

Philosophy for Living  
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A. **Area of Emphasis:** Humanities

B. **Topic:** Philosophy for Living

C. **Narrative Description:** What did you have for lunch? How do you treat the ones you love? What do you do for vacation? How do you entertain yourself? This is no normal philosophy course. We're going to be getting our hands dirty with "applied philosophy", which can verge on being both more emotional and messier than traditional philosophy because it appeals directly to what's going on in our every day lives. Philosophy can show us that these seemingly mundane questions actually *matter* – perhaps much more than we think! The way we live our day-to-day lives suggests our own answers to humanity's enduring questions, so it's important to stop and consider these "small" questions. Considering them carefully will likely pull us through issues about the environment, religion, politics, art, and more. We will discover that these issues are actually already everywhere around us – in the works of scientists, writers, and artists alike. In this course we'll learn how to tackle these questions through mastering the Socratic dialectic method of questioning. Just how messy will it get? Socrates was put to death for it!

D. **Course Description**

1. **Goals and Objectives:**

a. **Goal:** To develop an understanding of the importance of the seemingly mundane choices a person faces in their day to day life, while also developing the skills to reflect on the impacts of these decisions, in the hopes of being able to make better choices in the future.

b. **Objectives:** By the end of this session, scholars will be able to critically think through the ways that every day choices impact themselves and the world. This requires intellectual integrity, which will be discussed in class.

2. **Pre/Post Assessment:** A seemingly normal daily decision will be presented as a writing prompt, with instructions to explain the impact of this decision. The response will be graded on a rubric assessing critical thinking skills. The prompt will be presented again at the end of the course in order to see if improvement is made.

3. **Discussion topics**

**Day One**

**Topics:** A brief history of the beginning of Western philosophy in ancient Greece. This will serve as an introduction to the spirit and pursuit of philosophic inquiry. In contrast to familiarity with other subjects, many people aren't even sure what philosophy is *about*, so addressing its beginnings and some of the basic questions

that are asked by philosophy will help fill out that understanding and set the tone for the class.

Activity: To begin, each student will answer the questions: what is philosophy? and: what makes a person ethical? After that, they will break into groups to try to derive a single answer for each question as a group. Finally we will discuss the answers as a class.

Materials: Pre-Socratics comic handout from *Action Philosophers!*

Homework: Read *Socrates Café* book excerpt.

### **Day Two**

Topics: Introduction to the Socratic Method, which is a dialectic questioning.

What is a philosophic question? Why is it important to question? What is a universal definition and why does Socrates seek one for so many things? How can we apply this method to our every day lives? Socrates insisted that we use lots of terms that we think we understand, but after being questioned, most would find they didn't really have as firm of an understanding as they believed. Socrates is known for saying "the unexamined life is not worth living." We will be exploring the ways in which we can examine life.

Activities: (1) Hold our own Socrates Café (and maybe brew some coffee to enjoy – to get us started I have some various flavored sugars I can bring in, and after everyone makes their beverage, we can reflect on why we chose the ones we did). What does Socrates mean by "the unexamined life is not worth living?" (2) Group activity: derive a universal definition of a chair, which is much more difficult than it seems at first blush. We will then discuss this as a class. (3) Any extra time left will be spent getting a head start on homework assignment. The plan will be to leave a good chunk of time for this.

Homework: Read *The Apology*. Prepare for an in-class mock trial as if Socrates were to be tried in our modern system.

### **Day Three**

Activities: We will begin with preparation time for the prosecution and defense to work together and then move on to the actual Mock-trial of Socrates.

Topics: When to use the Socratic Method – or – We can't constantly question everything, can we? We will discuss whether or not Socrates' actions were harmful or beneficial to other citizens. What is the proper role for questioning?

Homework: Ask other scholars what they think happiness is and what makes them happy.

### **Day Four**

Topics: Happiness: we will begin our look into happiness using some of the videos and topics available through the YES! Magazine website. These activities promote a very practical version of "the examined life." Through these resources we will discuss as a class what happiness is, ways to achieve it, and possible obstacles. Although we are asking a broad philosophic question about the nature of happiness, the goal will be to keep the answer relevant to our own lives. What does the answer mean for what we do in our lives – from both our long term goals

to our every day actions? In doing this we will also discuss Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia*, which is generally translated as 'happiness' but means something deeper and more prolonged than our English word suggests.

Activities: Watching video clips used during or filmed during the making of *Project Happiness* documentary and from the YES! Magazine website.

Homework: In your own words, define the following: virtue, integrity, wisdom. Give an example of someone famous, living or dead, who portrays each characteristic.

### **Day Five**

Topics: Virtue, Integrity, and Wisdom. What does it mean to possess each of these? What role do they play in the achievement of happiness? In our moral life? In our day-to-day decisions? Some of the background information will be based on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which discusses virtue and wisdom in detail. We will also discuss integrity in-depth. Is integrity a type of virtue? Are there different types of integrity? What is the relationship between integrity and self-deception? The basis for the discussion about the relation between virtue and integrity will come largely from Linda Zagzebski's *Virtues of the Mind*. We will discuss intellectual virtues such as intellectual humility, perseverance, adaptability and communicativeness. This will certainly be the most theory-heavy day of the class, but it is important, because the discussion will tie together the concepts of virtue, integrity, and wisdom, showing how they are necessary to both the moral and happy life. This will complete our "tool-building" phase. With the tools we've learned and created thus far, we can move in to the "application" phase where we get our hands dirty applying this to everyday scenarios.

Activities: (1) Class begins with small group discussion which should attempt to reconcile the individual definitions derived for homework. (2) Create posters about each term, including the people who were selected to represent them.

Homework: Capture a moment of happiness, whether it be through video, a photograph, sketch, or short essay.

### **Day Six**

Topics: Happiness and media: what do mass media tell us about happiness? Is this the same or different than the conclusions we came to yesterday? Does media affect us, and if so in what ways? Some of the material will come from Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, one of the premier texts on the topic. We will also watch Sut Jhally's video *Advertising and the End of the World*. The average American spends 25% of their waking day watching television and encounters over 3,000 ads per day. How does this daily input affect us?

Activities: Ink-shedding: every student starts by answering a proposed question about media. After five minutes, everyone stops and trades papers with someone else. They read the paper they get and respond to that discussion. After five more minutes, we trade again, making sure not to get our own paper back. This goes through several iterations, allowing everyone to think and write about different

issues from different perspectives. We then come together as a class to discuss the results and most interesting responses.

Homework: Short reflection: Why are you friends with your best friend?

### **Day Seven**

Topics: Friendship: We all spend a great deal of time with our friends every week, yet we rarely stop to reflect on those relationships. Do you like your friends? Must friendships be mutual? Can you be friends at a great distance? What is the proper role of friendship? We now have enough background to move fully into the every-day topics and issues, with friendship being the first. A lot of the material covered in the next few days will come from Joshua Halberstam's *Everyday Ethics*. One popular conception is that friends are extensions of ourselves – we care about them as if they were us. However, they can also serve as a type of mirror. They are in the best position of everyone to reflect to us what we are really like. This role is important in conquering self-deception, which is an obstacle to integrity.

Activities: Write a "Friendship Recipe" telling someone else how to be a good friend. Include the "ingredients" of a friendship and the "recipe" (steps) for being a good friend or making new friends.

### **Day Eight**

Topics: Judging Yourself: intellectual integrity is extremely important in judging ourselves. Some are much too critical, while others are not ever very critical at all. We will reconsider the intellectual virtues and discuss how they are important in being a fair judge of ourselves. How do feelings of guilt and pride fit into this image? (Material from *Everyday Ethics*)

Activities: Create a posterboard version of "you" with images or words from magazines. Create a list of what you find funny. Reflect on what this says about you.

Homework: Imagine you've been captured by scientists while traveling in another country. They want to perform medical experiments on you that will be extremely painful and result in your death, but they tell you these experiments are justified because they will result in life-saving drugs that will benefit thousands in their country. Further they say that this is legal in their society and your outrage over it is just personal opinion. What argument would you make to them that they should not do these experiments on you?

### **Day Nine**

Topics: Judging Others: this issue ties in to many different areas of life, from friendship, to family, to politics to science to religion. The underlying philosophic question is whether or not the position of ethical relativism is true. In trying to think this through we will discuss good and bad ways of answering moral questions. Bad ways include personal preference, emotions, statistics, etc. The practical question we work up to is: Is it ok to judge others? If so, how? Some of this material draws upon Tom Reagan's *New Introductory Essays in*

*Environmental Ethics* (there are meta-ethical questions at the beginning) as well as Joshua Halberstam's *Everyday Ethics*. We can also tie this back into the issue of friendship, asking whether or not we have a responsibility to let our friends know our judgments.

Activities: (1) Break in to small groups and brainstorm possible *bad* ways of answering a moral question. (2) Create posters with common moralities expressed in different societies.

### **Day Ten**

Topics: Global impacts of local actions: Why our choices matter. Class discussion based on ideas from "Eating Well: Thinking Ethically About Food" by Roger J.H. King. We will also view short films: *The Story of Stuff* and *Packaging is Rubbish*. The objective is to determine how seemingly minor and harmless things that we each do add up to major problems for the entire globe.

Activities: Create a top-10 list of activities we personally partake in that only seem harmless, but add up to a larger negative impact. Then reorder the list so that the easiest actions for each of us to change in our daily lives are at the top of the list.

### **Day Eleven**

Topics: Politics: what's the point, why do we even have politics? What is the best role that a political system can play in our lives? The role is typically to protect citizens and make a flourishing life easier to achieve. We will consider the tension between corporations and government. A corporation has a duty to be profitable, a government to help its people flourish. Where does the environment enter into this equation? What about future generations? Much of this will material will come from Tom Reagan's *New Introductory Essays in Environmental Ethics* and Holmes Rolston III's *Environmental Ethics*, as well as a small bit of political theory from Thomas Hobbes and John Locke.

Activities: We will look at John Stuart Mill's principle that "to individuality should belong the part of life in which it is chiefly the individual that is interested; to society the part which chiefly interests society." In groups we will then consider various actions and try to classify them into which group they belong, ending with issues of environmental concern, in order to lead in to our discussion of the role of government.

### **Day Twelve**

Activities: Movie day! We will watch *The Insider* and follow up with discuss relating to integrity and the affects of our seemingly small actions.

### **Day Thirteen**

Topics: The Meaning of Life: Intellectual versus Existential meaning. We will discuss Leo Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Illych" after reading an excerpt. We all

intellectually know it is true that “all men are mortal” but this intellectual understanding is much different than the existential understanding that “I will die.” What kind of understanding do we typically have of issues? Do our views change if we switch from one understanding to another as Ivan did? We will also address the idea that choice, commitment, responsibility and risk are inescapable. Some choices can’t be answered by “I’ll decide later.” We will consider this issue through some of the writings of Soren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre.

#### **Day Fourteen**

Activities: Work on Thursday Night Presentations. One option will be a skit in which we turn philosophers into superheroes, and demonstrate the ideas we’ve learned. However, the final decision will be up to the scholars.

#### **Day Fifteen**

Topics: Review. Putting it all together: making better decisions. A look back at our actions, and how we might think of them differently now.

Activities: Jeopardy review game. I use a power point slide that is set up to work just like the actual Jeopardy screen. Students will accumulate points for each right answer. In case of a tie, there will be a final tie-breaker.

**4. Description of Class Format and Atmosphere:** I believe that there are two really important ways of doing philosophy: thinking in solitude and engaging in active discussion with others. The original “aha” moment of a new way of understanding typically comes during self-reflection, but the idea will almost always be improved upon by hammering out the details with a larger group. This class will proceed in a similar manner. Most topics will begin with individual reflection, either through homework or in-class writing, but we will then move to small group discussion or entire class discussion. Three hours is a long block of time for anyone to stay focused, so I’ve attempted to include a lot of activities and videos wherever possible. Most college classes on philosophy are more like history of philosophy classes, in which the purpose is to learn what other people have thought. This format tends to lend itself to lecture. Unlike a college course on philosophy, this class will focus on helping the scholars do their own thinking; therefore, very little lecturing will be done. Instead, we will rely heavily on the Socratic Method, striving for answers through questioning. The best way to learn this dialectic method is through participating in it. This process is usually energetic and exciting, so the atmosphere of the class will reflect that energy.

**5. Description of how this course related to the Governor’s School theme:** This course is directly tied to the theme of integrity. We will be exploring what integrity means and applying our conception of integrity to every day situations. Although the situations we are considering won’t necessarily be leadership issues, the same set of skills being learned should be easily applied to other situations, including leadership situations.

**6. Relationship to other areas:** As I discuss in my course description, we will be hitting a lot of other areas by necessity. We will view various works of art in order bring about a better understanding of the topics we discuss, we will discuss the role of politics, we will consider how scientific advancements play into moral questions, we will also need to discuss religion when on the topics of the meaning of life and ethical relativism, and much more! This course will absolutely depend on its interdisciplinary nature. The purpose is to develop a way of thinking that can be applied to any field, and in practicing that skill, we will look to apply it to different fields.

**7. Bibliography:** I plan to use a lot of video and small excerpts, so no main text is required. I already have access to all of these materials, but the ability to make copies in order to hand out the excerpts would be needed.

**8. Instructional Materials:**

- Poster board
- Standard classroom art supplies – markers, construction paper, colored pencils, scissors, etc.
- Computer with internet and projector in order to show videos, etc.
- Old magazines (I can likely supply these if necessary).
- Access to copy machine