Topic of the Course

Every person has a life to live, but what is this thing, “a life”, that every person has? To begin with, it’s just the temporally extended existence of the person, the proverbial three score and ten. But a person’s life is more than that, because it follows a natural progression of life-stages, from childhood to adolescence to middle age to senescence. And it’s even more still, since it is partly the creation of the person living it, who can plan it, evaluate it, anticipate its future, and remember its past.

We will explore these and other aspects of a person’s life through works of literature and philosophy. What makes you the same person throughout the different stages of your life? How does the passage of time color your perception of life? What makes for a good life? A meaningful life? Should you be grateful for having been born or dismayed at having to die?

Aims of the Course

Your primary aim in this course should be to explore how to live “an examined life,” in which you question things that seem obvious about life, often finding that they aren’t obvious, after all. Your second aim should be to improve your skills at critical reading and writing. Your third aim is to enjoy some great works of literature and philosophy. Please note that although the course should help you to reflect on your own life, it will do so by honing your skills at interpreting and assessing works by great authors, ancient and modern. Lectures, discussions, and written assignments will be devoted to critical thinking about the texts.

In your written work, aim at clarity of reasoning and expression. You will not be graded on grammar or spelling unless they get in the way of clarity, but the assignments, being relatively short, will give you an opportunity to hone these skills as well.

As for recitations, you should see them as an opportunity to practice expressing yourself, which will improve your skills at both speaking and writing. Since some students prefer to formulate their comments before speaking up, your section leaders are encouraged to avoid always calling on “first responders”.

Readings

9/11-9/13: Childhood:
    Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Chapters 1 - 9 (NYU Classes)

9/18-9/27: Personal identity
    Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* (bookstore)

**No class on 10/9**

10/2-10/16: The passage of time:
    Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (bookstore)
    J. David Velleman “Stop the Clock” (NYU Classes)
10/18-10/23: Adolescence
   Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding* (bookstore)

10/25-11/1: A good life
   Cicero, *De Finibus*, Book 1, sections 28 (p. 12) to 71 (p. 25) (NYU Classes)

11/6-11/8: Mid Life
   Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice* (bookstore)

11/13-11/15: Old age and death
   Leo Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilych” (NYU Classes)
   Epicurus “Letter to Menoeceus” (NYU Classes)

**No class on 11/20-11/22**

11/27-11/29: Meaning
   Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd” (NYU Classes)

12/4-12/6: Birth
   Seanna Shiffrin, “Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm” (NYU Classes)

12/11-12/13: Future Generations
   Samuel Scheffler, “The Afterlife” (NYU Classes)
   Derek Parfit, “On Doing the Best for Our Children” (NYU Classes)

**Writing**

You will write four 250-word responses to works of literature in the course. You will also write four papers, of increasing length, on assigned topics. *Your responses and papers must consist entirely of your own words plus some quotations from the reading, which must be clearly marked as quotations. No other material is allowed. Your papers must be submitted via NYU Classes. Emailed papers will not be accepted.*

- **Response 1 (Kafka)** due Sun 9/10 5:00 pm
- **Paper 1 (500 words)** posted Fri 9/22, due Sun 10/1 5:00 pm
- **Response 2 (McCullers)** due Sun 10/15 5:00 pm
- **Paper 2 (1000 words)** posted Fri 10/20, due Sun 10/29 5:00 pm
- **Response 3 (Mann)** due Sun 11/5 5:00 pm
- **Response 4 (Tolstoy)** due Sun 11/12 5:00 pm
- **Paper 3 (1500 words)** posted Fri 11/17, due Sun 11/26 5:00 pm
- **Paper 4 (2000 words)** posted Fri 12/1, due Sun 12/15 5:00 pm

**Policies**

*Laptops will not be permitted in class.* Research has shown that students who take notes by hand learn more and understand it better than those who type.

Please download the student version of the app “Socrative” onto a device that you will bring to class (iOS: https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/socrative-student/id477618130; android: https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.socrative.student). If you are uncomfortable raising your hand and asking a question, you can use this app to send questions to me anonymously as I lecture. I will also use this app to take attendance.
You will be required submit your papers via NYU Classes in MS Word or RTF format. Your papers, without your name but with the instructor’s comments and the grade, will be posted on NYU Classes for everyone to read. By taking the course you consent to have your work posted in this way. You will be encouraged to read other students’ papers — especially the ones that will be flagged as worth reading.

Because all of the papers will be posted, you will have no opportunity to revise written work. Instead, the early assignments will count less toward your grade, so that you will feel free to take risks on them, knowing that you will have a chance to improve along the way. Extensions will be granted only by prior arrangement with your recitation leader.

Responses and papers must consist exclusively of your own words plus quotations from the texts (if necessary). Quotations must be marked as such, with author and page number in parentheses.

REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES Academic accommodations are available to any student with a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility, learning disability, or is deaf or hard of hearing. Students should register with NYU’s Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities 726 Broadway, 2nd Floor New York, NY 10003-6675 Telephone: 212-998-4980 Voice/TTY Fax: 212-995-4114 Web site: www.nyu.edu/csd

Grading

Grades on written assignments will be awarded on a 100-point scale (95-100 = A, 90-94 = A-, 86-89 = B+, 83-85 = B, 80-82 = B-, 76-79 = C+, 73-75 = C, 70-72 = C-, ≤70 = D)

The assignments will be weighted in your final grade as follows:

- Each response: 5% (x 4 = 20%)
- First paper: 10%
- Second paper: 15%
- Third paper: 25%
- Fourth paper: 30%

You must do all of the assignments. Failure to do any of them will result in an F.

Attendance at both lecture and recitation is required. You will be permitted 3 unexcused absences in all (counting recitation and lecture together). Absences will be excused only if you have notified your recitation leader by email in advance of the lecture or recitation that you will miss. For every unexcused absence above 3, your final grade will be reduced by 2 points. Per CAS policy, chronic absence will result in an F.

Where to Find the Texts

The following texts will be available in paperback at the NYU bookstore. You may use Kindle or Nook editions provided that they have the same ISBN number. Texts not listed here will be available in pdf on NYU Classes (accessible through the “Academics” tab on NYU Home).


What is Philosophy?

Philosophy examines foundational questions — questions whose answers are presupposed in almost everything we think and do. For example: we assume that there is a difference between appearance and reality, between meaning and nonsense, between knowledge and ignorance, between right and wrong, between men and women, and we assume that we understand these differences more or less. We assume that each of us is a conscious, rational being with a remembered past and envisioned future. We assume that the universe runs on laws that we can discover, and that society ought to run on laws that we collectively adopt. Philosophers expose and probe such assumptions, seeking a more explicit understanding of things previously taken for granted.

Philosophy belongs to the humanities and shares with the other humanities disciplines a focus on human concerns, but it also differs from the others in some respects. Some areas of philosophy can seem more like social sciences such as psychology or linguistics than like English literature or art history; some areas of philosophy are a bit like math or physics. All areas of philosophy require techniques of reading, writing, and speaking that are not specifically taught in any other discipline, inside the humanities or out.

Students find these skills extremely valuable across the curriculum and in their later careers as well. For the beginning student, however, they require patience. In considering foundational questions, we quickly get lost if we don’t formulate the questions clearly, spell out our reasoning systematically, and take care to say exactly what we mean. Don’t be surprised if at first you get indifferent results with the reading and writing skills that have served you well in other disciplines. With practice, you will get the hang of it.

One of the best ways to speed your progress in the subject is to participate in class. Class discussion is your opportunity to learn how to do philosophy by trial and error — that is, by putting philosophical ideas into your own words and seeing what happens. What happens can sometimes seem discouraging: philosophy proceeds by argumentation, and some people find philosophical discussion a bit too argumentative. Don’t deprive yourself of the opportunity to sharpen your skills by participating. You will get better at it, and your smarty-pants fellow students aren’t as smart as they think.

Finally: be prepared to feel like you don’t understand even when you do. Sometimes you will follow a piece of philosophical reasoning as it goes along but suddenly feel mystified again after it’s done. For a moment there, the clouds parted and all was clear, and then the sky clouded over again. Don’t conclude that you’ve failed: this is often what understanding philosophy is like. You will come to take satisfaction in your ability to puzzle afresh through matters that never stop puzzling you.