



Happiness, Well-being, and a Good Life

PHIL 410 (HUMA, INQ) - Paul McNamara

What are happiness, well-being, and a good life?

What are some of the main theories of happiness and well-being?

What contributes to or detracts from happiness and well-being?

What are some key psychological findings about happiness and well-being, and about the extent to which we can increase them?

How is current psychological research on happiness, well-being, and a good life related to philosophical work on those topics?

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New interdisciplinary areas have emerged in the past few decades, *Happiness Studies*, and more broadly, *Positive Psychology*. These two areas are primarily populated by psychologists, but also involve philosophers, and the historical antecedents of these new areas lie predominantly in the history of philosophy. Happiness Studies focuses on happiness and psychological well-being, and positive psychology focuses on these, as well as many other desirable psychological states (e.g. optimism, resilience, virtues, positive emotions). Happiness studies aims at the empirical detection and measurement of happiness and well-being, as well as of their components, their correlates and causes, how they arise, are maintained, boosted, or decreased, and public policy implications, among other things. Positive Psychology does analogous things for additional desirable states.

Philosophers have been engaged in these disciplines, although the focus in philosophy tends to be more on developing and defending accounts of the nature of happiness, well-being, and other desirable states, and thus the influence has been more in the area of conceptual foundations rather than in empirical studies based on the concepts targeted by psychology for empirical investigation.

Part of what makes this new interdisciplinary work exciting is the emerging view that happiness and well-being need not be left to happenstance: there are findings suggesting that various things in our control can enhance our own happiness and well-being. This has substantial implications for rational life planning, as well as having potential ethical and political implications. For example, unsurprisingly, there are strong correlations between poverty and low well-being assessments.

We will approach this new area from both a philosophical perspective, and a psychological perspective. In the first half, we will focus primarily on philosophical accounts of the nature of well-being (although we will be doing some background reading about the contemporary scene in the psychology of well-being in tandem). We will then turn more fully to positive psychology generally, and its study of happiness and well-being specifically, and finally to evidence for ways these might be boosted.

In addition to regular quizzes on the readings, and two exams, there will be a final paper that centers around a plan you will develop for living a good life.