HAPPINESS, well-being, and a good life

PHIL 410, HUMA, INQ - Mon & Wed 5:40-7:00 - Paul McNamara

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

What did prior great thinkers say about the nature of these? three?

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

How is current psychological research on happiness, well-being, and a good life related to the history of philosophy?

What are some key psychological findings about happiness and well-being, and about the extent to which we can increase them?
There is a new interdisciplinary area that has emerged, called *Happiness Studies*. This area is especially populated by psychologists, but also by philosophers, and the historical antecedents of this new area lie predominantly in the history of philosophy. Happiness studies focuses on the nature of happiness, the empirical detection and measurement of happiness and its components, the causes of happiness, typical necessary conditions for happiness, how it arises, is maintained, boosted, or decreased in human beings, virtues and happiness, public policy implications of happiness research, among other things. Part of what makes this new work exciting is the emerging view that happiness need not be left to happenstance: there are many findings suggesting that various things in our control can substantially facilitate our own happiness. Some even advocate a 40% malleable zone in our potential for happiness (with 60% fixed by things largely out of our control). That’s almost half our potential for happiness susceptible to our own interventions in our own lives. If anything close to this is right, it has substantial implications for rational life planning, as well as ethical and political implications. For example, unsurprisingly, there are strong correlations between poverty and low well-being assessments.

We will approach this new area via a sweep through two millennia of reflections on the nature of happiness. In the first half, we will focus on readings in the philosophy on happiness from antiquity until the twentieth century (although we will be doing some background reading about the contemporary scene in happiness studies in tandem). We will see that this is a case where the sometimes mythological “wisdom of the ancients” has some genuine merit. We will then turn to the twentieth century with a focus on recent empirical work in the psychology of happiness and its reception in philosophy, as well as the reflection of the prior philosophical tradition in the work of many of the prominent psychologists in this area.