

ER 38: The Meaning of Life

Fall 2015

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Office Hour: Tuesday, 3-4

Teaching Fellows:

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Location: TBD

Class Days and Time: Monday/Wednesday 10-11

Course Description: Many of us have good reasons for doing this or that, making this decision rather than that, choosing this path over another, etc. There is often a point to these choices that we can identify, and sometimes have thought hard about. But is there a point, is there significance to life as a whole? That is the question about the “meaning of life.” Though the question is notoriously hard to make precise, one way or another it has animated much literature and art, and also much philosophy. Some philosophers have provided disheartening answers: life is suffering, and then it ends; life is absurd, and never gains any meaning; life is all about creating hell for each other, and we cannot escape. But other philosophers have provided more uplifting answers to support the quest for personal significance. Both kinds of answers deserve scrutiny. Such scrutiny should be of interest to anybody who wishes to reflect on her/his life as a whole as part of her/his education. After reviewing several pessimistic and more optimistic approaches to the meaning of life we turn to the subject of death. We will all die eventually. We normally encounter death among family and friends before we must deal with our own. These themes too are the subject of philosophical reflection. The class finishes with a discussion of an important set of lectures on the topics of this course by a contemporary philosopher. This class is wide-ranging, and will integrate historical figures, references to art and literature as well as to science as appropriate. But its main focus is on contributions by recent thinkers in the Anglo-American analytical tradition of philosophy. The methodology is philosophical. Some topics may touch you quite personally, and you

should take this into account before enrolling. Please do not expect an answer of the sort "The meaning of life is X." But short of that, there is much exciting material to be encountered here that combines intellectual depth with valuable personal advice.

Prerequisites: None. The course is introductory and open to all. We provide guidance in writing philosophical papers.

Requirements: Three papers of 5-6 pages, double-spaced; the first to be handed out on September 23 (due on Oct 2); the second on October 21 (due on October 30); and the third to be handed out on November 16 (due on November 30). A list of available topics will be provided. The aim of these papers is to help you to focus on the main issues of the course and to give you practice in developing careful, structured arguments. The paper assignments get progressively more complex. In the first paper, the emphasis is on reconstructing somebody else's argument, allowing you to develop the skill of logical reconstruction rather than narrative summary of a text. The second paper goes beyond mere reconstruction, asking you to both reconstruct and critically evaluate somebody else's argument. The third paper will give you an opportunity to develop a well-reasoned defense in support of your own view regarding one of the central issues of the class. Extensions on paper-deadlines can only be given by the instructor, and require a very good reason (please cc head TF on requests of extensions). There will be a final exam, for which study questions will be given out at the last lecture. Attendance in sections is expected. The purpose of the section is to increase understanding of the material discussed in the lectures, as well as to provide opportunities for students to exchange ideas and views about that material.

Policy on collaboration: All written work must be entirely your own. If you use ideas from written materials or ideas generated by others in conversation you must give proper credit in a footnote. Plagiarism is a serious offense. Please consult with your TF if you are not sure how to give credit, or for what you need to give credit.

Texts:

Reading will be about 40-80 pages per week, depending on difficulty. Reading will be about 40-80 pages per week, depending on difficulty. Some articles are available through Hollis or the Internet. They will be posted on the course website under "Course documents." The remaining texts have to be purchased in a course packet provided by University Readers (with purchasing instructions posted on the course website). The course reading packet includes articles and book chapters.

For purchase at the Coop:

E. D. **Klemke** (ed.), *The Meaning of Life*, Oxford University Press, 2000

Samuel **Scheffler**, *Death and the Afterlife*, Oxford University Press, 2013

Grading: All written assignments (three papers and a final exam) must be completed. The first graded paper will count for 10% of the final grade, the second and third papers for 20% each. The final exam will count for 35%, and section participation 15%. Late papers will be penalized at the rate of 1/3 of a grade per day, including the first weekend. Any student who is taking this course to meet the General Education Ethical Reasoning requirement must take this course letter-graded. Students who enroll Pass-Fail, must receive passing grades on all three papers and on the final exam.

AEO: Any student needing academic adjustments or accommodations is requested to present their letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although AEO may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation.

Lecture 1, Wednesday, September 2: Introduction - Initial Reflections on the Subject Matter of this Course

Thomas Nagel, "The Meaning of Life" (excerpt from *What Does it All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*), **reading packet**

Leo Tolstoy, "My Confession," in **Klemke**

Monday, September 7 - Labor Day (A Well-Earned Holiday)

Part I: The Challenges

Lecture 2, Wednesdays, September 9: Is Life All Suffering?

Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Vanity of Existence," (from *Essays and Aphorisms*), **reading packet**

Arthur Schopenhauer, "The Metaphysics of Sexual Love," from Volume 2 of *The World as Will and Representation*, **reading packet**

Lecture 3, Monday, September 14: Is Everything Pointless Without God?

Friedrich Nietzsche, The Death of God, *Gay Science* 125; *Twilight of Idols, Skirmishes of an Untimely Man* 5, **posted on course website**

David Swenson, "The Transforming Power of Otherworldliness," **reading packet**

William Lain Craig, "The Absurdity of Life Without God," **reading packet**

Lecture 4, Wednesday, September 16: Is Everything Pointless Without God, Cont.

Michael Perry, "Is the Idea of Rights Ineliminably Religious?," in *The Idea of Human Rights*, **reading packet**

Ronald Dworkin, "What is Sacred?," pp 68-84 in *Life's Dominion*, **reading packet**

Lecture 5, Monday, September 21: Is Life Absurd?

Albert Camus, *The Stranger*,
<http://www.macobo.com/essays/epdf/CAMUS,%20Albert%20-%20The%20Stranger.pdf>, **posted on course website**

Lecture 6, Wednesday, September 23: Is Life Absurd, Cont.

Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," **posted on course website**

Richard Taylor, "The Meaning of Life," in **Klemke**

First paper assignment posted today.

Lecture 7, Monday, September 28: Do We Create Each Other's Hell?

Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*, https://archive.org/stream/NoExit/NoExit_djvu.txt,
posted on course website

Part II: Responding to the Challenges

Lecture 8, Wednesdays, September 30: Affirming Atheism

Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship" and "Love, Knowledge, and Pity,"
reading packet

First paper due by 8 pm EST Friday, October 2

Lecture 9, Monday, October 5: The Scientific Worldview

Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, chapters 2 and 4

Lecture 10, Wednesday, October 7: The Existentialist Response

Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," **posted on course website**

Lecture 11, Wednesday, October 14: What Makes Life Worth Living?

Robert Nozick, "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life," pp 571-600 in *Philosophical Explanations*, **reading packet**

Lecture 12, Monday, October 19: Meaning and Happiness

Robert Nozick, "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life," pp 600-619

Susan Wolf, "The Meanings of Lives," in Perry, Bratman, Firscher, eds., *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (2007), **reading packet**

Lecture 13, Wednesday, October 21: Graduation Speeches 2005 – Steve Jobs and John Foster Wallace

Steve Jobs, Commencement Speech at Stanford, 2005
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1R-jKKp3NA>, **posted on course website**

David Foster Wallace, "This is Water," Commencement Speech at Kenyon College, 2005, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CrOL-ydFMI>, **posted on course website**

Second paper assignment posted today.

Part III: Taking a Step Back

Lecture 14, Monday, October 26: What are We Doing When Asking about the Meaning of Life?

A. J. Ayer, "The Claims of Philosophy," in **Klemke**

John Wisdom, "The Meanings of the Questions of Life," in **Klemke**

Lecture: 15, Wednesday, October 28: The Bigger Picture: Why is there Anything

at all?

Derek Parfit, "Why Anything? Why this? Why There is a Universe," *London Review of Books*, Jan 22, 1998, **posted on course website**

Second paper due by 8 pm EST Friday, October 30

Lecture 16, Monday, November 2: The Bigger Picture: Why is there Anything at all?

Derek Parfit, "Why Anything? Why this? Cosmology," *London Review of Books*, Feb 5, 1998, **posted on course website**

Part IV: Thinking about Death

Lecture 17, Wednesday, November 4: Approaching Death

Leo Tolstoy, "The Death of Ivan Ilych," **posted on course website**

Lecture 18, Monday, November 9: The Nature and Badness of Death

Shelly Kagan, *Death*, chapter 2 ("Dualism versus Physicalism")

Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, chapter 2 ("Death")

Lecture 19: Wednesday, November 11: Why Death Might Not be Bad At all: Epicurus and Lucretius

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, entries on Epicurus and Lucretius

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epicurus/>

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/lucretius/>

Lecture 20, Monday, November 16: Living in the Face of Death

Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case; Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," chapter of Williams, *Problems of the Self*

Shelly Kagan, *Death*, pp 288-303

Third paper assignment posted today.

Lecture 21, Wednesday, November 18: Suicide

David Hume, "On Suicide," In *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*

Fred Feldman, Confrontation with the Reaper, chapter 13 ("The Morality and Rationality of Suicide")

**Part V: Reflecting on Personal Significance and the Collective Afterlife:
Samuel Scheffler, *Death and Afterlife***

Lecture 22, Monday, November 23: The Collective Afterlife

Scheffler, Lectures 1 and 2

Wednesday, November 25 is part of Thanksgiving Recess

Lecture 23, Monday, November 30: The Collective Afterlife, Cont.

Scheffler, Lecture 3

Third paper due by 8 pm EST on Monday, November 30

Lecture 24, Wednesday, December 2:

Conclusion