



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.

Winter Term 2026
Wednesdays & Fridays
4:05–5:25 p.m.

David Matheson
Department of Philosophy
david.matheson@carleton.ca

Office hours:
Tuesdays & Thursdays
2:45–3:45 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

Because this course is lecture-focused, 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, however, I don’t take attendance in the course. Just don’t let this mislead you into thinking that you can regularly skip the lectures and still do well in the course.

Readings

You do not need to purchase textbooks or other learning materials for this course; all of the assigned readings will be made available to you digitally.

I list these readings in the course schedule below. 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.

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

Test 1 = 30%

Test 2 = 40%

In-person Essay = 30%

Tests

Throughout the term you will be expected to take two scheduled tests, both on 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 January 28 at 4:05 p.m., the second test will be on March 4 at the same time. 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.

Despite being online, these tests will be closed-book. By taking them, accordingly, you will be giving your word that you will not consult any notes, slides, books, friends, websites, or other external sources of information for their duration. Please also note, especially, that you are not permitted to make any use whatsoever generative artificial intelligence, such as ChatGPT, when writing these tests (e.g., when answering the brief-essay questions). If I acquire evidence that you have made use of generative AI on these tests, I will treat it as a suspected violation of academic integrity, per Section 1.3 of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences guidelines on Academic Integrity and Academic Offences, which may be found at: <https://carleton.ca/FASS-FPA-teaching-regulations/academic-integrity-and-academic-offences/#sect1.3>.

In-person Essay

You will also be expected to write a final essay for the course. The essay will be in the style of your answers to brief-essay questions on the tests, but about three times as long. You will write your final essay in class, at 4:05 p.m. on March 20. Note that you must write this essay in person at that time (you cannot write it online, and you cannot write it at a different time). I will give you a couple of topics on which to write at the beginning of that class; you will then choose one of those topics and write your 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 italicized phrases in the centre column indicate the broad topic sections of the course. In the right column are the assigned readings (if any) corresponding to the lectures I plan to give on the relevant dates.

Because I will be away at an academic conference at the time, there will be no in-person classes on March 25 and 27. In lieu of my in-person lectures those two days, I will post video lectures (or other online material) for you to consider in relation to those days' lecture topics.

Jan 7	<i>Introduction</i>	
Jan 9	<i>Religious perspectives</i>	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)
Jan 14		Fackenheim, E. ([1965] 2013). Judaism and the meaning of life (sects. I & II, pp. 1–2). <i>Jewish Ideas Weekly</i> , March 1–9.
Jan 16		Nozick, R. (1981). Excerpt from <i>Philosophical explanations</i> (pp. 594–610). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Jan 21		Hudson, H. (1971). Buddhist teaching about illusion. <i>Religious Studies: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion</i> , 7, 141–51.
Jan 23		Hudson continued
Jan 28	<u>Test 1</u>	
Jan 30	<i>Secular perspectives</i>	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.
Feb 4		Baier continued
Feb 6		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
Feb 11		Nietzsche continued
Feb 13		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.
Feb 18	Winter Break	
Feb 20	Winter Break	
Feb 25		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.

Feb 27		<p>Taylor, R. (1970). Excerpt from <i>Good and evil: A new direction</i> (pp. 256–68). New York: Macmillan.</p> <p>Taylor, R. (1999). The meaning of life. <i>Philosophy Now</i>, 24, 13–4.</p>
Mar 4	<u>Test 2</u>	
Mar 6		<p>Wolf, S. (1997). Happiness and meaning: Two aspects of the good life. <i>Social Philosophy & Policy</i>, 14, 207–25.</p> <p>Vitrano, C. (2013). Meaningful lives? <i>Ratio: An International Journal of Analytic Philosophy</i>, 26, 81–90.</p>
Mar 11		<p>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.</p>
Mar 13		Metz continued
Mar 18	<i>Pessimistic perspectives</i>	<p>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</p> <p>https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On_the_Sufferings_of_the_World</p>
Mar 20	<u>In-person essay</u>	
Mar 25	(No in-person class.)	<p>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.</p>
Mar 27	(No in-person class.)	Benatar continued
Apr 1		Kahane, G. (2014). Our cosmic insignificance. <i>Noûs</i> , 48, 745–72
Apr 3	Statutory holiday	
Apr 8		Kahane continued

Please see the following three pages for relevant departmental and university-wide policies.

Department of Philosophy and Carleton University Policies (Fall/Winter 2025-26)

Assignments:

Please follow your professor's instructions on how assignments will be handled electronically. We no longer allow hard copies to be placed in the department's essay box.

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:

The University Academic Integrity Policy defines plagiarism as '*presenting, whether intentionally or not, the ideas, expression of ideas or work of others as one's own.*' This includes reproducing or paraphrasing portions of someone else's published or unpublished material, regardless of the source, and presenting these as one's own without proper citation or reference to the original source.

Examples of sources from which the ideas, expressions of ideas or works of others may be drawn from include but are not limited to books, articles, papers, literary compositions and phrases, performance compositions, chemical compounds, artworks, laboratory reports, research results, calculations and the results of calculations, diagrams, constructions, computer reports, computer code/software, material on the internet and/or conversations

Examples of plagiarism include, but are not limited to:

- any submission prepared in whole or in part, by someone else, including the unauthorized use of generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT);
- using ideas or direct, verbatim quotations, paraphrased material, algorithms, formulae, scientific or mathematical concepts, or ideas without appropriate acknowledgment in any academic assignment;
- using another's data or research findings without appropriate acknowledgment;
- submitting a computer program developed in whole or in part by someone else, with or without modifications, as one's own;
- failing to acknowledge sources with proper citations when using another's work and/or failing to use quotations marks.

Plagiarism is a serious offence that cannot be resolved directly by the course's instructor.

The Associate Dean of the Faculty follows a rigorous [process for academic integrity allegations](#), including reviewing documents and interviewing the student, when an instructor suspects a violation has been committed. Penalties for violations may include a final grade of "F" for the course.

It is the responsibility of each student to understand the full 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](#))

Statement on AI:

As our understanding of the uses of AI and its relationship to student work and academic integrity continue to evolve, students are required to discuss their use of AI in any circumstance not described in the course outline with the instructor to ensure it supports the learning goals for the course.

Mental Health:

As a student you may experience a range of mental health challenges that significantly impact your academic success and overall well-being. If you need help, please speak to someone. There are numerous resources available both on- and off-campus to support you. For more information, please consult <https://wellness.carleton.ca/>.

Academic Accommodation:

Carleton is committed to providing academic accessibility for all individuals. You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term. The accommodation request processes, including information about the Academic Consideration Policy for Students in Medical and Other Extenuating Circumstances, are outlined on the Academic Accommodations website (students.carleton.ca/course-outline). Examples of special arrangements include:

- *Pregnancy or religious obligation:* write to your professor 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 [EIC](#) website.
- *Academic accommodations for students with disabilities:* The [Paul Menton Centre](#) for Students with Disabilities (PMC) provides services to students with Learning Disabilities (LD), psychiatric/mental health disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), chronic medical conditions, and impairments in mobility, hearing, and vision. If you have a disability requiring academic accommodations in this course, please contact PMC at 613-520-6608 or pmc@carleton.ca for a formal evaluation. If you are already registered with the PMC, contact your PMC coordinator to send your Letter of Accommodation at the beginning of the term, and no later than two weeks before the first in-class test or exam requiring accommodation. After requesting accommodation from PMC, meet with your professor to ensure accommodation arrangements are made.
- *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](#).
- *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:

Sept. 3	Classes start.
Sept. 16	Last day for registration and course changes for fall term and fall/winter (two-term) courses.
Sept. 30	Last day for entire fee adjustment when withdrawing from fall term or two-term courses. Withdrawals after this date will result in a permanent notation of WDN on the official transcript.
Oct. 13	Statutory holiday. University closed.
Oct. 20-24	Fall Break – no classes.
Nov. 21	Last day for summative tests or examinations, or formative tests or examinations totaling more than 15% of the final grade, before the official examination period.
Dec. 5	Last day of fall term classes. <i>Classes follow a Monday schedule.</i> Last day for academic withdrawal from fall term courses. Last day for handing in term work and the last day that can be specified by a course instructor as a due date for term work for a fall term course.
Dec. 6-7	No classes or examinations take place.
Dec. 8-20	Final examinations for fall term courses and mid-term examinations in two-term courses. Examinations are normally held all seven days of the week.
Dec. 20	All take-home examinations are due.
Jan. 5	Classes begin.
Jan. 16	Last day for registration and course changes in the winter term.
Jan. 31	Last day for a full fee adjustment when withdrawing from winter term courses or from the winter portion of two-term courses. Withdrawals after this date will result in a permanent notation of WDN on the official transcript.
Feb. 16	Statutory holiday. University closed.
Feb. 16-20	Winter Break – no classes.
Mar. 15	Last day for academic withdrawal from fall/winter and winter courses.
Mar. 25	Last day for summative tests or examinations, or formative tests or examinations totaling more than 15% of the final grade, in winter term or fall/winter courses before the official examination period.
Apr. 3	Statutory holiday. University closed.
Apr. 8	Last day of two-term and winter term classes. <i>Classes follow a Friday schedule.</i> Last day for handing in term work and the last day that can be specified by a course instructor as a due date for two-term and for winter term courses.
Apr. 9-10	No classes or examinations take place.
Apr. 11-23	Final examinations for winter term and two-term courses. Examinations are normally held all seven days of the week.
Apr. 23	All take-home examinations 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:
<https://carleton.ca/csas/support/>
 520-3822

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