“What is the good life?” Thinkers from disciplines as diverse as philosophy, psychology, government, and literature have explored this question. Their varying viewpoints raise important possible ways to begin answering it, emphasizing ethical principles, moral responsibilities, and the relationship between personal happiness and concern for others. How do we weigh our duties to others? How do we calculate our adherence to principles of right action? How do we balance those concerns with our own individual goals and desires?

Ronald Dworkin’s essay “What Is A Good Life?” takes on the question of the good life directly, grounding his discussion in definitions dating back to Plato and Aristotle. He explores how the concepts of ethics and morality contribute to our possible answers, ultimately setting up a framework for thinking about our decisions and behavior. Other thinkers have in turn arrived at their own answers to the question of how to evaluate what makes a life a good one. Here we will ask you to consider two other sources in addition to Dworkin’s work. In his famous essay “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” philosopher Peter Singer offers an alternative moral perspective. In their article “Sinning Saints and Saintly Sinners: The Paradox of Moral Self-Regulation,” psychologists Sonya Sachdeva, Rumen Iliev, and Douglas L. Medin consider factors that influence how we approach decisions in our own self-interest and those that promote the interests of others.

Before you write your own essay, first think closely about all three sources and identify the arguments presented by each author. Then use Dworkin’s ideas on the good life to analyze the other writers’ arguments. Specifically, you should use Dworkin’s ideas to focus on what you see as a central or important issue within the conversation among all three authors. Once you have chosen that focus, Dworkin’s essay may then help you clarify, explore, question, affirm, or critique the arguments made by the other authors.

Some Advice about How to Approach the Essay

As you begin to develop your argument, it may help to consider which ideas from these authors you find convincing and why. Do you find certain claims particularly persuasive? Certain values more important than others? Certain examples, pieces of evidence, assumptions or justifications unsatisfying? What are the implications of Dworkin’s argument for the arguments of the other authors? Whatever focus you choose, your argument should be based on evidence from and analysis of the arguments and definitions found in the readings, not simply on generalizations or on your own opinions.
You will not be able to address every point or problem these writers discuss. You might find yourself considering how Dworkin’s argument about ethics and morality helps you think about the issues explored by Singer and by Sachdeva, Iliev, and Medin; you might investigate the way his categories for evaluating the good life help you analyze the related or opposing claims made by the other sources; or you might identify some other important angle within these arguments. Whatever focus you choose, you are using the concepts and arguments of Dworkin’s essay to explore and illuminate the arguments made by Singer and by Sachdeva, Iliev, and Medin.

This approach of using one source as a way to frame your analysis of other sources is an essential strategy in academic writing. We recognize that this may be a new essay form for you. The guidelines below will help you approach your essay.

Your essay should do the following:

Present an arguable thesis:

- Offer an argument that is appropriately complicated: the argument may synthesize the various sides of the conversation into a new position; it may generate a new understanding of one side of the conversation through comparison with another; and so on. A strong essay will rarely fully agree or disagree with one position or another.
- Clearly articulate a thesis that is supported through concrete analysis, evidence, and examples derived from close readings of the authors’ arguments.
- Explain what your thesis adds to the conversation or what issue or problem in the conversation your thesis addresses.
- Develop and maintain the thesis clearly throughout the essay.

Use the sources:

- Use Dworkin’s argument to examine the arguments of the other two sources.
- Concisely summarize relevant aspects of the readings when needed in the service of your own argument.
- Pay attention to and incorporate all three of the readings.

Offer evidence and analysis:

- Base your argument in evidence from the sources. You should not research any outside sources as you develop your ideas; your essay should be informed only by these three sources and your own good analysis and reasoning.
- Engage in analysis that moves beyond noting superficial similarities and differences among the texts to deeper claims, ideas, and assumptions at work in these readings.
Develop a clear structure:

- Structure ideas in a logical and progressive organization that follows from the argument itself, rather than in a sequence of paragraphs that simply offer a series of examples.

Quote and cite the sources:

- Use quotations when appropriate and integrate them effectively.
- Clearly indicate when language and ideas come from the readings. You should use a parenthetical in-text citation style, putting the page number in parentheses at the end of the relevant sentence. For example, a quotation from the first page of Singer’s work would be followed by the citation (Singer 229). The placement test will not format footnotes. (For further examples of in-text citation, consult the Harvard Guide to Using Sources at http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu for MLA citation format.)

Present ideas clearly:

- Express ideas in clear prose, employing simple and straightforward language and avoiding errors of grammar, punctuation, and syntax.

College writing assignments commonly include a page limit, requiring students to be concise and select the ideas and information most helpful for their argument. Your essay should be about 1000-1200 words in length. We will stop reading each student’s essay at the 1200 word limit. Be concise, but write enough to argue your claim thoroughly and to include appropriate amounts of evidence.