

Syllabus: Phil 251 (Spring 2024)

Instructor: Sophia Pavlos, Ph.D.

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Office Hours: by appointment

Class Modality: ONLINE MW 1200-1315

Required Readings:

- **Albert Camus' *The Stranger***
- **Recommended version:** <https://www.amazon.com/Stranger-Albert-Camus>
- For those that would prefer to print it, you can find a PDF here: <https://www.slps.org>
- All the remaining readings will be available on Blackboard. **You must have this material available during class. Printed materials are highly encouraged.**

Course Description:

Chances are, you have some vision of how you want your life to go. Maybe you dream of having a certain career, finding success in work and relationships, garnering the respect and recognition of those important to you. Many of our actions seemed aimed at some notion of a meaningful life, and yet so often we find ourselves disappointed in our search for happiness. This course surveys core philosophical principles that shape contemporary understandings of “the good life” and the meaning of happiness. While boasting near universal appeal, happiness is surprisingly difficult to define, let alone achieve. Is it a feeling? A state? An illusion? To what extent is happiness within or outside the individual’s control? How do we define and measure happiness, and should we even seek it in the first place? These questions and more will be explored through interdisciplinary texts and cultural artifacts.

Course Structure:

Class meetings will be via Zoom, at the times specified (above), on the dates specified in the course schedule (below). It is expected that all students enrolled in the course will attend all Zoom lectures associated with this course—i.e., attend the Zoom class (on time). You can access the zoom link via Blackboard. We will use the same link for the entirety of the semester.

Grading Breakdown:

Assignment	Percent worth each	Total percent worth
Intro Self Assessment	10%	10%
Reading Responses	10%	30%
Midterm Project	20%	20%
Final Project	20%	20%
Participation	20%	20%

<i>Total</i>		<i>100%</i>
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Self Assessment

You will complete this after the first day of class. It will serve as a reference point to see the evolution of your perspective and understanding about the course's themes.

Reading Responses

These assignments can be found on Blackboard under the weekly module. You will have a reading response assignment for 3 of our class readings. They will comprise of short answer, long answer, true/false and multiple choice questions, and are expected to be completed before attending the class the reading is assigned for.

Midterm Project

For your midterm, you will be building a collaborative playlist with your classmates centered on the theme of the 'good life.'

Final Project

The final project will be a thought experiment which incorporates the themes of the semester. Information will be disclosed by the instructor.

Participation

This is a discussion-based class. You are expected to come to class ready to participate fully in class discussion. You should have prepared the material and have something to say about it. Participating involves engaging in a conversation with your classmates. You should pay attention to what others are saying and be ready to respond to others' comments. Your observations should contribute meaningfully to the dialogue in the class and help to produce a lively, useful discussion for everyone.

You will receive a participation grade based on these criteria.

None: You never participate, are not engaged, do not appear to be paying attention.

Half: You are engaged in the class when you attend, you answer questions in class and demonstrate that you have absorbed the material when asked.

Full: You attend all class sessions. You make valuable contributions to class that engage with the comments of your peers and encourage others to participate in a useful dialogue. You do not dominate conversation but seek to raise the level and interest of the class as a whole.

TLDR: Attend class. Be on time. Come prepared having done all assigned work/reading. Contribute vocally to class discussion. Have your camera on whenever possible.

Grade Values:

A: 94-100 **A-:** 90-93

B+: 87-89 **B:** 84-86 **B-:** 80-83

C+: 77-79 **C:** 74-76 **C-:** 70-73

D+: 67-69 **D:** 64-66 **D-:** 60-63

F: 59 and below.

Course Policies:**Grading:**

All assignments receive full credit if they follow the instructions and showcase engagement and effort. I will not grade you based off of your thoughts, or whether I agree/disagree with your argument. Instead, I am looking for evidence that you have put effort into the assignment, and that you are creatively engaging with the course themes and concepts.

Submission of Work and Extensions:

All required work shall be submitted on Blackboard. It is your responsibility to ensure that you can access a computer with internet in time to submit your assignments. If a student is having difficulty meeting any deadline, they should contact the instructor to get accommodation. Extensions are possible.

Two things must be made explicit:

- (1) All course work must be submitted to Blackboard
- (2) No work will be accepted after final grades have been submitted.

Academic Misconduct:

Students are expected to be familiar with the university's regulations concerning behavior and academic integrity. If a student is caught plagiarizing on any assignment, the student will receive a mark of zero on the assignment and reported to the Dept. Chair. The take-away: *research and cite, don't plagiarize.*

It should also be observed that some kinds of participation in online study sites violate the Mason Honor code: these include accessing exam or quiz questions for this class; accessing exam, quiz, or assignment answers for this class; uploading of any of the instructor's materials or exams; and uploading any of your own answers or finished work. Always consult your syllabus and your professor before using these sites.

Attendance and Zoom Policies:

It is expected that students who are enrolled in the course will attend and participate in all Zoom lectures associated with this course. It must be observed that philosophy is non-reducible a soliloquy delivered to an empty room—virtual or otherwise. For this reason, students are encouraged to participate in the discussions (which will occur during every class meeting). If, in the unfortunate event that a student cannot attend a lecture, the student is responsible to become aware of all information presented.

As a matter of best practice, it is requested that when a student is raising a discussion point, that they turn on their camera. Also, it must be observed that the impersonal nature of online learning—and the alienation associated with Zoom in particular—tends to be diminished when participants have their cameras on when they are actively participating with the class. Further, the professor enjoys when students use the various Zoom “reactions” during lectures.

Commitment to Diversity:

It is essential that to recognize the fundamental value of diversity. In this course, we recognize the morally heinous effects of the fraught history of immiseration that has traumatized members of marginalized groups. Here, we welcome and celebrate individual difference. This includes—but is not limited to—recognition of differences of race, ethnicity, religious belief, gender expression, indigenous and first nation status, socio-economic status, age, and ability.

In concrete terms, this means that we respect the views of others, refrain from behaviours that might stymie the expression of others, or otherwise diminish the quality of the lived experience of those with whom we share this space of learning.

Sexual and Interpersonal Forms of Violence:

George Mason University is committed to providing a learning, living and working environment that is free from discrimination and a campus that is free of sexual misconduct and other acts of interpersonal violence in order to promote community well-being and student success. We encourage students and employees who believe that they have been sexually harassed, sexually assaulted or subjected to sexual or interpersonal misconduct to seek assistance and support. University Policy 1202: Sexual Harassment and Misconduct speaks to the specifics of Mason’s process, the resources, and the options available to students and employees. The policy can be found here: (<https://universitypolicy.gmu.edu/policies/sexual-harassment-policy/>).

Special Needs:

This instructor is committed to providing reasonable accommodation and access to programs and services to persons with disabilities. If you self-identify as perhaps desiring accommodation, then please contact the instructor at your convenience.

Further, this instructor recognizes that principles associated with equity are of great importance during these fraught times. Historical, intergenerational, and socio-economic immiseration of marginalized groups is an aspect of our shared reality. If a student self identifies as desiring accommodation, please reach out to the instructor to discuss remedies. If any aspect of this course is unduly stressing a student (for any reason whatsoever), please reach out to the instructor for accommodation.

It is important to observe that Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students by upholding the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. If you are seeking accommodations for this class, please first visit <http://ds.gmu.edu/> for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Then please discuss your approved accommodations with me. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: ods@gmu.edu | Phone: (703) 993-2474.

Further, Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to upholding the letter and spirit of the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. Under the administration of University Life, Disability Services implements and coordinates reasonable accommodations and disability-related services that afford equal access to university programs and activities. Students can begin the registration process with Disability Services at any time during their enrollment at George Mason University.

If you are seeking accommodations, please visit <http://ds.gmu.edu/> for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: ods@gmu.edu | Phone: (703) 993-2474

Resources for Students:

George Mason University offers a plurality of resources to assist students. A complete list of these can be found here:

<https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/knowledge-center/knowning-mason-students/student-support-resources-on-campus/>

***This syllabus and reading schedule are subject to revision.**

Reading Schedule:

1.17 — *First Day of Class/ Introduction to the Good Life*

Homework: self-assessment survey (to be completed on Blackboard)

1.22 — Daniel Haybron, *The Nature and Significance of Happiness*

Q: Which of the three definitions of happiness appeals to you the most?

1.24 — Susan Wolf. "Moral Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol.79 No.8, Aug 1982 + Watch: *The Good Place*, season 3 episode 8

Q: Can someone be too good?

1.29 — Santos, L. R. & Gendler, T. S. (2015). *Knowing is not half the battle*. In M. J. Brockman (Ed.) *This Idea Must Die: Scientific Theories that are Blocking Progress*. New York: Harper Collins. 314-316.

Q: How can we apply the GI Joe fallacy to happiness?

1.31 — Watch Dan Gilbert's TED Talk "Surprising Science of Happiness" https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_asks_why_are_we_happy?

Q: Synthetic or natural — which is more accessible?

*2.5 — Kurtz, J. L., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). *Towards a durable happiness*. In S. J. Lopez & J. G. Rettew (Eds.), *The Positive Psychology Perspective Series* (Vol. 4). Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group. 21-36

Q: What does science add to an investigation of happiness?

2.7 — *The Happiness Calculator/* <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/kwh96n?fbclid=IwAR3nzwemQvKIdzeL2QSGwVAKFEijx8AmqrhDUE7-rzVFIdDLIipLZ52M-8U>

Q: What are the happiest words? What are the least happy words?

2.12 — Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics Book 1 excerpts*

Q: Is being a good person necessary for happiness?

2.14 — Stoicism/ *Handbook of Epictetus*

Q: How might Epictetus' personal history impact his philosophy?

2.19 — *Pessimism/ Schopenhauer excerpts*

Q: Is suffering inevitable?

2.21 — *Midterm assigned*

2.26 — **NO CLASS/ midterm work**

2.28 — *Midterm debrief*

3.4 — **NO CLASS**

3.6 — **NO CLASS**

*3.11 — *Sarah Ahmed, “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness”*

Q: What does power have to do with happiness?

3.13 — *From Chili-Eating Contests To Ultramarathons, Why Do We Seek Pain For Pleasure?*
<https://the1a.org/segments/from-chili-eating-contests-to-ultramarathons-why-do-we-seek-pain-for-pleasure/>

Q: How does masochism subvert the hedonistic definition of happiness?

3.18 — *Albert Camus, The Stranger Part 1*

Q: What is the role of the sun in the narrative?

3.20 — *Albert Camus, The Stranger Part 2*

Q: Why does Camus focus on the absurdity of Mersault’s experience during the trial?

3.25 — *Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “If We Are So Rich, Why Aren’t We Happy?” American Psychologist, October 1999*

Q: What is the relationship between money and a good life?

3.27 — *Kohn, A. (1993). “How’m I Doin’” (pp. 155-159) & “The Straight-A Student: A Cautionary Tale” (pp. 203-205). Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.*

Q: How have you been conditioned through school?

4.1 — *Andy Beckett, “Post-Work: The Radical Idea of a World Without Jobs,” The Guardian, January 19, 2018*

Q: Do you need a purpose to have a good life?

4.3 — *Matthew Crawford, "Work, Leisure, and Full Engagement," in Shop Class as Soulcraft*

Q: Is the model of work offered by Crawford accessible?

4.8 — *Aristotle Book 8 excerpts*

Q: Can you be happy all by yourself?

4.10 — *Lyubormirsky, S. (2014) "Part 1: Connections" (pp. 15-16) and "I'll Be Happy When... I'm Married to the Right Person" (pp. 17-33). The Myths of Happiness: What Should Make You Happy, but Doesn't, What Shouldn't Make You Happy, but Does. New York: Penguin Press.*

Q: Do you need a romantic partner to be happy?

*4.15 — *Maria Lugones, "Playfulness, world-traveling and loving perception"*

Q: Why does Lugones start with a personal narrative about her mother?

4.17 — *Lugones cont.*

Q: Have you ever had an experience of shifting between constructions of yourself?

4.22 — *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

Q: How can we bring together the two very different narratives offered in this article?

4.24 — *TBA (class choice)*

4.29 — *Final Project Assigned*

5.1-8 Final Project Due (see final exam schedule)

* marks readings that will have a corresponding reading response assignment (to be completed on Blackboard)