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**Ethics: The Philosophy, Science and Service of Love**  
**Spring 2006**

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“Compassion is a verb.”  
Thich Nhat Hanh

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Description:

The question of the meaning of love and its place in our lives is perhaps the most significant philosophical question we face as humans. However as we become more technologically advanced, the meaning of love becomes an issue of scientific interest as well. In this seminar we will explore this question, “what is the meaning of love and how does it fit into our lives?” from both theological and secular perspectives in discussions of classical and contemporary texts and films. We will explore how psychological science defines love within the study of Positive Psychology and create original independent research experiments to further that end. In order to provide a context for volunteerism and community service we will study writings of great social leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and how they used concepts such as agape, nonviolence and compassion as political tools. We will employ an interdisciplinary approach which will include philosophy, psychology, literature, drama, and science. Our course aim will be to address the interrelated questions, “What is love?” and “How can we live a good life?”

Course Objectives:

- To become aware of how forms of love (eros, philia and agape) are expressed in philosophical writings, scientific observations and unselfish service to others.
- To design, conduct and document an original independent research project based on the scientific study of values and Positive Psychology.
- To synthesize a personal experience of community service with the writings of great social leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- To understand how the roles and functions of philosophy, science and service interact within the context of the meaning of love.
- To articulate a personal definition of love.

### Course Format:

The class will meet five times a week for 16 weeks. Each class period will be 45 minutes. We will employ a discussion format for most class meetings similar to that of a Quaker-meeting style. The teacher will not necessarily begin all discussions and no one will be forced to speak. The discussion format will have only two rules: (1) everyone will be afforded the opportunity to make a comment or have an opinion within a safe and respectful environment, and (2) each comment or opinion must be supported by sound argument.

The structure of the course will be divided into three sections each approximately five weeks in length with a particular concentration relating to how we understand love: (1) philosophy, (2) science and (3) service. In each section readings, films, assignments and discussions will focus on one of the three particular concentrations. For example, when addressing questions of the philosophy of love readings will be taken from classical and contemporary texts and writing assignments will focus on contemplation and structure and style of arguments. When addressing questions of the science of love, readings will be taken from contemporary journal articles in the area of Positive Psychology with application to an independent research project. When addressing questions of the service of love, readings will be taken from great social leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century whose impact can be understood as putting unselfish love (agape) into action.

### Assignments:

As we study the concept of love through readings, discussions, films and music an assignment will correspond to the particular concentration:

#### *Analysis and critique of philosophical writings on love*

Each student will complete a 3 – 5 page exploratory response based on one or more of the readings we discussed in class. The focus of the response will be twofold: (1) to capture the author's major themes about love and its meaning, and (2) to offer a critical look at the author's shortcomings and provide a new and original insightful direction into the topic. References from discussions, films and other approved sources are strongly recommended.

#### *Independent research project*

Based on our readings of scientific journals in the area of Positive Psychology, each student will be responsible for an original project. During the first two weeks on the science of love (for this we will look closing at the behavioral manifestations of agape love) students will be required to submit a research design proposal. Each proposal must have two independent variables and one dependent variable, i.e., one experimental group, one control group, and one

variable to be measured. The final two weeks of the section will be used for conducting research, gathering data and creating a written report. Final research projects will be presented to the class for discussion. Each student must send final written report to The Whitman Journal of Psychology, a collection of student writing and research, for publication consideration. A presentation of methods and results is a part of the project.

### *Community Service Project*

The last section of the course will deal with how social leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century used a commitment to unselfish love (agape), compassion and kindness to influence change on a political level. As a means to better understand our readings, each student will be required to complete ten hours of community service work. Before service may begin students must submit a proposal detailing with what organization service will be completed, the name of a contact person supervising service and what will be the scope and duration of the project. Students are encouraged to maintain a journal of their service experience. At the conclusion of service students should complete an integrative, exploratory and reflective paper combining personal experience with the readings from the section on the service of love. Papers should be 3 – 5 pages in length. A brief presentation will also be required.

### Gratitude Journal:

Each student will be required to keep a gratitude journal for the length of the course. A gratitude journal is a weekly reflection on what one is grateful and thankful for in their lives. An answer to the question: “What am I thankful for today?” During the week entries can be made daily in the evening, or weekly before the start of the next week. Class time each Friday will be devoted to the sharing of student entries as well as weekly teacher inspection. In addition to weekly inspection at the end of the course students will be asked to submit their notebooks for a grade. Only pen/pencil and paper journal will be accepted. No electronic copies please for this assignment.

### Final Exam Dinner:

We have invited David Streight, the executive director of the Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education, to town to attend our end-of-year dinner. We plan meet at the George Washington Tavern in downtown Concord to dine and reflect. The end-of-year dinner will serve as an opportunity for our students to meet and talk with Mr. Streight following his brief address on the meaning of unselfish love, teaching high school ethics and how to apply what we have learned to our lives. This evening will also provide the chance to share with Mr. Streight the culmination of our coursework in the form of our final exam. The final exam will take place following the meal at the dinner table. We will go around the table in an informal manner to share our experiences, readings, writings, thoughts, etc. on what we have learned as a result of taking part in this course. Each member of the course community will share with the group what their personal definition of love is.

Grading:

Philosophical critique	20%
Independent research project (written and oral report)	20%
Reflective community service paper (written and oral report)	20%
Gratitude Journal	20%
Final exam (definition of love)	20%
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Total	100%
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Schedule of Course Readings

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**Philosophy of Love (5 weeks)**

Note: Some films will only be used as a reference by highlighting excerpts.

**WEEK 1**

*The Symposium* by Plato

Film: *The Royal Tenenbaums* by Wes Anderson

What kinds of love are being discussed? Which concept of love is most agreeable with your definition of love? How does Socrates deliver his message that is different from the others? How does he begin his oratory? What forms of love are present in *The Royal Tenenbaums* between Richie and Margot? Royal and his family?

*The Man Who Was Recklessly Curious* by Miguel Cervantes (An interpolated novel found in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*).

Film: *Play It Again Sam* by Woody Allen

What is the story of Lotario and Anselmo? How does Lotario test his love for Camila? Is it successful? How does this jive with your current view of relationships? Would you apply Lotario's logic and plan to your life? Why or why not? How is Allen's character in the film similar to Anselmo in Cervantes' story? Do both stories end the same way?

## WEEK 2

*Four Loves* by C. S. Lewis

Film: *Shadowlands* by Richard Attenborough

What are the four loves addressed by Lewis? Is one more important than another? Which one would you say is the best? Why? What is Lewis' concept of charity? What stages or forms of love does Lewis display in the film *Shadowlands*?

## WEEK 3

*The Works of Love* by Soren Kierkegaard

Film: *Through a Glass Darkly* by Ingmar Bergman

What is the significance of Kierkegaard's use of the word "works" in the title? How does he use Christian ethics and the Bible to understand love? What biblical passages are highlighted? How does the father's view about love change toward the end, and at the end of *Through a Glass Darkly*? What about other characters' views about love?

*Love and Will (Introduction and Part I)* by Rollo May

Film: *The Meaning of Life* by Monty Python

What does May mean when he says we live in a schizoid world? How does May define eros and how does it differ from Lewis' definition of eros? What is the relation of the daimonic to love? What do we find so comical about the sex education scene in Python's *The Meaning of Life*? What does that say about our views of the relationship between sex and love?

## WEEK 4

*The Bible (books of Matthew and Corinthians)* with excerpts from *The Good Book* by Peter J. Gomes

Film: *My Private Idaho* by Gus Van Sant

How does Gomes view the words of the Bible? Literal meaning or interpretive meaning? What are some contemporary social issues Gomes' tries to rectify with biblical teachings? How do the two main characters feel towards each other in *My Private Idaho*? What form of love would best describe their relationship?

## WEEK 5

*The Bhagavad Gita (Chapters 1, 3 and 4)* edited by Eknath Easwaran

What is the war within and how does Arjuna interpret Krishna's words? What is the Hindu concept of selfless service? How does Arjuna interpret wisdom in action?

*The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha (Part I, chapters 5 and 6)* edited by E. A. Burtt

Film: *Gates of Heaven* by Errol Morris

What is the parable of the mustard seed? What does it say about compassion and kindness towards others? How is the Buddhist concept of interconnectedness illustrated in the concept of universal love? How does it inform proper actions towards others? What do the pet owners in *Gates of Heaven* say about love? Is love for an animal different from love for another human? If so, how?

**Deadline for submission of Analysis and Critique of Philosophical Writings on Love (approximately mid-February)**

**Science of Love (5 weeks)**

Note: A large portion of class time during this section will be devoted to lab time. In addition to the readings below student will be given the chance to formulate and revise a research design proposal, reference journal articles, gather data, and write and refine final written report.

**WEEK 6 & 7**

*The Whitman Journal of Psychology (a collection of student writing and research)*

What was studied by these authors? What were their observations? How did they collect and organize the data (methodology)?

*Senior Thesis: The Effects of Castration and Testosterone Maintenance on Pheromone Recognition in Hybrid CK Male House Mice (mus domesticus)* by Scott Gartlan

How does the vomeronasal organ function in mice? What does that tell us about communication of attraction in mice? Can you relate that to human interaction? What can animal studies tell us about such human values as love, compassion, kindness, happiness?

*The New Science of Happiness* by Claudia Wallis

What is the new science of happiness? How is happiness defined? What makes someone happy and someone else not? How would one try to boost happiness? What factors contribute to one's sense of life satisfaction?

*Mind Wide Open (Chapter 4)* by Steven Johnson

What is the chemical oxytocin and how does it affect our behavior? How have scientists like Dr. Shelley Taylor among others studied the effects of oxytocin? How do some scientists understand the value and function of laughter? What is your opinion?

*The Value of Positive Emotions* by Barbara L. Fredrickson

How are scientists now looking at emotions such as contentment, joy and happiness? Does this new way jive with evolutionary theory? What research methods and experiments were used to make the case for the study of positive emotions?

*Positive Psychology: An Introduction* by Martin Seligman & Michlyi Csikszentmihalyi

What is Positive Psychology? How does it attempt to change the direction of psychological science? What are some key differences with traditional study of behaviors, thoughts and feelings?

*Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification (Introduction and Chapter 1)* by Christopher Peterson and Seligman

What is the difference between strengths and virtues? How do the authors compare this handbook with the traditional Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders? How were strengths identified? Virtues?

*Very Happy People* by Ed Diener and Seligman

What makes someone “very happy”? What factors contribute to someone who is “very happy” compared with some who is average or unhappy? How did the authors study this relationship?

*What Good are Positive Emotions in Crises?* by Fredrickson et al. & *Character Strengths Before and After September 11* by Peterson and Seligman

How can our emotions help those confronting conflict? What is resiliency? How can playfulness, hope, compassion, love, altruism influence those experiencing acute stress? What about your experience with tough times? How do you best cope?

## **WEEK 8**

Research Design Proposal Due

## **WEEK 9**

Data Collection Due

## **WEEK 10**

**Deadline for submission of Independent Research Project Final Written Report and Student Presentations of Methods and Results (approximately mid/late March)**

## **Service of Love (6 weeks)**

### **WEEK 11 & 12**

*I Have a Dream (Chapters 3, 5, 10, 15, 18 and 20)*, speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr., edited by James M. Washington

What makes Dr. King’s speeches so riveting? Which of the speeches did you find most meaningful? Was there any unifying theme found in all of the speeches?

*A Knock at Midnight (Chapters 1, 3, 9, 7 and 11)*, speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr., edited by Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran

How might we interpret this collection of speeches in our contemporary society both collectively and individually? When Dr. King speaks of love, how might we define it using our philosophical definitions?

### **WEEK 13 & 14**

*Selected Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi (Part I, chapters 7, 11, 13, 14 and 15; part II, chapters 2 and 10)* edited by Dennis Dalton

How does Gandhi define Satyagraha? Swaraj? How does Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence, compassion and fundamental rights come through in his political writings?

How does Gandhi demonstrate his disagreement with the British Empire using civil disobedience? What do his actions imply about his philosophy of the individual?

*The Essential Gandhi (Chapters 1, 9, 11, 15, 18, 20, 24, 25 and 26)* edited by Louis Fischer

Film: *Gandhi* by Richard Attenborough

How does Gandhi view his actions in the context of life and others? What do you think? What are his views on civil disobedience, the power of the mind, sex and cleanliness, time in jail, how African-Americans should handle their revolution? What do all of Gandhi's writings and philosophies tell us about him as a man and as a social leader? What is important to him? Is it important for you?

## **WEEK 15**

*Love in Action (Chapters 1, 4, and 11)* by Thich Nhat Hanh

What is love in action? How does Thich Nhat Hanh interpret Ahimsa into actions in one's life? What do the people of the Montagnards find meaningful in life? How does this inform their work ethic? Does this seem practical in our modern lives?

*An Open Heart (Chapter 7) and Ethics for the New Millennium (Chapters 1, 11 and 13)* by the Dalai Lama

Film: *Mother Teresa in San Francisco*

What is the modern problem according to the Dalai Lama? How can individuals incorporate his teachings into daily practice? What is the philosophical basis for the ethics of the Dalai Lama? Do the actions of Mother Teresa jive with the writings of the Dalai Lama? If so, how?

*Say Please, Say Thank You (Chapters 23, 24, 32, 33 and 35)* by Donald McCullough

Film: *Unbelievable People* narrated by Charles Kuralt

What are the lessons in these chapters? Are they too small to affect change in yourself or others? How do they relate with our definitions of agape love? How would you feel about implementing them in your life? Which of the many people in the video moved you the most? Why did you select that person and not another? How did you choose?

## **Deadline for submission of Reflective Paper on Community Service Project and Student Presentation of Service Experience (approximately mid/late April)**

## **WEEK 16**

Final week will be used as a reflection on value of the readings, discussion of current affairs and media relating to forms of love, and other student suggested readings not yet discussed. Final exam dinner will also take place this week.

Reading for the last day of class

*Love, Pity and Knowledge* by Bertrand Russell

Do you agree with Russell's three passions? Which do find to be most personally meaningful? How might you amend his three passions to add one of your own?

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