

ETHICS: THE GOOD LIFE

SEMINAR SYLLABUS

[WINTER 2021]

DESCRIPTION

Can we be happy? At times, looking around in our twenty-first century world, it would seem that “happiness” is a contingent, fleeting and difficult-to-grasp matter more of luck than of choice and action. Such a view stems from an implicitly nihilistic worldview, one unconsciously imbibed by many today, in which meaning is imposed upon the realities which extrinsically act upon us. The result of this worldview—this effort to burden the human being with creating the meaning for all the universe—is a deep, gnawing grief at the inevitable failure and ever-more-extreme attempts at improving anesthetics to dull this pain. To the contrary of this sadly inverted worldview, this seminar will look at the philosophical treatments of those in the tradition of the ancients and medievals who construe happiness as an inward possession whereby the human person acts outwardly for the sake of attaining real goods meaningful in themselves.



Finding a meaningful life, that is, requires effort: it is not something which *happens* to us, most especially when the world in which we live denies, both implicitly and often explicitly, that the universe is itself meaningful. Thus, by reading sources ancient, medieval, and modern, we will look at how the good of life has been **emptied**, how it can be **restored**, and how it can be **oriented**.

METHOD

The seminar is 8 weeks long, with one recorded lecture and one discussion session each week. Each discussion session is structured around a reading from a source attuned to the topic of the seminar. Participants are expected to have read the assigned reading and listened to the lecture prior to the session, so that they may engage in a semi-structured discussion directed and moderated by the instructor. As this is an advanced seminar, one *cannot* participate well without a *deep engagement* with the assigned reading. Moreover, *continual discussion* will foster that participation and engagement throughout the week. Participants will be expected to partake in these discussions on a regular basis, and will be challenged to do so directly.

READING

The **primary texts** for this seminar will all be made available to participants for **free**, though one may purchase hard copies if one so chooses. The first reading is from Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn's [*Ars Vitae*](#). The second reading, from Seneca the Younger, may be found in [*Dialogues and Essays*](#). The third through fifth readings are taken from St. Thomas Aquinas' [*Summa theologiae, prima secundae*](#), and may be found in an English translation by John Oesterle, [*The Treatise on Happiness*](#). The sixth and seventh readings are from Josef Pieper's [*Leisure: The Basis of Culture*](#). And the readings for the final session are found in Josef Pieper's [*Tradition as Challenge: Essays and Speeches*](#) and James V. Schall's [*The Universe We Think In*](#).

LECTURE

Each week there will also be a 20-40+ minute audio lecture, posted to Teams at the beginning of the week. This lecture will be based upon the assigned reading, but will also stray into related topics, or may use the reading as a launching point for addressing some related issue (perhaps one more general, or perhaps one more specific). The primary (but not sole) purpose of these lectures is to help clarify some of the more difficult concepts and arguments contained within the reading, as well as to raise specific questions that should help structure and guide our discussion sessions.

There *may* be accompanying visual aids (not necessarily) in order to provide some clarity as to textual points, but one *should* be able, in most cases, to simply listen to the lecture (and perhaps consult the visual aids later). This should allow more flexibility: making the lectures suitable accompaniment for a commute, while doing chores, going for a run, etc.

DISCUSSION

The heart of the seminar is the discussion session (**Saturdays at 3:00-4:00pm ET – if sufficient interest is had, a second session will be scheduled for Saturdays at 9:15-10:15am ET**): where all the thoughts emergent and encountered throughout the week—via the reading, lecture, and on-going conversations in the Teams channel—are brought into explicit conversation. This allows us to attempt a concerted effort at bringing resolution to our difficulties, and—failing such a resolution—to direct our inquiry further.

Each discussion session will begin with a brief synopsis of the week's material and a focusing on whichever aspects of that material seem most pressing. Beyond the direction provided by the instructor, participants are encouraged to bring their own concerns explicitly into view and to engage with the instructor and one another in civil debate and collective inquiry.

CONTRIBUTION

It is hoped and expected that each participant in the seminar will provide a contribution: a piece of writing, recorded presentation, or something else, within one month of the seminar's conclusion, as a way of coalescing what has been learned in a demonstrative manner. Topics are suggested, and the instructor is available for discussions and assistance in composing your contribution.

SESSION SCHEDULE

January 16	<p>The Empty Modern Self</p> <p>Lecture 1: Against the Nihilist Noise</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn 2020: "Introduction: <i>Therapeia</i>" in <i>Ars Vitae</i>.
January 23	<p>Engagement and Tranquility</p> <p>Lecture 2: Love and Boredom</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seneca c.60AD: <i>On Tranquility of the Mind</i>.
January 30	<p>Seeking Happiness</p> <p>Lecture 3: Entanglements of the Imperfect</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thomas Aquinas 1269-70: <i>Summa theologiae, prima secundae</i>, q.2; q.3, a.1-2, 8.
February 6	<p>The Constitution of Happiness</p> <p>Lecture 4: The Perfect Act of Rest</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thomas Aquinas 1269-70: <i>Summa theologiae, prima secundae</i>, q.4.
February 13	<p>The Attainment of Happiness</p> <p>Lecture 5: Participation and Rectitude</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thomas Aquinas 1269-70: <i>Summa theologiae, prima secundae</i>, q.5.
February 20	<p>Work and Contemplation</p> <p>Lecture 6: Thought and the Human Person</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Josef Pieper 1947: <i>Leisure: The Basis of Culture</i>, I-II.
February 27	<p>Leisure and Celebration</p> <p>Lecture 7: Peace and Worship</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Josef Pieper 1947: <i>Leisure: The Basis of Culture</i>, III-V.
March 6	<p>Creativity and the Human Soul</p> <p>Lecture 8: Wasting One's Life</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • James V. Schall 2012: "Art, Faith, and Creativity" and Josef Pieper 1960: "Doing and Signifying".