CORE-UA 400: TEXTS AND IDEAS – WHAT IS A GOOD HUMAN LIFE?

Time and Place: MW, 3:30–4:45.
Instructor: Anja Jauernig (anja.jauernig@nyu.edu), office 607 in the NYU Philosophy Department.
Office hours: TBA
Recitations: TBA
Recitation Instructors: TBA

Course Description. Two of the most fundamental questions that are addressed, more or less explicitly, in many of the arts, the humanities, and the sciences are the questions of what it means to be human, and of how to live a good human life. Indeed, these questions arise naturally for everyone of us who approaches life in a reflective way and thinks about how to make the best of it. These two questions will also function as the main guiding questions for this course. We will be reading and discussing important works of literature and philosophy from the ancient world up to the present that speak to these questions in some way or another. In some of these works, our questions are tackled in a fairly straightforward manner; in others, they are addressed more indirectly, through the presentation of a particular way of life or individual lived experiences. We will be examining these writings with the goal of broadening and deepening our understanding of possible answers to our questions in the hope that this will bring us closer to answering them for ourselves.


Aims for the course. This course has four main aims. The first of them is to deepen your love and appreciation for reading and thinking about important works of literature and philosophy. Many of these works are challenging but the hope is that you will come to agree that the considerable rewards of seriously engaging with them more than make up for the effort. The second aim is to improve your skills at critical reading, disciplined oral argumentation, and clear and well-organized writing. The third aim is to convince you of the value of an “examined life,” i.e., a life in which you question the status quo, and do not tire of thinking about what you ought to do and how to be the best version of yourself that you could possibly be. Finally, like all Texts and Ideas courses, this course aims to foster your recognition of the value and importance of humanistic learning, which lies at the very foundation of a liberal arts education. As a part of the College Core Curriculum, it is designed to extend your education beyond the focused studies of your major, and to help prepare you for your future life as a thoughtful individual and active member of society.

Requirements and grading. There will be four papers (about 5 pages, 12.5% each), a midterm exam (17.5%), and a final exam (17.5%). One of the writing assignments will be about a movie; another one will require you to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Your participation in the recitations and the lectures will also be taken into account in determining your grade (15%). You must complete all of the required assignments in order to pass the course. Frequent unexcused absences may lead to failing the course.

Preparation. Our discussion in class will be based on the assigned readings for the particular day. Accordingly, it is essential for you to do the readings beforehand.

Special Accommodations. If you are a student who requires accommodation for a disability please get in touch with me, and consult with the Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (https://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-wellness/students-with-disabilities).
Schedule

1/27 ~ Introduction, Logistics
1/29 ~ Plato, The Apology

2/3 ~ Plato, Crito
2/5 ~ Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics (selections)

2/10 ~ Plato, Symposium, 172a–198a (the end of Agathon’s speech)
2/12 ~ Symposium, 198a–end; topic for the first paper will be distributed

2/17 ~ President’s Day, no class
2/19 ~ Montaigne, “That to study philosophy is to learn to die,” “Of Friendship,” “Of Cannibals”; first paper due by the beginning of class

2/24 ~ Shakespeare, The Tempest
2/26 ~ Brecht, The Life of Galileo; topic for the second paper will be distributed

3/2 ~ Kant, ‘An answer to the question: what is enlightenment?’
3/4 ~ Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto; second paper due by the beginning of class

3/9 ~ catch-up opportunity
3/11 ~ Midterm Exam

Spring Break

3/23 ~ Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, chapters 1–5
3/25 ~ Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, chapters 6–11

3/30 ~ Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, chapters 1–10
4/1 ~ The Picture of Dorian Gray, chapters 11–20

4/6 ~ Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilyitch
4/8 ~ Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, chapters 1–3; topic for the third paper will be distributed

4/13 ~ A Room of One’s Own, chapters 3–6
4/15 ~ Levi, Survival in Auschwitz, chapters 1–8; third paper due by the beginning of class

4/20 ~ Survival in Auschwitz, chapters 9–16
4/22 ~ Kurt Vonnegut, Cat’s Cradle, chapters 1–66

4/27 ~ Cat’s Cradle, chapters 66–127
4/29 ~ Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, An Absurd Reasoning

5/4 ~ Sisyphus continued, The Absurd Man, Absurd Creation, The Myth of Sisyphus; topic for fourth paper will be distributed
5/6 ~ Kafka, The Metamorphosis
5/11 ~ Coetzee, The Lives of Animals; fourth paper due by the beginning of class
TBA ~ Final Exam