

Life Death and Meaning, PHIL 204

Wednesdays 10:00-11:30am, Fridays 8:30am-10:00am

Dunning Hall, Room 12

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Course Description: Many people wish to live a meaningful life. But what exactly does this mean? Is it even coherent to speak of a life as being full (or void) of meaning? And if it is, does meaning rest in the eye of the beholder or is it open to objective evaluation? Furthermore, are there necessary conditions (e.g. social, cultural or economic) to give a life meaning? And how might the fact of human mortality shape our thinking on the subject? In this course we will consider a variety of philosophical texts, ancient and contemporary, to help us think through these and other relevant questions. We will also, when useful, borrow insights offered by the social sciences. Our aim will be to grapple with the question of meaning in life, both in the abstract and as it relates to our everyday experience.

The reading list has been divided into four themes, each of which we will explore in depth throughout the course. They are as follows:

- (I) **What makes for meaningful (and meaningless) lives?** Most would agree that some lives are more meaningful than others. Yet it is not self-evident what such a claim actually entails. What does 'meaning,' understood as an independent dimension of life, consist of? And what is its relationship to other axes of life such as happiness and morality? Moreover, what are (if any) the components of a meaningful life? And how should we think about their ontological status? In other words, are 'meaning conditions' objective, subjective, or both?
- (II) **Death and Meaning.** Many today tend to shy away from thinking about death, in part, because it seems a great loss, even evil. But not all have thought so. Epicureans argued it is folly to fear death, the result of a basic misunderstanding. Others disagree. Furthermore, to what extent is meaning in life dependent upon our mortality? If we lived forever would this undermine our ability to lead meaningful lives? Or would immortality perhaps increase the cumulative meaningfulness of our lives?
- (III) **What is the meaning of life?** Some philosophers contend that whether or not we judge some lives to be meaningful, life is ultimately meaningless. They argue the world is disenchanted, void of Meaning (with a capital 'M'), and therefore numb to our existential needs. In turn, these thinkers conclude life is absurd. What arguments have been put forth to support this conclusion? Are they persuasive? And if they are, what attitude(s) should we adopt towards the absurdity of life? Finally, could the question, 'what is the meaning of life?' be incoherent? In short, might it indicate a category error (something like, *what is the colour of seven?*)? And if so, would it be best not to ask it at all?
- (IV) **Meaning in life and the (potential) limits of philosophy.** How might social, cultural, and economic conditions influence both whether we think life has meaning, and what we think constitutes a meaningful life? How should this influence our thinking on the subject? Does it even matter from a philosophical point of view? Furthermore, when it comes to leading a meaningful life, to what extent is philosophy useful or necessary? Put another way, to what extent does the attainment of meaning presuppose the non-rational? Might the examined life be at odds with the meaningful one?

Although these four themes will be explored and discussed separately and in chronological order, they should not be viewed as categorically distinct. Rather, they are in many ways conceptually linked, such that how one thinks about one theme will very likely influence how one thinks about another. It is useful to keep this in mind as we proceed.

Learning Outcomes: Students who successfully complete PHIL204 will be able to...

- Understand a wide variety of philosophical approaches to questions of meaning and existence.
- Grasp the development, significance, and (potential) limits of the application of philosophical methods to questions of life and death.
- Read and comprehend challenging texts.
- Think critically about the question of life's meaning and the various approaches taken to answer it.
- Reconstruct and analyze the structure and content of philosophical arguments.

Assessments: Throughout the course, assessment will take the form of:

- 1) Four short (750-1000 words) comment sheets, the best **two** of which will count towards the final grade (15% x 2);
- 2) A mid-term, in-class test (25%);
- 3) A (2000-2500 word) final essay (40%)
- 4) and Class Attendance/Participation (5%)

Late Policy: Assignments that are submitted late will receive a letter grade (e.g. B+ → B) deduction each day. If there is an extenuating circumstance that you would like the teaching assistants to consider, please try to e-mail us *before* the deadline rather than after it has already passed.

Statement on Academic Integrity: Queen's students, faculty, administrators and staff all have responsibilities for supporting and upholding the fundamental values of academic integrity. Academic integrity is constituted by the five core fundamental values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility (see <https://www.queensu.ca/arts/sci/students-at-queens/academic-integrity>) and by the quality of courage. These values and qualities are central to the building, nurturing and sustaining of an academic community in which all members of the community will thrive. Adherence to the values expressed through academic integrity forms a foundation for the "freedom of inquiry and exchange of ideas" essential to the intellectual life of the University.

Students are responsible for familiarizing themselves with and adhering to the regulations concerning academic integrity. General information on academic integrity is available at Integrity@Queen's University, along with Faculty or School specific information. Departures from academic integrity include, but are not limited to, plagiarism, use of unauthorized materials, facilitation, forgery and falsification. Actions which contravene the regulation on academic integrity carry sanctions that can range from a warning, to loss of grades on an assignment, to failure of a course, to requirement to withdraw from the university.

Student Accommodation: Queen's University is committed to achieving full accessibility for persons with disabilities. Part of this commitment includes arranging academic accommodations for students with disabilities to ensure they have an equitable opportunity to participate in all of their academic activities. If you are a student with a disability and think you may need accommodations, you are strongly encouraged to contact Student Wellness Services (SWS) and register as early as possible. For more information, including important deadlines, please visit the Student Wellness website at: <http://www.queensu.ca/studentwellness/accessibility-services/>

Required Reading Material:

Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, (Princeton University Press, 2010) (Available at the Campus Bookstore)

All other readings will be made available through the library e-reserve and posted to OnQ/Ares

Class Schedule

Theme I: What makes for meaningful (and meaningless) lives?

(Week 1: Friday, September 6)

- Course Introduction

(Week 2: Wednesday, September 11) What is 'meaning' and what makes for a meaningful life?

- Reading: Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton University Press, 2010), pgs. 1-33.

(Week 2: Friday, September 13) On meaning and morality

- Reading: Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton University Press, 2010), pgs. 34-63.
- Supplementary Reading: Wolf, Susan. 1997. "Meaning and Morality" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 97: 299-315.

(Week 3: Wednesday, September 18) Criticisms of Wolf's hybrid account

- Readings: (1) Nomy Arpaly, "Comment," In *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, pgs. 85-91.
(2) Jonathan Haidt, "Comment," In *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, pgs. 92-101.

(Week 3: Friday, September 20) A subjectivist account of the meaningful life

- Reading: Richard Taylor, "The Meaning of Life," In *Good and Evil*. (Prometheus Books, 2000)

(Week 4: Wednesday, September 25) An objectivist account of the meaningful life

- Reading: Smuts, Aaron. 2013. "The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life" *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51(4): 536-562.
- Supplementary Reading: Purves, Duncan, and Nicolas Delon. 2017. "Meaning in the lives of humans and other animals" *Philosophical Studies* 175: 317-338.
- **First Comment Sheet Assigned, Due October 2.**

(Week 4, Friday, September 27) Revisiting Wolf

- Susan Wolf, "Response," *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, pgs. 102-132.

Theme II: Death and Meaning

(Week 5: Wednesday, October 2) Should we fear death?

- Readings: (1) Epicurus, In *Letter to Menoeceus*
(2) Nagel, Thomas. 1970. "Death" *Noûs* 4(1): 73-80.
- Supplementary Reading: "Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow" (a poem)
- **First Comment Sheet Due (10:00am, by OnQ dropbox)**

(Week 5: Friday, October 4) Why death may not be so bad

- Reading: Suits, David B. 2001. "Why Death Is Not Bad for the One Who Died" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38(1): 69-84.

(Week 6: Wednesday, October 9) Is mortality necessary for meaning? Part I

- Reading: Williams, Bernard. "The Markopulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality," In *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (Cambridge University Press, 1973).
- Supplementary Readings: Lenman, James. 1995. "Immortality: A Letter" *Cogito* 9(2): 164-169.
- **Second Comment Sheet Assigned, Due October 16.**

(Week 6: Friday, October 11) Is mortality necessary for meaning? Part II

- Reading: Fischer, John Martin. 1994. "Why Immortality Is Not So Bad" *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 2(2): 257-270.

(Week 7: Wednesday, October 16)

- Midterm Review
- **Second Comment Sheet Due (10:00am, by OnQ dropbox)**

(Week 7: Friday, October 18)

- **In-Class Test**

(October 24-25) **Mid-term Break, No Class**

Theme III: What is the meaning of life?

(Week 8: Wednesday, October 30) Is life absurd? Part I

- Reading: Nagel, Thomas. 1971. "The Absurd." *The Journal of Philosophy* 68(20): 717-727.
- Supplementary Reading: Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Sufferings of the World," In *Studies in Pessimism* (Wiley, 1942)

(Week 8: Friday, November 1) Is life absurd? Part II

- Reading: Richard Hare, "Nothing Matters," In *Life, Death, and Meaning*, pgs. 41-47.
- Supplementary Reading: Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, (Random House, 1955).

(Week 9: Wednesday, November 6) Interrogating the question. Part I

- Reading: Robert Nozick, "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life," In *Philosophical Explanations* (Harvard University Press, 1981).
- **Third Comment Sheet Assigned, Due November 13.**

(Week 9: Friday, November 8) Interrogating the question. Part II

- Reading: David Schmitz, "The Meanings of Life," In *Robert Nozick* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Theme IV: Meaning in life and the (potential) limits of philosophy

(Week 10: Wednesday, November 13) The religious answer

- Reading: Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession* (selected excerpts), pgs. 13-22, 25-33, 55-60, 68-71.
- Supplementary Reading: Louis P. Pojman, "Religion Gives Meaning to Life" In *Meaning of Life: A Reader*, pgs. 27-30.
- **Third Comment Sheet Due (10:00am, by OnQ dropbox)**

(Week 10: Friday, November 15) The importance of praxis

- Reading: John Cottingham. "Chapter 1: Religion and spirituality: from praxis to belief" In *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

(Week 11: Wednesday, November 20) On play

- Reading: Moritz Schlick, "On the Meaning of Life," In *Meaning of Life: A Reader*, pgs. 62-71.

(Week 11: Friday, November 22) A sociological perspective on meaning(lessness)

- Reading: Paul Froese. "Chapter 3: The Reality of Meaninglessness," In *On Purpose: How we create the meaning of life* (Oxford University Press, 2015).
- **Fourth Comment Sheet Assigned, Due November 29.**

(Week 12: Wednesday, November 27) Meaning, motivation, and human suffering

- Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (selected excerpts) (Washington Square Press, 1946). pgs. 73-87, 110-119.

(Week 12: Friday, November 29)

- Final Class: Course Review
- **Fourth Comment Sheet Due (midnight, by OnQ dropbox)**

Final Essay Due Date: December 13 (midnight, by OnQ)

Grade Conversion Chart:

Assignment mark	Numerical value for calculation of final mark
A+	93
A	87
A-	82
B+	78
B	75
B-	72
C+	68
C	65
C-	62
D+	58
D	55
D-	52
F48 (F+)	48
F24 (F)	24
F0 (0)	0