

HUMS 411: LIFE WORTH LIVING

Course Description

What does it mean for a life to go well? What would it look like for a life to be *lived* well? In short, what shape would a life worth living take? We will explore these questions through engagement with the lives and visions of founding figures from seven diverse traditions of imagining a good life: the Buddha, the Torah and the Hebrew prophetic and wisdom writers, Jesus of Nazareth, Muhammad, John Stuart Mill, and Friedrich Nietzsche. The course will also feature visits from contemporary individuals who understand their lives to be shaped by the traditions in question.

Course Questions

- a. To whom or what are we responsible for living our lives a certain way?
- b. What is a human being and what is their place in the world?
- c. What does it mean for life:
 - i. to feel good? (And does it matter? Might the life worth living be miserable?)
 - ii. to go well? What is important in terms of life's circumstances?
 - iii. to be led well? What do we need to *do* in order to *lead* a life worth living?
- d. What is the role of suffering in a good life? How should we respond to suffering, our own and others'?
- e. What should we do when we fail to live a good life?

Assignments and Evaluation

All written assignments should be submitted in pdf format via Canvas assignments. Late papers will receive a grade reduction of one step (e.g., from A- to B+) for each day or part of a day that they are late.

1. 750 word (maximum) paper analyzing the vision(s) of a life worth living that the Yale community advocates or implicitly endorses. **Due March 12 by 11:59pm.** (20 percent of final grade)
2. 1000 word (maximum) paper analyzing the vision(s) of a life worth living that your peers (a) espouse and (b) adhere to de facto. The espoused vision and the adhered-to vision may or may not be the same. Specify which set of peers (e.g., college classmates, young adults in a particular culture or subculture, etc.) you will discuss. **Due April 2 by 11:59pm.** (20 percent of final grade)
3. 1250 word (maximum) paper outlining your own personal vision of a life worth living. **Draft due April 30 by 11:59pm. Final draft due by the end of reading period.** (30 percent of final grade)
4. *Reading responses.* There will be short, in-class reading responses due every day of class. There will also be five longer, more summative reading response assignments to help you synthesize what you have been learning. (10 percent of final grade).

5. *Participation.* One purpose of a seminar like this one is to provide the opportunity for dialogical learning, not only between students and faculty, but also intrapersonally. Consequently, the quality of your participation in class greatly influences the relative success or failure of this course. Accordingly, your participation will be assessed. But since the goal is a flourishing seminar, not a competition for “participation points,” participation cannot be reduced to “saying smart things frequently.” You’ll need to put some time, thought, and energy into how you yourself might cultivate a life worth living. In order to help monitor this crucial component of the course, you will submit periodical self-assessments of your progress and participation, both inside and outside of the class. In particular, you will be asked to complete six Learning Portfolio assignments, designed to be an iterative attempt at constructing your own vision of a life worth living. (20 percent of final grade)

NB: There will be a **virtual retreat Saturday, February 20, 2021**. While accommodations will be made for students unable to attend due to religious commitments, otherwise participation in the course retreat is expected of all students. (Students in previous years have described the retreat as a highlight of the course as a whole!)

Course Policies

Attendance at all synchronous meetings is expected except in case of emergencies. Unexcused absences from the seminar will result in a reduction of the final course grade.

Readings

Readings are available on the “Umbrella” Canvas site for the course.

Schedule of Meetings

This course includes “1 HTBA.” Most weeks, there will be specific asynchronous components of the course, noted below as “async” that account for this hour.

01. Introduction

February 1/2: Course Introduction
(Dates for MW/TTh)

Reading: Rob Riemen, *Nobility of Spirit: A Forgotten Ideal*, 83-96. (optional)

February 3/4: What is a Tradition?

Readings: Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Being in and Learning from Tradition,” *Confucian Reflections:*

Ancient Wisdom for Modern Times, 1-16.

[“Declaration of Independence”](#)

[“The Declaration of Sentiments,” Seneca Falls Conference](#)

Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” (excerpts)

[Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again”](#)

Async: The Tripartite Structure of the Good Life (optional lecture)

Feb 8/9: The Tripartite Structure of the Good Life (seminar)

Readings: Robert Nozick, “The Experience Machine,” *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 42-45.
Martha Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 359-366, 386-401.
“The Tripartite Formal Structure of Human Flourishing: A Hypothesis”

Feb 10/11: Implicit and Explicit Visions of the Good Life

Readings: James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 19-27, 93-103. (optional)
David Foster Wallace, “This is Water”

Async: Course Questions (optional lecture)

02. Utilitarianism

Feb 15/16: Utilitarianism & Happiness

Readings: John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 2 & pp. 198-201.
Peter Singer and Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek, “The Good Life—A Utilitarian Perspective” (optional)

Feb 17/18: Effective Altruism

Readings: Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save*, 3-41. (optional)
Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972):229-43.

Async: A Life Shaped by Utilitarianism (optional lecture)

Guest: Julia Wise

Watch lecture and submit questions for Q&A by Feb 18 @ 5pm
Watch Q&A and be prepared to discuss in next seminar session

03. Judaism

Feb 24/23: The Tanakh

Readings: Genesis 1-3, 9, 12:1-7; Deuteronomy 5-6; Leviticus 19:9-18; Psalm 100, 119:1-16; Isaiah 57:14-61:11
Optional readings: Genesis 17:1-17, 21:1-5; Deuteronomy 28; Job 1-7, 42; Amos 5:1-6:7

Mar 1/Feb 25: The Rabbis
Pirkei Avot, selections (commentary is optional)

Mar 3/2: Judaism, Work, & Rest (seminar)

Readings: Exodus 20; Lev 25. (optional)
Susannah and Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, vii-xvi (optional); 1-32; 95-101.
Jonathan Sacks, "If I Ruled the World," *Prospect*, July 18, 2013. (optional)
Jonathan Sacks, *Radical Then, Radical Now*, 130-135. (optional)

Asynch: A Life Shaped by Judaism (optional lecture)

Guest: Leah Sarna

Watch lecture and submit questions for Q&A by Mar 4 @ 5pm
Watch Q&A and be prepared to discuss in next seminar session

04. Yale's Vision of a Life Worth Living

Mar 8: Yale and the Good Life (seminar)

Readings: Dan Schawbel, *Me 2.0*, 1-22. (optional)
Pascal Bruckner, *Perpetual Euphoria*, selections
"Yale's Most Popular Class Ever," *New York Times*, Jan 26, 2018 (optional)
William Deresiewicz, "Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League"

Hartmut Rosa, “Two Versions of the Good Life and Two Forms of Fear,”
selections
Marina Keegan, “The Opposite of Loneliness” (optional)
Peter Salovey, “Repair the World!”
The Mission Statement of Yale College

Assignment: Reflection Paper 1 (Yale) due March 12 at 11:59pm.

05. Expressive Individualism

Mar 10/11: Origins of Expressive Individualism

Readings: Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Soliloquies*, 9, 26–48, 69–88.
Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” selections. (optional)

Mar 15/16: Authenticity

Readings: Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 25-53 (optional)
Susan Wolf, “The Meaning of Lives”

Mar 17/18: Self-Reflection, Self-Realization, Self-Expression (seminar)

Readings: Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 247–53.
———, *De profundis*, selections.

Async: Expressive Individualism in Popular Culture (optional lecture)

06. Christianity

Mar 22/23: New Testament

Readings: Mark
Matthew 5-7
John 14-17
Romans 5-8
Revelation 21-22

Async: A Life Shaped by Jesus (optional lecture)

Guest: Alysia Harris

Watch lecture and submit questions for Q&A by Mar 25 @ 5pm
Watch Q&A and be prepared to discuss in next seminar session

March 29/25: The Human Place in the World

Readings: Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love, selections
Miroslav Volf, "Epilogue," *Flourishing*, 195-206.

March 31/30: Christianity & Forgiveness (seminar)

Readings: Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 74-109. (optional)
Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 90-110.
Anne Lamott, *Hallelujah Anyway*, 3-19 and 141-157.

Async: Secular Faith (optional lecture)

Readings: Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*, "Natural and Spiritual Freedom," 173-211.

Submit questions for Q&A by April 1

Assignment: Reflection Paper 2 (peers) due April 2nd at 11:59pm.

07. Nietzsche

Apr 5/1: Friedrich Nietzsche

Readings: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, selections
———, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, selections
———, *Beyond Good and Evil*, selections

Apr 7/6: Nietzsche and Overcoming (seminar)

Readings: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, selections

08. Buddhism

Apr 12/13: The Buddha

Readings: *The Story of Gotama Buddha* (selections).
Life of the Buddha, 5.1-39, 14. (optional)
Wheel of Law (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta) (optional)

Apr 14/15: The Self, the World, and Compassion

Readings: Peter Harvey, "Theravāda Philosophy of Mind and the Person," *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings*, 265-274 (optional, though interesting)
[*Discourses of The Ancient Nuns \(Bhikkhuni-samyutta\)*](#), #10 only (Vajira)
Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, 123-126
The Dalai Lama, *How to See Yourself As You Really Are*, 32-38, 49-59, 67-73, 175-184, 201-208, 223-236

Async: A Life Shaped by the Buddha (optional lecture)

Guest: Geshe Darghey

Watch lecture and submit questions for Q&A by Apr 15 @ 5pm
Watch Q&A and be prepared to discuss in next seminar session

Apr 19/20: Buddhism and Food (seminar)

Readings: The Dalai Lama, "Compassion for All Sentient Beings," *Religious Vegetarianism*, 87-91.
(More texts TBA)

09. Islam

April 21/22: The Way of Islam

Readings: Asad Tarsin, *Being Muslim: A Practical Guide*, 1-16, 155-163, 217-225
Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittack, *The Vision of Islam*, 175-181
Recitation of the opening Surah of the Quran by Abdul Rahman Al-Ossi ([link](#))

April 26/27: The Human Place in the World

Readings: Hamza Yusuf and Zaid Shakir, *Agenda to Change Our Condition*, 1-2.
Asad Tarsin, *Being Muslim: A Practical Guide*, 4-5 (from session 1), 17-35
Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittack, *The Vision of Islam*, 120-131

April 28/29: Prayer (seminar)

Readings: Hamza Yusuf and Zaid Shakir, *Agenda to Change Our Condition*, 40-46.
Asad Tarsin, *Being Muslim*, 44-73.
Martin Nguyen, *Modern Muslim Theology*, 155-180

Async: A Life Shaped by Islam (optional lecture)

Guest: Mohamad Hafez

Watch lecture and submit questions for Q&A by Apr 29 @ 5pm
Watch Q&A and be prepared to discuss in next seminar session

10. Conclusion

Assignment: Draft of Reflection Paper 3 (personal) due April 30 at 11:59pm.

May 3/4: Wrap up

May 5/6: Wrap up

Final paper draft due end of reading period