

“The Good Life”

Ethical Philosophy at the Transition to Adulthood

Harlan Gilbert



A course in philosophy offers the chance for high school students to encounter and explore fundamental questions that have occupied humanity for thousands of years:

Who am I? What is reality? What is truth? What is the purpose of life?

At Green Meadow Waldorf School, an ethical philosophy block is intentionally placed at the end of the twelfth-grade year, when the pupils are at a critical moment in their lives. In a short time, their lives will no longer be largely under the direction of parents, teachers, and other guardians. All aspects of how they will live will then be under their own control. (In the terminology of Immanuel Kant, they are about to transition from a primarily *heterogeneous* to a primarily *autonomous* existence.)

I ask the students, in view of this impending change, to think about what kind of life they would wish to live. After journaling on this theme silently for a few minutes, they share their priorities with the rest of the class. Their responses are invariably diverse, but frequently heard themes include making a contribution to society, close relationships with friends and family, a successful career, financial stability, and personal happiness.

After all students have shared, I ask them whether any goals they heard from others resonated with them. Everyone always affirms that this was the case. I then ask if any goals were mentioned that were not part of their own image of a good life. The students have always indicated that the factors others gave voice to were also important to themselves, even if they did not list these among their main priorities. Those who stated that they want to serve others recognize that financial stability will be necessary to accomplish this; those who want to achieve a successful career recognize the importance of friends and family; and so on. From this, a sense arises that people largely share the same fundamental goals, even if we prioritize these differently.

An Overview of Philosophy

At this point, before diving into the course content, I situate our work within the field of philosophy. I start by examining what the world was like before philosophy, at a time when cultures relied on traditional wisdom. Those of us attending this school find it natural

to employ and to encounter self-driven rational inquiry. This has not always been the case.

Beginning around the sixth century BCE, many literate cultures went through a quite sudden and quite remarkable development. Perhaps you have heard of Laozi and Confucius in China, the Buddha in India, or Thales and Pythagoras in Greece. They all lived roughly around the sixth century BCE, and they all began philosophical traditions, traditions of individualistic thought, within their respective cultures. We know no names of any similar thinkers who preceded these figures. Through these pathbreakers, the way in which people looked for answers to the fundamental questions of life shifted from received wisdom, the traditions of myth and religion, to reasoned thinking and dialogue.

Karl Jaspers described this radical turn from the certainty of convention and tradition to the uncertainty of the questioning mind as “the axial age,” and it was he who pointed out that this happened in many cultures roughly contemporaneously.¹ There is a great mystery here: was this simultaneity the result of these particular cultures fructifying one another (we know there were extensive trade and communication routes even in antiquity)? Or was this flowering of philosophic discourse happening truly worldwide, even in cultures for which we have no records from this period, such as the Zapotec culture in Mesoamerica and the Kingdom of Kush in Northeast Africa? We may never be able to answer this question.

In any case, over the following centuries, cultures throughout Eastern and Southern Asia, North Africa, and Southeastern Europe saw an incredible bloom in thinking and writing, in attempts to use reason to understand the world. Thousands of works recording people’s reflective thoughts suddenly began to appear. A revolution had been achieved, a revolution that we take for granted today, but which must have been truly remarkable to live through.

This revolution represents the birth of philosophy, a word which literally means *love of wisdom* (“philo”=

1 Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (London: Routledge, 2021; originally published in 1949). Jaspers’ picture is slightly oversimplified: there was arguably a rich tradition of religious philosophy in India from Vedic times, for example, but truly secular philosophy does seem to originate in the period Jaspers described.

love, “sophia”= wisdom). A philosopher is thus a person who loves wisdom and seeks to live wisely.

I describe philosophy as addressing three fundamental kinds of questions:

- Questions about the nature of the world and reality. Such questions are the realm of *ontology* and *metaphysics*.²
- Questions about how knowledge is attained and whether it can be trusted. These themes are the realm of *epistemology*.
- Questions about the value and aims of human existence, about how best to live. This is the realm of *ethics* or *moral philosophy*.³

This is the most ancient⁴ and enduring⁵ thematic division of philosophy, and for me its elegance and quintessential⁶ character are convincing, especially for the purpose of presenting students with an easily comprehensible set of basic questions. Some alternative divisions are in use today, however.

Though some explorations into the other areas are woven into the course, our primarily focus will be the central question of ethics with which we began: “What is a good life?”

Course Expectations

The course expectations are as follows:

- Students will read excerpts from philosophical works and discuss these in class.
- Each student keeps a *Philosophical Journal*, into which they enter each day reflections on the readings, class discussions, or any other philosophical theme, as well as quotations from their readings that touched them.
- Students research and write an essay on a philosophical theme of their choice. The possibilities

here are nearly infinite, as every aspect of human experience can be (and has been) approached philosophically!

There is no conventional main lesson book.

After gaining an initial overview of the field and reviewing the course expectations, we turn to the question: What light have philosophers over the ages shed on the question, “How should I live?”? I will describe here a few exemplary themes treated in the course.

Theme One: The Way (of Life)

Diverse ancient Greek philosophical schools all described the central goal of human existence as *eudaimonia*. This word is etymologically derived from *living in harmony* (“eu”) with *one’s guiding spirit* (“daimon”), but is most commonly rendered into English as *flourishing, fulfillment, or happiness*.

I ask the students whether living in flourishing, fulfillment, happiness, and harmony with the higher self seem like valuable goals to them. Are these aims related to the goals they described at the opening of the course, and if so, how?

As the students are considering the path they want their lives to take, the following quote, which opens one of the most significant spiritual texts of all time, gives pause:

“The path (<i>Tao</i>) that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging path.” ⁷	“The <i>Tao</i> (Way) that can be told of is not the eternal <i>Tao</i> . ” ⁸
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What is Laozi suggesting about how we should live our lives? What is “the enduring and unchanging path”? What is similar and what is the difference between living in accordance with *eudaimonia* and following the *Tao*?⁹ How can we achieve either? As this passage is notoriously difficult to translate, I provide several alternative translations, enabling students to compare the nuances of each.

However they express the ultimate goals of life—whether *eudaimonia*, the *Tao*, or other formulations—philosophers from most classical cultures agreed that these goals are best achieved by following the path

2 Both metaphysics and ontology explore the nature of reality, but they ask somewhat different questions.
3 One important branch of ethical thought, *political philosophy*, asks these questions at a societal level.
4 By the 3rd century BCE, Zeno of Citium had already divided philosophy into questions about the world (*physics*), questions of knowledge (*logic*), and questions of how to live (*ethics*) (Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. Charles Duke Yonge (London, UK: Bell, 1895), 274.). I am not aware of any earlier meta-philosophical overview from any philosophical tradition.
5 For more than two thousand years, this division was widely accepted by Western philosophers. It is still sometimes deployed in treatments of both Western and Buddhist philosophy (e.g. Jon Nuttall, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002); Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2007).
6 For example, while aesthetics is sometimes considered to be a separate branch of philosophy, questions about how to *recognize* beauty are essentially epistemological in nature, while questions about what *constitutes* beauty are metaphysical and ontological. (The ethics of beauty has also been explored.)

7 Laozi, *The Tao Te Ching*, trans. James Legge (Waiheke Island: Floating Press, 2008), 8.
8 Laozi, “Tao-Te Ching,” in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, by Wing-tsit Chan (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), 139.
9 The word 道 can be transliterated as either *Tao* or *Dao*.

of virtue. Though being “virtuous” can sound priggish to modern ears, many philosophers meant something closer to living a balanced existence. Perhaps the earliest full articulation of this *Middle Way* philosophy is that of the fifth-century BCE Chinese philosopher Zisi, who advises his readers to “maintain the mean at any time,” for “[e]quilibrium is the great foundation of the world, and harmony its universal path.”¹⁰

Aristotle explained the Middle Way path of ethical virtue¹¹ very concretely by considering a series of particular qualities of soul. Consider, for example *honesty*. Now ask yourselves: Can someone have too little honesty? Well, we could say that a habitual liar has too little honesty. But could there also be an excess of honesty—are there times when you don’t want someone to be completely honest? We might call the excess of honesty *tactlessness*.¹²

What would describe a balanced level of honesty, the middle ground between a deficit of honesty, lying, and too much honesty, being tactless? We might call this balance, “tactful honesty.”

The following chart shows the balance between the extremes:

Deficit	Balance, Middle Way	Excess
Dishonesty, lying	Tactful honesty	Tactlessness

Aristotle suggests that each person must determine for themselves where this balance is found, individually and situationally. This is what makes Aristotle’s approach so modern: instead of setting forth an absolute morality—“always be honest”—he recognizes that the middle path of virtue is to be in balance, and that any absolutism represents a dangerous extremism.

Let’s choose another quality: peacefulness. Can there be too much peacefulness? What would this look like? Perhaps laziness or inertia?

Can there also be too little peacefulness? Irritableness, agitation, anxiety, or even hyperactivity might come to mind.

10 Zisi, “The Doctrine of the Mean,” in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, by Wing-tsit Chan (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), 98–99. Buddha also articulated a Middle Way philosophy, but original articulation of this is usually understood to refer to a mean between sensualism and asceticism; later Buddhist philosophy, particularly the Mahayana tradition, first generalized this.

11 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, Chapters 6–9.

12 In the discussion, I let the students come up with the terms to describe deficits, excesses, and balances.

What would be the balance between too much and too little peacefulness? Shall we call this calm? Or is peacefulness itself a good description?

Let’s add this new polarity to our chart:

Deficit	Balance	Excess
Agitation	Calm, peacefulness	Laziness, inertia
Dishonesty	Tactful honesty	Tactlessness

I encourage my readers to explore other qualities. What about generosity, love, pride? (It is also possible to start with one of the extremes, e.g., grumpiness, naivety, or aggressiveness, and derive the middle point and the other extreme from this.)

Rather than expecting unrealizable perfection (complete honesty, complete serenity, complete generosity, complete self-abnegation, etc.), Middle Path philosophers focus on achieving a healthy balance, on finding a middle ground. This seems remarkably modern in several respects. It is situational: we are free to find the middle path in each situation on its own merits. It is individual: each person is responsible for determining where the balance lies for them. It is dynamic: the healthy balance need not be located at some abstract middle-point between the extremes, but can tend toward one extreme or the other—for example, we might prefer to lean toward more, rather than less, honesty or generosity.

Theme Two: Non-Attachment

Does happiness or success in life depend solely on ourselves, or is it dependent upon what external circumstances bring to us? In what have become known as the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha taught that a successful life depends on achieving non-attachment:

- Suffering suffuses the lives of all experiencing beings.
- Attachment to things is the root of suffering. (The Buddha went on to specify three typical kinds of objects to which people become attached: attachment to sensory pleasures or objects, to one’s identity or experiences, and to avoidance of particular experiences, or experience *per se*.)
- When attachments cease, suffering will be overcome.
- To free oneself from false attachments, it is necessary to practice self-improvement, with the goal

of achieving Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. This is known as the Eightfold Path.

I ask the students to reflect on the role suffering has played in their lives. I invite my readers to do the same. Consider the following:

- Was the source of this suffering attachment?
- Would it have been possible, would it have been better, to not have had the attachments that led to your suffering?
- Are you in some way thankful for something suffering brought to you?

Stoic philosophers formulated a strikingly parallel philosophy of non-attachment. Compare Epictetus' approach:

[I]f you are averse only to what is against nature among the things that are up to you, then you will never fall into anything that you are averse to; but if you are averse to illness or death or poverty, you will meet misfortune. So detach your aversion from everything not up to us, and transfer it to what is against nature among the things that are up to us... What upsets people is not things themselves but their judgments about the things.¹³

Is it really only our own judgments that upset us? Should we never blame anything external to us for our emotions and reactions? The discussions on these themes are lively.

[R]emind yourself that what you love is mortal, that what you love is not your own; it has been granted to you just for the present, not irrevocably, and not for ever, but like a fig or bunch of grapes, for a particular season of the year; so that if you long for it in the winter, you're a fool. And likewise, if you long for your son or friend at a time when he's no longer granted to you, you should know that you're longing for a fig in winter. For as winter is to a fig, so is every circumstance that arises from the general order of things in relation to the things that are destroyed in accordance with that circumstance. From now on, whenever you take delight in anything, call to mind the opposite impression; what harm is there in your saying beneath your breath as you're kissing your child, 'Tomorrow you'll die'?¹⁴

13 Epictetus, *The Handbook (The Encheiridion)*, trans. Nicholas P. White (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1983), 12.

14 Epictetus, "Discourses," in *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*, trans. Robin Hard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 207.

This raises many questions. Should a person not be attached to their friends, siblings, or children? Is this truly a Middle Way philosophy, or should we perhaps seek a balance? What kind of attachment is balanced? Is it possible to attain a kind of love that cares for its objects without striving to hold on to these? Relationships between parents and children, between friends, and between lovers provide rich example for our discussions.

Theme Three: Improving the World by Improving Oneself

A next theme of the block takes an outward turn. An important aspect of ethics is how to improve the world. In the block, this has two phases.

In the first phase, we investigate the path to societal transformation articulated by Martin Buber, a twentieth-century German Jewish philosopher. Buber suggested that when we see a problem in the world, before trying to change the world, it is important to go through the following preliminary steps:

- First, find how this problem manifests or is reflected in *yourself*.
- Second, heal or overcome the problem in *your own being*.
- Third, now go out to heal or overcome the problem *in the world*.

I ask the students why these steps might make a person a more effective change agent. They identify a number of factors. Rather than repeating these here, I leave readers free to contemplate this question and come up with their own answers.

A second exercise is based on Steiner's ethical philosophy.¹⁵ Inspired by Kant's radical affirmation of the autonomous moral will,¹⁶ Steiner believed that each person (1) can discover through acts of individual intuition those moral ideals they wish to live by, (2) can visualize how to apply the chosen principles to real situations (without such vision, ideals remain impractical), and (3) having visualized the needed change, can determine what practical skills (including social skills to build coalitions and technical skills to build sustainable structures) would support accomplishing the desired change.

I will describe the process we go through in class, but I urge the readers to go through this process themselves

15 Rudolf Steiner, *Intuitive Thinking As a Spiritual Path: A Philosophy of Freedom*, trans. Michael Lipson (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1995). Chapter 12.

16 See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals and Critique of Practical Reason*.

to experience its transformative power. At each of the four invitations below, therefore, please take a moment to really respond to the question posed.

I ask each student to choose any social issue important to them, an aspect of the world that they find in some way problematic.

(I invite the readers to identify an aspect of the world they find problematic.)

Once students have chosen an issue, I ask them to consider what moral principle they believe should be at work in this issue. What ethical idea should guide this aspect of the world, but is not yet doing so?

(I invite the readers to determine what ethical principle they feel should be at work in their chosen theme.)

Next, I ask what concrete change would take place if this principle were to take hold in this particular area. At this stage, it is important to describe the envisioned implementation of this moral principle in as concrete terms as possible.

(I invite the readers to consider how, if this ethical principle were to be followed, they envision the world changing.)

Third, what social or practical skills would enable people to achieve the change you described in part two? What would you, in particular, have to learn to contribute to achieving this transformation?

(I invite the reader to consider what concrete skills would be necessary to accomplish the change?)

Each student then presents the social problem they identified, the moral principle they would wish to see realized in this realm, their image of what would be different if this moral principle were fulfilled, and the practical steps that would be needed to effect this change.

All three stages offer the possibility of deeply individual insights. For example, one year, sensitized by extensive media reports of police shootings, two students chose the theme of police violence. Strikingly, when it came to visualizing a solution in this area, one aimed at better education of police, so they would have a wider toolkit of responses to the situations they will confront and awareness of when to use what response, while the other aimed to enact stricter laws regulating police that provided effective consequences for misbehavior. These radically different approaches brought home to the students that it is possible to have a diversity of responses to the same social challenges.

This is what makes Aristotle’s approach so modern: instead of setting forth an absolute morality—“be honest”—he recognizes that the middle path of virtue is to be in balance.

Theme Four: Applied Ethics

There are many themes of burning contemporary societal relevance that resonate with young adults. As questions of social justice are at the forefront of many people’s minds today, I will illustrate my approach to a theme within this general area: the role of punishment in a justice system.

I begin with the question: If someone purposefully injured you or someone close to you, what would you wish would be done to the perpetrator in response? While virtually everybody feels that something should be done, what this ‘something’ is differs from person to person. To go deeper, I ask about the goal of these responses.

What are they intended to accomplish? Responses to wrongdoing are generally justified by one of the following:

- To take revenge on the wrongdoer (or that person’s family or friends)¹⁷
- To prevent wrongdoers from committing further crimes (e.g., by incarcerating them)
- To dissuade others from doing wrong
- To enable or to obligate wrongdoers to make amends for their wrongdoing
- To rehabilitate wrongdoers

Here are some thoughts on the theme from the 19th century English philosopher John Stuart Mill:

There are some who say, that it is unjust to punish any one for the sake of example to others; that punishment is just, only when intended for the good of the sufferer himself. Others maintain the extreme reverse, contending that to punish persons who have attained years of discretion, for their own benefit, is despotism and injustice, since if the matter at issue is solely their own good, no one has a right to control their own judgment of it; but that they may justly be punished to prevent evil to others, this being the exercise of the legitimate right of self-defense. Mr. Owen [a social reformer]... affirms that it is unjust to punish at all; for the criminal did not make his own character; his education, and the circumstances which surrounded him, have made him a criminal, and for these he is not responsible. All these opinions are extremely plausible; and so

¹⁷ It may seem unlikely that a modern society would take revenge on family and friends, but there are countless examples: the 2001 US attack on Afghanistan (the hosts of the real perpetrators), Israeli policy of destroying the homes of family members of suicide bombers, etc.

long as the question is argued as one of justice simply, without going down to the principles which lie under justice and are the source of its authority, I am unable to see how any of these reasoners can be refuted. For in truth every one of the three builds upon rules of justice confessedly true. The first appeals to the acknowledged injustice of singling out an individual, and making a sacrifice, without his consent, for other people's benefit. The second relies on the acknowledged justice of self-defense, and the admitted injustice of forcing one person to conform to another's notions of what constitutes his good. The Owenite invokes the admitted principle, that it is unjust to punish any one for what he cannot help. Each is triumphant so long as he is not compelled to take into consideration any other maxims of justice than the one he has selected; but as soon as their several maxims are brought face to face, each disputant seems to have exactly as much to say for himself as the others. No one of them can carry out his own notion of justice without trampling upon another equally binding.¹⁸

The class is invited to discuss whether our current justice system is effective in achieving any of these aims. Alternative approaches are considered, such as South Africa's "Truth and Reconciliation Committees" and the application of transformative justice in post-genocide Rwanda. Both of these were inspired by *Ubuntu*, an ethical principle that centers community and the restoration of community:

Ubuntu is a Zulu social and ethical concept which literally means human-ness, those composite qualities which constitute the core of what it means to be human... it is a quality of personhood which is rooted in one of the most important African ethical concepts, i.e., reciprocal relationships as the ground of being and becoming human. This concept is expressed in Zulu as umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu, i.e., a person is a person through other persons.

This idea of coming into being and achieving the fullness of our human-ness in and thru relationships is perhaps best known from John Mbiti's maxim, "I am because we are and, because we are therefore I am." Adding agency to this fundamental principle, Kawaiida philosophy posits it as "I

am related and I relate therefore I am." Or in the collective, we are related and relate; therefore, we are. In other words, we come into being and come into the fullness of ourselves in and thru reciprocal relationship. And these rightful relationships are rooted in our human identities as both social and natural beings, and must be aligned in such a way that we truly feel at home in and with the world.

Ubuntu is also an ethical and spiritual foundation for building and living a truly human life, and a social and political ideal towards which we constantly strive. Its core values seek not only to cultivate a truly human person, but also a truly human society and world. Some of these core values are: mutual respect, mutual caring, mutual sharing, harmonious living together and a shared commitment to the ongoing work of peace thru justice. Again, at the heart of the concept and practice of Ubuntu is the value reciprocity in relationship and practice. Indeed, reciprocity or mutual responsiveness inform and undergird each principle and practice of Ubuntu.¹⁹

The principle of Ubuntu has relevance beyond its transformative power in the justice system. Might its centering of community provide a healing counterbalance in other areas where individualism has gone to excess? In our increasingly polarized society, are "mutual respect, mutual caring, mutual sharing, harmonious living together and a shared commitment to the ongoing work of peace thru justice" perhaps what we are missing?

At this point, I show videos of individuals from Rwanda, Israel, and the United States expressing friendship and solidarity with those who had previously grievously injured them and their families. I ask the students: Could you forgive those who have transgressed against you and welcome them back into community with you? Even if this forgiveness is predicated on the transgressors

coming to genuine remorse, many find it difficult to comprehend the congregants of the South Carolina Emanuel AME Church who reached out to express their forgiveness to the perpetrator after a terrible massacre was committed during a Sunday service,²⁰ or the

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18 John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism," in *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 168.

19 Maulana Karenga, "The Ideal and Ethics of Ubuntu," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 24, 2010, <https://lasentinel.net/the-ideal-and-ethics-of-ubuntu.html>.

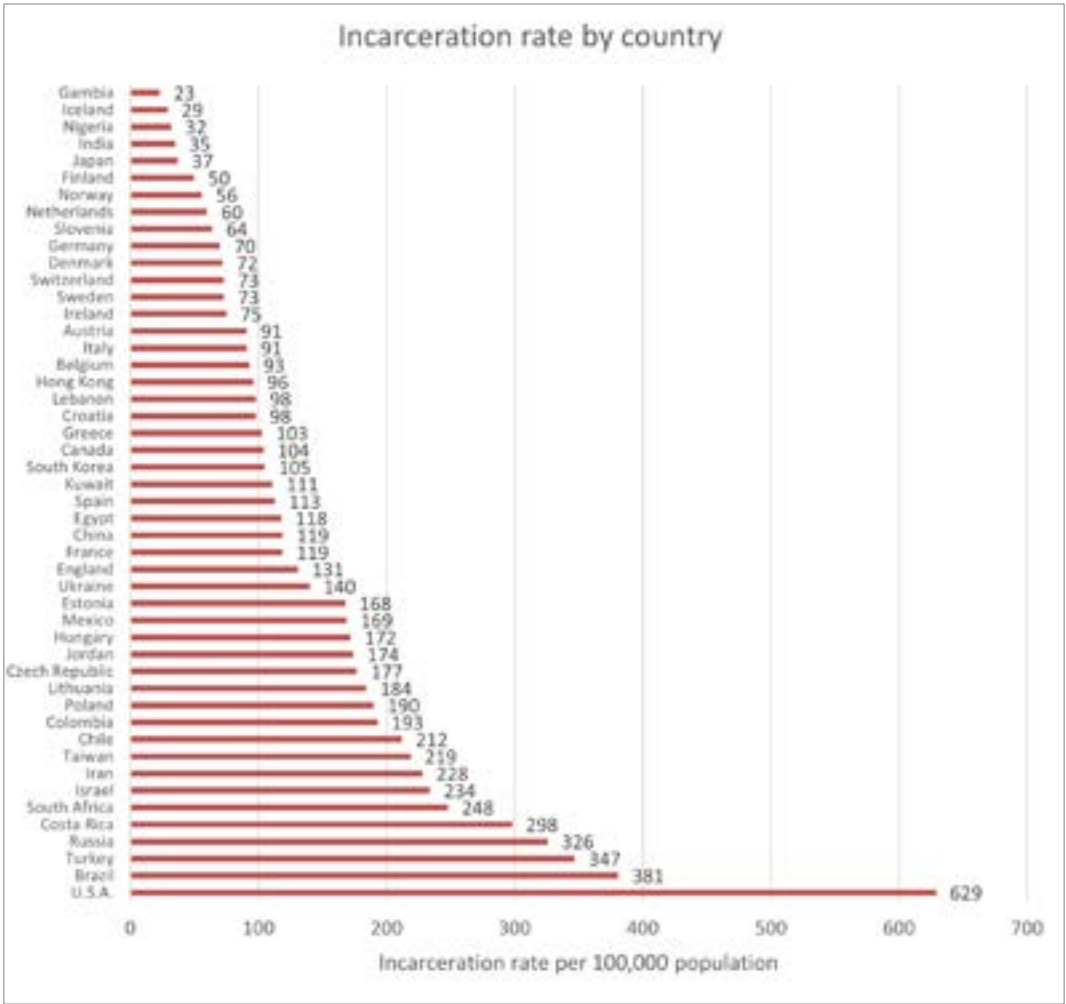
20 Mark Berman, "'I Forgive You.' Relatives of Charleston Church Shooting Victims Address Dylann Roof," *Washington Post*, October 26, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/06/19/i-forgive-you-relatives-of-charleston-church-victims-address-dylann-roof/>.

mother who speaks of the person who had killed her child as “her spiritual son.”²¹

I find it impossible to leave the subject of justice and punishment without considering the incarceration rate in the United States in its historical and world context (see charts below). Questions I invite the class to ponder include:

- The US incarceration rate is almost quadruple the median rate of 141 persons per 100,000.²² Why does the United States, the self-proclaimed land of the free, imprison a far higher percentage of its residents than any other country?

- How are countries such as Gambia, Iceland, Nigeria, India, and Japan able to achieve such low incarceration rates?
- Why has the imprisoned population in the United States increased so dramatically over recent years?
- What are we trying to achieve with incarceration, and is the means effective in achieving these ends?



Data from World Prison Brief’s World Prison Population List (13th edition), 2023. Image by author.

21 Rachel Bird, “Mary Johnson and Oshea Israel,” *The Forgiveness Project* (blog), accessed March 18, 2023, <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories-library/mary-johnson-oshea-israel/>.
22 Helen Fair and Roy Walmsley, “World Prison Population List (13th Edition)” (World Prison Brief, 2021), https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world_prison_population_list_13th_edition.pdf.



Public domain image by the November Coalition. URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:US_incarceration_timeline-clean.gif, accessed March 10, 2023

Theme Five: Ontology

At some point in the block, I try to give a brief sense of the questions about the fundamental nature of the world that metaphysics and ontology raise. I open with explorations of early philosophers, as their pregnant statements gives rise to fascinating discussions:

You cannot step into the same river twice.

(Heraclitus, Fragments)

Why not? What does this say about the world, and what does it say about those stepping into it?

Thirty spokes are united around the hub to make a wheel,

But it is on its non-being that the utility of the carriage depends.

Clay is molded to form a utensil,

But it is on its non-being that the utility of the utensil depends.

Doors and windows are cut out to make a room,

But it is on its non-being that the utility of the room depends.

(Laozi, Tao Te Ching, 11)

Again, if this is a statement about the world, is it also a statement about human beings?

A second portal, if there is time, leads us to explore the ontology of the human being. A slightly modified version of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs provides an easy entry path:

Ontological aspect of the human being	Needs á la Maslow
Physical body	Physical security (protection from bodily harm or death)
Physiological processes	Nourishment (food, water, air), warmth (clothing and housing), exercise, sexual fulfillment
Psychological experience	Friendship, happiness, enjoyment, interest, activity
Selfhood	Self-respect, respect from others, sense of direction, freedom
	Self-actualization, ability to grow, ideals

I have purposely left the last entry on the ontological side blank, as people prefer various terms for that aspect of ourselves that seeks to grow, to become more than what we already are—in Maslow’s terminology, to self-actualize. In this context, the question of whether what people seek is to fulfill our destiny can be tentatively raised.

Conclusion

The topics I cover in this philosophy course represent a very personal choice, and any reader will no doubt see other fruitful possibilities. Discussions in class usually begin with one or two students reading either a quotation or a personal reflection from their journals. Lively and self-sustaining conversations take wing and bear many surprises, as philosophical themes naturally lend themselves to analogy, example, personal reflection, and other well-springs of fruitful ideation.

My main goal is to enable students to contemplate more deeply. Philosophy is a means of expanding one’s ideas and interests, a step toward inner freedom.

In a very real sense, all that we take up unquestioningly has us in its thrall. This was powerfully brought home to me one year, when a group of teachers who had come from China to visit a variety of school types in the United States came to Green Meadow. We happened to be the last school they were visiting before they returned to

China. The group visited my philosophy main lesson, over several days, on one of which students were giving short reports on the themes they had investigated for their independent projects. Fortuitously, one student that year happened to present Marx’s philosophy in a very positive light. At the end of their visit, the teachers asked to speak to me. They told me that over the whole visit to the United States, these philosophy lessons had most clearly showed them the difference between education in the two countries. Philosophy lessons in China, they informed me, were meant to train students in the proper Marxist-Leninist-Maoist way of thought. It was unthinkable to express criticism or divergent opinions. To see students freely discussing and critiquing philosophical ideas was startling to them, and that in the US, students could quite positively cite socialist ideas without fear of repercussions really brought home to them the extreme difference between the societies.

Earlier in the year, our students are offered a main lesson dedicated to exploring American Voices such as Emerson’s, Thoreau’s, and Frederick Douglas’. The Ethical Philosophy course complements the earlier offering by incorporating a much broader cultural and historical range of voices, making it possible to situate these American voices in a broader historical tradition. This is in line with one of the most important aims of the final school year, “an overview of the connections within history” that fosters a comparative understanding across time and traditions.²³

By exposing students to one of the central disciplines of human experience, this block can be an important preparation for young people getting ready to make a transition to independent study and life. Over the years, many alumni have told me that the senior philosophy course inspired them to take philosophy classes in college. Others have shown me their heavily highlighted copies of the source book we draw on for many of our texts, *The Good Life*.²⁴

I hope you, dear readers, might be equally stimulated; I will have fully succeeded if one or two of you are furiously journaling away right now!

Harlan Gilbert, Ph.D., is an active lecturer and writer. His articles have appeared in many places, including *The Golden Blade* (a yearbook for anthroposophy), the *Research Bulletin*, and *Lilipoh* magazine. Harlan has written a book on child development, *At the Source: the Incarnation of the Child and the Development of a Modern Pedagogy*, which was published by AWSNA Press in 2005. He received his Ph.D. in Transformative Studies from the California Institute of Integral Studies, with a dissertation on *Expanding Identity: The Significance of Oikeiosis for Contemporary Ethics*. Harlan joined *Green Meadow High School* in 2003, where he teaches math, computer science, physics, and philosophy.

23 Rudolf Steiner, *Faculty Meetings with Rudolf Steiner: 1922-1924*, trans. Robert Lathe and Nancy Parsons Whittaker, vol. 2, *Foundations of Waldorf Education* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1998), 738.

24 Charles Guignon, *The Good Life* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999).