

How to Flourish despite Almost Anything

Syllabus

Instructor: Prof. Jacob Stump (jacob.stump@northeastern.edu)

Office hours: Thursdays, 3-4:30pm, Renaissance Park #408

Overview

The goal of this course is to equip us with the skills necessary to be okay no matter what happens to us.

We will go about that by adopting philosophy as a way of life, i.e., by doing philosophical exercises in our personal lives and then reflecting together on what the experiences disclose to us. There will be an emphasis on increasing awareness of our mental lives, developing mindfulness of the world around us, and training ourselves in the skill of acknowledging and accepting what is really there.

As these are difficult activities, we will seek guidance from philosophers and therapists who have made progress before us. In all of history, there are two main philosophical schools that promise reliable strategies for living well no matter the circumstances: Stoicism and Buddhism. We will practice mental techniques from both traditions and use them to increase our self-awareness, improve our relationships with others, develop a sense of spirituality (broadly construed), and relate to our work in a meaningful way. Additionally, we will practice therapeutic techniques from Internal Family Systems, a recently developed model of therapy that develops insights from Stoicism and Buddhism.

Class will consist largely of discussion, and a significant number of assignments will consist of experiential learning activities.

Course objectives

1. Practice discussing philosophy slowly and carefully.
2. Grow in courage, self-awareness, curiosity, acceptance, and mindfulness.
3. Understand the views of Stoicism, Buddhism, and Internal Family Systems on the central issues of the course.
4. Gain experience in philosophy as a way of life.
5. Develop a regular practice that helps you to process your emotions.

Texts

You are required to buy three books:

- (1) Epictetus, *Encheiridion* (Hackett Publishing), \$9
or
Epictetus, *Discourses and Selected Writings* (Penguin), \$10
- (2) Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* (Harmony), \$10
- (3) Richard Schwartz, *No Bad Parts* (Sounds True), \$14

I will buy a few copies of each book and leave them at the front desk of the philosophy department (4th floor of Renaissance Park). If it is difficult for you right now to purchase books, you are welcome to take one of these. It is yours for free.

All other readings will be made available in PDF on Canvas.

Class

Schedule. [See the reading schedule here.](#)

Workflow. It will be useful to think of class in terms of a workflow.

For many classes, there will be two components: (i) the reading, (ii) Questions Assignment. For some classes, there will be a third component: (iii) Exercise.

First, do the reading. Give yourself uninterrupted time when you are most alert, and go slowly. Think along with the author, trying to identify the main claims and the main reasons in support of those claims. If you find that your eyes are merely passing over the words, without any thought actually happening, stop and come back to it later. Note: Reading philosophy is difficult, and you should be prepared to read the texts more than once. *You will often be confused*—that is okay! Try to figure out why you are confused, and come to our meetings prepared with questions to help you understand.

Second, after you do the reading, do the Questions Assignment.

Third, if there is an Exercise, do it. The exercises are meant to give you real-life experience in developing a skill or gaining insight into a component of life that you need to see clearly to live well.

That is what you need to do before class.

Then come to class. Be ready to talk about the reading and think together. I recommend doing something to get yourself into the proper mindset: go for a short walk before class, e.g., or make yourself a tea, or do five minutes of meditation—whatever is effective at preparing you to focus. **Be sure to bring your one-page questions document to class and also the reading for that day.**

Often classes will end with us not having reached a final answer and desiring to investigate further. In some cases, we will do that in the next class. In others, we will move on, and you are encouraged to continue the inquiry in the form of a Reflections Document or Connections Document, or by talking with your mentor for the Mentor Assignment, or by talking further with your peers or friends who are outside of the class or family members.

Discussion. Philosophical discussion can go well or badly, depending on the behavior of the people doing it. Two common problems are talking too often and rambling. *If you find yourself talking too often, hold back and give others a chance to talk.* If, after a pause, no one volunteers, then you can fill the gap. *To avoid rambling, clarify your question or comment in your mind before speaking. Make it concise.* Finally, note that you can expect disagreement. This is good—it is often the source of progress and clarification—so long as it is civil. **Remember that the goal is not to sound smart or to win the argument.** The goal is to figure out the truth (or what is likely to be true, or what is definitely false), and this happens best when we are all open to revising our claims and admitting when we are wrong. We want to think together so that, *together*, we can reach a better and more considered view. Again, the goal is not to be the person who is correct or wins the argument. That is not important.

Assignments

[You will find instructions to the Assignments in this document.](#) The document is available also on Canvas under ‘Logistics’ and then ‘Assignments.’

Here is a short overview of the assignments.

Questioning Assignment

The purpose of this assignment is to develop the skill of asking questions of a text. It is also to animate our in-class discussions. You will do one of these before each class that has a reading. The due date is before the corresponding class. You must print off your one-page questions document and bring it with you to class. You must also upload it to Canvas.

Exercises

The purpose of this assignment is to give you experience in living philosophically. You will do one of these before each Monday class. The instructions will be given at latest by Thursday at 10am. The due date is before the Monday class. You must upload a report on the exercise to Canvas.

Processing Emotions Assignment

The purpose of this assignment is for you to develop an activity that helps you to process your emotions. You should keep a record of each time that you do one of the three activities (meditation, yoga, or journaling). Present me with this record during our meetings for the Chart your Journey assignment.

Scribe Assignment

The purpose of this assignment is to train the skill of listening closely to a philosophical discussion. It is also to produce a written record of our discussions that we can reference in the future. You will sign up to do this once before November. You will work with one of your peers. You should post the written record to the google doc on Canvas under 'Class Documents'. This is due by 11:59pm on the day of class.

Mentor Assignment

The purpose of this assignment is to develop a mentoring relationship with an adult whom you admire. You must meet with them once in September, October, and November. You must write a report on each conversation and upload it to Canvas.

Class-facing Assignment

The purpose of this assignment is to encourage you to keep thinking about our discussions even after class. It is to take the inquiry further on your own. You will do one of the two options (Reflections Document or Connections Document) in September, October, and

November, for a total of three documents. You should add your document to the corresponding google doc under 'Class Documents' on Canvas.

Project of your Choice

The purpose of this assignment is to give you the opportunity to explore in detail and at length whatever is most interesting to you that is related to the course. It is due on November 25. You should meet with me sometime in October or early November to discuss your ideas for the project. Presenting your project in class on December 2 or December 4 might be required.

Chart your Journey

The purpose of this assignment is to make you be intentional about your personal goals for the course and to help you achieve them. It is also for you to propose a final grade for yourself. I will consider your proposal when I give you a final grade.

Due dates

Questions Assignment: **before each class.** Exercises: **before each Monday class.** Processing Emotions Assignment: **once a week in September, twice a week in October, three times a week in November and December.** Scribe Assignment: **by 11:59pm on the day of the class that you sign up for.** Mentor Assignment: **one report in September, one report in October, one report in November.** Class-facing Assignment: **one Reflections or Connections document in September, one Reflections or Connections document in October, one Reflections or Connections document in November.** Project of your Choice: **November 25.** Chart your Journey: **one meeting with me September 23-27, one meeting with me November 4-8, one meeting with me December 2-6.**

Grade conversion.

A:	93-100 (4.0)
A-:	90-92 (3.7)
B+:	87-89 (3.3)
B:	83-86 (3.0)
B-:	80-82 (2.7)
C+:	77-79 (2.3)
C:	74-76 (2.0)
C-:	70-73 (1.7)
D+:	67-69 (1.3)

D: 64-66 (1.0)
D-: 60-63 (0.7)
F: 59 or below (0.0)

How to succeed in this course. Do the readings twice before class: once quickly, solely to get a sense of things (this should take no longer than five minutes); once slowly, pausing where you are confused (this should take no longer than two hours). Mark your text while you read. Identify key claims (e.g., premises and conclusions of arguments), perhaps with a checkmark or by underlining them. Identify also questions that you have, perhaps with a question mark or the actual question written in the margins. Then do the Questions Assignment for that reading, submitting it on Canvas and printing it off to bring to class. Come to class prepared to be attentive (get good sleep, put away your cell phone, quiet your mind). You might very quickly review the reading and your Questions Assignment right before class (this should take no longer than ten minutes). During class, focus. I'll be doing my best to clarify all of my claims and to make all of my reasoning transparent. If something that I say seems wrong or confusing, I want to hear about it. So, please speak up. You might consider taking notes during class, but, if so, do so sparingly. Don't try to capture everything I say. Instead quickly jot down any important ideas that occur to you. The goal during class is to think together, and it is hard to do that while taking lots of notes. (Also, there will be Scribes for most classes, and they will be producing written records of our conversations. I do this in part because I want you to be free to think along with me during class. That really is the goal.) After class, stew on our discussion. Call it to mind while doing other things (e.g., walking around). Talk to your friends about it. Then, when you have something to add, consider writing it in a Reflections or Connections document. Check these documents frequently to see what other people are saying, and respond to their contributions when you feel inclined. Other than all of that, do the assignments. It is a good rule to finish major written assignments a few days before they are due, so that, after completing a first draft, you can set it aside, allowing your mind to clear, then reviewing it once more with fresh eyes before submitting it, revising any mistakes that you find. Finally, come to office hours when you want to talk. I am happy to think through things with you.

Contact

If you e-mail me (jacob.stump@northeastern.edu), put the course code (1310) in the subject line; otherwise your e-mail may get lost. I will try to respond to e-mails within a day or two (no promises on weekends). Note that e-mail is not the right format for philosophical questions; please come to my office hours to discuss philosophical material, or e-mail me to set up a meeting. Also, my responses to your e-mails may be terse. Don't be offended. It's simply the effect of having lots of e-mails to respond to.

Disclaimer

I may change the details above at any point in the course. If I do so, I will always let you know via an announcement on Canvas, and I will have the changes be in your favor.

Optional, useful philosophical resources

1. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (online). Useful as a starting point for research or to teach yourself the basics of some topic (a philosopher's Wikipedia, but more reliable).
2. Philpapers (online). A good collection of philosophy papers online.

Policies & university resources

Accessibility. Students with diverse learning styles are welcome in this course. Please feel free to approach me or the Disability Resource Center (www.northeastern.edu/drc) so that we can assist you in achieving academic success.

Writing help. If you want help with your writing, you are encouraged to contact the Northeastern writing center (www.northeastern.edu/writingcenter). I am also happy to consult with you about your writing in office hours or by appointment.

Plagiarism. Don't do it (it's *really* easy to catch). If you do, the university's disciplinary measures will be taken. If you have questions about what counts as plagiarism, visit <https://osccr.sites.northeastern.edu/academic-integrity-policy/> or talk to me. Note that presenting the work of ChatGPT (or other LLMs) as if it were your own counts as plagiarism. All submitted work must be your own, and you should attribute the ideas and language of others properly, in accordance with university and course guidelines.

Counseling. You are very encouraged to prioritize your mental health. Northeastern offers you two main sources of confidential support: www.northeastern.edu/uhrs/counseling-services and <https://we-care.studentlife.northeastern.edu/>. Please feel welcome to use them however you may want or need.

Title IX. Title IX Policy prohibits sexual harassment, sexual assault, relationship or domestic violence, and stalking. This applies to the entire Northeastern community, including students, faculty, and staff, of all genders and all sexualities. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, *confidential* support and guidance can be found at the University Health and Counseling Services (www.northeastern.edu/uhrs/) and the Center for Spiritual Dialogue and Service (www.northeastern.edu/spirituallife/). Violations can be reported

non-confidentially to the Title IX Coordinator in the Office for Gender Equity and Compliance (titleix@northeastern.edu) or through NUPD (emergency: 617-373-3333; non-emergency: 617-373-2121). Reporting prohibited offenses to NUPOD does not commit the victim / affected party to future legal action. Note that faculty (such as me) are considered “responsible employees” at Northeastern, meaning that they are required to report all allegations of sex- or gender-based discrimination to the Title IX Coordinator (in other words, I am not a confidential resource here). A complete list of reporting options and resources both on- and off-campus can be found at www.northeastern.edu/titleix.

Concerns about the course. You are encouraged to discuss concerns about the course with me. I am always interested in how to improve the learning environment. If you would like to discuss a concern about the course with someone else, you can contact Serena Parekh, Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion. Information about formal academic appeals can be found at www.catalog.northeastern.edu/graduate/academic-policies-procedures/appeals/.

How to Flourish despite Almost Anything Schedule

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Getting started

Week 1

(1) Sept. 4 – Where are we?

Week 2

(2) Sept. 9 – Plato #1, Tripartite soul

* *Republic* 4.436a-445e

(3) Sept. 11 – Plato #2, Types of souls

* *Republic* 8.548d-550b

* *Republic* 8.553a-555b

* *Republic* 8.559d-562d

* *Republic* 9.571a-580a

* *Republic* 5.474c-475c, 6.485a-487a

Stoicism

Week 3

(4) Sept. 16 – Stoicism #1

* Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 1-28

(5) Sept. 18 – Stoicism #2

* Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 29-53

Week 4

(6) Sept. 23 – Stoicism #3

* Expert on living as a Stoic ([Brittany Polat](#))

(7) Sept. 25 – Stoicism #4

* Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 3 (excerpts)

Buddhism

Week 5

(8) Sept. 30 – Buddhism #1

* Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Chs. 1-3, 6-8

(9) Oct. 2 – Buddhism #2

* Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Chs. 9-11

Week 6

(10) Oct. 7 – Buddhism #3

* Expert on living as a Buddhist ([William Jackson](#))

(11) Oct. 9 – Buddhism #4

* Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Chs. 12-16

Internal Family Systems

Week 7

(12) Oct. 16 – Internal Family Systems #1

* Richard Schwartz, *No Bad Parts*, pgs. 1-28

* [optional] Richard Schwartz on Rich Roll's podcast, "Multiplicity of the Mind: An Approach to Healing the Inner Self"

* [optional] Richard Schwartz on IFS Talks podcast, "The Nature of the Self, with Dick Schwartz"

Week 8

(13) Oct. 21 – Internal Family Systems #2

* Richard Schwartz, *No Bad Parts*, pgs. 29-58

(14) Oct. 23 – Internal Family Systems #3

* Richard Schwartz, *No Bad Parts*, pgs. 59-106

Week 9

(15) Oct. 28 – Internal Family Systems #4

* Expert on IFS therapy ([Nancy Sowell](#))

(16) Oct. 30 – Internal Family Systems #5

* Richard Schwartz, *No Bad Parts*, pgs. 107-146

TBD

Week 10

(17) Nov. 4 – November Committee Discussion

(18) Nov. 6 – TBD

Week 11

(19) Nov. 13 – Add/Subtract Groups, Navigating Academic Success

* William Deresiewicz, “What is College For?” from *Excellent Sheep*

Week 12

(20) Nov. 18 – Authenticity (Insecurity, Social pressure)

* Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese”, “The Summer Day”, “The Journey”

(21) Nov. 20 – Friendship

* Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8 & 9 (excerpts)

Week 13

(22) Nov. 25 – No class

Week 14

(23) Dec. 2 – TBD

(24) Dec. 4 – TBD