



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, 2021
Tuesdays & Thursdays
6:05—8:55 p.m.

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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.

Video lectures & email consultations

In lieu of classroom lectures, before each scheduled class time on Tuesdays and Thursdays I will post video lectures to Brightspace. I will then make myself available during the class times for email consultations about these video lectures.

You may of course email me at other times with course-related questions. But if you want to email me questions about the video lectures in particular, please do so during the scheduled class times. I will answer these questions as promptly as I can during those times, on a first-come, first-serve basis. To keep things manageable, questions emailed during the scheduled class times should be about the lectures of the past two weeks.

Finally, please keep in mind that my video lectures are not for broader consumption. Don’t share them with anyone outside of the course. You are not permitted to post them online. Nor are you permitted to submit them to crowdsourced platforms like www.coursehero.com.

Readings

You don't need to buy a textbook for this course; all of the assigned readings will be made available to you.

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 have posted it on Brightspace—just go to the “Readings” section of the course's Brightspace page to access it.

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 watched the video lectures associated with them.

Evaluation

You will be required to take two major tests in this course, both delivered on Brightspace. The first test will focus on what we've covered in the course to date, and it will be worth 40% of your overall course grade. The second test will be cumulative and worth the remaining 60% of your overall grade. Both tests will consist of multiple-choice (and perhaps a few short-answer) questions aimed at gauging your understanding of perspectives discussed in the course, as well as your ability to assess the relative merits of those perspectives. Because the tests are based on what I discuss in the video lectures, your best study guides for the tests will be the notes you take about those videos. (To help you with your notetaking, I will post the lecture slides that appear in my video lectures. I recommend that you use these slides as the basis of your own notes—editing and supplementing them as you see fit while you watch the associated video lectures.)

The first test will be at 6:05—7:05 p.m. on May 20. The second will be at 6:05—7:25 p.m. on June 10. Per the Registrar's Office regulations, you are required to be available at these times despite the asynchronous nature of the course, and note that *I am unable to reschedule test times due to conflicts with personal schedules.*

There is no final examination for this course.

Schedule

The left column of the following table lists the scheduled meeting times. The centre column indicates the general theme of the topics to be discussed in a section of the course, which will typically run across multiple meeting times. The right column gives the readings for the particular topics to be discussed in the posted video lectures.

May 6	<i>Introduction</i>	No readings
May 11	<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)

		Fackenheim, E. ([1965] 2013). Judaism and the meaning of life (sects. I & II, pp. 1—2). <i>Jewish Ideas Weekly</i> , March 1—9.
May 13		Nozick, R. (1981). Excerpt from <i>Philosophical explanations</i> (pp. 594—610). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Hudson, H. (1971). Buddhist teaching about illusion. <i>Religious Studies: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion</i> , 7, 141—51.
May 18	<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. 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
May 20		Test 1: 6:05—7:05 p.m.
May 25		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. 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.
June 1		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 3		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 8	<i>Pessimistic perspectives</i>	Nagel, T. (1971). The absurd. <i>The Journal of Philosophy</i> , 68, 716—27.
June 10		Test 2: 6:05—7:25 p.m.
June 15		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
June 17		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.

Department of Philosophy and Carleton University Policies (Summer 2021)

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: carleton.ca/sexual-violence-support
- *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:

<p>+</p> <p>May 6 Classes start.</p> <p>May 13 Last day for registration and course changes for <u>early</u> summer courses.</p> <p>May 20 Last day for registration and course changes for <u>full</u> summer courses.</p> <p>May 21 Last day for a full fee adjustment when withdrawing from <u>early</u> and <u>full</u> summer courses. Withdrawals after this date will result in a permanent notation of WDN on the official transcript.</p> <p>May 24 Statutory holiday, University closed.</p> <p>June 11 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.</p> <p>June 18 Last day for <u>early</u> summer classes. Classes follow a Monday schedule. Last day for handing in term work, subject to any earlier course deadline. Last day for academic withdrawal from <u>early</u> summer courses.</p> <p>June 19-20 No classes or examinations take place.</p> <p>June 21-27 Final examinations.</p> <p>June 27 Take-home examinations for <u>early</u> summer courses are due.</p>	<p>July 1 Statutory holiday, University closed.</p> <p>July 2 Late summer courses begin and full summer courses resume.</p> <p>July 9 Last day for registration and course changes for <u>late</u> summer courses.</p> <p>July 23 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.</p> <p>Aug. 2 Civic holiday, University closed.</p> <p>Aug. 9 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.</p> <p>Aug. 16 Last day of <u>late</u> and <u>full</u> summer term classes. Last day for handing in term work, subject to any earlier course deadline. Last day for academic withdrawal from <u>late</u> summer and <u>full</u> summer courses.</p> <p>Aug. 17-18 No classes or examinations take place.</p> <p>Aug. 19-25 Final examinations.</p> <p>Aug. 25 Take-home examinations for <u>late</u> or <u>full</u> summer courses are due.</p>
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Addresses:

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 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