

**GESM 120: Seminar in Humanistic Inquiry**  
**Section 35357: What is the best way to live?**  
Fall 2020

Monday and Wednesday, 2.00 – 3.20 pm

Instructor: Ralph Wedgwood

The course will be online, over Zoom and Blackboard (<https://blackboard.usc.edu/>)

Office hours: Tuesday 3–5 pm, on Zoom

Email: [wedgwood@usc.edu](mailto:wedgwood@usc.edu)

Should you have any overarching goals in your life – for example, to be rich, famous, and successful? Or to have fun and be happy? Or to serve your fellow human beings or to make the world a better place? Or some goal that is part of a traditional religious practice? Or whatever goal you happen to want to pursue? Or perhaps it is better *not* to have any overarching goals, but just to muddle through life with no preconceived aims?

Some philosophers have thought that there might be *general* answers to these questions – answer to these questions that would be right, not just for you, but for anyone who is capable of reflecting on the question of how to live. We will try to explore the ideas and arguments of these philosophers.

We shall by looking at the question of what is good for a person – or what it is to have a good life. Then we shall look at theories of what is morally right and wrong. Finally, we shall look at a number of particular moral problems that pose test cases for different ways of thinking about how to live. The readings will be taken both from classics texts from the history of philosophy and from more contemporary philosophical discussions.

This course satisfies USC’s GE-B (Humanistic Inquiry) and GE Seminar requirements. The course is designed for students in their freshman year.

**Learning Objectives (Humanistic Inquiry):**

- To reflect on what it means to be human through close study of human experience throughout time and across diverse cultures.
- To cultivate a critical appreciation for various forms of human expression, including literature, language, philosophy, and the arts, as well as develop an understanding of the contexts from which these forms emerge.
- To engage with lasting ideas and values that have animated humanity throughout the centuries for a more purposeful, more ethical, and intellectually richer life.

- To learn to read and interpret actively and analytically, to think critically and creatively, and to write and speak persuasively.
- To learn to evaluate ideas from multiple perspectives and to formulate informed opinions on complex issues of critical importance in today's global world.
- To learn to collaborate effectively through traditional and new ways of disseminating knowledge.

Having successfully met the learning objectives, you will have acquired both practical skills and more intangible competencies. You will master strategies for finding, reading, and understanding relevant information from different genres, for analyzing complex problems, for making and evaluating compelling arguments, and for preparing effective presentations. You will become a clearer thinker and a stronger writer. You will gain new insights and be inspired. You will be ready for a life of learning and creativity.

**Required Texts (available from the USC Bookstore):**

1. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford University Press)
2. Roger Crisp, *Mill on Utilitarianism* (Routledge)
3. Russ Shafer-Landau, ed. *The Ethical Life: Fundamental Readings in Ethics and Moral Problems*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Oxford University Press)

Other readings will be distributed electronically on the course Blackboard site.

**Course Requirements:**

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|-----------------------------------|-----------|
| 1. Reading blog:                  | 10%       |
| 2. Attendance/Class Participation | 15%       |
| 3. Three papers (1000-1500 words) | 25% each; |

Reading blog: for every reading assignment (but with 4 passes) you must submit a brief blog post to Blackboard (150-300 words), which articulates *either* (a) one concern you have about the author's view, *or* (b) one thing that puzzles you about it, *or* (c) a (courteous and charitable!) response to another student's post on the same reading. These must be posted by 9am the morning of the class for which the reading is assigned. They will be graded simply as Satisfactory/Not Satisfactory.

It is important that you attend and participate in class meetings and complete the assigned reading (see schedule below) prior to class. As explained below, we will have several different sorts of classes over the semester. Some classes will be general meetings of everyone involved in the course; some will be small-group meetings. Some of the general meetings will be lectures followed by discussion; others will be student-led debates.

Paper topics will be handed out at least two weeks in advance. The papers will be due at the beginnings of Weeks 6, 10, and 14, respectively. There will be no exam.

### Class meetings

- **Lecture + general discussion:** in six weeks (Weeks 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, and 10), the classes will have the traditional format of a lecture interspersed with discussion periods.
- **Small-group meetings:** in three weeks (Weeks 2, 5, and 9), the class will meet in four small-groups of four students on both days. The instructor will join each group for 40 minutes.
- **Debates:** in four weeks (Weeks 7, 11, 12, and 13), the class will engage in a series of debates about particular ethical issues. In each of these weeks, the debates will be introduced by four students: on Monday, two of these four students will argue for one side, with the other two arguing on the other side; then, on Wednesday, there will be another debate, with the two pairs of students switching sides, and arguing for the opposite side of the debate from the side that they argued for on Monday.

### Policy on lateness

Papers submitted late without an extension will be penalized 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g. A to A-); additional 1/3 grade penalties will be applied after 24 hours late and for every subsequent week late.

### Office Hours

I will be holding office hours on Tuesdays, from 3 pm until 5 pm. Office hours are an opportunity for you to ask questions about the class or the readings. They are also a chance to chat about how the course is going, to tell me about your ideas about any of the moral issues that we are discussing, to test out a plan for one of your papers on me, or to ask for general advice. Don't hesitate to take advantage of this opportunity.

### Students with Disabilities

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability should register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP), and provide us with a statement listing the requested accommodations. (DSP is open 8:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number is (213) 740-0776.)

## Schedule of readings and topics

WEEK 1 (August 17 and 19)

*Lecture + general discussion*

1. Introduction

### Part 1: What is good for us?

2. Qualitative Hedonism J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chaps. 1–2

WEEK 2 (August 24 and 26)

*Small-group meetings*

3. The “experience machine” Nozick (in *The Ethical Life*)
4. Discussion of hedonism 1 Crisp, *Mill on Utilitarianism*, chap. 2

WEEK 3 (August 31 and September 2)

*Lecture + general discussion*

5. Alternatives to hedonism 1 Crisp. *Mill on Utilitarianism*, chap. 3
6. Alternatives to hedonism 3 Hooker (in *The Ethical Life*)

WEEK 4 (September 7 and 9)

*Lecture + general discussion*

7. Labor Day – No classes
8. Alternatives to hedonism 3 Wolf (in *The Ethical Life*)

WEEK 5 (September 14 and 16)

*Small-group meetings*

9. Psychological Hedonism J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chap. 4
10. Discussion of hedonism 2 Crisp, *Mill on Utilitarianism*, chap. 4

### Part 2a: What is morally right and wrong? – Utilitarianism

WEEK 6 (September 21 and 23)

*Lecture + general discussion*

11. Utilitarianism J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chap. 2 (again!)
12. Utilitarianism and rights J. S. Mill *Utilitarianism*, chap. 5

WEEK 7 (September 28 and 30)

*Student led debate: Is there a defensible form of utilitarianism?*

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|-----|------------------------------|--|
| 13. | Forms of utilitarianism      | Crisp, <i>Mill on Utilitarianism</i> , chap. 5 |
| 14. | Criticisms of utilitarianism | Crisp, <i>Mill on Utilitarianism</i> , chap. 6 |

**Part 2b: What is morally right and wrong? Alternatives to utilitarianism**

WEEK 8 (October 5 and 7)

*Lecture + general discussion*

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|-----|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 15. | Aquinas: Natural law       | Aquinas (in <i>The Ethical Life</i> ) |
| 16. | The categorical imperative | Kant (in <i>The Ethical Life</i> )    |

WEEK 9 (October 12 and 14)

*Small-group meetings*

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|-----|-----------------|--|
| 17. | Ross's theory   | Ross (in <i>The Ethical Life</i> )     |
| 18. | Feminist ethics | Lindeman (in <i>The Ethical Life</i> ) |

**Part 3: Ethical problems**

WEEK 10 (October 19 and 21)

*Lecture + general discussion*

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|-----|----------------------|---|
| 19. | Responding to racism | Appiah and Lebron (in <i>The Ethical Life</i> ) |
| 20. | Responding to racism | Anderson (in <i>The Ethical Life</i> )          |

WEEK 11 (October 26 and 28)

*Student-led debate: Should you vote or not?*

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|-----|----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 21. | The ethics of voting | Brennan, "Polluting the Polls"    |
| 22. | The ethics of voting | Guerrero, "The Paradox of Voting" |

WEEK 12 (November 2 and 4)

*Student-led debate: What should we do about those who are poor and hungry?*

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|-----|--------------------|--|
| 23. | Poverty and hunger | Singer (in <i>The Ethical Life</i> )   |
| 24. | Poverty and hunger | Narveson (in <i>The Ethical Life</i> ) |

WEEK 13 (November 9 and 11)

*Student-led debate: How should we protect the environment?*

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|-----|-----------------|---|
| 25. | The environment | Posner and Sunstein (in <i>The Ethical Life</i> ) |
| 26. | The environment | Hill (in <i>The Ethical Life</i> )                |

## Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

### Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” [policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b](http://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

### Support Systems

*Student Counseling Services (SCS) – (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call*

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. [engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling)

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1 (800) 273-8255*

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) – (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call*

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. [engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp)

*Sexual Assault Resource Center*

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: [sarc.usc.edu](http://sarc.usc.edu)

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086*

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. [equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu)

*Bias Assessment Response and Support*

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. [studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support)

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs*

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. [dsp.usc.edu](http://dsp.usc.edu)

*Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710*

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. [studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa)

*Diversity at USC*

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. [diversity.usc.edu](http://diversity.usc.edu)

*USC Emergency Information*

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible. [emergency.usc.edu](http://emergency.usc.edu)

*USC Department of Public Safety – UPC: (213) 740-4321 – HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24-hour emergency or to report a crime.*

Provides overall safety to USC community. [dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu)