



PHIL 1200: The Meaning of Life

0.5 credit. An introduction to concerns expressed by the perennial philosophical question, “What is the meaning of life?” Students will be familiarized with the major philosophical approaches to life’s meaning through a consideration of various contemporary and late modern works in the philosophy of life.

Early Summer Term 2025
Tuesdays & Thursdays
2:35–5:25 p.m.

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Office hours:
Tuesdays & Thursdays
1:30–2:30 p.m.

Overview & Objective

To wonder about the meaning of life is to wonder about the best sort of thing you can do in your life. In this course we will explore a number of perspectives on that topic.

According to the religious perspectives we will explore, the meaning of life involves relating yourself in the right way to a supernatural being or realm. According to the secular perspectives we will explore, meaning involves more down-to-earth things. According to the pessimistic perspectives we will explore, meaning is cold comfort, because the best sort of thing you can do in your life is still not good enough, not by a long shot.

The objective of the course is to provide you with useful tools for sorting out your own coherent perspective on life’s meaning. These tools include a good understanding of the various existing perspectives on the topic, and a well-developed ability to assess the relative merits of those perspectives.

Attendance

This fully in-person course is very lecture-focused, and nothing is more important for your performance in it than attending the lectures each week and taking good notes. Because this is

university and you're all adults, I don't take attendance at the lectures. But don't let this mislead you into thinking that you can regularly skip the lectures and still do well in the course.

Readings

You don't need to buy a textbook for this course; all of the assigned readings will be made available to you at no cost. I list these readings in the course schedule below.

Some of the assigned readings can be very difficult to understand if no one has explained their context and central aims to you advance. For this reason, I recommend that you do the readings after, rather than before, you've attended my lectures on those readings.

Evaluation

Tests (30+40% = 70% of overall grade)

Throughout this early summer term you will be expected to take two major tests, both delivered through Brightspace. In keeping with the main objective of the course, the purpose of these tests is to ensure that you have a good understanding of the perspectives so-far discussed in the course and are developing your ability to assess the relative merits of these perspectives. Because the tests are based on what I discuss in the lectures, your best study guides for the tests will be the notes you take about lectures.

The tests will consist of both multiple-choice and brief-essay style questions. You will have one hour to complete each test. The first test will be worth 30% of your overall grade, the second 40%.

The first test will be on **May 15 at 2:35 p.m.**, the second test will be on **May 29 at 2:35 p.m.** Note that although you needn't come to campus to write them, you must write the tests at these times; you will not be permitted to write them afterwards, and missing them will be like missing a formally scheduled exam. Also note that the use of artificial intelligence (e.g., ChatGPT) when writing these tests is strictly prohibited.

In-person final essay (30% of overall grade)

You will also be expected to write an in-person final essay for the course. The essay will be in the style of your answers to brief-essay questions on the tests, but about two to three times as long. You will write your essay **in class on June 10**. I will give you at least two topics on which to write at the beginning of that class; you will then choose one of those topics and write your entire essay on it.

There is no final examination for this course.

Schedule

The left column of the following table lists the scheduled class dates. The centre column indicates the broad topic sections of the course. In the right column are the assigned readings corresponding to the lectures I plan to give on the relevant dates. If there is a hypertext link after a listed reading, it means that the reading is freely available online and you can access it simply by clicking the link. If there's no link after a listed reading, it means that the reading is not freely available online but I will post it in the relevant Brightspace module.

May 6	<i>Introduction</i>	No readings.
May 8	<i>Religious perspectives</i>	<p>Tolstoy, L. ([1880] 1921). <i>A confession</i>, trans. A. Maude (sects. IV & IX). Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_Confession_(Maudes_translation)</p> <p>Fackenheim, E. ([1965] 2013). Judaism and the meaning of life (sects. I & II, pp. 1–2). <i>Jewish Ideas Weekly</i>, March 1–9.</p>
May 13		<p>Nozick, R. (1981). Excerpt from <i>Philosophical explanations</i> (pp. 594–610). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.</p> <p>Hudson, H. (1971). Buddhist teaching about illusion. <i>Religious Studies: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion</i>, 7, 141–51.</p>
May 15		Test 1
May 20	<i>Secular perspectives</i>	<p>Baier, K. (1957). <i>The meaning of life: Inaugural lecture delivered at the Canberra University College on 15 October 1957</i> (29pp.) Canberra: Commonwealth Government Printer.</p> <p>Nietzsche, F. ([1891] 1994). Zarathustra's prologue. In <i>Thus spake Zarathustra: A book for all and none</i>, trans. T. Common. Ames, IA: The EServer Project at Iowa State University. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm</p>
May 22		<p>Camus, A. ([1942] 1991). Excerpt from <i>The myth of Sisyphus</i>, trans. J. O'Brien (pp. 23–24; pp. 119–23 of the original translation). New York: Vintage Books.</p>

		Feinberg, J. (1980). Absurd self-fulfillment. In P. van Inwagen (ed.), <i>Time and cause: Essays in honor of Richard Taylor</i> (pp. 255–81). Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
May 27		Taylor, R. (1970). Excerpt from <i>Good and evil: A new direction</i> (pp. 256–68). New York: Macmillan. Taylor, R. (1999). The meaning of life. <i>Philosophy Now</i> , 24, 13–4.
May 29		Test 2
June 3		Wolf, S. (1997). Happiness and meaning: Two aspects of the good life. <i>Social Philosophy & Policy</i> , 14, 207–25. Vitrano, C. (2013). Meaningful lives? <i>Ratio: An International Journal of Analytic Philosophy</i> , 26, 81–90.
June 5		Metz, T. (2011). The good, the true, and the beautiful: Toward a unified account of great meaning in life. <i>Religious Studies: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion</i> , 47, 389–409.
June 10		In-person Essay
June 12	<i>Pessimistic perspectives</i>	Schopenhauer, A. ([1851] 1891). On the sufferings of the world. In <i>Studies in pessimism: A series of essays</i> , trans. T.B. Saunders (pp. 9–30). London: Sonnenschein https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On_the_Sufferings_of_the_World Benatar, D. (2017). Excerpt from <i>The human predicament: A candid guide to life's biggest questions</i> (pp. 71–82). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
June 17		Kahane, G. (2014). Our cosmic insignificance. <i>Noûs</i> , 48, 745–72.

Department of Philosophy and Carleton University Policies (Summer 2025)

Assignments:

Please follow your professor's instructions on how assignments will be handled electronically.

Evaluation:

Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean.

Deferrals for Term Work:

If students are unable to complete term work because of illness or other circumstances beyond their control, they should contact their course instructor no later than *three working days* of the due date. Normally, any deferred term work will be completed by the last day of the term. Term work cannot be deferred by the Registrar.

Deferrals for Final Exams:

Students are expected to be available for the duration of a course including the examination period. Occasionally, students encounter circumstances beyond their control where they may not be able to write a final examination or submit a take-home examination. Examples of this would be a serious illness or the death of a family member. If you miss a final examination and/or fail to submit a take-home examination by the due date, you may apply for a deferral no later than *three working days* after the original due date (as per the University Regulations in [Section 4.3 of the Undergraduate Calendar](#)). Visit the [Registrar's Office](#) for further information.

Plagiarism:

It is the responsibility of each student to understand the meaning of 'plagiarism' as defined in the Undergraduate or Graduate Calendars, and to avoid both committing plagiarism and aiding or abetting plagiarism by other students. ([Section 10.1 of the Undergraduate Calendar Academic Regulations](#))

Academic Accommodation:

You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term:

- *Pregnancy or religious obligation:* Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details, visit the [Equity Services website](#).
- *Academic accommodations for students with disabilities:* If you have a documented disability requiring academic accommodations in this course, please contact the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (PMC) at 613-520-6608 or pmc@carleton.ca for a formal evaluation or contact your PMC coordinator to send your instructor your Letter of Accommodation at the beginning of the term. You must also contact the PMC no later than two weeks before the first in-class scheduled test or exam requiring accommodation (if applicable). After requesting accommodation from PMC, meet with your instructor as soon as possible to ensure accommodation arrangements are made. For more details, visit the [Paul Menton Centre website](#).
- *Survivors of Sexual Violence:* As a community, Carleton University is committed to maintaining a positive learning, working and living environment where sexual violence will not be tolerated, and where survivors are supported through academic accommodations as per Carleton's Sexual Violence Policy. For more information about the services available at the university and to obtain information about sexual violence and/or support, visit: <https://carleton.ca/sexual-violence-policy/>
- *Accommodation for Student Activities:* Carleton University recognizes the substantial benefits, both to the individual student and for the university, that result from a student participating in activities beyond the classroom experience. Reasonable accommodation must be provided to students who compete or perform at the national or international level. Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist.

Important Dates:

May 5	Classes start.	July 1	Statutory holiday, University closed.
May 9	Last day for registration and course changes for <u>early</u> summer courses.	July 2	Late summer courses begin and full summer courses resume.
May 16	Last day for registration and course changes for <u>full</u> summer courses.	July 8	Last day for registration and course changes for <u>late</u> summer courses.
May 16	Last day for a full fee adjustment when withdrawing from <u>early</u> summer courses. Withdrawals after this date will result in a permanent notation of WDN on the official transcript.	July 15	Last day to withdraw from <u>late</u> summer courses with a full fee adjustment. Withdrawals after this date will result in a permanent notation of WDN on the official transcript.
May 19	Statutory holiday. University closed.	Aug. 1	Last day for academic withdrawal from full and late summer courses.
May 31	Last day to withdraw from full summer courses with a full fee adjustment. Withdrawals after this date will result in a permanent notation of WDN on the official transcript.	Aug. 4	Civic holiday, University closed.
June 10	Last day for summative tests or examinations, or formative tests or examinations totaling more than 15% of the final grade for <u>early</u> summer courses before the official examination period.	Aug. 7	Last day for summative tests or examinations, or formative tests or examinations totaling more than 15% of the final grade for <u>late</u> summer and <u>full</u> summer courses before the official examination period.
June 17	Last day for <u>early</u> summer classes. Last day for handing in term work, subject to any earlier course deadline.	Aug. 14	Last day of <u>late</u> and <u>full</u> summer term classes. Classes follow a Monday schedule. Last day for handing in term work, subject to any earlier course deadline.
June 18-19	No classes or examinations take place.	Aug. 15-16	No classes or examinations take place.
June 20-26	Final examinations.	Aug. 17-23	Final examinations.
June 26	Take-home examinations for <u>early</u> summer courses are due.	Aug. 23	Take-home examinations for <u>late</u> or <u>full</u> summer courses are due.

Addresses:

Department of Philosophy:
www.carleton.ca/philosophy
 520-2110

Registrar's Office:
www.carleton.ca/registrar
 520-3500

Academic Advising Centre:
www.carleton.ca/academicadvising
 520-7850

Writing Services:
<http://www.carleton.ca/csas/writing-services/>
 520-3822

MacOdrum Library
<http://www.library.carleton.ca/>
 520-2735