

# **PHILOSOPHY 1200A: MEANING OF LIFE**

**CARLETON UNIVERSITY: WINTER TERM 2021**

**DR. KENNETH FERGUSON**

## **COURSE SYLLABUS**

**TERM:** Winter Term 2021  
**INSTRUCTOR:** Ken Ferguson

**OFFICE HOURS:** TBD  
**EMAIL:** [kenneth.ferguson@carleton.ca](mailto:kenneth.ferguson@carleton.ca)

### **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.

## Online Course

This is an entirely online, or distance, course. All course lectures will be pre-recorded, and will be available for students to access online; no in-person classes will be held. The PowerPoint slides on which lectures will be based will all be posted on CuLearn, as well as all course assignments, midterms, exams, etc., and students will submit all of their required course assignments through CuLearn.

## LECTURES

This will be what is described as a “blended course”: pre-corded lectures on all of the main topics in the course will be posted on CuLearn as the course goes along. In addition, live Zoom meetings will be held periodically during the course for discussion, exam preparation, office hours and other purposes.

## REQUIRED TEXT

*The Meaning of Life: A Reader*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, edited by E.D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn (Oxford: Oxford University Press). This is a well-known text that students can easily order online (and may also be available in digital form).

In addition to this text, some readings will be posted on CuLearn, while others will be available online. The web addresses for these online readings are provided in the complete list of **Topics and Readings** posted on CuLearn.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

### MIDTERMS

There will be two **midterm exams** each worth 30% of the overall grade. The (somewhat) tentative dates for the midterms are Feb. 12 and March 15 respectively. These midterms will have the following format: two weeks before the date of the midterm, a list of study questions on topics central to the material that has been covered will be posted on CuLearn; the instructor will then select a number of these questions for students to answer on the midterm, but students will not know beforehand which questions will be selected.

### 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 the midterms.

## COMPLETE LIST 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 (on CuLearn):** Jean Kazez, Review of David Benatar's, "Better Never To Have Lived", available on CuLearn

**Reading 4:** 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 5:** Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus", (Klemke) p. 66

**Reading 6:** Richard Taylor, "The Meaning of Life", (Klemke) pp. 128-133

**Reading 7 (optional):** Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd", (Klemke) p. 137

#### III. Religious Approaches to the Meaning of Life

##### Defense of Religious Approach:

**Reading 8:** Leo Tolstoy, "My Confession", (Klemke) p. 7

**Reading 9 (CuLearn):** Louis Pojman, "Religion Gives Meaning to Life", see this reading posted on CuLearn

**Reading 10 (online):** William Lane Craig, "The Absurdity of Life Without God", at: <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/the-absurdity-of-life-without-god>

**Reading 11 (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](https://philosophynow.org/issues/35/The_Meaning_of_Life)

##### Critique of the Religious Approach:

**Reading 12 (online):** Theodore Schick, "Morality Requires God – Or Does It?", Google author and title, or go this address: <https://secularhumanism.org/1997/06/morality-requires-god-or-does-it/>

**Reading 13:** Robert Nozick, "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life", (Klemke) p. 197

**Reading 14 (optional CuLearn):** "About Humanism", from the website of the Humanist Association of Toronto, at: <http://www.humanisttoronto.ca/about-humanism>

**Reading 15:** 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 16 (online):** Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism", at:

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

**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", in Klemke, p.215

**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:** John Martin Fischer, "Why Immortality Is Not So Bad", Klemke, p. 239

**Reading 24 (optional online):** Stephen Luper, "Death", 2014, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at: <http://plato.stnford.edu/entries/death/>

## D. A.J. Ayer's Deconstructionist Approach to the Issue

### VI. 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. Approaches from Antiquity

### VII. Hedonism: Pleasure Is What Gives Life Value

**Reading 27 (optional online):** Tim O’Keefe, “Epicurus (341-271 B.C.E.)”, “Introduction”, Section 1, and Section 5, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at:

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/epicur/>

**Reading 28 (online):** Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, taken from *Epicurus, The Extant Remains*, translated by Cyril Bailey (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1926), at:

<http://alien.dowling.edu/~cperring/epicurustomeneceus.html>

**Reading 29 (optional Online):** Sigmund Freud, Selections from *Civilization and Its Discontents*, at: <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/freud-civ.html>

**Reading 30 (online):** Robert Nozick, “The Experience Machine”, at:

[http://www.cas.unt.edu/phil/documents/exper\\_machine\\_nozick.pdf](http://www.cas.unt.edu/phil/documents/exper_machine_nozick.pdf)

**Reading 31 (online):** Dan Weijers, “Hedonism”, Section 5: Contemporary Objections, 2011, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/hedonism/>

**Reading 32:** Richard Taylor, “The Meaning of Life”, (Klemke) p. 128-136

### VIII. Stoicism and Buddhism: Renouncing Desire as the Key to Happiness

**Reading 33 (online):** Selections from David Sedley’s Entry on Stoicism in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (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](http://www.phil.cmu.edu/Cavalier/80130/part1/sect2/texts/R_Stoicism.html)

**Reading 34 (optional online):** Epictetus, selections from *The Enchiridion*, or *Handbook*, from the Website “Humanistic Texts”, at:

<http://www.humanistictexts.org/epictetus.htm>

**Reading 35:** Christopher Gowans, The Buddha’s Message, in Klemke ... p. 27

**Reading 36 (optional):** Henry Rosemont, The Confucian Way, Klemke, p. 35

### IX. Aristotle: The Good Life as Self-Development

**Reading 37 (online):** “Aristotle on Happiness”, at: <http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/aristotle/aristotle-on-happiness/>

**Reading 38 (online):** Aristotle, selections from *The Nichomachean Ethics*, at:

<http://www.mnstate.edu/gracyk/courses/web%20publishing/AristotleHappiness.htm>

**Reading 39 (optional online):** Richard Kraut, “Aristotle’s Ethics”, 2010, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Phil*, at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/#ThrLivCom>

## F. Society, Alienation and Meaningful Lives

### X. Marx on Work and Alienation

**Reading 40 (online):** Jorn Bramann, "Marx: Capitalism and Alienation", available at: <http://faculty.frostburg.edu/phil/forum/Marx.htm>

### XI. Henry David Thoreau: Transcendental Naturalism

**Reading 41 (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 42 (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 43 (online):** Aaron Smuts, "It's a Wonderful Life: Pottersville and the Meaning of Life", at: [http://community.lhup.edu/dshaw/II%20ProblemsWithThePottersvilleTestversion4\\_20111016\\_DSrev\\_toDS.pdf](http://community.lhup.edu/dshaw/II%20ProblemsWithThePottersvilleTestversion4_20111016_DSrev_toDS.pdf)

**Reading 44 (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 45:** Susan Wolf, "Meaning in Life", (Klemke) p. 205

**Reading 46 (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 47 (online):** Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (selections), at: <http://delphinius56.wordpress.com/2014/04/12/terry-eagleton-a-very-short-introduction-the-meaning-of-life-conclusion/>

**Reading 48 (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 49 (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](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 50:** Samuel Scheffler, "The Afterlife", Klemke, p. 251

**Reading 51:** Harry Frankfurt, "How the Afterlife Matters", Klemke, p. 255

**Reading 52:** Susan Wolf, "The Significance of Doomsday", Klemke, p.257

## Department of Philosophy and Carleton University Policies (Fall/Winter 2020-21)

### **Assignments:**

Please follow your professor's instructions on how assignments will be handled electronically. There will be NO hard copies placed in the essay box this coming year.

### **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:* 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 [EDC](#) 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](mailto: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. 9	Classes start.
Sept. 23	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. 12	Statutory holiday. University closed.
Oct. 26-30	Fall Break – no classes.
Nov. 27	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. 11	Last day of fall term classes. <b><i>Classes follow a Monday schedule.</i></b> 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. 12-23	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. 23	All take-home examinations are due.
Jan. 11	Classes begin.
Jan. 25	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. 15	Statutory holiday. University closed.
Feb. 15-19	Winter Break – no classes.
Mar. 31	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. 2	Statutory holiday. University closed.
Apr. 14	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. <b><i>Classes follow a Friday schedule.</i></b>
Apr. 15	No classes or examinations take place.
Apr. 16-27	Final examinations for winter term and two-term courses. Examinations are normally held all seven days of the week.
Apr. 27	All take-home examinations are due.

**Addresses:**

Department of Philosophy:  
[www.carleton.ca/philosophy](http://www.carleton.ca/philosophy)  
 520-2110

Registrar's Office:  
[www.carleton.ca/registrar](http://www.carleton.ca/registrar)  
 520-3500

Academic Advising Centre:  
[www.carleton.ca/academicadvising](http://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