Narrative

This course examines the question, “what is the good life?” beginning with Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*. Socrates’ defense of the examined life has been so influential that each of the three traditional ways to conceive of the good life—Happiness, Morality, and Meaning—may claim him as a forebear. After all, Socrates thought that the persistent examination of himself and others was good for his soul (38c) and offered the only path to happiness (*eudaimonia*). But he also thought that it was good for others that he philosophize, saying that he had a duty to stir them to pursue a better life (30d-e), an obligation he pursued without regard for the consequences (23c, cf. 31b-c). Finally, he argued that he alone had a divine mission to practice philosophy (30a; cf. 23b, 28e, 29d), having been singled out by the god through oracles and dreams to practice philosophy (21a-ff.; Phd 60e-61b).

The assigned texts and other media illustrate or defend some of the core commitments within each tradition. The main theoretical texts require students to extend their reflection on Socrates’ legacy. Other texts present disagreements within the tradition, or different approaches to the question, prompting students to deepen and refine their conception of that tradition. The wealth of non-theoretical works—biography, letters, music, poems, memoir, film, and novels—encourages students to connect principle and practice. Each unit features a key figure whose life captures something essential in each tradition: Beethoven (happiness) Mother Teresa (morality), and Paul Gauguin (meaning). Students will join together to identify features of the tradition in these lives and in the lives of other historical, fictional, and contemporary persons. Ultimately, the course challenges students to examine themselves and empowers them to search for their own answers to the enduring question.
The course materials and assignments invite students to enter a debate that crosses the three traditions and more than two millennia: Must the good life engage a variety of our skills and capacities (Aristotle)? Or is it best to focus on a single, most valuable feature of ourself (Stoicism)? Do we alone have the power to attain the good life (Kant)? Or do we require the cooperation of persons and things outside of our control (Mill, Hobbes)? Can we point to objective standards when aiming for the good life (Nussbaum)? Or is it uniquely particular and relative to a subjective standpoint (Nozick, Schmidtz)? Because their own lives are the most fundamental “text” in the course, students will also explore more pointed questions in class discussions and informal writing assignments: What is the good life for me? How can I attain it? How ought reason, emotion, and desire inform or guide my search? If one tradition is central to my conception of the good life, what is the role of the other two?

The Happiness tradition gives perhaps the most intuitive answer to the question of what is the good life. Aristotle, however, shows that ordinary conceptions of happiness fall short. The life of pleasure, or one devoted to amassing wealth or power, or even the life that seeks the honors of others—all fail to capture what happiness really is. For Aristotle, happiness is the virtuous activity of the human soul. This conception of the good life is applied by a contemporary scholar in her efforts to promote wellbeing in the developing world (Nussbaum). Other Happiness thinkers disagree with Aristotle’s concept and support a modified hedonism (Mill), or express pessimism about our prospect of ever attaining it (Schopenhauer).

The Happiness tradition has met with fierce criticism from the Morality tradition, especially Kant. Long before him, however, the Stoics argued forcefully against Aristotle. They reject his view that we require “equipment” (including friends and money) to live well. For them, chance neither makes nor wrecks our lives; instead, the keys to the good life are held by
the hands of reason and a morally-sound soul. Their austere perfectionism may seem remote to contemporary concerns. But the idea that we can only be harmed if we allow ourselves to be harmed still compels attention. So too the idea that we can transcend ourselves and connect to a source of genuine value, as such diverse thinkers as Confucius, Franklin, Wesley, and even Whitman hold.

The Meaning tradition emerged out of concern that theism no longer grounds our lives. Its earliest formulations in the 20th Century seek a secular alternative to sources of meaning provided within cultural or religious traditions, though theists have reasserted themselves (Tolstoy, Swenson). Both sides of this tradition argue, for different reasons, that a commitment to secular morality can be problematic. For nontheists, morality can make excessive demands on us, and the life lived according to its dictates can seem stunted or inhuman. And both sides of the Meaning tradition hold that the life of happiness is disconnected from values that genuinely motivate us. Nevertheless, some thinkers (Taylor, Nagel) make it seem that a meaningful life is almost impossible to achieve, while others (Nozick, Schmidtz) bring meaningfulness down to earth by making room for the subjectivity and particularity found in poetry (Doty, Ryan), memoir (Bauby), and an illustrated blog (Kalman).

**Nature of the Course:** This course is a first year seminar (FYS) required of all incoming first year students. Sixteen students meet twice a week in 80-minute class meetings. Since I am an historian of philosophy, this course is in many ways like other courses I teach where the focus is on primary texts in translation drawn from different historical periods; I also regularly teach courses (e.g., Aesthetics, Philosophy and Literature) that attract non-philosophers and encourage the use of interdisciplinary works, assignments, and pedagogies. I would use many of the same
techniques for keeping students engaged by the material: study questions and on-line discussion forums; brief, in-class group work and handouts; and a variety formal and informal writing assignments. Though I am tempted to use technology, as I have done in the past, to share our insights and conversations with a broader audience, I am concerned that the use of online tools such as blogs and wikis may inhibit first year students who tend to require a safe environment in which to discuss ideas that draw so closely on their personal experience. To be sure, the course is demanding, but no more than most courses at Wheaton where the standard load is four courses a semester. Moreover, a reasonable degree of rigor promotes cohesiveness and inter-reliance among students. This is fundamental to the intellectual community that this course seeks to build.

Assignments: Students will be trained to critically evaluate the arguments and assumptions of the authors, and they will write formal academic papers in which they analyze, compare and contrast, and finally synthesize positions studied in the course. They will also respond creatively to the ideas studied: producing letters in the urgent style of Seneca, dogmatic essays like Thoreau, or personal reflections that reach out to the lyricism of Whitman or the affecting subjectivity of Maira Kalman. The biographical and fictional works are a proving ground for the imagination, helping to make the ideas more concrete and promote discussion. Students can almost feel the significance of standing in one tradition rather than another when reading about how Huck Finn’s gut compels him to place friendship above the demands of morality, or how Stevens’ blind loyalty to the corrupt Lord Darlington destroys his chance to live well (*Remains of the Day*), or how Bauby courageously creates meaning in the wake of a horrifying injury (*Diving-Bell and the Butterfly*).
Throughout the semester, I will provide exercises so that groups of students may undertake, evaluate, and reflect on some of the recommendations emerging in the field of positive psychology. In this way, there will be an empirical dimension to the course, a chance for students to pursue strategies for living the good life and evaluate their success. Finally, there is funding at Wheaton to support a trip to the MFA in Boston to see Paul Gauguin’s self-proclaimed masterpiece, “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?” I believe that the blend of academic and experiential elements in the course will create an exceptional educational experience for the students. Moreover, because the FYS colors students’ initial impressions of Wheaton and shapes the choices they make going forward, the course promises to impact the students throughout their undergraduate experience.

FYS instructors serve as the academic adviser to each student in the course, providing a built-in mechanism for evaluation. The out-of-class presence of two student preceptors and one administrative mentor allows for additional opportunities for feedback. There are robust mid-year and end-of-year evaluations of all FYS courses, and students’ ungraded, informal writing about their significant assignments will be collected and analyzed as an additional measure of the success of the course. Finally, the use of questionnaires from Seligman’s Authentic Happiness website (http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx) will help students gage the quality of their lives. They may even be able to determine whether their lives were improved after taking the course!

Plan of Work: I will teach the course first in Fall 2011 and then again in Spring 2013 (to students admitted in January 2013). Course preparation begins June 2011, starting with the Stoic and Eastern sources on the “Bibliography of Works,” which lists works for me to consult when
preparing a final syllabus. I will also work through the biographical and other non-theoretical works on the bibliography and the “Preliminary Course Syllabus” in order to integrate them into the more traditionally philosophical parts of the syllabus. In addition, I will dedicate sufficient time and resources in the summer of 2011 to further investigate my interest in positive psychology and to devise activities that promote good lives. In January 2012, I will assess the course by conducting exit interviews with my students, who are my advisees until they declare their major. Summer 2012 is the time for adjusting assignments, where necessary, and I will complete the assessment of the course in May 2013.

**Faculty Preparation:** My interest in these topics is both personal and professional, and it is difficult to pull one part from the other. Professionally, my research centers on the interpersonal and religious dimensions of Plato’s thought. As a teacher, I have been fortunate that Wheaton values my passion for teaching. It has supported my effort to facilitate a residential living and learning community, create courses that respond to students’ interests in new perspectives or theoretical frameworks, and to enhance existing courses with a view to our innovative Connections curriculum. Personally, the support of this grant at a moment when I am early mid-career is difficult to overstate. The Enduring Questions grant would support a fundamental transformation of my approach to pedagogy and to my ability to use non-philosophical and non-Western sources. Not only would I continue to offer this FYS course every two to three years, I would be empowered to take risks in existing courses and in courses yet to be designed. In short, the Enduring Questions grant would provide the support, “laboratory,” and direction for me to make enormous strides in realizing Wheaton’s central mission of transforming lives.
Bibliography of Works


Belshaw, Christopher, 10 Good Questions about Life and Death (Blackwell 2005).


Dreyfus, Hubert and Sean Kelly, All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age (Free Press, 2011).


Gauguin, Paul, Intimate Journals (Dover, 1997).


Gilbert, Daniel (Producer), This Emotional Life (2010) [DVD]

Gill, Michael (Producer), Paul Gauguin: The Savage Dream (1988) [VHS]

Grabsky, Phil (Director), In Search of Beethoven (2009) [DVD].

Graver, Margaret, Cicero on the Emotions: Tusculan Disputations 3 and 4 (Chicago, 2002).

---, Stoicism and Emotion (Chicago, 2007).


Januszczyk, Waldemar (Director), Gauguin: The Full Story (2003) [DVD].


---, What is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being (Harvard, 2007).
---, Six Myths About the Good Life (Hackett, 2006).
Nussbaum, Martha and Amartya Sen, eds., The Quality of Life (Oxford, 1993).
Nussbaum, Martha, Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach (Cambridge, 2000)
Pakaluk, Michael, Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship (Hackett, 1991)
Pietre, Ann and Jeanette Pietre (Directors), Mother Teresa (1986) [DVD]
Seligman, Martin, Authentic Happiness Website URL= http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx, cited on 31 August 2010
Taylor, Astra (Director), The Examined Life: Philosophy is in the Streets (2010) [DVD]
Teresa, Mother, Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light (Image, 2007).
---, Meaning in Life and Why It Matters (Princeton, 2010).
Young, Julian, The Death of God and the Meaning of Life (Routledge, 2003).
Preliminary Course Syllabus (principal texts in **bold**)

The Question: “What is the Good Life?” Week 1  
**Plato, Apology of Socrates**

**Happiness. Weeks 2 through 5**  
**Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, Books 1-4, 8-9**  
**Mill, Utilitarianism, Chapter I and II**  
Thoreau, “Life Without Principle”  
Beethoven, Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125 “Choral”  
Friedrich Schiller, “Ode to Joy” (=poem set to Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9)  
Beethoven, “The Heiligenstädter Testament” (=letter to his brothers)  
Montainge, “Of Friendship” and/or Emerson, “Friendship”  
Schopenhauer, “On the Suffering of the World” and/or “On the Vanity of Existence”  
Hobbes, “Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as Concerning their Felicity and Misery”  
Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, to be read prior to the semester  
*In Search of Beethoven* [DVD], to be viewed out of class

**Morality: Weeks 6 through 10**  
**Epictetus, Enchiridion (=Handbook); Letter to Menoeceus**  
**Kant, “Transition from the Ordinary Rational Knowledge of Morality to the Philosophical” Section One of *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals***  
Seneca, Letters 85, 87, and 119  
Confucius, *Analects*, Book Ten  
Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book 10, Ch. 6-8  
Franklin, Benjamin, “The Way to Wealth” and Wesley, John “The Use of Money”  
Whitman, Walt, “A Song of Joys”  
*Mother Teresa* [DVD], to be viewed out of class

**Meaning: Weeks 11 to 15**  
**Tolstoy, Leo, “My Confession”**  
**Swenson, David, “The Dignity of Human Life”**  
**Nozick, Robert, “Philosophy and the Meaning of Life” in *Philosophical Explorations***  
**Schmidt, David, “The Meanings of Life” in *Robert Nozick* (Cambridge)**  
Ryan, Kay, “Things Shouldn’t Be So Hard” in *The Niagara River* (Grove/Atlantic, 2005)  
Gauguin, “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?” MFA, Boston  
---. Selected journals and letters  
Januszczak or Gill documentary on Gauguin [DVD or VHS], to be viewed out of class

John Partridge, Wheaton College
Résumé

John Partridge
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Wheaton College
http://wheatoncollege.edu/Faculty/JohnPartridge.html

Education
Ph.D. Philosophy, Johns Hopkins University, 2001
   Dissertation Title: “The Art of Love in Plato’s Phaedrus”
M.A. Philosophy, Johns Hopkins University, 1996
B.A. Philosophy, College of William and Mary, Magna cum laude, 1991

Positions Held
Associate Professor. Wheaton College. 2008-present
Assistant Professor. Wheaton College. 2001-2008
Instructor, full-time. Loyola College in Maryland. 2000-2001

Selected Awards, Honors, and Fellowships
Visiting Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Brown University, Spring 2010
Wheaton Research Partnership, Wheaton College, 2009-2010
Nominated for the Hannah Goldberg Chair in Teaching Innovation, Wheaton College, 2009
Mars Faculty/Student Summer Research Grant, Wheaton College, 2009
Faculty Research Grant, Wheaton College, 2008
Mellon Summer Research Award, Wheaton College, 2007
The L. G. Barnhart Dissertation Fellowship, Johns Hopkins University, 1998-1999
The American Philosophical Association Graduate Student Travel Stipend, 1997
The William Miller Essay Prize, 1995
The Mellon Summer Seminar in Humanities, Johns Hopkins University, 1994
The Jerry V. Miller Award for Outstanding Senior Essay, William and Mary, 1991
Phi Beta Kappa, William and Mary, 1990

Courses offered in the last three years (new courses in bold)

Fall 2010
Ancient Philosophy 203
Introduction to Philosophy 101

Fall 2009
Aesthetics 236
Ancient Philosophy 203
Introduction to Philosophy 101

Spring 2011
Philosophy and Literature 233
Senior Seminar 401: “Philosophy of Deception”

Spring 2010
sabbatical
Fall 2008
Plato Seminar: “The Feminine and Divine in Platonic Philosophy 398” (cross-listed as Women’s Studies 398)
Introduction to Philosophy 101

Spring 2009
Philosophy and Literature 233
Ancient Philosophy 203
Introduction to Philosophy 101
Philosophy of Martha Nussbaum 098 (co-taught with Prof. Serene Khader)

Selected Publications


Other Scholarly Activity

Additional Professional Activity
Philosophy Club President, College of William and Mary, 1989-1991
Philosophy Club Faculty Liaison, Loyola College, 2000-2001
Philosophy Club Faculty Liaison, Wheaton College, 2001-present
Faculty in Residence, Beard Hall, Wheaton College, 2002-2004
  • Inaugurated, supervised, and resided in a living-learning community of 100 student residents
Philosophy Department Chair, Wheaton College, 2010-2013
Women’s Studies Advisory Committee, Wheaton College, 2010-2012
AAUP Vice-President, Wheaton College, 2010-2011
AAUP President, Wheaton College, 2011-2012
Abstract

This course poses the enduring question, “what is the good life?” It examines historical and contemporary reflections on how to live well, starting with Plato’s *Apology*. Socrates’ life and death inspired three different ways of thinking about the best life. Accordingly, the course features three units: Happiness, Morality, and Meaning. Though these traditions are rooted in antiquity, even the earliest answers within each tradition have relevance today. Students will appreciate the breadth and complexity of each tradition and the implications of the different answers given within them. This course aims not only to enlighten students but also to empower them to pursue the good life as they see it.

The principal texts exemplify the core commitments within each tradition while illuminating the Socratic legacy. Additional works—including literature, poetry, memoir, and music—invite students to put the three traditions into conversation with one another. Finally, each unit includes a figure embodying something essential in each tradition. Students will study the life and work of Beethoven (happiness), Mother Teresa (morality), and Paul Gauguin (meaning) and will identify how the conception of the good life in each tradition informs these lives and the lives of other historical, fictional, and contemporary persons.