

Happiness and the Good Life

Spring 2026¹

REL 231 | PHIL 231
Full Semester | In-Person
Tues. & Thur. 2:00-3:20 pm

Dr. Stephanie Mota Thurston

Course Description:

What does it mean to live well—to live a good or meaningful life? How is happiness related to ideas of the Good Life? This course introduces students to resources and concepts from the Western philosophical and Christian theological traditions related to these overarching questions. Students will critically and charitably engage these traditions, determining what resources they might offer and what considerations they might neglect.

Learning Outcomes:

- Define and analyze key course concepts, including but not limited to: eudaimonia, virtue, habit, flourishing, moral exemplar, practical reason, etc.
- Identify and evaluate the main arguments of assigned course material
- Contribute to collaborative knowledge production and assess your contribution.
- Practice charity and critique with course content and colleagues.
- Describe the features of a “Good Life,” happiness, or “a life well-lived” and defend your account.
- Practice moral virtues and evaluate the practice and its implications.

Grade Distribution:

Close Reading/Annotations: 25%

Class Contributions: 20%

Attendance: 10%

Discussion Contributions: 10%

Journal Entries: 10%

Trying on a Virtue Project: 10%

Time and the Good Life Project: 10%

Final Integrative Reflection Essay: 5%

Final Exam: 20%

¹ This syllabus is subject to minor revisions over the course of the semester. Any revisions will be announced on Canvas and in class.

Assignments:

Close Reading/Annotations (25%):

Closely reading philosophical texts and annotating these texts is a central skill for learning in the humanities. Each class, your close reading and annotations will be assessed in a variety of ways. For example, we might have an in-class assessment where you reflect on how you annotated a particular section, you might turn in your annotated text for feedback, you might share your annotations with a colleague and write a reflection on your partner's annotation processes. Each class period will begin with some time to assess and evaluate your annotations.

These are graded as follows: Full Credit (10 points), Partial Credit (5 points), No Credit (0 points). Two (2) of your lowest scores will be dropped at the end of the semester.

Class Contributions (20%):

Attendance (10%): Attendance and participation in a discussion-based course is central to the course going well, therefore, attendance will be taken and comprises 10% of your final grade. I do not make a distinction between “excused” or “unexcused” absences. All absences, for any reason, are legitimate. Because you may be sick, have another important commitment, or need to miss for another reason, each student will be given credit for up to two (2) absences over the course of the semester. After which, absences will begin to impact your attendance grade. If you need to miss a class, you can consult with a classmate, or you might also want to set up office hours with me to review anything missed.

Discussion Contributions (10%): Contributing ideas, questions, and comments, to our class discussion is one of the most central tasks of this class. A discussion contribution rubric will be distributed, to clarify what strong discussion contributions look like in the course. Three times during the semester, you will have an opportunity to assess how you are contributing to the collective knowledge production in the class through both whole group discussions and small group discussions. This assessment, along with the professor's assessment, will compose your discussion contribution's grade for the course. If you are someone for whom speaking in class is exceptionally difficult, there are some ideas below for how you can still contribute to the collective knowledge production of the class via Canvas.

OPTIONAL CONTRIBUTION ROLES

Notetaker: the notetaker's job is simply to take good notes during a class which will be shared to our Canvas site. These can be used by anyone but will be especially helpful in case someone missed class. Please email notes to the professor by the end of the day to be uploaded to Canvas.

Questioner: If you serve in this role, you'll simply need to submit 2-3 questions the night before class via email. You, a classmate, or the professor can refer to these

questions during our discussions. Questions should be specific by citing a particular sentence, paragraph, or short passage that elicited the question. Questions can seek clarification, elaboration, or point out inconsistencies or concerns with the argument or the themes. Questions might also seek application or evaluation.

Researcher: If you serve in this role, you can choose to do some additional research to share with the class related to something from our course content. For example, you might want to find out more about something that an author/speaker mentioned in passing (an event, a person, a theory, a text, etc.). You might want to fact check something an author or speaker said. You might want to look up a resource that was mentioned or do some independent research on different views surrounding a certain topic. If you choose this role, you can email your research document (no more than 1 page) to the professor to upload to our Canvas site.

Illustrator: Some people are visual thinkers and benefit from mapping out an idea or a thesis/argument or drawing other illustrations to clarify something from our course content. If you choose to serve this role, simply email a picture or scan of your illustration to the professor, who will upload it to the Canvas site. Please do so within one week of when the reading/audio was assigned.

Connector: Some students benefit a great deal from making thematic connections across weeks. If this is you, and you would like to serve in this role you will simply need to write a short piece 1-3 paragraphs that makes thematic or theoretical connections across any number of topics of our course content. These should be emailed to the professor within one week of when the most recent reading/audio was assigned and will be uploaded to the Canvas site.

Journal Entries (10%):

Journal Entries are assigned regularly in class so that you can critically process and apply the course content. There are four (4) separate due dates for journal entries throughout the semester.

Feedback will be given in addition to a mark of “✓” for good, “✓+” for excellent, and a “✓-” for needs improvement.

Journal Entry Due Dates:

Thursday, February 5th in class
Thursday, February 26th in class
Thursday, March 26th in class
Tuesday, April 21st in class

Trying on a Virtue Project (10%):

This assignment is an opportunity to engage with foundational theoretical concepts from the course in a practical manner. The assignment has a practical component where you will select a virtue to practice for several weeks and a short, written analysis (600-800 words). The assignment is due **Friday, March 13th by 11:59pm.**

Time and the Good Life Project (10%):

For this project, you will systematically keep track of how you spend your time for one full week. Completing a second week of data collection is encouraged and will result in extra credit for the assignment. After you have collected these data, you will write a brief analytic and reflective essay to evaluate your time use in light of your understanding of a good life or a life well-lived. The essay will be (600-800 words). A rubric and specific instructions will be distributed in class in the second half of the semester. The project is due **Friday, May 1st**.

Final Integrative Reflection Essay (5%):

This is a short integrative analysis of the key themes and questions that have animated the course. The essay will ask you to return to and reevaluate certain elements of your journal and the course content. The essay prompt and rubric will be distributed during the second half of the semester. This short essay will range from 1,000-1,200 words and it will be due **May 8th by 11:59pm**. Final in class presentations will be held during our last two class sessions.

Final Exam (25%):

There will be a final exam, during finals week. You will be permitted to use your readings and up to 5 pages typed or 10 pages handwritten of notes on readings and key concepts. The exam will consist of multiple choice and short answer questions, to be handwritten. The exam will assess how well you can explain and analyze our course readings, including key concepts and key arguments.

Important Course Information:

General Education: Humanities—History and Philosophy

Credit Hours: 3.0

Weekly hours of expected student work, apart from instruction time: 6 hours

Required Course Materials for Purchase:

Books (paper books only, no e-books)

- Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*

Other materials:

- Paper journal or notebook for journal
- Notebook for taking notes in class (I encourage all notes to be done by hand, but notes during discussions should be done by hand, no laptops during discussions)
- Time Tracking App ([ATracker](#))
 - Purchase: \$3 for Android, \$5 iOS, or \$3 subscription for a month
- NY Times Subscription (1 month only needed to access an old podcast)
 - \$4/month

COURSE OVERVIEW

Introductions

Tuesday, January 20

No pre-class reading

UNIT ONE: FOUNDATIONS

Topic 1: Eudaimonia

Thursday, January 22

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, 1-2, 4, and 7 (7 pages)

Tuesday, January 27

Augustine, *De beata vita* (34 pages)

Topic 2: Virtue

Thursday, January 29

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, 9 & 13 and Book II, 1- 9 (14 pages)

Tuesday, February 3

Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (15 pages)

Ch. 1 “Introduction”

Ch. 2 “Virtue, Character, and Disposition”

Topic 3: Moral Exemplars and Moral Formation

Thursday, February 5

“Admiration and Exemplars” Lecture 2 of 2015 Gifford Lectures by Linda Zagzebski - Stop before Q & A at 54:00 –

“Attainable and Relevant Moral Exemplars Are More Effective than Extraordinary Exemplars in Promoting Voluntary Service Engagement,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, by Hyemin Han, et. al

Focus on the following sections: Introduction (pg. 1), Attainability (pg. 2), Relevance (pg. 2), and General Discussion (pg. 10)

UNIT TWO: SOCIAL LOCATION

Topic 4: Positioning Theory, Racial Habits and Gender Cones

Tuesday, February 10

Allen and Wiles, “The utility of positioning theory to the study of ageing”
Focus on pages 175-179 **(5 pages)**

Eddie Glaude, “Racial Habits,” chapter 3 in *Democracy in Black* **(16 pages)**

Thursday, February 12

“Gender is Complicated for All of Us. Let’s Talk About It.” *The Ezra Klein Show*.
Podcast. Conversation with Professor Katherine Bond Stockton. **(1hr. 18 min.)**

Topic 5: Traditions and Moral Formation

Tuesday, February 17

Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life and the Concept of a Tradition,” in *After Virtue* **(20 pages)**

Thursday, February 19

Susan Moller Okin, “Whose Traditions? Which Understandings?” in *Justice, Gender, and the Family* **(32 pages)**

UNIT THREE: DESIRE

Topic 6: Desire, Love, & Care

Tuesday, February 24

Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, chapter 1 “The Question: How Should we Live?” **(30 pages)**

Thursday, February 26

Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, chapter 2 “On Love and its Reasons” **(33 pages)**

Topic 7: Consumerism, Capitalism & Desire

Tuesday, March 3

Luke Bretherton, "Consumerism, Fair Trade, and the Politics of Ordinary Time" in *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* (25 pages)

Thursday, March 5

Tressie McMillan Cottom, "The Price of Fabulousness," in *Thick and Other Essays* (14 short pages)

"Is Capitalism Good for Us?" Faith and Reason 2020, Villanova University
Department of Humanities. Conversation with Dr. Mary Hirschfeld and Dr. Eugene McCarraher. - Stop before Q & A at 42:00 -

UNIT FOUR: SOCIO-POLITICAL LIFE

Topic 8: Citizenship and Civic Virtue

Tuesday, March 10

Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed are the Organized*
Ch. 1—"The Responsibilities of a Citizen" (20 pages)
Ch.8—"The Authority to Lead" (20 pages)

Thursday, March 12

No Class: Work on Trying on Virtue Project

SPRING BREAK—No Class March 17, & 19

Tuesday, March 24

Malcolm Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not be Tweeted" *The New Yorker* (16 pages)

Topic 9: Burdened Virtues

Thursday, March 26

Lisa Tessman *The Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*
Ch. 3—The Ordinary Vices of Domination (28 pages)

Tuesday, March 31

Lisa Tessman *The Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*
Ch.5—The Burden of Political Resistance (26 pages)

UNIT FIVE: FRIENDSHIP, FAMILY, WORK

Topic 10: Friendship

Thursday, April 2

A.C. Grayling, *Friendship*

Ch. 2—"The Classic Statement: Aristotle" (pages)

Ch. 4—"Christianity and Friendship" (pages)

Tuesday, April 7

"On Friendship: Gilbert Meilaender" *Call and Character Podcast* (44 min.)

Topic 11: Family

Thursday, April 9

Mara Benjamin, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought*

Ch. 1—Obligation (16 pages)

Ch. 2—Love (10 pages)

Tuesday, April 14

Marie Solis, "We Can't have a Feminist Future without Abolishing the Family," *Vice*

Erin Maglaque, "Red love, for all" *The New Statesman*

Topic 12: Vocation, Work, & Meaning

Thursday, April 16

Nora Tubbs Tisdale, "Job and Vocation: Discerning the Difference," *Reflections*

Miroslav Volf "God the Employer," *Reflections*

Tuesday, April 21

Interview with Sarah Jaffe "Why Work Won't Love you Back" *At Work with the Ready Podcast* (50 min.)

David Gelles, "McMindfulness" in *Mindful Work* (28 pages)

Topic 13: Sabbath

Thursday, April 23

Nilaya Knafo, "Shabbat Rest: A Catalyst for Peace," *Reflections Blog*, Yale Divinity School

Conclusions

Tuesday, April 28

No Class: Work on presentations and final assignments (Final Exam, Time and the Good Life Project)

Thursday, April 30

Presentations in Class

Tuesday, May 5

Presentations in Class

Important Due Dates:

If you cannot make a due date for some reason, you need to be in touch with me as soon as possible to make alternate arrangements.

DATE	WHAT IS DUE?
February 5 th in class	Journal Submission #1
February 26 th in class	Journal Submission #2
March 13 th by 11:59pm	Trying on Virtue Project
March 26 th in class	Journal Submission #3
April 21 st in class	Journal Submission #4
May 1 st by 11:59pm	Time and the Good Life Project
May 8 th by 11:59pm	Final Integrative Reflection Essay
May 12 th 1:30-4:30pm in class	Final Exam

CLASS/ UNIVERSITY POLICIES & OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Class Recordings and PowerPoint Slides:

Recording of lectures or class discussions is not permitted. I will not post or distribute PowerPoint slides from lectures, but you are welcome to come into office hours to review slides.

Grading Scale:

97-100	A+	74-76.99	C
94-96.99	A	70-73.99	C-
90-93.99	A-	67-69.99	D+
87-89.99	B+	64-66.99	D
84-86.99	B	60-63.99	D-
80-83.99	B-	Under 60	F
77-79.99	C+		

Late Assignment Policy:

Please reach out to the instructor as soon as possible if you believe you cannot make an assignment deadline. Late or incomplete assignments will be given full credit if the student has contacted the instructor prior to the due date of the assignment (or in the case of emergencies, as soon as is practicable).

Extra Credit:

There will be a few opportunities during the semester for you to receive extra credit for attending an event outside of class that is relevant to the themes of the class. I will announce these opportunities in class. After attending the event, you'll have one week to submit a short, written reflection with two components. First, summarize the key themes or ideas presented at the event. Second, connect these themes to key questions and ideas from the class. You can attend up to two events, and each completed extra credit assignment will add up to 0.5% to your final grade.

Academic Integrity and AI Use:

Please read the student code pamphlet (sections 1-401 to 1-406) which clearly and thoroughly delineates all the guidelines and standards for academic integrity that must be met by every university student. If you are unsure about any of these standards, please come and see me. Please consult the [Academic Integrity Link](#) for more information.

As a college student, it is your responsibility to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. Representing work generated by artificial intelligence as your own work is

considered to be academically dishonest. This includes (a) ensuring that all work submitted for grades is your own original work and (b) properly citing any sources that you use.

Most importantly, while AI generated technologies are useful and exciting technological developments, they can never replace what is at the very heart of academic reading and writing, which is the opportunity for you to figure out what YOU think, believe, and value.

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA):

See <https://registrar.illinois.edu/ferpa> for more information on Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

Mental Health & Resources for Additional Support:

If you find yourself struggling academically or personally, there are many resources on this campus to help. You're welcome to make an appointment for office hours or to visit any of the following offices for support.

Counseling Center: counselingcenter.illinois.edu

McKinley Health Center: mckinley.illinois.edu

Courage Connection: courageconnection.org

Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES): disability.illinois.edu

Rape Advocacy, Counseling and Education Services (RACES): cu-races.org

Women's Resources Center: <https://wrc.illinois.edu/>

Student Assistance Center | Dean of Students Office: odos.illinois.edu

Sexual Misconduct and Reporting:

The University of Illinois is committed to combating sexual misconduct. Faculty and staff members are required to report any instances of sexual misconduct to the University's Title IX and Disability Office. In turn, an individual with the Title IX and Disability Office will provide information about rights and options, including accommodations, support services, the campus disciplinary process, and law enforcement options. A list of the designated University employees who, as counselors, confidential advisors, and medical professionals, do not have this reporting responsibility and can maintain confidentiality, can be found here: <https://wecare.illinois.edu/resources/students/#confidential>

Community of Care:

As members of the Illinois community, we each have a responsibility to express care and concern for one another. If you come across a classmate whose behavior concerns you, whether in regard to their well-being or yours, we encourage you to refer this behavior to the Connie Frank CARE Center (formerly the Student Assistance Center) in the Office of the Dean of Students. You may do so by calling 217-333-0050 or by submitting an [online referral](#). Based on your report, staff in the Connie Frank CARE Center will reach out to offer support and assistance.

Further, as a Community of Care, we want to support you in your overall wellness. We know that students sometimes face challenges that can impact academic performance (examples include mental health concerns, food insecurity, homelessness, personal emergencies). Should you find that you are managing such a challenge and that it is interfering with your coursework, you are encouraged to contact the [Connie Frank CARE Center](#) (formerly the Student Assistance Center) in the Office of the Dean of Students for support and referrals to campus and/or community resources.

Students with Disabilities:

To obtain disability-related academic adjustments and/or auxiliary aids, students with disabilities must contact the course instructor as soon as possible and provide the instructor with a Letter of Academic Accommodations from Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES). To ensure that disability-related concerns are properly addressed from the beginning, students with disabilities who require assistance to participate in this class should apply for services with DRES and see the instructor as soon as possible. If you need accommodations for any sort of disability, please speak to me after class, or make an appointment to see me or see me during my office hours. DRES provides students with academic accommodations, access, and support services. To contact DRES, you may visit 1207 S. Oak St., Champaign, call 217-333-1970, e-mail disability@illinois.edu or visit the DRES website at <https://dres.illinois.edu/>. Here is the link for information to apply for services at DRES: <https://dres.illinois.edu/information-before-you-apply/application-process/>.

Disruptive Behavior:

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students' ability to learn and an instructor's ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office for Student Conflict Resolution (<https://conflictresolution.illinois.edu>; conflictresolution@illinois.edu; 333-3680) for disciplinary action.

Emergency Response Recommendations:

Emergency response recommendations and campus building floor plans can be found at the following website: <https://police.illinois.edu/em/run-hide-fight/>. I encourage you to review this website within the first 10 days of class.

Religious Observances:

It is the policy of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign to reasonably accommodate its students' religious beliefs, observances, and practices that conflict with a student's class attendance or participation in a scheduled examination or work requirement, consistent with state and federal law. Students must make requests for accommodation in advance of the conflict to allow time for both consideration of the request and alternate procedures to be prepared. Requests should be directed to the instructor. The Office of the Dean of Students provides an optional resource on its [website](#) to assist students in making such requests.

Veterans and Military Students:

As a military-friendly institution, and per federal regulations and Illinois statutes, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign has established policies and procedures to accommodate military-connected students. In addition to the support available at the Chez Veterans Center (<https://chezveteranscenter.ahs.illinois.edu/>), members of the National Guard or Reserves and active-duty military personnel with military obligations (e.g., deployments, training, drills) are encouraged to communicate these, in advance whenever possible, to the instructor. The policy for Excused Absences and Departure from the University for U.S. Military or other U.S. National Defense Services can be found at <https://studentcode.illinois.edu/article3/part3/3-313>.