

Regional

The Lyceum aims discussions at philosophy

Is it up to you to determine what makes your life meaningful? Is it enough for a meaningful life that you find it satisfying? Or could you be wrong about the meaningfulness of your life? Does meaningfulness require sacrifice to something larger than yourself? What makes for a happy, or a meaningful life is just one of the topics of philosophical interest discussed by the SIUE student philosophy club, The Lyceum.

The Lyceum was formed at SIUE in 2014 by a handful of students, led by philosophy major Stephen Wilke, with the help of faculty advisor Matthew Cashen. The group is open to all and meets weekly in the Morris University Center to engage in critical discussion of topics of philosophical interest. Discussion topics have included torture, forced vaccination, the police state, rap music as folk art, the meaning of fear, the possibility of knowledge and artificial intelligence.

The Lyceum is the name of an ancient Greek school founded by Aristotle. Today's Lyceum at SIUE consists of students engaging in Socratic roundtable discussion in the ancient Greek tradition. A question is posed. Someone proposes an answer. Others question and critically assess the answer as the group develops and refines better answers to the original question. Participants will disagree, but all answers are subjected to challenging questions and constructive counter-examples. In this way, the group fosters critical thinking across the academy using the methods of philosophy.

Recently, the Lyceum engaged in a Socratic roundtable discussion on the notion of happiness, or more specifically, the ancient Greek concept of Eudaimonia. Eudaimonia is perhaps the most important concept in classical Greek ethics. The word is typically translated as "happiness," though this translation is approximate, and can be misleading. "Happiness" can characterize our moods and feelings. We describe ourselves as feeling happy, or we say that certain activities make us happy. But Eudaimonia applies to whole lives, rather than transient feelings. A happy life, in the sense of Eudaimonia, is a good or successful life. It matters enormously that we understand what makes a life a good life, because this influences our everyday and



Photo by Stephen Wilke

Meeting of the Lyceum Philosophy Club at SIUE.

long-term choices, informs what we strive for and gives us guidance in organizing our lives.

Eudaimonia is a multidimensional concept, involving emotional aspects and moral character traits, as well as meaningfulness. The Lyceum chose for its recent discussion to focus on the third aspect, meaningfulness. A Eudaimon life in this sense is substantial; it

is not, in the end, for nothing. When looking back on our life, we want to recognize it as meaningful. The question about meaningfulness is especially pressing for young people needing to make decisions that will have a long-term impact on their lives. To put it simply: How do I arrange not to waste my life?

An initial suggestion was that you need

to recognize for yourself what meaning is, using your rational faculties; meaningfulness cannot be imposed on you externally. This led some to question whether it is up to the individual to determine what is meaningful. Is it sufficient for a meaningful life that you enjoy and value your own life, and that you are engaged in something, whatever it is? Or

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is it possible to believe you have a meaningful life but be wrong, because you are mistaken about what is meaningful?

Contemporary philosopher Susan Wolf has suggested that "meaning occurs when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness." The idea is that it is necessary for a meaningful life that there is something you care about and are engaged in, but this is not sufficient. What you are engaged in needs to be objectively meaningful. While striving for the "objectively meaningful" may seem a tough standard, two examples arose that suggest there is something to this.

First, suppose Hitler was deeply engaged in his life goals, and accomplished a great deal of what mattered to him personally. Did Hitler live a meaningful life? Surely it was a repugnant life. Is this a case of someone fully engaged in a life project, finding it meaningful, and being wrong? Or consider the myth of Sisyphus. In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was condemned to spend eternity pushing a large stone up a hill, only for it to roll back down over and over again. This appears to be a life doomed to failure, and utterly meaningless. But suppose (Susan Wolf's example) that Sisyphus is given a drug that makes him feel that he absolutely loves stone rolling and feels deep satisfaction with his life. Now is his life meaningful? Is it a good life?

One consideration that came out forcefully in the discussion is that there remains a sense in which it really is up to you to determine what makes your life meaningful, and to make it so. It is necessary to use your rational faculties to determine what is meaningful. This is perhaps where Hitler failed. In our modified version of Sisyphus, Sisyphus allowed others to inject "meaning" into his life, rather than relying on his rational faculties to see for himself what counts as meaningful. Sisyphus may think he accomplished all he wanted in life, but he did not truly live.

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