

**Region: Asia, Middle East and Muslim civilizations**

**Course information and description: PHI 215: Philosophical Issues (with a globalized focus on Chinese philosophy)**

*Philosophy is the systematic study of ideas and issues, a reasoned pursuit of fundamental truths, a quest for a comprehensive understanding of the world, a study of principles of conduct, and much more. Every domain of human experience raises questions to which its techniques and theories apply, and its methods may be used in the study of any subject or the pursuit of any vocation. Indeed, philosophy is in a sense inescapable: life confronts every thoughtful person with some philosophical questions, and nearly everyone is guided by philosophical assumptions, even if unconsciously. One need not be unprepared.*

-“A Brief Guide for Undergraduates” by the American Philosophical Association

This class aims at three ends: equip students with the skills to approach philosophical problems, introduce students to the study of theoretical and practical philosophy, and to develop an appreciation for the pursuit of truth, beauty, and goodness.

**Description of module**

There is also an increasingly visible movement in the field of philosophy toward diversifying the canon by introducing students to philosophical works developed in a non-European and non-American context. This movement aims to create opportunities for students to examine in closer detail the premises and arguments of non-Western philosophies. This module is structured as a comparative approach, focused on allowing students to appreciate the distinctive contributions of Chinese and other East Asian philosophers, to see how some questions about the human condition are ubiquitous and transcendent, and to better discern the ways in which Western philosophy and European perspectives may not be as universal or timeless as they are often presented. In addition, some learning activities are directed toward students developing the skills of argumentation and application necessary for explaining the relevance of philosophy to our everyday lives.

As an alternative rather than a replacement, this module proceeds by way of giving students an opportunity to explore classical texts in the non-Western canon. Many textbooks do not devote much space (if any) to these perspectives, although this is slowly beginning to change. However, many instructors have limited discretion in terms of the textbooks they use at their institutions. Therefore, an important objective for this module is to find readily available, open source resources that instructors could access and incorporate into their own curriculum. This module provides links to many of these open source resources. Other resources must be sought out by instructors on their own. It would be prudent to enlist your college librarian and seek their assistance. You may also reach out to me at Guilford Technical Community College. My email address is ndzavediuk [at] gtcc [dot] edu.

**Student Global Learning Outcomes**

1. Students will examine the distinctive philosophical contributions of thinkers outside the Anglo-European canon and gain a deeper appreciation of the contemporary relevance of multiculturalism.
2. Students will be able to identify and explain philosophical concepts and demonstrate the skill necessary to undertake a comparative analysis between Western and non-Western thinkers in the Chinese tradition.
3. By applying philosophical insights and concepts to their own daily lives and intended occupations, students will demonstrate how philosophical ideas and arguments can translate into self-knowledge.

## Student Global Learning Activities

### 1. Title: I Am Going to Die: Existentialism and Death (Multi-Part Individual/Group Assignment)

**Objective:** Students will apply the core concepts and supporting arguments of two classical thinkers to a leading-edge (but accessible) philosophical work on a contemporary topic. The aim is to foster an appreciation in students of the contemporary relevance of classical thought by thinking about how old ideas may shed new light on the modern condition.

**Procedure:** The inevitability of death and the recognition of this fact is often accompanied by feelings of profound anxiety and dread. Awareness of one's own eventual death is considered by some to be the defining feature of the human condition. Most human beings strive for permanence in their relations, institutions, and contributions. Yet they all will perish. But what should be made of this fact? Is death a tragedy, and why?

**Follow-up and Assessment:** Is it possible to love life without fearing death? Upon surveying some of the key issues raised in a popular Open Yale Courses offering, this activity challenges students to develop an answer to this question (and others) through the second chapter of the collected writings Zhuangzi (*Chuang Tzu*).

The first part of this assignment requires students to write a 250-word assignment that answers the following question: "Are you frightened of death? Do you wish that you could live forever?" (Students are then assigned to a group by their

The second part of the assignment asks students to then read Walter Kaufmann's essay, "Death without Dying." Each student bring with them to class with a 250-500 word assignment that answers the following prompt: "Having read Kaufmann's essay, identify and explain at least four (4) distinct claims that occur in the essay about death and how one should regard its significance. Which of these four claims resonates most closely with what you describe in your essay (and why), and which of the four is the furthest from your own thinking about death (and why)?" (With the same group they were part of in the first part of the assignment, students should then share their responses with each other. Although there will be some overlap, the group should determine together the number of distinctive claims they identified as a group and make a list of them. The class should come together and discuss

The third part of the assignment starts with the instructor introducing students to Taoism. Depending on time constraints, the instructor could show a short video on Taoism from *The School of Life* series and the first part of Bill Moyers interview with Huston Smith, "The Wisdom of Faith." Time permitting, an instructor could instead chose to screen for their students "Taoism: A Question of Balance," from the 1970s BBC documentary series *The Long Search*, presented by theatre director Ronald Eyre. (All three videos are widely available on YouTube.) After reading Chuang Tzu's essay, "Discussion on Making All Things Equal," students are then asked to write a 250-500 word assignment addressing the following two questions:

1. Given what you have learned about Taoism in the videos we have watched, explain what you see as the Taoist nature of Chuang Tzu's view of death.
2. Taking the claim about death you took to be most significant in your second assignment, explain what you see as the most significant assumption or argument that separates Chuang Tzu's view of death from that claim.

3. Has anything in Kaufmann's essay or your acquaintance with Taoism caused you to reflect on what you wrote in your first assignment, or perhaps pushed you to modify a claim you made therein? In short, have your views about death (or how one should think about death) changed? Explain your reasoning.

**Resources:**

Kagan, S. (2012). *Death*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

<https://oyc.yale.edu/NODE/196> (Shelley Kagan's Yale Open Course "Death" in an invaluable resource for instructors looking for guidance on how to discuss this topic with their students.)

Kaufmann, W. (1976). "Death Without Dread," in his *Existentialism, Religion, and Death: Thirteen Essays*. New York, NY: New American Library.

Kaufmann, W. (1960). "Existentialism and Death" in Herman Feifel (ed.) *The Meaning of Death*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill. (This essay is available online, and is an excellent survey of how existentialist philosophers conceptualize and argue about the fact of death.)

Smith, H. (1991). *The World's Religions*. New York, NY: HarperOne. (This book contains a helpful chapter on Daoism/Taoism, its relation to Confucianism, and the key features of its world view.)

<https://terebess.hu/english/chuangtzu.html> (In these collected writings, instructors will find Chuang Tzu's essay "Discussion on Making All Things Equal.")

Down, B. (2000). "Death in Classical Daoist Thought." *Philosophy Now: A Magazine of Ideas*. [https://philosophynow.org/issues/27/Death\\_in\\_Classical\\_Daoist\\_Thought](https://philosophynow.org/issues/27/Death_in_Classical_Daoist_Thought)

## 2. Title: What Is An Ideal Day? Virtue and Human Flourishing

**Objective:** Students will learn about virtue-theoretic approaches to human well-being and the reciprocal relationship between individual virtue, a just society, and personal flourishing from both an Eastern and Western perspective.

**Procedure:** Most normative theories of ethics offer a theory of right and wrong actions by specifying a set of moral rules or principles that can then be applied to a determinate set of circumstances. By contrast, Aristotle's ethical theory concerns instead the issue of human excellence. What is the best kind of life a person can live, and what are the factors that contribute to *eudaimonia* or human flourishing? According to Aristotle, the kind of life that brings the most happiness or well-being a life of *virtue*. Aristotle defines virtues as traits of character that tend toward the 'intermediate' or 'mean' by avoiding both excess and deficit. Our passions, emotions, and actions define our 'practical wisdom,' and a virtuous agent is one who acts and feels "at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way" (*Nicomachean Ethics* II.6). Like Aristotle, the Chinese thinker Confucius emphasizes the centrality of qualities of *jen* (human-heartedness) and *li* (well-ordered relationships) to a well-lived life and a well-organized society.

**Follow-up and Assessment:** This learning activity is spread over the course of three weeks, and incorporates both philosophical texts as well as recent work of happiness in the natural and social sciences.

Before reading any of the assigned texts, students will be asked to write a 250-500 word essay on their 'ideal day,' which is to describe what they see as an ideal (within the realm of possibility) 24-hour period. As there are lots of ways to write or structure this little essay, instructors may want to Google "My Ideal Day Assignment" to find some inspiration or guidelines for their students in what they are looking for out of this initial piece of writing.

After each reading, students will revisit their initial essay and revise it in keeping with Aristotelian and Confucian views about flourishing, excellence and happiness. Instructors who are seeking to incorporate an interdisciplinary bent may also search for research that students can use as a basis for revising their essays in terms of new conceptual frameworks and data from the scientific study of happiness and well-being. This latter work often falls under the label 'positive psychology.' (A link to a fun and engaging TED talk by the Harvard psychologist Dan Gilbert can be found in the resources below.) Finally, an online forum will be created where students will share their final 500-word essay with their classmates and explain how their perspective on an ideal day evolved over the course of the three weeks.

**Resources:**

<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html> (This is an open source version of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Instructors are, of course, encouraged to use whatever they assign in their textbooks.)

<http://classics.mit.edu/Confucius/analects.html> (This is an open source version of the *Analects* of Confucius.)

[www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com) (This online publication provides pieces written for a popular audience that are usually based on peer-reviewed research. The quality of the pieces vary, and some authors push a pseudo-scientific agenda, so use your best judgment when picking something to incorporate into your reading schedule.)

<http://sites.sandiego.edu/mzwolinski/files/2015/04/Syllabus-Good-Life-Spring-2008.pdf> (This assessment was designed by Matt Zwolinski, a philosopher, and Jennifer Zwolinski, a psychologist, for an interdisciplinary course, "The Good Life," they co-taught at the University of San Diego.)

[https://www.ted.com/talks/dan\\_gilbert\\_asks\\_why\\_are\\_we\\_happy?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_asks_why_are_we_happy?language=en) (Dan Gilbert's "The Surprising Science of Happiness" is a fascinating TED Talk on how human beings can "synthesize" happiness. Seek out other talks or interviews with Gilbert.)

**3. Title: *Pleasure, Happiness, and What Else? The Moral Philosophy of Consequentialism***

**Objective:** To demonstrate a thorough and charitable comprehension of the moral theory of utilitarianism, which the Harvard psychologist Joshua Greene ambitiously labels a "meta-morality" that transcends local, particular moralities.

**Procedure:** A foundational issue in normative ethical theory concerns the basis for according an entity 'moral status.' That is, what qualities or characteristics make something an object of moral concern or respect? According to the ethical theory of utilitarianism, something has moral status if it is capable of experiencing pleasure and pain. As the English philosopher, jurist, and economist Jeremy Bentham wrote, "The question is not, Can they reason?, nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer? Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being?"

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist moral theory that defines the rightness and wrongness of actions solely in terms of outcomes. An action is right to the extent that it maximizes pleasure or minimizes pain, whereas an action is wrong to the extent that it produces the converse. Accordingly, utilitarianism requires individuals act so as to 'bring about the greatest good for the greatest number.'

Rather than addressing the standard challenging questions about calculating the utility of actions, or this activity requires students to consider the underlying psychology of the ideally utilitarian agent. Notably, utilitarianism is based on an especially demanding conception of *impartiality*, in which "everybody to count for one, and no more than one" (Bentham).

**Follow-up and Assessment:** This comparative assignment asks students to reconstruct the moral theory of the classical utilitarians and compare their assumptions and views to those of the classical Chinese thinker, Mozi ('Mo-Tzu'). Mozi's teachings are the basis for the Chinese school of thought, *Mohism*. Students may then also be asked to develop an argument as to whether Mozi's consequentialism is closer to that of Bentham or Mill.

### Resources

Johnston, I. (2014). *The Book of Master Mo*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Ivanhoe, P.J. and Van Norden (Eds.). *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company. (Instructors should assign chapter two, *Mozi*. This contains a translator introduction, and particular attention should be paid to the section in "Impartial Caring.")

<https://www.utilitarianism.com/jeremy-bentham/index.html> (This is an open source version of *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*)

<https://www.utilitarianism.com/mill1.htm> (This is an open source version of *Utilitarianism*.)

### 4. Title: *My Vocation, My Life: Stoicism, Daoism, and Daily Life*

**Objective:** Students will develop the ability to apply philosophical insights from both Ancient Greece and Ancient China to their anticipated profession as well as the events of the daily lives, both with respect to what is routine and what are widely characterized as milestones.

**Procedure:** Stoicism is a philosophical movement that is strongly interested in the practical matter of how best to live one's life. Although it is frequently identified with notions such as 'steadfastness' or 'indifference,' a stoic approach to life is based on a metaphysical view of the events of nature as driven by a vital force and a universe in which all bodies (matter) are bound together. Stoicism asserts that living wisely requires structuring one's life and perspective in a way that agrees with nature and is in accordance with what will in fact happen. Likewise, Daoism holds that there is a force (*Tao*) that both transcends and flows throughout the whole universe. As such, it advises individuals to align their daily life with this force, not unlike the way that water flows effortlessly and forcefully ('effortless effort' or *wu wei*) wherever it travels. Rather than see happiness as a psychological state or in terms of the qualities and circumstances of one's life, both Stoicism and Daoism see happiness as configuring one's perspective and (non-)actions in terms of the natural course of the universe. Recent popular books on both philosophies suggest an uptick in public interest in these ideals.

**Follow-up and Assessment:** This activity requires students to read and engage with the *Tao Te Ching*, the classical Chinese text of Daoism, as well as excerpts from a recent book on the philosophy of the Stoics.

Students begin by writing a short (250-500 word) essay describing their daily life, as well as a shorter piece on where they see themselves in 10-20 years. They will also use Google to research reflections by individuals who are currently practicing the line of work they eventually see themselves in (e.g., carpentry, accounting, nursing, or policing).

Students will then be asked to assess and revise their initial essay and subsequent research in terms of the Stoic and Daoist point of view.

### Resources

Baker, J. (2018). Choose the Hyundai. Symposium on Stoicism. *Reason Papers* 40(1), pp. 9-13.

Samuelson, S. (2014). *The Deepest Human Life: An Introduction to Philosophy for Everyone*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. (Instructors and students will benefit immensely from reading chapter 4, "The Mysterious Freedom of the Stoic.")

<https://www.philosophytalk.org/shows/philosophy-and-everyday-life>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9OCA6UFE-0> (This is a short TED-Ed video on "The Philosophy of Stoicism" by Massimo Pigliucci.)

<https://terebess.hu/english/tao/gia.html> (The Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu. This scripture should be read in its entirety.)

Massimo Pigliucci maintains a comprehensive website related to his book on modern Stoicism (<https://howtobeastoxic.wordpress.com/>).

### 5. Title: **Yes, But is it Art? Western Aesthetics, Chinese Aesthetics, and Chinese Art (Group Presentation)**

**Objective:** Students will learn about fundamental questions in the philosophy of art, while applying the insights and arguments to Western aesthetics. Students will also learn about the distinctive contributions of Chinese aesthetics

**Procedure:** There are many different ways to teach aesthetics and theories of art in an introductory philosophy class, and thus plenty of discretion for instructors in terms of the topics and figures that are taught. Some major topics include the nature of beauty and aesthetic judgment (What makes something beautiful? Can anything be 'objectively' beautiful, or is all beauty a matter of subjective perception and taste?), the nature of art in comparison with other manufactured artefacts (What makes something art as opposed to non-art? Can clothes or computers be art?), the value of art (Should art make us *feel* something, and why? Can art make us better or worse people? Do immoral works of art have aesthetic value?), and the relation of art to social and political conditions (Can art make a political statement? Can we learn anything from art? Does art have any distinctive epistemological value? When is art propaganda?).

A unique element in Chinese aesthetics is the construal of art (painting, poetry, and calligraphy) as a form of both self-expression and self-*cultivation* or the individual. Understanding art and producing art oneself has *ethico-aesthetic* value insofar as it is an opportunity for a person to make works that reflection an understanding of tradition and virtue, and also models continuity between the natural order and human culture. (The former approach is more in keeping with the Confucian virtue of *Ren*, or “human-heartedness,” whereas the latter approach hews more closely to Taoism.)

**Follow-up and Assessment:** In this learning activity, students will work together to create a Pecha Kucha presentation. Pecha Kucha (Japanese for “chatter”) is a lively presentation style format based on one simple rule: show 15 (or 20) slides for only 20 seconds each. The slides are set to change automatically, and emphasizes short, simple, powerful messages to get one’s point across to the audience. These presentations are heavy on images, although there is room to use text parsimoniously in order to achieve maximum effect. Instructors may ask students to write a short paper (2-3) pages in addition to the presentation, or simply collect the short notes that students need to write that accompany their presentation.

The aim of the presentation is for students to introduce their classmates to a particular movement or school in Chinese art and offer an accurate and charitable exposition of pertinent philosophical issues and arguments.

Some suggested Chinese art movements and traditions that instructors would assign to the groups include, but are not limited to:

- a. Confucianism and calligraphy
- b. Confucian moral teachings in painting
- c. Daoism and *shan shui*
- d. Daoism in the paintings by Zhou Dongqing, Wu Boli, and Fang Congyi
- e. Buddhist architecture
- f. Socialist Realism
- g. Cynical Realism
- h. Modern art and imbalance in China ([http://lehman.edu/vpadvance/artgallery/gallery/Dao\\_intro.html](http://lehman.edu/vpadvance/artgallery/gallery/Dao_intro.html))

## Resources

<https://www.pechakucha.com/> (This is the official website of the Pecha Kucha network. Instructors will find amazing examples of these presentations to give students inspiring examples of how to make a short, concise presentation.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32WEzM3LFhw> (This video tutorial by Marcus Weaver-Hightower, from the University of North Dakota, is a helpful guide to creating and successfully executing a Pecha Kucha presentation. You will give a successful presentation in the same way you get to Carnegie Hall: practice, practice, practice.)

Chen, W., Qi, J., and Hao, P. (2018). “On Chinese Aesthetics: Interpretive Encounter Between Taoism and Confucianism.” *Culture and Dialogue* 6(1), pp. 61-76.

<https://www.iep.utm.edu/category/value/aesthetics/> (The *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* covers a number of specific topics in the philosophy of art.)

**Resources and References used in the creation of the module (e.g. books, articles, etc.)**

Bonevac, D. and Phillips, S. (Eds.). (2009). *World Philosophy: A Multicultural Reader*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Pigliucci, M. (2017). *How to Be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life*

Van Norden, B. (2017). *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Wright, R. (2017). *Why Buddhism is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.