

THE LIFE WORTH LIVING
RLG 6938-002 | SPRING 2026

Wednesday 5:00-7:45 PM

Prof. Justin Henry
Office hours: Mon/Wed 2:00-5:00 PM

Prospectus

What does it mean for life to go well? What would it look like for a life to be lived well? In short, what shape would a life worth living take? This course engages with these questions through readings from philosophical figures and religious texts, from the ancient world to the present day. Close readings of these texts will form the basis for discussions on deep questions such as the necessity of belief in a higher power, the basis of moral action, our place in the world and the long span of history, and our obligations to others.

Course Materials

You are required to buy one book for this course:

- Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun, and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *Life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most*. The Open Field, 2023. ISBN-13: 978-0593489307.

All other readings will be available on the Canvas course page under “Modules,” arranged by the day for which they are to be read.

Evaluation

Grades are based on weekly reading responses (4 points each, 14 total) and three reflection papers (12 points each) and class participation (8%). In order to plot the development of your thinking throughout the semester, each week’s set of readings comes with a journal prompt. The journal itself is not for submission or for a grade, but cumulative reflections in your journal will serve as the basis for reflection papers. This will be a discussion-based class, so I expect voluntary participation from everyone. One point per day will be deducted for late reading responses essays and two points per day for late papers.

Attendance is required to pass the class. Two unexcused absences will result in a reduction of your final grade by 5 points. Four unexcused for absences will result in an F for the course. If you have to missed class for a valid, pre-planned reason, please communicate with me beforehand. Being late to class by more than five minutes is equivalent to one half of an absence.

Grading scale:



A = 94-100
A- = 90-93
B+ = 87-89
B = 84-86
B- = 80-83
C+ = 77-79
C = 74-76
C- = 70-73
D+ = 67-69
D = 64-66
F = 63-0

Classroom device usage.

Since this is intended to be a discussion-based class, phones and laptops are not allowed in class. I ask that you take notes by hand (if you prefer to take handwritten notes on a tablet with a stylus that is also OK). Those requiring accommodations for laptops or other assistant devices should contact [Student Accessibility Services](#).

COVID-19 Protocols

For the most recent communication regarding COVID-19 protocols, please visit:
<https://www.usf.edu/coronavirus/>.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is the foundation of the University of South Florida's commitment to the academic honesty and personal integrity of its university community. Academic integrity is grounded in certain fundamental values, which include honesty, respect, and fairness. Broadly defined, academic honesty is the completion of all academic endeavors and claims of scholarly knowledge as representative of one's own efforts. The process for faculty reporting of academic misconduct, as well as the student's options for appeal, are outlined in detail in [USF Regulation 3.027](#). AI use to generate written responses is prohibited.

Academic Grievance Procedure

The purpose of these procedures is to provide all undergraduate and graduate students taking courses at the University of South Florida an opportunity for objective review of facts and events pertinent to the cause of the academic grievance. An "academic grievance" is a claim that a specific academic decision or action that affects that student's academic record or status has



violated published policies and procedures, or has been applied to the grievant in a manner different from that used for other students.

Disability Access

Students with disabilities are responsible for registering with Students Accessibility Services (SAS) (SVC 1133) in order to receive academic accommodations. SAS encourages students to notify instructors of accommodation needs at least five (5) business days prior to needing the accommodation. A letter from SAS must accompany this request. Please visit the [Student Accessibility Services website](#) for more information.

Disruption to Academic Progress

Disruptive students in the academic setting hinder the educational process. Disruption of the academic process ([USF Regulation 3.025](#)) is defined as the act, words, or general conduct of a student in a classroom or other academic environment which in the reasonable estimation of the instructor: (a) directs attention away from the academic matters at hand, such as noisy distractions, persistent, disrespectful or abusive interruption of lecture, exam, academic discussion, or general University operations, or (b) presents a danger to the health, safety, or well-being of self or other persons.

Food and Housing Insecurity

We recognize that student facing financial difficulty in securing a stable place to live and/or in affording sufficient groceries may be at risk of these financial issues affecting their performance in classes. Students with these needs are urged to contact Feed-A-Bull (feedabull@usf.edu or [their website](#)), or Student Outreach and Support (socat@usf.edu or [their website](#)).

Florida Statute 1004.097 Free Expression on Campus

Students may, without prior notice, record video or audio of a class lecture for a class in which the student is enrolled for their own personal, educational use ([USF Policy 10-048](#)). A class lecture is defined as a formal or methodical oral presentation as part of a university course intended to present information or teach enrolled students about a particular subject. Recording class activities other than class lectures, including but not limited to lab sessions, student presentations (whether individually or part of a group), class discussion, clinical presentations such as patient history, academic exercises involving student participation, test or examination administrations, field trips, private conversations between students in the class or between a student and the faculty member is prohibited. Recordings may not be used as a substitute for class participation and class attendance and may not be published or shared without the written consent of the faculty member. Failure to adhere to these requirements may constitute a violation of the [USF Student Conduct Code](#).



Religious Observances

All students have a right to expect that the University will reasonably accommodate their religious observances, practices and beliefs ([USF Policy 10-045](#)). The University of South Florida, through its faculty, will make every attempt to schedule required classes and examinations in view of customarily observed religious holidays of those religious groups or communities comprising USF's constituency. Students are expected to attend classes and take examinations as determined by the university. No student shall be compelled to attend class or sit for an examination at a day or time prohibited by his or her religious belief. However, students should review the course requirements and meeting days and times to avoid foreseeable conflicts, as excessive absences in a given term may prevent a student from completing the academic requirements of a specific course. Students are expected to notify their instructors at the beginning of each academic term if they intend to be absent for a class or announced examination, in accordance with this Policy.

Sexual Misconduct / Sexual Harassment

USF is committed to providing an environment free from sex discrimination, including sexual harassment and sexual violence ([USF Policy 0-004](#)). The USF Center for Victim Advocacy is a confidential resource where you can talk about incidents of sexual harassment and gender-based crimes including sexual assault, stalking, and domestic/relationship violence. This confidential resource can help you without having to report your situation to the Title IX Office unless you request that they make a report. Contact the [USF Center for Victim Advocacy](#): 813-974-5757. Please be aware that in compliance with Title IX and under the USF Policy, educators must report incidents of sexual harassment and gender-based crimes including sexual assault, stalking, and domestic/relationship violence. If you disclose any of these situations personally to an educator, he or she is required to report it to the Title IX Office. For more information about Title IX, a full list of resources, or to report incidents of sexual harassment, sexual violence, relationship violence or stalking visit: usf.edu/title-ix

Statement of Academic Continuity

In the event of an emergency, it may be necessary for USF to suspend normal operations. During this time, USF may opt to continue delivery of instruction through methods that include, but are not limited to: Canvas, Teams, email messaging, and/or an alternate schedule. It is the responsibility of the student to monitor the Canvas for each class for course-specific communication, and the USF, College, and Department websites, emails, and [ALERTUSF](#) messages for important general information ([USF Policy 6-010](#)).

Class Sessions



WEEK 1

Wednesday, January 14

Life on the 'Pale Blue Dot': Philosophical perspectives on meaning to (and in) life.

- Nat Rutherford, "Why our pursuit of happiness may be flawed."
- Susan Wolf, "The Meaning of Lives"
- *Life Worth Living*, xi-xxxiv, 3-17 (preface + chapter 1).
- Reading response: What does Susan Wolf mean in speaking about the distinction between "meaning to life" and "meaning in life"? What does Wolf mean by her conclusion that a meaningful life is one in which one's activities are "positively worthwhile" and how does this relate to the idea of "a stopping place by which to ground the claim of meaningfulness"? On the basis of Susan Wolf's argument and your own intuitions, what do you think about her conclusion that "there can be meaningful lives in a meaningless world"?

WEEK 2

Wednesday, January 28

The Ethics of Pleasure and the Good Life.

- *Life Worth Living*, 18-32 (chapter 2).
- YouTube Video to watch at home: "Utilitarianism: Crash Course Philosophy #36."
- Peter Nozick, "The Experience Machine," *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 42-45.
- Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality."
- What is Peter Singer arguing about how we should morally orient our lives/make use of our resources through his example of our intuitions about saving a child from drowning in a shallow pond? What do you think about this? Do you think that he is completely right, or can you envision complications arising in trying to apply his moral paradigm to your own life?

WEEK 3



Wednesday, February 4

Socrates on the examined life.

- Plato's *Apology* and *Crito*.
- Josiah Ober, "What Kind of Citizen Was He?"
- *Life Worth Living*, 62-76 (chapter 5).
- How does Socrates' outlook change between the "Apology" and the "Crito"? What do you see as the relationship between the defense that Socrates gives us himself/his actions at his trial and his fidelity to the laws of Athens subsequently in his dialogue with Crito? Why did Socrates refuse to escape from prison even when presented with the opportunity? Put yourself in his shoes -- what would you have done? Why? Even if you don't agree with him, can you understand his motivations for making the choice that he did?

WEEK 4

Wednesday, February 11

The Buddha and his quest.

- In-class guest: Rev. Dr. Derangala Kusalagnana Thero.
- Andrea Miller, "Who was the Buddha?"
- *Life Worth Living*, 35-61 (chapters 3 and 4).
- What is the image of "the good life" that you feel you are exposed to every day through advertising on social media, TV, billboards, etc.? What kinds of implicit promises does modern advertising make to consumers (i.e. to us)? How do the readings for today—the selection from *Life Worth Living* and Andrea Miller's summary of the life of the Buddha—call this image of the good life into question? What was your personal reaction to these readings? Did they open up any questions for you that you had never considered before? Or did they enlarge any questions that you had though a little bit about before, or talked about in other classes?

WEEK 5



Wednesday, February 18

Philosophy as a way of life: Discipline and 'technologies of the self.'

- Pierre Hadot, "Philosophy as a way of life."
- Anupam Bajra, "How can you Practice Self-Control according to Buddhist Monks?"
- Selections from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola.
- *Life Worth Living*, 77-102 (chapter 6).
- How does Pierre Hadot argue that philosophy was "a way of life" in antiquity, in contrast to philosophy as a form of "scholasticism" in the Middle Ages? What activities, institutions or belief systems have provided you anything like the philosophical "way of life" of antiquity described by Hadot? What, if anything, so far in this class has made you reflect more on practices and/or beliefs that might provide something like a "way of life" for you going forward?

WEEK 6

Monday, February 23

****Paper #1 due by 11:59 PM.**

Wednesday, February 25

Leggerezza and the lightness of being.

- Brook Sunderman, "Religion and Comedy: What is the relationship?"
- Italo Calvino, "Lightness."
- What does Italo Calvino mean by "lightness" (*leggerezza*)? What are some different contexts in which he applies this term? Can you think of any examples from your own life when you have experienced a sense of relief or reassurance when confronted with something like the "lightness" Calvino is describing? And/or, can you think of examples of how "lightness" (in theory or in practice) could bring comfort/psychological relief from the stresses we see in the news every day right now?

WEEK 7



Wednesday, March 4

Mysticism and the varieties of religious experience.

- Fr. Robert Spitzer, “Rudolph Otto’s ‘Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans.’”
- Todd Moody, *Does God Exist?*: 67-87 (“Suffering”), 122-32 (“The Role of Experience”).
- Jules Evans, “The Varieties of Spiritual Experience.”
- What does Rudolph Otto mean by “numinous experience”? How does this relate to the conversation in “The Role of Experience” (pp.122-32) from *Does God Exist?* How does this relate to anything (if anything) you have experienced in your own life? What exchange between the characters in the dialogue in *Does God Exist?* stood out to you the most and why?

WEEK 8

Wednesday, March 11

Divine love, east and west.

- “Radha Krishna: The Divine Union of Love and Devotion.”
- “Beatrice and Dante.”
- Selections from the *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri.
- *Life Worth Living*, 105-25 (chapter 7).
- Who are Radha and Krishna? What is their relationship, and what according to the article is the theological significance of this relationship? Who is Beatrice and what is her role in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*? How do you contrast the theological significance between the role of Radha in Hindu devotionalism (*bhakti*) and the role of Beatrice in Dante’s (Christian) theological poem?

WEEK 9

Wednesday, March 18

***Spring break, no classes.*

WEEK 10



Wednesday, March 25

Deep ecology and the living earth.

- In class guest: Rev. Dr. Joshua Fenska.
- YouTube video to watch at home: “Gaia Hypothesis: Is the earth really a living entity?”
- Selections from Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*.
- “An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation.”
- Selection from *Laudato Si'*, 2015 Encyclical by Pope Francis.
- *Life Worth Living*, 126-50 (chapter eight).

- What is James Lovelock’s “Gaia Hypothesis”? How do you understand this in relation to any of the Native American myths or scientific anecdotes mentioned by Robin Wall Kimmerer in the selection from *Braiding Sweetgrass*? What do you think about this idea? How does the ideal of environmental stewardship or “care for nature” relate to your understanding of your own spiritual tradition?

Week 11

Monday, March 30

****Paper #2 due by 11:59 PM.**

Wednesday, April 1

Interrogating Subjectivity, Self, and Agency.

- Zachary Fruhling, “Foucault's Concept of "Power/Knowledge" Explained.”
- YouTube video to watch at home: “Politics of Piety chapters 1-3.”
- Ratna Kapur, “The radical intellectual legacy of Saba Mahmood.”

- What is the challenging intellectual question about the definition of “agency” and “freedom” that Saba Mahmood puts forth in her book, *Politics of Piety*? How does this relate to her take on why Muslim women should not be forced to “unveil” in public (e.g. the series of recent laws in France banning veils, headscarves and abayas in public contexts)? Do you think that Mahmood is right? If so, why? What is your take on this?

WEEK 12



Wednesday, April 8

What doesn't kill us...

- In-class guest: Prof. Zoe Anthony (University of Tampa).
- *Life Worth Living*, 187-206 (chapter 11).
- "Friedrich Nietzsche: The Übermensch (Overman)."
- Who is the Übermensch ("Overman") described in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*? What is Nietzsche's view of the importance of suffering and how do you understand this in relation to his concept of the Übermensch? What do you think about this idea?

WEEK 13

Wednesday, April 15

***Class retreat.*

- *Life Worth Living*, 153-86 (chapters 9-10).
- There is no formal assignment for today but please reflect on the "your turn" sections of chapter 9 in the book (p.170f.) as this will form the basis for a small group exercise we'll do during class.

WEEK 14

Wednesday, April 22

AI and Transhumanism.

- Karina Parikh, "Artificial Intelligence: Should robots have rights?"
- Frank Martela, "Artificial intelligence and free will: generative agents utilizing large language models have functional free will."
- Zoë Corbyn, "AI scientist Ray Kurzweil: We are going to expand intelligence a millionfold by 2045."
- *Life Worth Living*, 207-23 (chapter 12).
- (Optional reading) Paul Bloom, "How Moral Can A.I. Really Be?"
- What is the difference between the philosophical concepts of "physical free will" and "functional free will" according to Frank Martela? On the basis of this distinction, how does he argue that AI in its current form possesses "functional free will"? What is the difference between "global" and "local" free will? On the basis of this distinction (between "global" and "local" free will), and on the basis of what we've discussed so far in the course, what do you think about the proposition that robots might be granted



rights? (E.g. rights of legal protection as are guaranteed to us by the US Constitution, etc.?)

WEEK 15

Wednesday, April 29

Humanism and the Future.

- Simone Tyrie, “*Star Trek* Gave Us a Utopian Vision of an Egalitarian, Postcapitalist Future.”
- Phil Zuckerman, “What is Secular Humanism?”
- Michael Jindra, “It’s About Faith In Our Future: *Star Trek* Fandom as Cultural Religion.”
- *Life Worth Living*, 241-58 (chapters 13-14).
- What is secular humanism and how does it relate to *Star Trek*’s utopian vision of the future? In what ways do think that secular humanism could itself be viewed as a “religion,” or do you think that secular humanism is categorically distinct from “religions” as a worldview?

WEEK 16

Wednesday, May 6

****Paper #3 due by 11:59 PM.**

