

What Makes a Life Significant?

CC Alumni Reading Group Syllabus Spring, 2008

General Description

This syllabus examines a cluster of questions that are concerned with how human beings should live and what sorts of lives they should most admire. The primary text *Leading Lives that Matter* is an anthology developed in and for a Christ College course. As noted in the "Preface" to that book, many of the readings were discovered and selected by CC students. Reading groups might therefore use their first meeting to design their own syllabus by examining the contents of the anthology, previewing the eight suggested units below, and then choosing topics they wish to consider. For the first study group meeting, members might propose, *before doing any reading*, which two people (one of whom they know personally, the other of whom is a twentieth-century figure known to them only through reading about them) have led lives of exceptional significance and proceed to justify these judgments. Initial judgments might then be re-examined at a concluding party or final session.

Readings and Films

Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass, *Leading Lives that Matter* (Eerdmans, 2006)
Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Random House, 2003)

It's A Wonderful Life, directed by Frank Capra
Groundhog Day, directed by Harold Ramis, 1993
Changing Lanes, directed by Roger Michell, 2002

Study Options

The texts and films are divided into eight sections or units. Reading groups may select any number of units depending upon their interests and how often they meet, or they may design their own units, as already noted. **Note that some units, e.g. Units II and III and Units IV and V, may be easily combined.** Each unit represents a different aspect of the more general problem of what makes a life significant.

Unit I: What Makes a Life Significant?

Readings

"Introduction" and "Prologue," *LLTM*, 1-13

William James, "What Makes a Life Significant?" in *LLTM*, 14-28

Comment

Each participant in the reading group should, even before reading the James essay, select one person whom they know well and another twentieth-century figure whom they admire but do not know personally as examples of people who lead or have led exceptionally significant lives. Discussion among the group about principles of selection should lead to discovery of what assumptions group members make about what kinds of people and what kinds of lives are most worthy of admiration and esteem.

Discussion Questions

William James considers and then rejects several ideas about what makes a life significant. Which of the ideas that he rejects do you like the best? Do you agree with James's reasons for rejecting it? Why or why not?

Would James regard the two lives you chose as significant? Why or why not?

Finally, are James's "ideals" completely relative to those who entertain them? In other words, are some ideals more choiceworthy than others? Would my life be significant if my ideal were to become the most successful pornographer in the world? If James's notion of ideals is a relative one, does that undermine the persuasiveness of his definition of a significant life? Why or why not? What virtues does James think are essential to a significant life?

Unit II: Can we Judge Rightly the Significance of a Life?

Film

It's A Wonderful Life

Comment

Units II and III belong together. This classic film opens up fundamental questions about whether anyone can make sound judgments about the relative significance of his or her own life or the life of anyone else. And the film combines the two dominant "traditions" that have shaped American reflections upon questions about how we should live--the democratic tradition and the Christian tradition. This combination probably explains in part the film's enduring popularity.

Discussion Questions

Why and to what extent do you admire George Bailey as someone who led a significant life?

Does the significance of a life depend at all upon what a person has given up in order to lead well the kind of life they are in a sense forced to lead?

Does the film suggest reasons why it might be impossible for anyone but God to pass judgment upon the question of whether one life is more significant than another one? If so what are those reasons? If the reasons are compelling, should we abandon altogether the idea that some lives are more significant/virtuous/praiseworthy/exemplary than others? Or should we simply remain agnostic about the issue, refusing to pass judgment on any life?

Unit III: Are Some Lives More Significant than Others?

Readings

"Are Some Lives More Significant than Others" (intro), *LLTM*, 117-123
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (selection), *LLTM*, 129-130
Homer, *Iliad* (selection), *LLTM*, 130-144
"The Martyrdom of Perpetua," *LLTM*, 144-153

Comment

The selections here raise questions about whether truly significant lives must be single-minded and heroic by comparison to "balanced" and ordinary. Achilles, in the passage selected, chooses to return home and abandon his fellow warriors to certain defeat in the war. He will eventually be moved to stay and fight, not by the arguments advanced by his teacher and friends--Odysseus, Ajax, and Phoenix--but by his passionate desire to avenge the death of his friend Patroclus at the hands of the great Trojan hero Hector. Aristotle offers arguments about why the virtuous human being should choose the brief life of heroic achievement over the long life of ordinary existence. We should wonder why and whether we agree with him. We should wonder why we admire Perpetua or why we do not admire her. Is her self-sacrifice more or less admirable than Achilles's?

Discussion Questions

It's A Wonderful Life gives us two brothers, one of whom leads the life of heroism akin to Achilles, the other of whom, largely against his own will, leads a balanced life of relatively undistinguished achievement. Aristotle would clearly have thought Harry more worthy of admiration than George. Do you? Why or why not?

Additional discussion questions may be taken from the introductions to the selections above in *LLTM*, pp. 129, 130, 144.

Unit IV: Character and Success

Readings

"Vocabularies." In *LLTM*, 39-46
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *LLTM*, 65-83
Theodore Roosevelt, "The Vigor of Life," 83-86

Comment

The readings in this unit examine one of the three dominant ways in which we tend to speak and think about what makes for a significant life: the vocabulary of virtue. Moreover, these readings, especially the selections from Aristotle, prepare the way for Unit V, the viewing and discussion of the film *Groundhog Day*. **Study groups may elect to combine these two units by reading only pp. 65-75 in *LLM* before watching the film and then focusing upon the discussion questions for Unit V.**

Discussion Questions

Does a person need to lead a virtuous life in order to lead a significant one? If not, why not? If so, what more than virtue is necessary for significance?

Which virtues do you think are most important to a life of significance and substance?

Compare the list William James uses to Aristotle's list. Which important virtues, e.g. honesty, are omitted? Which ones would you add?

Should benefactors who have more to give and who therefore give more be held in higher regard than those who give less because they have less to give? In other words, what do you make of Aristotle's discussion of the virtue of magnificence? .

Consider once more the two people whom you thought about at the beginning of the year. In which of TR's two senses of success were either or both of them successful? Do you think that TR has understood success rightly?

Do significant lives have to be successful lives? Why or why not? What is the relationship between success and virtue or human excellence?

Review as well the discussion questions that introduce relevant selections, pp. 65-66; 83-84, in *LLTM*.

Unit V: Becoming Virtuous

Film

Groundhog Day

Comment

This wonderful comedy dramatizes almost perfectly the moral psychology of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Viewers should have read at least those selections of the *Ethics* from *LLTM*, 65-75 before they watch the film. Its basic question is this: Can a base or vicious person become a noble or virtuous one, and if so, how? Aristotle had argued that we become virtuous through habituation, through the repeated performance, under the guidance of virtuous mentors, of virtuous actions until they become "natural" for us. This process takes place over many years under constantly changing circumstances. In *Groundhog Day* one character lives through the *same* day repeatedly.

Discussion Questions

How and to what extent does Phil develop from a vicious into a virtuous character? Is his transformation convincing? Why doesn't he simply become more vicious, e.g. more intemperate through over-eating and over-drinking and overly indulging his sexual appetites?

Aristotle had argued that friendship was the virtue without which all of the others would seem empty. What is Rita's role in Phil's transformation?

Discuss the stages of Phil's character development. For example, for a time he moves from doing the wrong things to doing the right things for the wrong reasons to doing the right things for the right reasons. What moves him from stage to stage?

The process of his transformation lasts at least ten years (he becomes a virtuoso musician, for example). Why does the process finally "end" when it does, when it could continue indefinitely?

Why do Phil and the groundhog have the same name? What links them besides their names?

Do we think that Phil will move on to live a life of significance and substance as the result of his strange moral education? Why or why not?

According to Aristotle and the film, do virtuous people take pleasure in performing good deeds or do they feel a conflict between duty and desire that produces pain? Do we admire people more when they desire the bad but nevertheless overcome desire to do the good or when their desires and actions are of a piece? Which virtues does Phil acquire? Which vices does he overcome?

Unit VI: The Single-minded Life

Reading

Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*

Comment

This unit belongs together with Unit VII, although the two of them probably should not be combined into one session. The two units together examine the contemporary version of the problem faced by Achilles when he was given a choice between a short, heroic life and a long but undistinguished one. Some of us have a choice between a single-minded life of great achievement in one domain of endeavor and a more balanced life a decent achievement in several domains concurrently. The life of Paul Farmer exemplifies almost perfectly both the attractions and the liabilities of the single-minded life, and it helps us to think through what we really mean by a life of significance.

Discussion Questions

Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously remarked that although he could not define pornography, he knew it when he saw it. Would you say the same thing with respect to 'significance' and Paul Farmer, i.e. that even though you cannot exactly define significance you somehow *know* that Paul Farmer, as presented by Tracy Kidder, is leading a life of significance? If so, what do you learn about significance by thinking about Farmer's life?

Consider Farmer's relationships to the important women in his life, in particular Ophelia and his wife. Do these relationships enhance or diminish your estimation of Farmer?

What is wrong with "cost/benefit" analysis, such as that offered on p. 165? Don't all of us have to use such thinking some of the time?

"Lives of service depend on lives of support." (p. 108) If the statement is true, how does it affect your understanding of what a significant life might be?

"Better to ask for forgiveness than permission." What do you make of this "rule of thumb" (p. 149)? Is it good ethical counsel?

After reading this book, some might feel like dropping everything and heading for Haiti to work with Farmer and PIH. But when Tim White confesses this feeling, Farmer tells him that if he were to do that it "would be a sin." (p. 95) Why? Would it be a sin for you? Why or why not?

Marx famously remarked that his point was not to try to understand the world but to change it. Compare this to Farmer's own changing sense of the discipline of anthropology. (p. 83; cf. p. 44)

Are study and contemplation ends in themselves, parts of the good life? Or must they always be used to transform the world for the better in order to be worthy of regard?

How did Farmer become the kind of human being he is? "That's all I do. Is not do things." (p. 287) What does this mean?

Unit VII: The Balanced Life

Readings

- Introduction, "Is a Balanced Life Possible. . . ?" *LLTM*, 245-254
Robert Wuthnow, "The Changing Character of Work," *LLTM*, 255-262
Arlie Hochschild, "There's No Place Like Work," *LLTM*, 272-277
Abigail Zuger, M.D., "Defining a Doctor" *LLTM*, 278-80
"Two Eulogies for Yitzhak Rabin," *LLTM*, 294-97
"Three Biographical Sketches," *LLTM*, 166-175
William Butler Yeats, "The Choice," in *LLTM*, 302
"Interview with Martha Nussbaum," *LLTM*, 308-312

Comment

The readings in this unit return us once more to the fundamental questions about the relative significance and praiseworthiness of different lives. And it includes more sketches of various lives to consider, along with the longer account of the life of Paul Farmer in Unit VI.

Discussion Questions

Is the belief that we *can* lead balanced lives if we so choose pernicious, a vain aspiration to "have it all," as Wuthnow suggests?

Of the several lives presented or discussed in the readings above, which ones seem more worthy of emulation, the single-minded ones or the balanced ones?

Do any of them compare favorably to Paul Farmer's life? Which?

Does the variety of achievement represented in the several lives presented here simply suggest that nobility and significance are pluriform and that there is no point in attempting to rank lives on a unitary, ethical scale?

Martha Nussbaum returns us to the Greeks and in so doing gives us a novel way to think about the "problem" of balance in a life. What do you make of her idea that the structure of human life is inherently tragic for those who seek to live well? Does she successfully resolve the problem of balance by dissolving it, by refusing to regard the whole matter as a "solvable problem?"

Nussbaum and others suggest that problems of balance may have more to do with the structure of the workplace than with the kind of spiritual sickness that Wuthnow describes as the desire to "have it all." Are the difficulties we face if we seek to live well more social, political, and economic than they are ethical, psychological, and spiritual?

And is Yeats right: *must* we choose between perfection of the life and perfection of the work?

Unit VIII: Contingency and Chance

Readings

Introduction, "Can I Control What I Shall Do and Become?" *LLTM*, 427-433

William Ernest Henley, "Invictus," *LLTM*, 434-35

Merton "Thought in Solitude," *LLTM*, 449-450

Film

Canging Lanes

Comment

Discussions about how we should live often presuppose that our lives are shaped more by choice and character than they are by contingency and chance. The readings and the film force us to examine that presupposition closely. In addition to this concluding examination, study groups may wish to revisit the two people whom they put forward at the beginning of the year as having led significant lives. Would people now amend their initial judgments? Why or why not?

Discussion Questions

Which of the two central characters, Gavin or Doyle, is more worthy of admiration?

Does the accident lead to fundamental changes in the character and/or the lives of one or both men? Or does the accident simply bring out fundamental aspects of each man's character?

Is this a film about characters in conflict or about the power of small contingencies to change lives?

Compare the influence of Gavin's wife upon his character and Doyle's wife upon his to the influence of Rita on Phil in *Groundhog Day*. Is Doyle's alleged love of chaos due to the fact that he and his life are simply "out of control?"

By the end of the film has Doyle secured some measure of control over his life? If so, how? And what does the end of the film suggest about his future?