

PHILOSOPHY 1200A
MEANING OF LIFE
CARLETON UNIVERSITY
PROFESSOR KENNETH FERGUSON

COURSE SYLLABUS

TERM:	Fall Term 2019	OFFICE:	Paterson Hall, 3A56
TIME:	Monday/Wednesday 2:35-4	OFFICE HOURS:	Tues/Thurs, 3:00 – 4:00
LOCATION	TBA	EMAIL:	kenneth.ferguson@carleton.ca
INSTRUCTOR:	Ken Ferguson		

CATALOGUE DESCRIPTION

PHIL 1200 [0.5 credit]

THE MEANING OF LIFE: 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.

Lectures three hours a week.

DETAILED COURSE DESCRIPTION

The aim of this course is to explore a number of questions about the meaning of life and related issues: Does life have any meaning or purpose? Does it matter whether life has meaning? Is the meaning of life dependent on the existence of God and an afterlife? Would immortality be a good thing or a bad thing? Is death, as some have argued, essential to the very possibility of a meaningful life? Is there such a thing as the good life, or the best way to live one's life, and, if so, what is it? Does the question "Does life have meaning?" itself have any clear meaning? What is it that makes life valuable or worthwhile?

In addressing these and other questions, we will examine many different approaches that have been defended by philosophers, writers and other reflective people, both in the past and the present, including theism, nihilism, absurdism, existentialism, hedonism, stoicism, Buddhism, moralism, and many others, as well as attempts to deconstruct the entire issue of the meaning of life as confused and misguided. We will discuss the pros and cons of these different approaches and subject them to careful critical scrutiny. Students will also be encouraged to develop their own approaches to the issues.

REQUIRED TEXT

The Meaning of Life: A Reader, 4th edition, edited by E.D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn (Oxford: Oxford University Press). This text is available in the University Bookstore.

In addition to this text, many required readings will be taken from online sources. A complete list of required readings is provided below.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Although attendance will not be taken, as it is not feasible in a class of this size, regular attendance is important if students wish to do well. It is understood that students are responsible for any material missed due to absence.

CLASS FORMAT

The emphasis in the course will be on reasoning, analysis and critical evaluation. Readings will be assigned for each class, and students should read them.

The role of the Instructor will be to guide students through the readings, to ensure that discussions remain focused on relevant and important issues, and to illustrate the processes of interpretation, analysis and criticism by repeated example in class.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Midterms: There will be **two midterm exams** each worth 30% of the overall grade. They will have the following format: one week before the date of the midterm a list of study questions on topics central to the material covered will be posted on CuLearn; the instructor will then select a number of these questions for students to answer on the midterm.

The first midterm will be held in our scheduled class on Wednesday, Oct. 9. The second midterm will be held in our scheduled class on Wednesday, Nov. 6.

Final Examination: There will be a final exam scheduled during the examination period, worth 40% of the overall grade for the course grade. The format for the final will be similar to that for midterms.

ACCESS TO CULEARN

Students must ensure that they have access to CuLearn for this course, as lecture slides and other information and material will be posted on it.

OUTLINE OF TOPICS AND READING

A. Introduction

I. Overview of Issues to be Discussed

Reading 1: E.D. Klemke and S.M. Cahn, *The Meaning of Life*, Introduction, pp. 1-4

B. Nihilism and the Religious Response

II. Nihilism: Life Has No Meaning or Purpose

Reading 2: Arthur Schopenhauer, "On The Sufferings of the World", (Klemke) p. 43

Reading 3 (Optional online): Jean Kazez, Review of David Benatar's, "Better Never To Have Lived", available on CuLearn

Reading 3: Peter Singer, Response to Benatar, NY Times, June 6, 2010, online at: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/06/should-this-be-the-last-generation/>

Reading 4: Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus", (Klemke) p. 66

Reading 5: Richard Taylor, "The Meaning of Life", (Klemke) pp. 128-133

Reading 6 (Optional): Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd", (Klemke) p. 137

III. The Transcendent (Religious) View of the Meaning of Life

Defense of Religious Approach:

Reading 7: Leo Tolstoy, "My Confession", (Klemke) p. 7

Reading 8 (CuLearn): Louis Pojman, "Religion Gives Meaning to Life"

Reading 9 (Online): William Lane Craig, "The Absurdity of Life Without God", at: <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/the-absurdity-of-life-without-god>

Reading 10 (Online): Daniel Hill, "The Meaning of Life", from the publication *Philosophy Now*, Issue 35, Sept/Oct, 2014, at: https://philosophynow.org/issues/35/The_Meaning_of_Life

Critique of Religious Approach:

Reading 11 (CuLearn): Theodore Schick, "Morality Requires God – Or Does It?" posted on CuLearn

Reading 12: Robert Nozick, "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life", (Klemke) p. 197

Reading 13 (Optional CuLearn): "What is Humanism?", from the website of the British Humanist Association

Reading 14: Kurt Baier, "The Meaning of Life", Section 2: "The Purpose of Man's Existence", (Klempe) p. 93-104

C. Existentialism and the Significance of Death

IV. Existentialism: We Must Create Our Own Meaning

Reading 15 (Online): Jean-Paul Sartre, “The Humanism of Existentialism”, at:

<http://teacherweb.com/MI/PCCS/Humanities/sartre.pdf>

Reading 16 (Optional online): Stephen Crowell, “Existentialism”, 2010, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>

Reading 17 (Online): Tom Butler-Bowdon, Review of Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, taken from Butler-Bowdon’s *50 Self-Help Classics*, at:

<http://www.butler-bowdon.com/manssearch>

Reading 18 (Optional Online): Viktor Frankl, “The Will to Meaning”, 1962, (Selections from *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Chapter 2) at: <http://www.panarchy.org/frankl/meaning.html>

V. Death: Is it a Bad Thing or a Good Thing?

Reading 19 (Optional online): “Curing Aging and The Consequences”, interview with Dr. Aubrey de Grey, Cambridge University, conducted by the European Molecular Biology Organization, at:

<http://www.nature.com/embor/journal/v6/n3/full/7400354.html>

Reading 20: Thomas Nagel, “Death”, from Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, (Cambridge: C.U. Press, 1991) pp.1-10, at: <http://dbanach.com/death.htm>

Reading 21 (Online): Shelley Kagan, “Is Death Bad For You?” from the Chronicle of Higher Education, at: <http://chronicle.com/article/Is-Death-Bad-for-You-/131818/>

Reading 22: Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality”, in Klemke, p. 223

Reading 23 (Optional online): Max More, “The Myth of Stagnation”, home page of British futurist Max More, at: <http://www.maxmore.com/mythofstagnation.htm>

Reading 24 (Optional online): Stephen Luper, “Death”, 2014, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/death/>

D. A.J. Ayer’s Deconstructionist Approach to the Issue

VI. A. J. Ayer on the Meaning of Life

Reading 25: Summary of A.J. Ayer’s *The Claims of Philosophy*, from the website Reason and Meaning: Phil Reflections on life, death and the meaning of life, online at:

<https://reasonandmeaning.com/2015/11/06/a-j-ayer-on-the-meaning-of-life/>

Reading 26: Summary of Kai Nielsen’s “Linguistic Philosophy and the Meaning of Life”, from the website Reason and Meaning: Phil Reflections on life, death and the meaning of life, online at:

<https://reasonandmeaning.com/2015/11/07/kai-nielsen-on-the-meaning-of-life/>

E. Ancient Wisdoms

VII. Hedonism: Pleasure Is What Gives Life Value
<p>Reading 27 (Optional online): Tim O’Keefe, “Epicurus (341-271 B.C.E.)”, “Introduction”, Section 1, and Section 5, <i>Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i>, at: http://www.iep.utm.edu/epicur/</p> <p>Reading 28 (Online): Epicurus, <i>Letter to Menoeceus</i>, taken from <i>Epicurus, The Extant Remains</i>, translated by Cyril Bailey (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1926), at: http://alien.dowling.edu/~cperring/epicurustomenoeceus.html</p> <p>Reading 29 (Optional Online): Sigmund Freud, Selections from <i>Civilization and Its Discontents</i>, at: http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/freud-civ.html</p> <p>Reading 30 (Online): Robert Nozick, “The Experience Machine”, at: http://www.cas.umt.edu/phil/documents/exper_machine_nozick.pdf</p> <p>Reading 31 (Online): Dan Weijers, “Hedonism”, Section 5: Contemporary Objections, 2011, <i>Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i>, at: http://www.iep.utm.edu/hedonism/</p> <p>Reading 32: Richard Taylor, “The Meaning of Life”, (Klemke) pp. 140-142</p>
VIII. Stoicism and Buddhism: Renouncing Desire as the Key to Happiness
<p>Reading 33 (Online): Selections from David Sedley’s Entry on Stoicism in the <i>Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i> (especially the sections entitled “The Goal”, “The Cosmic City”, “Passions”, and “Fate”), at: http://www.phil.cmu.edu/Cavalier/80130/part1/sect2/texts/R_Stoicism.html</p> <p>Reading 34 (Optional Online): Epictetus, selections from <i>The Enchiridion, or Handbook</i>, from the Website “Humanistic Texts”, at: http://www.humanistictexts.org/epictetus.htm</p> <p>Reading 35: Christopher Gowans, The Buddha’s Message, in Klemke ... p. 27</p> <p>Reading 36 (Optional): Henry Rosemont, The Confucian Way, Klemke, p. 35</p>
IX. Aristotle: The Good Life as Self-Development
<p>Reading 36 (Online): “Aristotle on Happiness”, at: http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/aristotle/aristotle-on-happiness/</p> <p>Reading 37 (Online): Aristotle, selections from <i>The Nichomachean Ethics</i>, at: http://www.mnstate.edu/gracyk/courses/web%20publishing/AristotleHappiness.htm</p> <p>Reading 38 (Optional online): Richard Kraut, “Aristotle’s Ethics”, 2010, <i>Stanford Encyclopedia of Phil</i>, at: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/#ThrLivCom</p>

F. Society, Alienation and Meaningful Lives

X. Marx on Work and Alienation

Reading 39 (Online): Jorn Bramann, "Marx: Capitalism and Alienation", available at: <http://faculty.frostburg.edu/phil/forum/Marx.htm>

XI. Henry David Thoreau: Transcendental Naturalism

Reading 40 (Online): Henry David Thoreau, *Walden Pond*, Chapter 2, "Where I Lived, and What I lived For", (Start reading from paragraph 8.) at: <http://thoreau.eserver.org/walden02.html>

Reading 41 (Optional Online): Rick Anthony Furtak, "Henry David Thoreau", 2009, in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thoreau/#2>

G. Doing Good and Projects of Worth

XII. Doing Good: Morality and the Meaning of Life

Reading 46 (Online): Aaron Smuts, "It's a Wonderful Life: Pottersville and the Meaning of Life", at: [http://community.lhup.edu/dshaw/II%20ProblemsWithThePottersvilleTest version4 20111016 DSrev toDS.pdf](http://community.lhup.edu/dshaw/II%20ProblemsWithThePottersvilleTest%20version4%2020111016%20DSrev%20toDS.pdf)

Reading 47 (Online): Peter Singer, selections from *How Are We to Live?*, at: <http://www.veganoutreach.org/articles/howarewetolive.html>

XIII. Meaningful Lives as the Pursuit of Projects of Value

Reading 48: Susan Wolf, "Meaning in Life", (Klemke) p. 232

Reading 49 (Online): Jussi Suikannen, "Susan Wolf and Meaningfulness", from the website PEA Soup (a blog dedicated to philosophy, ethics and academia) June 21, 2011, at: <http://peasoup.typepad.com/peasoup/2011/06/susan-wolf-and-meaningfulness.html>

H. Society and Culture as the Locus of Meaning

XIV. The Meaningfulness of Human Life

Reading 50 (Online): Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (selections), at: <http://delphinus56.wordpress.com/2014/04/12/terry-eagleton-a-very-short-introduction-the-meaning-of-life-conclusion/>

Reading 51 (Optional Online, longer version of Reading 47): Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: OUP, 2007) Chapter 4, "Is Life What You Make Of It?", pp. 135-175, at: <http://environment.yale.edu/visions/wp-content/uploads/2007/09/meaning-of-life-eagleton.pdf?newconsciousness/wp-content/uploads/2007/09/meaning-of-life-eagleton.pdf/wp-content/uploads/2007/09/meaning-of-life-eagleton.pdf>

Reading 52 (Optional online): Joshua Seachris, "The Meaning of Life As Narrative: A New Proposal For Interpreting Philosophy's "Primary" Question", in *Philo* 12:1. (Spring/Summer 2009): 5-23, available online at: http://www.academia.edu/450436/The_Meaning_of_Life_as_Narrative_A_New_Proposal_for_Interpreting_Philosophys_Primary_Question

XV. The Significance of the Afterlife in Scheffler's Sense

Reading 53: Samuel Scheffler, "The Afterlife", Klemke, p. 251

Reading 54: Harry Frankfurt, "How the Afterlife Matters", Klemke, p. 255

Reading 55: Susan Wolf, "The Significance of Doomsday", Klemke, p.257

Department of Philosophy and Carleton University Policies (Fall/Winter 2019-20)

Assignments:

Unless specifically told otherwise by their instructors, students:

- Must not use a plastic or cardboard cover or paper clips.
- Must staple the paper (there is a stapler on the essay box).
- Must include the following on the first page: student name and number; course name and number; instructor's name.
- No assignments will be accepted after the last day for handing in term work – see dates below.
- Assignments handed in through the essay box (just inside the glass doors, Paterson Hall, Floor 3A) must be dropped into the box by **4:15** on a regular business day in order to be date-stamped with that day's date. Assignments handed in after 4:15 or on a non-business day will be stamped as having been handed in on the next business day.
- Students are required to keep copies of their assignments. If your paper is lost at any point, you will be considered not to have submitted it if you cannot produce a copy immediately on request.

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 Final Exams:

If you miss a final examination (formally scheduled or take-home) because of circumstances beyond your control, you may apply for a deferral. You must apply within 3 working days after the scheduled date of your formally scheduled exam or within 3 working days after the due date of a take-home exam. Visit the Registrar's Office for more information:

<http://calendar.carleton.ca/undergrad/regulations/academicregulationsoftheuniversity/acadregsuniv2/#2.5>

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.

<https://carleton.ca/registrar/academic-integrity/>

Academic Accommodation:

You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term. For an accommodation request the processes are as follows:

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. carleton.ca/pmc

Pregnancy 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 Equity Services website: <http://www2.carleton.ca/equity/>

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 Equity Services website: <http://www2.carleton.ca/equity/>

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 is 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. <https://carleton.ca/senate/wp-content/uploads/Accommodation-for-Student-Activities-1.pdf>

For more information on academic accommodation, please contact the departmental administrator or visit: students.carleton.ca/course-outline

Important Dates:

Sept. 4	Classes start.
Sept. 17	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. 14	Statutory holiday. University closed.
Oct. 21-25	Fall Break – no classes.
Nov. 22	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. 6	Last day of fall term classes. Classes follow a Monday schedule. 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. 9-21	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. 21	All take-home examinations are due.
Jan. 6	Classes begin.
Jan. 17	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. 17	Statutory holiday. University closed.
Feb. 17-21	Winter Break – no classes.
Mar. 24	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. 7	Last day of two-term and winter term classes. Last day for academic withdrawal from fall/winter and winter 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 two-term and for winter term courses.
Apr. 10	Statutory holiday. University closed.
Apr. 13-25	Final examinations for winter term and two-term courses. Examinations are normally held all seven days of the week.
Apr. 25	All take-home examinations are due on this day.

Addresses:

Department of Philosophy:	3A35 Paterson Hall www.carleton.ca/philosophy 520-2110
Registrar's Office:	300 Tory www.carleton.ca/registrar 520-3500
Academic Advising Centre:	302 Tory www.carleton.ca/academicadvising 520-7850
Writing Services:	4 th Floor, Library http://www.carleton.ca/csas/writing-services/