>
<b>April 1</b>	<p><b>Community</b> <i>Over the past fifty years, sociologists have noticed, our lives as Americans have become increasingly less communal. The years of COVID have accelerated this trend toward individualism and isolation. To what extent, though, does community really matter for our sense of well-being?</i></p> <p><i>Reading:</i>  Dorff, “Loneliness, Family, and Community During the Pandemic” Hunter, “Augustine and the Making of Marriage”</p>
<b>April 3</b>	<p><b>Gratitude</b> <i>Expressing gratitude has been found to enhance subjective well-being for many. How, though, can one move from isolated acts of gratitude to creating and maintaining a grateful orientation?</i></p> <p><i>Reading:</i> Rosmarin et al, “Grateful to God or Just Plain Grateful?” S. Schimmel, “Gratitude in Judaism” Wood, et al., “Gratitude and Well-Being”</p>
<b>April 8</b>	<p><b>Flourishing</b> <i>There is a difference between simply trying to alleviate suffering and cultivating a life that seems purposeful and more readily brings positive emotion. Can leaning into your strengths help?</i></p> <p><i>Reading:</i> Selection of Seligman, <i>Flourishing</i> Harris, <i>The Happiness Trap</i>, pp. 167-79</p>
<b>April 10</b>	<p><b>Developing the Virtues</b> <i>Most traditional religious thinkers link flourishing to living a life of virtue. More easily said than done! What, practically, can be done to move in this direction?</i></p> <p><i>Reading:</i> Haidt, <i>The Happiness Hypothesis</i>, pp. 107-79</p>

	<i>Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh</i> , part 2
<b>April 15</b>	<p><b>Religion</b>  <i>A significant body of research claims that religious people are, on average, happier than non-religious people. Why would this be? Is there something special about religious participation, or are there elements of religion that can be more broadly applied?</i></p> <p><i>Reading:</i>          Selections from E. Durkheim          T. VanderWeele, “Religious Communities and Human Flourishing”          Ciarrocchi et al., “God or Rituals?”</p>
<b>April 17</b>	<p><b>Hope and Transcendence</b>  <i>Optimism and hope are correlated with subjective well-being. How can we understand the connection, and what can we do to cultivate such an outlook?</i></p> <p><i>Reading:</i>          Haidt, <i>The Happiness Hypothesis</i>, pp. 181-211          Article on William James          Book of Revelation</p>
<b>April 22</b>	<p><b>Framing</b>  <i>Our experiences have no objective meaning. Whether good or bad, we give them meaning, and the meaning that we give them influences our sense of well-being. Is there a way to turn suffering into joy?</i></p> <p><i>Reading:</i>          Frankl, <i>Man’s Search for Meaning</i></p>
<b>April 24</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>