Happiness, Tranquility, and Mysticism

Course FIRST-UG80         Fall 2012
Bldg: 1WP  Room:501        Tues/Thurs 11-12:15
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Office hours (please schedule in advance):
    Thurs (2-4:30) and Fri (12-2)

After a century studying mental disease and pathology, contemporary psychologists have recently charted a “new” research agenda devoted to human happiness, flourishing, and positive emotions. This new science of happiness deploys neuroscience methods and quantitative psychology towards the goal of discovering the secrets of human well being. Already, this new science has many critics and adherents. In important ways, the emerging research harkens back to William James work on the Varieties of Religious Experience. At the same time, it is rediscovering and reinvigorating ancient philosophical and religious traditions that go back for millennium. This First Year Seminar takes advantage of the renewed interest in the good life to compare and contrast modern “positive psychology” with its critics and with other wisdom traditions such as ancient philosophy, Eastern meditation, and Christian contemplation. Authors we read include Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, Lyubomirsky, Maslow, Ehrenreich, James, Plato, Epicurus, Seneca, Merton, Cloud of Unknowing, Buddha, Nhat Hanh, Bhagavad-Gita, and Patanjali.

One of the most interesting aspects of the new science of happiness is the way it has become part of popular culture. This means that we have to know something about cultural theory to fully understand what is going on in the popular culture uptake of happiness research. Stuart Hall, one of the founders of cultural studies, argues that popular culture also matters because it is a strategic site of cultural struggle. Popular culture, Hall argues, “is the arena of consent and resistance… where hegemony arises, and where it is secured.” By engaging with debates around happiness we join the struggle over happiness and the very meaning and purpose of our lives and our community.
Required Texts:

Plato: *Trial and Death of Socrates*
DeBotton: *The Consolation of Philosophy*
Shear: *The Experience of Meditation*
James—*Varieties of Religious Experience*
Thich Nhat Hahn: *Breathe, You Are Alive: The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing*
Stephen Mitchell: *Bagavad Gita*
*Cloud of Unknowing*

Schedule:

1. Sept 4 (T): Introduction
   Video: Happy (intro)

   **DETOUR THROUGH THEORY**

2. Sept 6 (Th): Cultural Studies
   Hall: Notes on Deconstructing the Popular
   Video: Hall (in class)

3. Sept 11 (T): Cultural Studies
   Hall: Representation (to p. 41)
   Saussure (selections)
   Barthes (selections)
   Video: Hall (in class)

4. Sept 13 (Th): Cultural Studies
   Hall: Representation (finish)
   Foucault: Power as Knowledge
   Video: Hall (in class)

   **HAPPINESS**

   Maslow: Self-actualization and Beyond
   Seligman and Csiksezenmihalyi: Positive Psychology: An Introduction
   Video: Seligman (in class)

Dahlsgaard, Peterson, Seligman: Shared Virtue

   Boehm and Lyubomirsky: The Promise of Sustainable Happiness
   Lyubomirsky: *The How of Happiness* (sections on meditation and spirituality)
   Shapiro: Meditation and Positive Psychology
   Paragment and Mahoney: Spirituality the Search for the Sacred
   Action For Happiness Website [http://www.actionforhappiness.org/](http://www.actionforhappiness.org/)
   Action For Happiness Pack
   Video: Lyubomirsky (in class)

8. Sept 27 (Th): Critical Concerns
   Ehrenreich: *Smile or Die* (excerpts)
   Ahmed: Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness

9. Oct 2 (T): **First Paper Due**

   Paper Topic: “**Intentional activity**” in positive psychology (3-4 pgs) A core thesis of positive psychology posits that “intentional activity” can create happiness. For our extended paper, we will be arguing that this perspective also underlies many other philosophical and spiritual approaches to happiness as well. In this section of the paper, please develop an introductory paragraph that concludes with this thesis claim. Then develop the thesis as relevant to positive psychology.

**TRANQUILITY**

10. Oct 4 (Th): Tranquility and Greco-Roman Philosophy
    DeBotton: Consolations of Philosophy, Chapter 1 Unpopularity
    Video: DeBotton: Socrates (in class)

11. Oct 9 (T): Tranquility and Greco-Roman Philosophy
    Plato: Trial and Death of Socrates
    Video: DeBotton: Socrates (in class)

12. Oct 11 (Th): Tranquility and Greco-Roman Philosophy
    DeBotton: Consolations of Philosophy, Chapter 2 Not Having Enough Money
    Epicurus: Letter to Menoeceus
    Video: DeBotton: Epicurus (in class)
Oct 13 (T): Break

13. Oct 18 (Th): Tranquility and Greco-Roman Philosophy
   DeBotton: Consolations of Philosophy, Chapter 3 Frustration
   Seneca: The Happy Life
   Video: DeBotton: Seneca (in class)

14. Oct 23 (T): Second Paper Due—“intentional activity” as a link between Positive Psychologists Ancient Philosophers (3-4 pgs)

   Valle: Mystical Phenomenology (in class)

   MYSTICISM

   James: Varieties of Religious Experience: Mysticism Lectures XVI and XVII

   James: Varieties of Religious Experience: Value of Saintliness Lectures XIV and XV

17. Nov 1 (Th): Psychology, Religious Studies, and Mysticism
   King: Mysticism and Spirituality
   Loy: Non-Duality (selections)
   Video: Fierce Grace (in class)

   Bhagavad Gita: Intro and chapters 1-12—also on audible.com at: http://www.audible.com/search?searchAuthor=Phoenix+Books%2C+Barbara+Stoler-Miller+%28translator%29 (on audible the intro starts at the end, around 2:27.30)
   Loy: Non-Duality in the Bhagavad-Gita
   Yoga Sutra
   Shear: Experience of Meditation: Yoga
   Video: Fierce Grace (in class)

   Shear: Experience of Meditation: Transcendental Meditation
   Video: Fierce Grace (in class)

Shear: Experience of Meditation: Theravada and Zen Buddhism
Thich Nhat Hahn: Breath, You are Alive: The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing
Video: Thich Nhat Hahn (in class)

   Thich Nhat Hahn: A Buddhist Poet in Vietnam
   Thich Nhat Hahn: Engaged Buddhism Selections (Love in Action, Suffering is Not Enough, Call Me By My True Names)
   Snyder: Buddhism and the Possibility of a Planetary Culture
   Video: Thich Nhat Hahn (in class)

22. Nov 20 (T): Third Paper Due—“intentional activity” in eastern thought (allows us to reconsider William James’ four features) (3-4 pages)

Nov 22 (Th): Thanksgiving Break

   Shear: Experience of Meditation: Christianity
   Merton: (selections)
   Video: Merton (in class)

   Merton: (selections)
   Video: Merton (in class)

   Cloud of Unknowing (p. 3-67)
   Video: Merton (in class)

   Cloud of Unknowing (p. 67-118)
   Video: Merton (in class)

27. Dec 11 (T): Concluding Discussions
   Carrette and King: Selling Spirituality (excerpts)
   Macy: Taking Heart: Spiritual Practices for Activists
   Blake: The Chimney Sweeper

28. Dec 13 (Th): Final Paper—“intentional activity” and Christian Mysticism (3-4 pgs)
Course Requirements

Grades are based on five parts: attendance/participation (20%) and 4 papers (20% each). The attendance/participation grade is composed of weekly class attendance and participation. Remember that this is a seminar class which means that discussion begins with student initiative. For your part of the preparation, please type out two quotes from each of the week’s readings about which you have questions or comments. I will often ask you to read your quotes and discuss your questions or comments during class. Doing this assignment carefully not only helps you prepare for your papers and increases your participation grade, it also helps your classmates because it increases the quality of our conversations together.

Developing your academic writing skills will be a big part of our goal together. The four papers you write for this class are practice for writing longer papers. As such, the four papers will work together to defend a single thesis and develop a sustained argument. We will discuss how to do this in class. Each paper section is 3-4 pages type written, double spaced. Please use the material from the class to develop the topic question I hand out. Back up your thesis with arguments and examples from the class readings. A good paper demonstrates that you’ve integrated the material from the class discussions and class materials and can use it to analyze your topic. You do not need outside research for these papers. Use your energy reading closely and thinking seriously about the materials you have.

The grading scale for the class will be as follows: 93-100% (A) 90-92 (A-), 87-89 (B+), 83-86 (B), 80-82 (B-), 77-79 (C+), 70-76 (C), 63-69 (D), and below (F).

During the semester, please schedule at least one office visits to discuss with me how the class is going for you. Also, if you have questions about your papers, or how you are doing in class, please schedule an office appointment to discuss.