

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

Monday and Wednesday, 11:00–12:15

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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, philosophy, and political thought 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.

Readings. Plato, *The Apology*, *Crito*, *The Symposium*; Aristophanes, *The Clouds*; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (selections); Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*; William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*; Berthold Brecht, *The Life of Galileo*; Immanuel Kant, 'An answer to the question: what is enlightenment?'; Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*; Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*; Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*; James Joyce, *The Dead*; Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*; Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*; John Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*.

Aims for the course. This course has three 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. Last but not least, 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.

Requirements and grading. There will be four short papers (about 3-4 pages, 10% each), one medium sized paper (about 5-6 pages, 20%); and a longer paper (about 7-8 pages; 25%). 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 us, or consult with the Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (<https://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-wellness/students-with-disabilities>).

Schedule

1/23 ~ Introduction, Logistics

1/25 ~ Plato, *The Apology*

1/30 ~ Plato, Crito

2/1 ~ Aristophanes, The Clouds; topic for first short paper will be distributed

2/6 ~ Plato, Symposium, 172a–198a (the end of Agathon's speech)

2/8 ~ Symposium, 198a–end; first short paper due by the beginning of class

2/13 ~ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics (selections)

2/15 ~ Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy, Book I–book III, poem 9

2/20 ~ The Consolation of Philosophy, Book III, prose 10–end; topic for second short paper will be distributed

2/22 ~ Shakespeare, The Tempest

2/27 ~ Brecht, The Life of Galileo; second short paper due by the beginning of class

3/1 ~ Kant, 'An answer to the question: what is enlightenment?'; topic for medium sized paper will be distributed

3/6 ~ Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto; medium sized paper due by the beginning of class

3/8 ~ catch-up opportunity

Spring Break

3/20 ~ Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, chapters 1–5

3/22 ~ Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, chapters 6–11

3/27 ~ Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, chapters 1–10

3/29 ~ The Picture of Dorian Gray, chapters 11–20; topic for third short paper will be distributed

4/3 ~ Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilytch

4/5 ~ Ibsen, A Doll's House; third short paper due by the beginning of class

4/10 ~ Joyce, The Dead

4/12 ~ Levi, Survival in Auschwitz, chapters 1–8

4/17 ~ Survival in Auschwitz, chapters 9–16; topic for fourth short paper will be distributed

4/19 ~ Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, An Absurd Reasoning

4/24 ~ Sisyphus continued, The Absurd Man, Absurd Creation, The Myth of Sisyphus

4/26 ~ Butler, Gender Trouble, chapter 1; fourth short paper due by the beginning of class

5/1 ~ Butler, Gender Trouble, chapter 2; topic for the longer paper will be distributed

5/3 ~ Coetzee, The Lives of Animals

5/8 ~ Catch-up opportunity and wrap-up

5/12 ~ Longer paper due by 12 p.m.