

Happiness and the Future of Earth
ILS 372 / Fall 2010
2:00 – 4:30 p.m. Wednesdays, Meeting place TBA

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Introduction

The quest for happiness is innate in humans, but what that happiness is varies over cultures and time. Sustainability is the quest to ensure that, as futures come and go, humanity continues to get happier (or least does not get less happy). The purpose of this course is give you enough context and background to determine whether or not you agree with these assertions. And if you do not, to articulate some alternatives.

To facilitate our analysis and spur our thinking, we will read from a broad selection of history, psychology, political science, complexity theory, biology and fiction. We will use changes from the past to guide our imagining of the future (and we will discover that it is hard to think about the future). To advance the nuance of our own thinking, we will compare our own ideas with those of our colleagues and to the thinking of the authors we read. Through work in groups and in the context of the class as a whole, we will gain exposure to the relationship between individual and group happiness.

In the first eight weeks of the class we will focus happiness as it occurs with individuals. In this context, we will explore the breadth of perspectives from which our own happiness can be considered.

After the break, we will grapple with the happiness of the group. We will do a bit of complexity theory, think a bit about voting and public policy, and spend a session on the pursuit of happiness. In final two class sessions we will return to the assertions above and attempt to articulate what sustainability might look like and how we might go about making Earth a happier place.

Goals and Outcomes:

I have designed this class with the following goals; hopefully, each of us will:

- Gain deeper understanding of what we think about our own happiness.
- Be more aware of cultural and historical contexts of happiness.
- Have a better understanding of the relationship between individual and group outcomes.
- Have a better understanding of how long time is.
- Be better able to articulate the emotional, psychological and biological elements of happiness.

The learning outcomes that will result if we are successful include:

- Writing and verbal articulation of one's own thinking about happiness (as reflected in blog posts and class participation).
- Ability to relate other's ideas about happiness to one's own (as reflected in blog comments and class participation).
- Appreciation of the depth of time (as reflected in class participation and the mid-term paper).
- Understanding of the relationship between individual and group happiness (as reflected in class participation and group project).

Class Structure:

Each class session will be in two parts separated by a short break. In the first part, I will more or less lecture and draw out the what I think are the main points in the readings and augment the readings with other material. The second part of the class will be discussion and will be a forum for your work and ideas to be presented and discussed.

Assignments and Evaluation:

In the first half of the class you be responsible for the following each week:

- The assigned reading.
- Writing 1 blog post of at least 200 words. The post should contain one well articulated idea and be no longer than is necessary.
- Commenting on at least one of your colleagues' posts. To satisfy this requirement your comment must be civil, more than trivial and advance class happiness.
- Being present, in the full sense of the word, during class. This means that you listen when others are talking, you speak when you have something to say and you think about things related to the class with as much concentration as you can muster.

After the break you will be responsible for the following:

- The assigned reading each week.
- Being present, in the full sense of the word, during class. This means that you listen when others are talking, you speak when you have something to say and you think about things related to the class with as much concentration as you can muster.
- Working with your small group to prepare and present the project that will be assigned. This will include leading the discussion in the second part of the class session. (This work will actually begin before the break).

Grading:

Participation - 32 points (1 point for turning up, another for contributing to the class.)

Bloggng - 16 points (1 point for completing the requirement, another for completing it with gusto. Partial points are possible here.) These points will be assessed at noon on the day of class.

Mid-term paper - 16 points The paper is due electronically in either .docx or .pages format by noon on Friday before the break (11 March 2010). Late papers will be penalized 2 points in the first 24 hours and 5 points thereafter.

Group Project - 32 points

8 points for pre-meeting preparation.

8 points for presentation and engagement.

16 points for content.

96 points	86.4	Happiness - A
86.4	76.8	Contentment - B
76.8	67.2	Disappointment - C
67.2	57.6	Unhappiness
57.6	0.0	Extreme Unhappiness

Note that there is not a lot of room for giving up points and currently there is no mechanism for getting them back once they are gone. That said, I will strive for transparency in awarding points where my judgment is called for (e.g. the mid-term paper and the group project).

Participation:

All of the basics apply, in particular:

- Treat each other with respect.
- Think, then speak (if you find yourself speaking before thinking, bail as gracefully as possible).
- Turn up on time, stay until we are done. If, on rare occasions, this is not possible, touch base with me as soon as possible.
- With respect to the use of information technology... see the first and third points.

A couple of other points:

- Don't be afraid to go out on a limb. Creativity, even if the limb breaks, is more interesting than restating the obvious.
- Don't be afraid of the obvious, sometimes it isn't as obvious as you might think and other times it is simply waiting to be said.
- I am not afraid of the uncomfortable silence; there will be times when I will wait for you to move the conversation forward.
- In general, I will let conversation flow with minimal interference. I will orchestrate at times when I sense that an opening needs to be created or when we start to drift too far from the main stream.

Blog Posts and Comments:

The url of the blog is: [learnuw.wisc.edu/...](http://learnuw.wisc.edu/)

These posts can be informal, but they should also be well written and hopefully entertaining. The idea is to clearly articulate a single idea and in so doing advance the class discussion.

Flaming in comments is not acceptable; which is not to say that you should only comment on posts that you agree with. In fact, I encourage you to challenge each other's thinking in constructive terms. To get credit your comment needs to be much more substantial than "good point".

Midterm paper:

The topic of the paper is: What does a happy Earth look like to my *great* grandkids?

- This paper should be somewhere in the neighborhood of 2500 words.
- It should create a clear image of happiness on Earth 3 generations into the future.
- It should be well written (spelling and grammar count) and look nice on the page.
- We will talk more about this sometime around week 5.
- The paper should be submitted electronically in either .docx or .pages format and should have a filename in the format "your last name"ILS372midterm.

Group Project:

The class will be divided into 5 groups. Each group will be responsible for engaging the entire class in a rigorous discussion of your chosen topic. Groups will be formed in the first few weeks of the semester and each group will lead the second half of one class in the second half of the semester. Topics will be identified 1 week after groups are formed.

Starting in week 10, I will meet with each group and we will go over your plan for your session. This meeting will be about an hour in length and by the end of it we will have a set of actions and a framework for your session. In preparation for that meeting, you should prepare a broad outline of what you plan to do. This should include:

- 1 reading of about 15 pages.

- An outline of the ideas you will present.
- An idea of how you will engage the rest of the class.

Required Resources:

I would like you to buy:

- *The Geography of Bliss* (2009), Eric Weiner
- *Conquest of Happiness* (1930), Bertrand Russell
- *Burning Chrome* (1986), William Gibson

The rest of the readings will be abstracted from larger works and available from the course web site (url...). Some of the readings are available on the web. More hints on finding the readings are available below.

Class Sessions:

Reading and writing for each session is to be completed, *before* the class session. I will wrap up each week with an introduction to the following week to give some context for the out of class work.

Week 1 / 19 January - Introduction to the Course

This session will diverge from the norm in that we will have 2 mini-sessions. Before the break we will go over the syllabus, introduce ourselves to each other and set the context for the course. In the second part of the class, I will give a short introductory talk and then we will have a discussion about what we think happiness is.

Week 2 / 27 January - History of Happiness: linear

History can be told as a linear progression of events and in this session we will address the temporal development of thinking about happiness.

- McMahon, D. - Happiness: a history (course web site)
- Blog - Am I happy?

Week 3 / 2 February - History of Happiness: conceptual

History can also be told in terms of the development of important concepts. In this session we will take a look at a few conceptualizations of happiness.

- White, N - A Brief History of Happiness (course web site)
- Blog - How do I know that I am happy?

Week 4 / 9 February - Introduction to Sustainability

A lot has been written about sustainability; in this session we will touch on a few of the highlights.

- Brundtland, G.H. - Our Common Future (<http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm>)
- Cohen, J. - How Many People Can the Earth Support (course web site)
- Blog - More forks? Better manners? Bigger Pie?

Week 5 / 16 February - Utopias and Dystopias

Utopias illustrate what we value about the future and dystopias often illustrate what we fear. I have argued that a minimum condition of sustainability is that we are not headed toward a dystopic future. Here we will consider these two end-members for the future.

- Gibson, W. - Johnny Mnemonic? (or excerpt from Morgan, R. - Altered Carbon?) (purchase)
- Malthus, T. - excerpt from his classic (<http://tinyurl.com/3a9sac6>)

Veblen, T. - excerpt from Theory of the Leisure Class (or perhaps Gorz, A. - excerpt from Critique of Economic Reason) (<http://tinyurl.com/24csfpo>)

Blog - How is my happy state different from that of my grandparent's generation?

Week 6 / 23 February - Psychological elements of Happiness

Are some people inherently more happy than others? Can we do anything to change this? We will consider the psychological elements of happiness from the philosophical, psychological, and spiritual perspectives.

Russell, B. - Conquest of Happiness (purchase)

Freud, S. - Civilization and It's Discontents (<http://tinyurl.com/2a4krrk>)

Bok, S. - Exploring Happiness (course web site)

Gyatso, T. - The Art of Happiness (course web site)

Blog - This Sucks!

Week 7 / 2 March - Physiological elements of Happiness

Brain chemistry plays a role in depression. In this session we will explore the relationship between emotions and the functioning of the brain.

Damasio, A. - Looking for Spinoza (course web site)

Blog - Chemistry and how I feel?

Week 8 / 9 March - Cultural elements of Happiness

Are some countries happier than others? What does that mean? How can we tell? We will explore both the sociological and economic elements of happiness in different locations around the globe.

Graham, C. - Happiness around the world (course web site)

Weiner, E. - Geography of Bliss (purchase)

Maslow, H - Hierarchy of Needs (pdf on class website)

Blog - Utopia from where I sit

Week 9 / 16 March - break

In this session we will all take a deep breath (hopefully).

Week 10 / 23 March - Complexity and Models of the Brain

Much work has been done on consciousness and how the brain produces it. In this session the idea of emergent properties will be introduced along with some basic ideas about complexity theory.

Descartes, R. - Meditation... (<http://tinyurl.com/267p43v>)

Dennett, D. - excerpt from Consciousness Explained (course web site)

Hofstadter, D. - excerpt from Gödel, Escher, Bach related to Aunt Hilary (course web site)

Searle, J. - excerpt from The Rediscovery of the Mind (course web site)

Week 11 / 30 March - One vs. Many

It turns out that identifying the best outcome for a group of people is deeply problematic. We will consider some aspects of voting and think about how democracy fits into the idea of a happy Earth.

Declaration of Independence (<http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration.html>)

Voting / Szpiro, G. (course web site)

Utilitarianism / Mill, J.S., Bentham, J. (books.google.com)

Week 12 / 6 April - Public Policy and Happiness

If we are to move toward happiness as a society, then we will need to develop public policies that steer our communities in the right direction.

U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights (<http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution.html>)

Bok, D - Politics of Happiness (course web site)

Week 13 / 13 April - Prediction is difficult...

All of this is fine and good, but how do we know what will happen in the future? It turns out that it is very difficult to know what to do now in order to be happy later.

Gilbert, D. - Stumbling on Happiness (course web site)

Week 14 / 20 April (Passover 19 April) - Thinking about the Future

Despite the difficulty, we try to imagine the future and shape it. Here we will compare the present with the imaginings of past futurists and consider what some futurists imagine is coming.

Readings from past futurists Orwell, Wells (books.google.com)

Readings from (more or less) current futurists such as Peter Schwartz, Ray Kurzweil, Arthur C. Clarke (course web site)

Week 15 / 27 April - What is sustainability?

Week 16 / 4 May - Making Earth happier

In these last two sessions we will strive to come to some conclusions as a group regarding happiness and the future of Earth.