

Philosophy 408C, Contemplation, Well-Being and Personal Identity (Spring 2007)

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This course revolves around the three topics noted in the title. Let us begin with the latter two.

There has been a surge of interest in the last few years in so-called “positive psychology” – attempts by psychologists to understand happiness and well-being. This has produced a flood of psychological and popular literature, as well as web sites, activities and so on. One of our goals will be to create a map, as it were, of this relatively new territory. There are questions about empirical findings, questions about research methods but also philosophical questions about how the constructs of happiness at the center of this new research link up with older philosophical concepts of happiness. One obvious contrast: that between the older Aristotelian notion of *Eudaimonia*, which might think of, roughly, as the health of the soul, and Utilitarian concepts of happiness that link it with pleasure.

From here to issues about personal identity is not a long distance. By “personal identity” I mean to allude primarily to the philosophical literature about the question of what, if anything, makes someone the same person over time. Some concepts of happiness suggest a long-term “narrative” view of the person. Others – the ones closer to utilitarianism are more “moment based.”

And this brings us to the first topic in the trio: contemplation. By “contemplation” here I mean to refer to a range of disciplines and practices of a generally meditative sort, but in particular to so-called “mindfulness meditation,” which is rooted in the Vipassana tradition of Buddhism.

Vipassana meditation – or mindfulness meditation – is decidedly *not* intended to induce religious experiences or altered states. It is a practice that one can come to with no particular metaphysical beliefs at all, and it certainly does not require any religious beliefs. But it is a form of meditation and mental training that has been in the news a great deal over the last few years. There is a good deal of evidence that it has physical and psychological benefits, but in Theravada Buddhism, it is also an integral part of the path to wisdom.

But what is wisdom? And what could meditation have to do with achieving it?

For the Buddhist, there is a deep connection between wisdom and meditation because part of wisdom calls for seeing things as they are. This does not mean seeing them in the way the scientist would (though it doesn’t exclude that) but being able to pay attention to what our experience is like and to how we are related to what is going on around us. One of the oft-repeated claims of Buddhism is that there is no self; this is the doctrine of *anatta*. And this is an insight that we are supposed to gain partly as a result of Vipassana meditation.

Here the issues become very rich. There is a deep connection between this Buddhist notion of the “self” as a mere construction and the philosophical understanding of personal identity that we find in David Hume and also in the contemporary philosopher Derek Parfit. Parfit and Hume agree with Buddhism that there is no metaphysical self; no underlying substantive entity that makes us who we are. Instead, there is a certain sort of causal sequence – an idea not unlike the Buddhist concept of “dependent origination.”

We might ask two questions about this idea. The first is whether it is true as a matter of “metaphysical fact.” The second is whether treating it *as though* it is true has something to be said for it. We will address both questions, but for the moment, let us say a bit about the second of these.

One of the things that mindfulness meditation trains us to do is to pay attention to what actually goes on in our thoughts. And one of the things we notice very quickly is that we are full of thoughts, many of which may not be true at all. Mindfulness meditation teaches us to detach from these thoughts – to become less identified with them, and not to think of them as aspects of a “self.”

This is not unlike what cognitive behavioral therapy asks us to do. Cognitive behavioral therapy teaches us to notice “automatic thoughts” that we tend to treat as true, often with undesirable psychological consequences.

What we see, then, is a network of issues that overlap in a variety of ways. How will we proceed?

The first point is that the center of gravity of the course is contemplative practice itself. We will learn to meditate, and we will try to spend at least a bit of time in class (most though not all days) doing a brief meditation. That means that showing up for class matters, and in particular, showing up on time matters. Coming in late for a meditation won’t work, because it is likely to prove very distracting for others.

You will also be expected to establish a regular meditation practice of your own. By “regular” I mean at least three times a week outside class. You will be asked to keep a log (it will help keep you on track) and a journal. The journal is *not* something that you should feel you have to fill out as soon as you are through sitting. In fact, that’s probably not a good time to do it. Instead, you should find at least two times a week when you can reflect on what your practice has been like and on how it is or isn’t fitting in with the rest of your life. The entries don’t need to be long, but they should be reflective in the best sense of that word.

The log and journal will make up 15% of your grade. The rest will be as follows.

There will be group projects, the results of which will be, for example, annotated bibliographies or resource guides. More on that later. This will be 20% of your grade. You will also be expected to come up with a research question, and to pursue it in a paper. The question may be empirical, or philosophical, or a mixture of both. You will need to submit a prospectus for the research, of around 1,000 words, outlining the question you plan to explore, the methods and sources you will use, and the sorts of results or conclusions you anticipate you might find. This will be a separate graded item. It will be worth 15%.

The term paper – the outcome of the prospectus – will be worth 25%. There will also be a final exam, worth 25%. To sum up:

Log and Journal:	15%
Group projects:	20%
Prospectus:	15%
Research Paper:	25%
Final Exam:	<u>25%</u>
	100%

Your log should simply note when and where you meditated and for how long. You need to establish a discipline around meditation. It may take a little doing at first, but you need to find a way to practice several times a week outside class. Start off with short periods (unless you are already experienced) – say, 10 minutes. Then gradually build up your sitting time so that you can do at least 20 minutes and, ideally, 30 minutes on at least one day.

Your journal should offer responses to what the meditation experience has been like *and* to ways in which you have been able to practice mindfulness in other situations. Journaling is a practice as well. Don't be perfunctory about it. When you journal, you may need to take a few minutes to settle down and sort through your responses. A reasonable journal entry will be at least 250 words, and you should journal at least three times a week. But you can write journal entries in odd moments – on the bus, waiting for a class, before you go to bed...

I need to stress: journaling and meditation are both disciplines. You are entering into a practice to see what happens as you follow through. That means really committing to the practice

I will ask to see your logs and journals at three points during the semester. If you keep them electronically, you can send them to me in that form. If you write by hand, you should give me copies so that you won't have your journal tied up.

Schedule

We will be spending much of February getting oriented to meditation. During March and April, we will be moving on to broader topics about well-being and person identity. You should read the book by Sharon Begley. If you can get it, you should consider reading Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. From the anthology on personal identity by Martin and Barresi, we will be reading *at least* essay 3 by Parfit, essay 5 by Korsgaard, essay 6 by Unger, essay 9 by Schechtman, Essay 10 by Johnston, Essay 11 by Parfit and essay 13 by Strawson. I strongly recommend that you start reading now so that when we come to discuss these texts, you will already have thought about them.

I will also be distributing various other readings as pdf files.

Guest Speakers

On Feb. 7, Hugh Byrne from the Insight Meditation Community of Washington will be visiting us.

On Feb. 14, Prof. Levinson from the philosophy department, will be here to talk about listening to music.

On February 19, Dr. Akira Otani from the counseling center will talk with us about cognitive behavioral therapy.

On Feb. 21, Lisa Pradhan from the Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine will be with us to talk about empirical research on meditation and health outcomes.

I am also planning to have Michael Cifone come talk to us about some relevant themes in Buddhist thought, and to have Prof. Leshner speak with us about contemplation in ancient Greek philosophy. There may also be one or two other speakers.

Journal Checks

I will do journal checks on :

February 28

March 28

April 25

Journals will be handed in on the last class

Prospectus

Your prospectus is due on March 12.

Term Paper

Your term paper is due on May 9

Group Projects

You will present the results of your group projects on May 2 and May 7.

Final Exam

Wednesday, May 16, 1:30pm, in the usual classroom.

TOPICS AND READINGS

Note: "TBD" means "to be distributed". If an article says "available through research port," then you need to (a) go to <http://www.lib.umd.edu>, (b) click on the "Research Port" link, (b) IF YOU ARE NOT ON CAMPUS, click the appropriate library link and enter your 14-digit number from the back of your library card, (d) click "E-JOURNALS," and (e) using the name of the journal, do the appropriate search. You will (after a few steps) be able to download a pdf file.

Personal Identity

Hume:

Treatise, Book 1, part iv section 6 ("Of personal identity")

Bennett version: <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfbits/htb.html>

Original version: <http://oll.libertyfund.org/Home3/Book.php?recordID=0213>

Parfit, Derek:

"Divided minds and the nature of persons" (From *Immortality*, Edwards (ed.) TBD

"Why our identity is not what matters," In Martin and Barresi pp. 115 ff.

"The unimportance of identity," in Martin and Barresi pp. 292 ff.

Siderits, Mark:

"Beyond Compatibilism: A Buddhist Approach to Freedom and Determinism" TBD

"Buddhist Reductionism," *Philosophy East & West*, Vol. 47, No. 4. (Oct., 1997), pp. 455-478 (available through research port)

Perrett, Roy W. "Personal identity, minimalism and Madhyamaka", *Philosophy East & West* Volume 52, Number 3 July 2002 373–385 (available through research port)

Korsgaard, Christine M. "Personal identity and the unity of agency: a Kantian response to Parfit," in Martin and Barresi pp. 168 ff.

Johnston, Mark, "Human concerns without superlative selves," in Martin and Barresi pp. 260 ff.

Schechtman, Marya, "Empathic access: the missing ingredient in personal identity," in Martin and Barresi pp. 238 ff.

Strawson, Galen "The Self," in Martin and Barresi pp. 335 ff.

Welfare and Well-being

Kahneman, D. "Experienced utility and objective happiness: a moment-based approach", Chapter 37, pp. 673-692, in: D. Kahneman and A. Tversky (Eds.) *Choices, Values and Frames*, New York: Cambridge University Press and the Russell Sage Foundation, (2000)

available at

<http://209.85.165.104/search?q=cache:VUd1cVuniAwJ:www.isop.ucla.edu/cms/files/Kahneman.pdf+%22carried+two+different+meanings+in+its+long+history%22&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us&client=firefox-a> and TBD

Frederickson, Barbara L., "Extracting meaning from past affective experiences: The importance of peaks, ends, and specific emotions," *Cognition and Emotion* 2000, 14 (4), 577–606. (available through research port)

Kelman, Mark "Hedonic Psychology and the Ambiguities of 'Welfare'," 2005 by Blackwell Publishing, Inc. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 33, no. 4 (available through research port)

Lykken, David and Tellegen, Auke, "Happiness is a stochastic phenomenon," *Psychological Science*, v. 7 no. 3 pp. 186 -189 (available through research port)

Diener, Ed and Diener, Carol, "Most People are Happy," *Psychological Science* vol. 7 no. 3 May 1996 pp. 181 – 185 (available through research port)

Hayborn, Daniel M., "Happiness, the self, and human flourishing," available at <http://www.tc.umn.edu/~tiberius/workshoppapers.html>

Diener, Ed and Scollon, Christie, "Subjective well-being is desirable, but not the *summum bonum*," available at <http://www.tc.umn.edu/~tiberius/workshoppapers.html>

Wisdom and Related Concepts

Frankfurt, Harry G., Freedom of the will and the concept of a person," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 68, No. 1. (Jan. 14, 1971), pp. 5-20. (available through research port)

Godlovitch, Stanley "On wisdom," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, March 1981 (TBD)

McKee, Patrick, "Philosophy and Wisdom," *Teaching Philosophy* 13:4 December 1990 pp. 325-330. TBD

Tiberius, Valerie, "Wisdom and perspective," *Journal of Philosophy* vol CII no. 2 April , 2005 pp. 163-182.