We shall explore - historically and analytically - the meanings of happiness and its place in our lives. What is happiness? Have the meanings of happiness changed over time? Is there a necessary connection between happiness and virtue? Is happiness an essentially subjective and/or culturally relative idea? Does it depend on luck? Can and should it be a goal of living? What is its relationship to other goods we value in life - like meaning, freedom, pleasure, goodness and justice? Is happiness “overrated”? Has and should the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic affected our understanding of happiness?

**Required Texts**

1. Most of our readings will be available online at our course website. Each day’s readings (or videos) are preceded by a question-set that should help you focus your thoughts for the purpose of posts and class discussions.

2. In addition, there are two required books:

3. You’ll be expected to listen to a podcast and watch some short videos and two films. All are available online.

**Some Interesting Websites and Podcasts**

- The Happiness Lab with Laurie Santos [https://www.happinesslab.fm/](https://www.happinesslab.fm/)
- TED [https://www.ted.com/topics/happiness](https://www.ted.com/topics/happiness)
- How to Build a Life [https://onbeing.org/](https://onbeing.org/)
- BigThink [https://aeon.co/](https://aeon.co/)
- New York Times “Stone” column [https://www.brainpickings.org](https://www.brainpickings.org)
Course Requirements

1. **Faithful preparation, class attendance, and participation** in our discussions. Because we only have 15 meetings, any one absence is equivalent to missing an entire week during a regular, 15-week semester. Absences for which there isn’t a very good excuse will hurt your grade. A pattern of helpful participation in class will help your grade.

2. During the first four weeks of class, you must write two “posts” (i.e., reading responses) per week. Each post should be at least **500 words** (approximately 3 paragraphs or 2 double-spaced pages). You must post for Wednesday (on Plato) and Friday (on Aristotle) during our first week. You may choose which day you skip during weeks 2, 3 and 4. See below for what I expect from your posts.

Use our course website on Canvas for the purpose of posting.

   a. Start by creating a file of your post on your desktop.
   b. Next, upload it to the “Assignments” page on Canvas, and press “Submit.”
   c. I will receive it and provide comments. You will receive an e-mail notification after I have responded to your post.

In the event of difficulties with Canvas, you can always send your posts as an attachment directly to me via e-mail at lavog@conncoll.edu. Be sure to put your name on the title line of your post! You should write your post about the next day’s reading assignment, although you may also use it to respond to issues that came up in the previous class. **Your post is due by midnight before class.**

3. By 8:45 A.M on our last day (Friday, 6/26) you must post your carefully edited 8-10 page **final paper** (approximately 2,500 words) on Canvas. I will meet with each of you “virtually” during the last 2 weeks to talk over your final project with you.

4. In our last class (Friday 6/26), you will make a 5-minute **oral presentation** outlining the central question, thesis and argument of your final paper. I see this as a “philosophical party,” where we have a chance to celebrate what we’ve done during our brief semester.

**What do I expect from your POSTS?**

Posts will help you prepare well for our class discussions and warm you up for your longer papers. The best structure for a post involves the following steps:

1. Identify a **thesis** that one of our authors puts forward (e.g., Plato **believes** that x....).
2. Explain the **reasons** why s/he believes this thesis.
3. Raise an **objection** to the author’s thesis or her defense of it.
4. If you have time, propose **your own** thesis and explain why you believe it. (But this is a lot to ask for in a short post.)

A post can serve several functions. It can help you:

1. **Dissect the argument** presented in a reading: breaking it down into premises and conclusions.
2. **Critically evaluate** the argument of the reading. (This presupposes that you understand the argument.)
3. Raise questions about what you don’t understand in the reading.
4. Make connections with other readings or things you are encountering in other courses.
5. Personalize our material by connecting it with your life.
6. Use examples to illustrate (and breathe life into) your points.

Once again, each post should be at least 500 words (approximately 3 paragraphs or 2 double-spaced pages). You can’t do everything in such a small space. Make your key argument and give your reasons.

EDIT your entry before you post it!!!! Each post is due by midnight before the class for which you post. LATE POSTS MAY NOT BE ACCEPTED AS I NEED TIME TO READ THEM BEFORE CLASS.

Though I will not grade your posts individually (hoping that this frees you up to feel creative), I shall look at your posts as part of your overall portfolio, and your grade will be affected by their quality and whether you completed all eight posts.

What do I expect from your FINAL PAPER?

Your final paper should have the same structure that I recommend for your posts: identify a thesis or claim about happiness that at least one author has made, explain why they believe it, subject it to critical examination, and conclude with a thesis of your own and a defense of it. In your 2,500-word final paper you’ll have more room to develop your argument than you did in your posts.

Elements of a GOOD ESSAY in Philosophy

Among the authors we read, Paul Bloomfield, Richard Kraut, Thomas Nagel, Samuel Scheffler, Pascal Bruckner and Susan Wolf offer fine examples of a well-constructed philosophical essay. You may not agree with their conclusions, but they meet the criteria below.

1. Clear statement of the issue(s) and central thesis.
2. Development of key conceptual distinctions.
3. Use of examples to motivate and/or illustrate the argument.
4. Identification of fundamental premises, reasonable defense of thesis and criticism of alternatives. (To defend an interesting philosophical position, you must be able to imagine others who would disagree with you and explain why they are mistaken.)
5. Organization: brief introduction, main body of the argument, and conclusion.
7. An important aspect of a good essay is that you “make the topic your own.” Sometimes an essay reads like the writer was “going through the motions.” I’m interested in reading an essay that shows you care about the topic: that it grows out of an issue you’re really wrestling with or something rooted in your personal experience in the world. Questions about happiness are at the core of what it means to be human. Try to connect with our questions in your own way.

Tutoring

With help from the Center for Teaching and Learning, the Yale Summer Session has online writing tutors available for students this summer! This is an invaluable resource. Please take advantage of it, especially if I recommend it in my comments on your posts!!
5/25  1. Introduction: Philosophical Questions about Happiness

- Introducing One Another
- What are Your Philosophical Questions about Happiness?
- Mommy Maria vs. Party Maria: A Thought-Experiment from Joshua Knobe
- Plato’s Challenge: Is a Just Life Necessarily Happier than an Unjust Life?
  - We’ll work through an outline of the opening arguments of Plato’s Republic, Book I in order to set up the reading from Books II, IV, and IX for Wednesday, 5/27.

I. Classical Sources: Philosophy as the Path to a Happy Life

5/27  2. Socrates and Plato: Moral Virtue is Necessary and Sufficient for Happiness (Eudaimonia)

- Plato, from The Republic, Books II, IV and IX, pp. 3-18.
- Recommended: Raymond Belliotti, Happiness is Overrated, Ch. 1, Sec. 1, pp. 1-11.
- Paul Bloomfield, “Good to be Bad?”

5/29  3. Aristotle: Happiness (Eudaimonia) Requires Moral Virtue – and a Little Bit of Luck

- Aristotle, from The Nicomachean Ethics, pp. 19-34.
- Recommended: Belliotti, Happiness is Overrated, Ch. 1, Sec. 2, pp. 11-19.

6/1  4. Epicureanism: Death and the Way of Ataraxia (“Don’t’ Worry; Be Happy”)

- Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus” and “Leading Doctrines.”
- Lucretius, “The Symmetry Argument that Death is Not to be Feared.”
- Recommended: Belliotti, Happiness is Overrated, Ch. 1, Sec. 4, pp. 21-28.
- Thomas Nagel, “Death.”
- Charles Taylor, “The Sting of Death: Why We Yearn for Eternity.”

6/3  5. Stoicism: Embracing Your Fate by Way of Apatheia (Freedom from Unhealthy Passions)

- Epictetus, The Handbook (The Encheiridion)
- Recommended: Belliotti, Happiness is Overrated, Ch. 1, Sec. 5, pp. 28-32.
- Stoicism as a Contemporary Option: An outline based on William Irvine’s A Guide to the Good Life: the Ancient Art of Stoic Joy
6/5


• “Sermon on the Mount,” Matthew 5-7 from The New Testament.

• Sigmund Freud, "On the Inclination Towards Aggression," from Civilization and its Discontents.

• Martin Luther King, Jr., "On Being a Good Neighbor."

• Summary: McMahon, Ch. 2, Happiness: A History, pp. 66-139.

II. Modernity and its Discontents

A. In Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity, Charles Taylor writes:

“According to traditional, Aristotelian ethics, ‘ordinary life’ – the life of production and the family – was important as the necessary background and support to ‘the good life’ defined by the ‘higher’ activities of contemplation and citizenship. With the Reformation, we find a modern, Christian-inspired sense that ordinary life was on the contrary the very center of the good life. The life of the God-fearing was lived out in marriage and their calling. The previous ‘higher’ forms of life were dethroned. And along with this went frequently an attack on the elites who had made these forms their province. (13-14)

By the eighteenth century a new model of civility emerges, in which the life of commerce and acquisition gains an unprecedentedly positive place... The ‘bourgeois ethic’ has obvious leveling consequences, and no one can be blind to the tremendous role it has played in constituting modern liberal society through the founding revolutions with their ideals of equality, their sense of universal right, their work ethic, and their exaltation of sexual love and the family. The main strands of revolutionary thought – most notably, Marxism – have also exalted man as producer: one who finds his highest dignity in labor and the transformation of nature in the service of life.”

(214-5)

B. At the end of “Part One: The Making of a Modern Faith” in his book, Happiness: A History, Darrin McMahon concludes:

“On the whole, the momentum of modern culture has been in the direction of earthly content, accompanied by a steadily expanding sense of prerogative, entitlement, means and due. Do we not feel today that all human beings, in the best of possible worlds, deserve to be happy? In our lives and in our loves, in our work and in our play, in sickness and in health, happiness draws with omnipresent force, a force that is all the more compelling for our inability ever to clearly conceive it, and its own protean power to shape itself in keeping with our projected desires. As philosopher Pascal Bruckner has aptly observed, “happiness has become the sole horizon of our democracies,” a vision that for many is the measure of all things. Whereas for most men and women at the dawn of the modern age, God was happiness, happiness has become our God.”

Rousseau’s belief that a higher happiness could be found here on earth proved to be a stubborn – and very modern faith. But it collided time and again with the hard realities of
life in the modern world. Even in those places like the United States, where the pursuit of
happiness was treated as an individual responsibility and choice, the end could demand
means that threatened to subvert it, transforming the smiling face into a sullen frown.
Happiness, we might say, has proved a taskmaster as hard, at times, as the God it sought
to replace. (267)

6/8 7. The Modern Enlightenment: Bourgeois Happiness – and Disillusionment

- Read quotations above by Charles Taylor and Darrin McMahon
- John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, brief selection.
- Recommended: Bellioti, Happiness is Overrated, Ch. 2, Secs. 3 and 4, pp. 53-61.
- Bernard Reginster, “Happiness as a Faustian Bargain”
- Recommended Summary: McMahon, Happiness: A History, pp. 267-453

6/10 8. Modern Bourgeois Happiness and the Specter of “Meaninglessness”

- Summary of the Historical Narrative of our Course So Far:
  Darrin McMahon, “What Does the Ideal of Happiness Mean?”
- Pascal Bruckner, “Condemned to Joy”
- Zygmunt Bauman, “Happiness in a Society of Individuals”
- William Deresiewicz, “The End of Solitude”
- Chris Lebron, “The Inheritance of Disaffection”


- Four Thought-Experiments on Happiness and the Meaning of Life
- Susan Wolf, “Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life”
- Bellioti, Happiness Is Overrated, Ch. 5, Secs. 4-8, pp. 140-167


- Susan Wolf, “The Importance of Love”
- Hi Phi podcast: “A Better Love” (47 minutes)
  https://hiphination.org/complete-season-one-episodes/episode-10-a-better-love/
- Recommended: TED talks on the topic of love – Pick at least one to watch...
  https://www.ted.com/topics/love
III. Contributions from Contemporary Psychology

6/17 11. The Positive Psychology Movement and Some Critics

- Peter Salovey, “Yale Convocation Address to First-Years, 2007.” [https://president.yale.edu/speeches-writings/speeches/pursuit-happiness](https://president.yale.edu/speeches-writings/speeches/pursuit-happiness)
- Eric G. Wilson, “In Praise of Melancholy”
- Barbara Ehrenreich, “Pathologies of Hope”
- Adam Phillips, “A Psychoanalyst’s View of Happiness Addiction”
- Doris Iarovici, “The Antidepressant Generation”

6/19 12. Am I Happy So Long As I’m “Satisfied with My Life”? 


IV. Rethinking Happiness During the 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic

6/22 13. Can and Should We Be Happy in a Time of Pandemic?

• “We Are Grieving the World We Have Now Lost”: YouTube Interview with David Kessler (15:38)
  [webpage](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/amanpour-and-company/video/grief-expert-we-are-grieving-the-world-we-have-now-lost/)
• Emily Afshahani Smith, “On Coronavirus Lockdown, Look for Meaning, not Happiness,” NYT
  [link](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/opinion/coronavirus-mental-health.html)
  [link](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/opinion/coronavirus-meaning.html)
• Madeleine Albright, “The Best Response to Disaster is Resilience,” NYT, 4/12/20.
  [link](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/12/opinion/madeleine-albright-coronavirus.html)
  [link](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/opinion/coronavirus-mental-health.html)
• “Happiness Lab” with Laurie Santos: Coronavirus Bonus
  [link](https://www.happinesslab.fm/coronavirus-bonus)
• “Ten Percent Happier”: Coronavirus Sanity Guide
  [link](https://www.tenpercent.com/coronavirussanityguide)

6/24  14. Life and Wisdom from the Big Picture Perspective: Individual and Species

  • [link](https://magazine.nd.edu/stories/the-symphony-of-a-lifetime/)
• Robert Pollack, “Rethinking Our Vision of Success,” EdgeCast, 10/10/2019. (30 minutes)
  • [link](https://edgecast.fireside.fm/558)

6/26  15. Our Final Day: Presentation of your final paper to the class. And fare well!!

• Your 8-10 page paper (approximately 2,500 words) is due at the beginning of the final day of class. No late papers will be accepted. By the requirements of the Summer Session, all work must be completed and turned in on 6/26/2020. Our last class – Friday, June 26 – will be a virtual “party” where you'll give a short, five-minute presentation letting the class know the central question, thesis and argument of your paper.