

Phil 251: Happiness and the Good Life

Course Information

Instructor: Dr. [Anna Brinkerhoff](#)

- Email: abrinke@gmu.edu
- Office Hours: By appointment

Location: Virtual

Synchronous Zoom Sessions: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 3:00p – 4:15p EST

Link to Zoom Meetings

<https://gmu.zoom.us/j/91691335002>

Course Description

This course is an introduction to central philosophical issues and arguments regarding happiness, well-being, and the good life. It has two units. In the first unit, we'll consider questions related to the nature of happiness and well-being:

- Is happiness just a state of mind? An emotion? Or something else?
- What about well-being? Are things like health, happiness, and friendship necessary for well-being? Are they sufficient? Does whether or not something is good for you depend on your attitude towards that thing? Or is it attitude-independent?
- What's the relationship between happiness and well-being?

In the second unit, we'll consider questions related to the normative dimension of happiness and well-being, and how they contribute to a good life:

- Can a morally vicious person be happy? Is the best life the *morally* best life?
- Is life absurd? If not, what makes a life meaningful?
- Is death bad for us? Would an immortal life be better than our mortal one?
- What does well-being over a lifetime look like?
- How should we think about well-being from a feminist perspective? From an animal rights perspective? From the perspective of people who are disabled?
- What aspects of well-being should governments promote? To what extent is government paternalism justified in order to promote citizens' well-being?
- Is engaging with social media good or bad for us? How about accumulating wealth?
- How should we approach life's hard choices?

By the end of this course, you will be able to clearly communicate key positions on central issues in the philosophy of happiness and well-being (both orally and in writing), reconstruct and critically evaluate arguments about these issues, and develop your own, original arguments about them.

Course Materials

Access to high-speed internet, Zoom, and Blackboard are required for this course. You do not need to buy any texts for this course. You can access all required reading materials through our course site on Blackboard.

Diversity, Accessibility & Accommodation

I strive to make this course a welcoming place for all perspectives, where all students are treated as valued and respected members of the class community regardless of gender, sex, ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual identity, socioeconomic background, or ability. Please reach out to me

early in the term if you have a condition, religious commitment, or extenuating circumstance that might require accommodations or modification of any of the course procedures.

Course Grades and Requirements

Course Grades will be based on the following components:

- Attendance 5%
- Participation 5%
- Reading Summaries 20%
- Midterm Paper 30%
- Final Paper 35%
- Peer Review Exercise 5%

Attendance: You are required to attend synchronous Zoom sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays *with your camera on*. You are expected to arrive on time and stay for the duration of the session. You are allowed three absences without penalty, no questions asked. For any absence over 3, your attendance grade will be lowered by 10%. For any session that you do miss, you are expected to watch the Zoom recording of that session (which can be found on our course site on Blackboard).

Participation: This is a discussion-based course and so informed and respectful participation is expected. In order to earn full participation credit, you are expected to (1) regularly engage with your fellow students during small group discussion in breakout rooms and (2) on average, proactively contribute at least twice a week in whole-class discussions by asking clarifactory questions, answering my questions, responding directly to another student's comment, or reporting back what was discussed in break out rooms. If you strongly prefer not to speak up in whole-class discussion, I understand! You can instead earn participation credit by doing at least two of the following each week: ask a question or make a comment via the chat function on Zoom, email me or talk with me during office hours about that week's reading, or make an extra contribution to the discussion board for that week's readings on Blackboard. About half way through the semester, I will provide give you a preliminary participation grade so that you can gauge how you are doing.

Reading Summaries: I'll assign regular readings – usually between 10 to 20 pages. You will need to do each assigned reading carefully, preferably more than once. To hold you accountable for doing the readings, I expect you to write up a summary for each required reading. Summaries should be short (100-200 words). Summaries for a given day's reading must be posted on the relevant discussion forum on Blackboard before the start of class (3:00p). Late posts will not be accepted. You will be able to see each other's summaries only after you post your own. For each missed post over 2, your reading summaries grade will be lowered by up to 10%. If you miss a reading summary post, you will still be expected to complete the reading at some point before the end of the relevant unit.

Papers: You will write two short philosophy papers for this course. The midterm paper is on a reading from unit 1, and the final paper is on a reading from unit 2. Papers should be around 1200 words, but no less than 1000 and no more than 1500. For each paper, you will choose any one of the assigned readings in the relevant units to write on. Around half of each paper should be devoted to clearly, accurately, and charitably presenting one of the author's arguments. The other half of the paper should be devoted to your own original philosophical evaluation of that argument. The due dates for the papers are Friday, March 11 (midterm paper) and Friday, May 13 (final paper). Papers are to be submitted on Blackboard by 11:59pm on the due date. A few weeks before the mid-term paper is due, I will be hosting a writing workshop during class time to teach mid-term how to write a philosophy paper step-by-step. You will have the opportunity to rewrite the first paper in light of my feedback. If you turn in a rewrite, the recorded grade for that paper will be the average of the grades of your original paper and your rewrite. Because of time constrains, I will not be able to give extensive comments on your final papers.

Peer Review Exercise: For your final papers, you will complete a peer review exercise with a classmate. I will provide you with guidelines on how to provide feedback. You may request a certain classmate as your partner by emailing me on or before Wednesday, April 13. Students who have not submitted a partner request will be randomly assigned a partner. You will email a draft of your final paper to your partner (cc Anna) by Friday, April 29. You will then have one week to comment on / edit your partner's paper. You will send your partner your feedback via email (cc Anna) by Friday, May 6. You are expected to meet with you partner sometime on or before Tuesday, May 10 to discuss each other's feedback. You will have until Friday, May 13 to revise your paper in light of your partner's feedback.

Course Policies

Zoom Recordings: All synchronous sessions will be recorded to accommodate students unable to attend particular meetings. Recordings will be stored on Blackboard and will only be accessible to students taking this course during this semester. You are prohibited from making your own recordings or sharing access to recordings.

Camera-On: You are required have your cameras on during Zoom sessions when possible. Having your camera regularly turned off can negatively affect your attendance grade. If you have good reason to have your camera off during class sessions, please reach out to me at the beginning of the semester to discuss accommodations.

One-On-One Meetings: During the first couple of weeks, I would very much like to meet one-on-one with each student. I have set up a sign-up sheet on google docs, which you can access by [clicking here](#). Meeting with me is not a requirement but is highly encouraged. Those who meet one-on-one with me will get an extra (third) freebie for reading summaries.

Email: The best way to contact me is by email (abrinke@gmu.edu). On weekdays, I typically respond to emails within 24 hours. I do not typically respond to emails over weekends.

Late Work: All assignments are due on dates and times indicated on the syllabus. Late reading summaries will not be accepted. Late papers may be deducted 5% for each day after the due date they are submitted. If you need an extension on a paper, please ask *before* the assignment is due.

Office Hours: Although I will not be holding office hours during a pre-set time each week, I am more than happy to chat with you over Zoom about course content, paper ideas, any struggles you may be having in the course, or philosophy in general. Just email me to set up a time to meet.

Addressing me: Please feel free to call me "Anna." My last name is a mouth-full!

Academic Integrity: All work you submit for this course should be original, and you should be sure to cite any sources used. Academic integrity is violated if one of the following occurs: plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, egregious misquotation, or facilitation of academic dishonesty. Any suspected violation of academic integrity will be referred to and processed by GMU's Office of Academic Integrity.

Course Schedule

This schedule is subject to change.

Italicized readings are optional (not required) but recommended. No summary is required for optional readings.

Important deadlines are highlighted in blue.

Unit 1: The Nature of Happiness and Well-being

Course Introduction

Tuesday, January 25: Syllabus Day (no reading)

Thursday, January 27: Crash Course on Arguments (no reading)

What is the nature of happiness?

Tuesday, February 1: Haybron, "Pleasure"

Thursday, February 3: Haybron, "Life Satisfaction"

Tuesday, February 8: Haybron, "Emotional State"

Thursday, February 10: Haybron, "Psychic Affirmation"

What is the nature of well-being?

Tuesday, February 15: 9.1 – 9.2 of Tiberius, "Prudential Value: Objective Theories"

Thursday, February 17: 9.3 – 9.4 of Tiberius, "Prudential Value: Subjective Theories"

Tuesday, February 22: Woodard, "Hybrid Theories"

Writing Workshop!

Thursday, February 24: Pryor, "Guidelines for Writing a Philosophy Paper"

What's the connection between happiness and well-being?

Tuesday, March 1: Badhwar, "Happiness and Wellbeing"

Unit 2: Happiness, Well-being, and the Good Life

Do you have to be morally virtuous in order to be happy?

Thursday, March 3: Cahn, "The Happy Immoralist" & Response

Is the best life the *morally* best life?

Tuesday, March 8: Wolf, "Moral Saints"

Is life absurd? If not, what makes a life meaningful?

Thursday, March 10: Nagel, "The Absurd"

*Friday, March 11 – Midterm Paper Due

Tuesday, March 15: NO CLASS – Spring Break

Thursday, March 17: NO CLASS – Spring Break

Tuesday, March 22: Wolf, "Meaningfulness"

Is death bad for the one who dies?

Thursday, March 24: Nagel, "Death"

Would an immortal life be better than a mortal one?

Tuesday, March 29: Ismael, "Death"

What does well-being over a lifetime look like?

Thursday, March 31: Velleman, "Well-being and time"

How should we think about well-being from the perspective of feminism? Non-human animals? People with Disabilities?

Tuesday, April 5: Holroyd, "Feminism and Wellbeing"

Thursday, April 7: NO CLASS – Anna's away

Tuesday, April 12: NO CLASS – Anna’s away

*Wednesday, April 13 - Deadline to Email Anna Peer Review Partner Preference:

Thursday, April 14: Rice, “Animals and Wellbeing”

Tuesday, April 19: Barnes, “Creating Disability; Valuing Disability”

What aspects of well-being should the government promote?

Thursday, April 21: Nussbaum, “Creating Capabilities”

To what extent (if any) is government paternalism justified?

Tuesday, April 26: Flanigan, “Seat Belt Mandates and Paternalism”

Does engaging with social media promote or undermine well-being? How about wealth?

Thursday, April 28: Franzen, “Liking is for Cowards” & Singer, “Happiness, Money, and Giving it Away”

*Friday, April 29: Draft Due to Peer Review Partner

What’s the best way to approach life’s hard choices?

Tuesday, May 3: Chang, [Hard Choices](#) (YouTube video)

Thursday, May 5: Course wrap-up (no reading)

*Friday, May 6: Feedback Due to Peer Review Partner

*Friday, May 13: Final Paper Due