

Happiness
FYSE-119
Fall 2012

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Each first-year seminar is a variation on a theme. Although the topics and the approaches might be very different, each seminar is designed to introduce students to the many ways of understanding and communicating taught here at Amherst.

I have chosen the topic “happiness.”

In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson riffed on John Locke and placed the “pursuit of happiness” at the core of what he thought of as god-given rights. (“inalienable right”) He replaced “property” with “happiness,” creating an interesting connection between ourselves as citizens, consumers, and as agents of well-being.

In this seminar, we will examine happiness through several lenses.

I have organized the course around the book *Stumbling on Happiness* by Daniel Gilbert.

We will read each of the chapters and then read supporting material; I will select some of it and you will select readings so that you can pursue areas of personal interest.

We will examine other media and do related introspective exercises during and outside of class.

Class time

For each class, I will expect that you will have done the assignments and be ready to discuss and analyze the reading, films, etc. I will sometimes lecture, but I hope that much of the time will be spent conversing.

Introspective Exercises

Of the many modes of learning, direct experience can be quite powerful. During the course, I will introduce exercises that provide you a chance to become aware of your own responses to the content of the course. Through these, I hope that you can bring another level of understanding to the material by finding yourself in the center of your education.

Grading

Your grade will be determined by your class participation (25%), weekly writing assignments (40%) and a final paper (35%). The final paper will be due during finals week. (more about that later)

Outline:

Week: Sept 4: Introduction

Reading:

- Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day,” “Mindful,” and “Morning Poem.”
- *Stumbling*, Forward, Chapter 1: “Journey to Elsewhen” & Chapter 2: “The View from in Here”

Sept 11: “We like to frolic in the best of all imaginary tomorrows – and why shouldn’t we?”

Reading:

- Timothy D. Wilson and Daniel T. Gilbert, “Affective Forecasting: Knowing What to Want,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14(3), 2005, 131- 134.
- Jonathan Gardner and Andrew Oswald, “Money and mental wellbeing: A longitudinal study of medium sized lottery wins,” *Journal of Health Economics* 26, 2007, 49-60.
- Barbara Ehrenreich, “Pathologies of hope,” *Harper’s Magazine* Feb 1, 2007.

Sept 18: “Happiness, then, is the you-know-what-I-mean feeling.”

Reading:

- Aristotle, Section from *Nicomachean Ethics*
- Seneca, “On the Happy Life”
- Freud, Sections I & II, *Civilization and its Discontents (Das Unbehagen der Kultur)*
- Nozick, “The Experience Machine,” *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. pp. 42-45.

Sept 25: Multiple Selves

Reading:

- Richard Thaler and H.M. Shefrin, “An Economic Theory of Self-Control,” *Journal of Political Economy* 89(2), 1981, 392 – 406.
- Samuel M. McClure, et al. “Separate Neural Systems Value Immediate and Delayed Monetary Rewards,” *Science* 306(503), 2004, 503 – 507.

Oct 2: “Imperfect tools are a real pain, but they sure beat pounding nails with your teeth.”

Reading:

- *Stumbling*, Chapter 3: “Outside Looking In”
- Daniel Kahneman and Alan Krueger, “Developments in the Measurement of Subjective Well-being,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 20(1), Winter 2006, 3-24.
- Joshua Wolf Shenk, “What Makes Us Happy?” *The Atlantic Online* June 2009.
- <http://www.nationalaccountsofwellbeing.org/learn/measuring/>
take the survey and compare yourself to several European nations.

Oct 11 [fall break Oct 9]: “The crowning intellectual accomplishment of the brain is the real world.”

Reading:

- *Stumbling*, Chapter 4: “In the Blind Spot of the Mind’s Eye”
- Thomas Gilovich and Victoria Husted Medvec, “The Experience of Regret: What, When, and Why,” *Psychological Review* 102(2), 1995, 379-395.
- S. Millhauser, “The Disappearance of Elaine Coleman”

Oct 16: “Any brain that does the filling-in trick is bound to do the leaving-out trick as well, and thus the futures we imagine contain some details that our brains invented and lack some details that our brains ignored.”

Reading:

- *Stumbling*, Chapter 5: “The Hound of Silence”

Oct 23: “We can’t see or feel two things at once, and the brain has strict priorities about what it will see, hear, and feel and what it will ignore.”

Reading:

- *Stumbling*, Chapter 6: “The Future is Now”
- Dolly Chugh and Max Bazerman, “Bounded Awareness: what you fail to see can hurt you,” *Mind & Society* 6, 2007, 1-18.

Oct 30: “Presentism occurs because we fail to recognize that our future selves won’t see the world the way we see it now.”

Reading:

- *Stumbling*, Chapter 7: “Time Bombs”
- Paul Bloom, “First Person Plural,” *The Atlantic Online* November 2008.

Nov 6: “We ask whether facts *allow* us to believe our favored conclusions and whether they *compel* us to believe our disfavored conclusions.”

Reading:

- *Stumbling*, Chapter 8: “Paradise Glossed”

Nov 13: “When experiences make us feel sufficiently unhappy, the psychological immune system cooks facts and shifts blame in order to offer us a more positive view.”

Reading:

- *Stumbling*, Chapter 9: “Immune to Reality”

Nov 20: “The fact that the *least likely experience* is often the *most likely memory* can wreak havoc with our ability to predict future experiences.”

Reading:

- *Stumbling*, Chapter 10: “Once Bitten”
- “Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter, Spring.”

Thanksgiving Break (start reading *Housekeeping*)

Dec 4: “Almost any time we tell anyone anything, we are attempting to change the way their brains operate – attempting to change the way they see the world so that their view of it more closely resembles our own.”

Reading:

- *Stumbling*, Chapter 11: “Reporting Live from Tomorrow”
- Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*.

Dec 11: “I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact: that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber.”

Reading:

- Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 127-139.