

PHIL 317.001 THE MEANING OF LIFE**Spring 2014**

MWF 1:00-1:50, Compton 100

Instructor: Stephen J. Sullivan, Ph.D

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This course explores the question of the meaning of life, distinguishing different versions, and critically examines several different answers, both religious and secular, to these questions. The emphasis is on helping students to develop and defend their own answers. Prerequisites: ENG 102 and one philosophy course or permission of instructor. [PHIL 317 is *not* yet approved for Distribution 1.]

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

The specific objectives of the course are as follows:

- (a) an adequate understanding of the meaning of the question “what is the meaning of life?”;
- (b) an adequate understanding of standard answers—religious and nonreligious—to the question;
- (c) the ability to develop and articulate the student’s own answer;
- (d) thoughtful self-reflection and critical thinking about that answer.

Reading responses and exams will test students’ fulfillment of objectives (a) and (b); the opening mini-essay and term paper will test their fulfillment of (c) and (d). Additional assignments provide either or both kinds of assessment.

Note that the instructor is not a guru out to make his students’ lives more meaningful by sharing his supposed wisdom! Any benefit they derive from the course will be through their own hard work. Indeed he will strive to remain neutral in class about the issues we examine; the obvious exception will be the two classes we spend on his own essay “What is the Meaning of God’s Existence?”.

REQUIRED READINGS:

Assigned selections from E.D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn (editors), The Meaning of Life: A Reader, 3rd edition: ML

Required and optional handouts on electronic reserve in folders for Units I, II, III, IV: www.edinboro.edu, Library, Electronic Reserves, Sullivan, PHIL 317, password: ssullivan

Articles on Baron Forness Library electronic reserve in Additional Articles folder :
Mircea Eliade, “The Message of the Buddha”; Antony Flew, “Tolstoi and the Meaning of Life”; T.M.P. Mahadevan, “Outlines of Hinduism”; Robert Nozick, “The Experience Machine”; Arthur Schopenhauer, “On the Vanity of Existence”; Stephen J. Sullivan, “What is the Meaning of God’s Existence?”; Robert Wright,

Introduction to Non-Zero: The Logic of Human Destiny; Robert Zaretsky, “Camus the Jew”

REQUIRED WORK:

Opening mini-essay (mandatory but ungraded, 1-2 pages): due F 1/24 --see Mini-Essay Assignment below for details.

Two homework assignments (1-2 pages each), due W 1/29 and F 4/25 respectively: 5% + 5% --see Homework Assignments below for more details.

Reading responses (one or two paragraphs each, explaining by class time at least one point in the starred assigned reading that you find significant, puzzling, perceptive, or otherwise noteworthy; emailed by class time if you miss the class): 15% overall --see Grading Policies below for more details

Three exams, the last during finals week (W 2/19, F 4/4, W 5/7 12:30): 15% each

Term paper (6-8 pages), due F 4/18: 20% --see Term-Paper Assignment for more details

Interview report, due F 5/2: 10% --see Interview-Report Assignment for details.

Note on attendance: “six strikes and you’re penalized”. (For information about excused absences, penalties, extra credit, etc., see Grading Policies below.)

Note on class participation: it may affect borderline course grades.

TENTATIVE COURSE OUTLINE:

Unit I: Preliminaries

Week 1: W 1/22 – F 1/24

W: Introduction to the course and topic

Rdg.: “Kurt Vonnegut on Critical Thinking About the Meaning of Life”

F: Important distinctions

Rdgs.: ML Preface, Intro, and especially “Introduction to the Question(s) of the Meaning of Life” handout

Mini-essay due

Week 2: M 1/27 – F 1/31

M: How our questions arise

Rdgs.: “Life ‘Meaningless’ For One in 10 Young Adults” and “Article Shows We’re a Drop in the Bucket” handouts

W: Nozick’s experience machine

Rdg.: Nozick article, “Intrinsic Value: What Matters to You For Its Own Sake?” handout

First homework assignment due by classtime

F: Related matters

Rdgs.: “True Servant”, “Parents Are Happier People”, and “Reclaiming My Voice” handouts (optional are “Are You Totally Improbable or Totally Inevitable?”, “Member of Resistance Saved Lives of 2,500 Polish Jews”, “A Communist Life With No Apology”, “Our Best and Worst Moments Occur Within Social Relationships”)

Unit II: Religious Approaches

Week 3: M 2/3 – F 2/7

M: Tolstoy's fideistic theism

Rdgs.: ML Ch. 1* and "Leo Tolstoy on the Meaning of Life" handout (optional are "Description is Prescription" and "The Fame Motive")

W: Questions for Tolstoy

Rdgs.: "Santayana's Implicit Reply to Tolstoy", "Tylenol May Do the Trick" (optional are Flew article plus "Death Anxiety...", "Psychological Common Ground..." handouts)

F: Pojman's fideistic theism ("Tolstoy lite"?)

Rdg.: ML Ch. 3* (optional is "Asking the Right God Question" handout)

Week 4: M 2/10 – W 2/14

M: Questions for Pojman

W: Swenson on human dignity, happiness, and God

Rdgs.: ML Ch. 2* and "David F. Swenson on the Meaning of Life" handout (optional is "The Search for Satisfaction")

F: Questions for Swenson

Week 5: M 2/17 – W 2/21

M: Exam review

W: **First exam**

F: Baier's critique of Christian theism

Rdgs.: ML Ch. 10* (Sec. 1 is optional), "Kurt Baier's Critique of Christian Theism" handout (optional is "The Kate I Knew")

Week 6: M 2/24 – W 2/28

M: Questions for Baier

W: Hindu reincarnation, karma, and theistic nirvana

Rdgs.: Mahadevan article* and "Brief Outline of Hinduism handout (optional is "We Are All Hindus Now")

F: Buddhist reincarnation, karma, and nontheistic nirvana

Rdgs.: Eliade article* and "Basic Buddhist Doctrines" handout (optional are "Buddhist Glossary" and "Buddhists: Theravada, Sinteiana, Mahayana")

Unit III: Nonreligious Approaches

Week 7: M 3/3 – F 3/7

M: Schopenhauer's atheistic pessimism

Rdgs.: Schopenhauer article* and "Arthur Schopenhauer on the Meaning of Life" handout (optional is ML Ch. 6)

W: Edwards' reply to Schopenhauer

Rdgs.: ML Ch. 11 (esp. pp. 114-129)* and "Paul Edwards on the Meaning of Life" handout

F: Schlick's reply to Schopenhauer

Rdgs.: ML Ch. 8* and "Moritz Schlick on the Meaning of Life" handout

(optional is “Europe Ponders the Meaning of Life”)

Week 8: M 3/10 – F 3/14

M: Camus on absurdity and integrity

Rdgs.: ML Ch. 9* and “Albert Camus on the Meaning of Life” handout (optional are the Zaretsky article and “Important Camus Quotations...” handout; recommended for fun is “French Intellectuals to be Deployed to Afghanistan...”)

W: Questions for Camus

F: Nagel on the absurdity of human life

Rdg.: ML Ch. 13* and “Thomas Nagel on the Meaning of Life” handout

SPRING BREAK!

Week 9: M 3/24 – F 3/28

M: Nagel on irony and the cosmic unimportance of our cosmic unimportance

Rdgs.: “Feinberg on Nagel on Irony” and “What Irony Is, and What It Ain’t” handouts (optional are “Shoplifters Robbed...” and “Nagel-Like Approach in Robert Fulgham!?”)

W: Questions for Nagel

F: Taylor on Sisyphus and futility

Rdgs.: ML Ch. 12* and “Richard Taylor on the Meaning of Life” handout

Week 10: M 3/31 – F 4/4

M: Questions for Taylor

W: Exam review

F: **Second exam**

Week 11: M 4/7 – F 4/11

M: Klemke’s atheistic humanism

Rdgs.: ML Ch. 15* and “E.D. Klemke on the Meaning of Life” handout

W: Questions for Klemke

F: Wolf (vs. Cahn) on active engagement in worthwhile projects

Rdgs.: ML Ch. 20* - 21 and “Portraits of Passionate Hobbyists” handout

Week 12: 4/14 – F 4/18

M: Wright’s contemporary defense of evolutionary progress

Rdgs.: Wright article* and “Robert Wright on the Meaning of Life” handout (optional are “Spreading Scandinavian Genes...”, “Natalie Angier Lecture”)

W: Questions for Wright

F: Ayer’s partial dismissal of the meaning of life question

Rdgs.: ML Ch. 16 (esp. Secs. 3 and 4)*, and “Outline of A.J. Ayer’s Position on the Question of the Meaning of Life” handout

Term paper due

Unit IV: Related Issues

Week 13: M 4/21 – F 4/25

M: Questions for Ayer

W: Nozick on God and meaning

Rdg.: ML Ch. 19*

F: Questions for Nozick

Second homework assignment due

Week 14: M 4/28 – F 5/2

M: Sullivan on the meaning of God's existence

Rdg.: Sullivan article*

W: Questions for Sullivan (really!)

F: Exam review

Interview report due—some reports to be presented in summary form for extra credit, poetry recitations too?

Week 15: M 5/5

M: Music to discuss the meaning of life by; poetry recitations?

Second homework assignment due

Final exam: W 5/7 12:30-2:30

GRADING POLICIES:

Attendance: You are expected to attend class as often as possible and to be prepared to discuss the assigned readings. If you miss more than six 50-minute classes without a legitimate, documentable excuse (personal illness, family emergency, official university commitment, court appearance, etc.), your overall grade will be lowered one full letter grade; more than nine classes, two letter grades; and so on. (But everyone gets one free “flat tire” excuse!) To be counted as present in class you must be there for at least 30 minutes; if you leave early you should notify the instructor in advance if possible. Habitual lateness to class is distracting and will be penalized (for example, by denial of extra-credit opportunities) unless there is a good reason for it.

Other lateness penalties:

Reading responses are due by classtime and will receive no more than half credit if turned in late for any reason; late ones will be accepted, however, up until the last day of regular class (W 12/6). The same point about lateness goes for the term paper (due F 4/18), second homework assignment (due F 4/25), and interview report (due F 5/2); but the first homework assignment (due by F 1/24 classtime) cannot be turned in late. If it is not completed on time, see the instructor about an alternative (and harder) assignment to which the lateness penalty does apply.

Exams should be taken on time; the instructor should be informed in advance if you cannot attend. If you have no legitimate, documentable excuse, your exam grade may be lowered significantly.

The lateness penalty for any writing assignment is 1/3 of a letter grade per day, including weekends and holidays. If your ungraded mini-essay is late, then the penalty is one point per day deducted from your first exam.

Note that any assignment can be submitted by email attachment or turned in early.

Grading of responses to starred readings in course outline:

The grade for each response is simply Full Credit (for a serious effort), Half Credit (for insufficient effort, or lateness, or absence of page references for quotations), or No Credit (minimal effort; or insufficient effort plus either lateness or absence of page references). A serious effort will be at least a paragraph long, and the paragraph will be more than a few sentences; half a page overall (typed and double-spaced) is normally about right, though a shorter but still thoughtful response may still receive full credit, and of course longer ones are allowed.

Note that you will not receive full credit if you do not give specific page references for quotations. For example, if you quote the author in your response, just put the page number of the quoted passage in parentheses; no need for footnotes or endnotes. (Nor are page references needed for paraphrases, unlike in the term paper). Note further that you will receive NO credit--and a stern warning-- if you quote without using quotation marks. Proper citation of sources is a serious matter in academia; the separate term-paper handout on plagiarism will discuss this in more detail.

There are seventeen assigned responses; the top sixteen count. Your overall grade will be based on the following scheme: 16/16: A+; 15/16: A; 14/16: A-; 13/16: B+; 12/16: B; 11/16: B-; 10/16: C+; 9/16: C; 8/16: C-; 7/16: D+; 6/16: D; 5/16: D-; 0-4: F.

Extra credit: The lowest of your three exam grades can be raised in each of the following ways:

- (a) Two-page paper on any lecture/sermon/play/novel/short-story/poem that is relevant to the course: +5 or more. (Describe the item in question, indicate its relevance to the course, and give your reaction to or assessment of it. You can instead write about a movie over and above the one you cover in your second homework assignment. This extra-credit paper cannot overlap significantly with your term paper.)
- (b) Participation in the April Fool's Day costume and/or bad-tie contests on W 4/2: points to be explained later, additional ones for explicable relevance to the course
- (c) Three-minute oral summary to the class (during Week 14) of your interview report: +5 or more.
- (d) Original course-related poem of at least eight lines: +3 or more (+5 or more if you read it out loud to the class!).
- (e) Recitation of borrowed, course-related poem in class on M 5/5, with an explanation of its relevance: +4
- (f) Course-related piece of music to play for the class on an ipod or CD during the last class; you must explain its relevance: +3 (+6 if you sing it too!).

Extra-credit writing is due by the last day of class: M 5/5 before midnight.

Final points about written work: No handwritten work (except on exams) will be accepted. Written work emailed by attachment should be sent in Word or as a text file; it's up to you to get to me on time in accessible form. If I can't open an attached file I will let you know as soon as possible.

MINI-ESSAY ASSIGNMENT (1-2 PAGES, TYPED, DOUBLESPPACED):

What specifically do you find makes your life **worth living**? Are there any circumstances under which it would not be worthwhile, and if so, what are they? Is there anything you think is worth dying for, and if so, what is it? --DUE BY F 1/24.

Note that this assignment is mandatory though ungraded; see Grading Policies for the lateness penalty. It is meant to get you thinking about an important course topic and to help prepare you for the mandatory term paper.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS (1-2 PAGES EACH, TYPED, DOUBLESPPACED):

(1) Give Robert Nozick's description of "the experience machine" (Nozick article, pp. 104-105) and answer the following questions:

- (a) Would you plug into the machine if you could be sure that it would function properly for the rest of your life?
- (b) Precisely why or why not?
- (c) What is the point of Nozick's "thought experiment"? Is it a point worth making?

If your answer borrows at all (via quotation or paraphrase) from Nozick, pp. 105-108, be **sure** to give proper citations: e.g., 'Nozick, p. 105'. --DUE BY CLASS-TIME, W 1/29; NO EXTENSIONS! If you fail to complete this assignment, see your instructor about doing an alternative one.

(2) Write a review of any movie that is relevant to this course, explaining its relevance to our course and offering your own assessment. Suggestions: "Wild Strawberries" and/or "The Seventh Seal" (Ingmar Bergman), "Monty Python's The Meaning of Life", "The Meaning of Life" (Albert Brooks), "The Matrix",* "Vanilla Sky", "Source Code", "The Adjustment Bureau", "Memento",* "Inception", "Total Recall", "Insidious", "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind", "D.O.A.",* "Braveheart",* "The Godfather" (I, II, and/or III)*, "Hombre", "The Bucket List", "Lost in Translation", "The Truman Show", "About Schmidt", "Whose Life Is It Anyway?", "The Sea Inside", "Walkabout",* "Chocolat",* "Before Sunrise"/ "Before Sunset"/"Before Midnight" (trilogy—pick one!), "Defiance",* "Manhattan" (and many other Woody Allen films), "Schindler's List",* "The Great Gatsby", "Up in the Air", "Serendipity". DVD or video versions of starred movies may be borrowed from your instructor if you cannot readily obtain them elsewhere. More suggestions welcome! --DUE F 4/25

INTERVIEW-REPORT ASSIGNMENT (4 TYPED, DOUBLE-SPACED PAGES):

This report, which is due F 5/2, should have four parts: (i) your list of interview questions; (ii) a brief description of the interviewees: name (be sure to get permission), age, religion if any, occupation, perhaps sex and race or ethnicity; (iii) their answers to your questions; and (iv) your conclusions or comments about the results.

You are to interview three people, no more than one of them a relative and no more than one from your place of worship (if any); furthermore, none may be taking this course! Try to pick interviewees who are likely to have diverse perspectives on our question (as opposed, say, to a group of fervent atheists or of devout adherents to the same religious denomination). Then write up their answers (by quotation or paraphrase). Do you notice any patterns or differences? Were you surprised by any answers? Indicate any conclusions you have reached about your results.

I strongly recommend asking the interviewees, not the ambiguous question “What is the meaning of life?”, but more specific questions, such as (1) – (5) and (7) in your term-paper assignment below. Especially important are (1) and (4), which correspond to the two main versions of the meaning-of-life question that we distinguished in Week 1 (see “Introduction to the Question(s) of the Meaning of Life” handout: I.A-B). But you may ask any relevant questions you wish, as long as you explicitly include them in your report.

Note that you may earn extra credit by orally summarizing your report *to the class* (say, in 3 to 5 minutes) on F 5/2.

TERM-PAPER ASSIGNMENT (6-8 TYPED, DOUBLE-SPACED PAGES):

This 6 to 8 page paper (standard margins) on **your answer(s) to the question(s) of the meaning of life** is due on F 4/18. There will be a separate handout on plagiarism that will be important to read carefully.

Here are some questions to consider in developing your paper. (The bolded ones are required, the others optional. The more you answer, the better your paper may be judged to be, other things being equal; but you can still get an A without answering the optional questions.)

- (1) (As in the opening mini-essay:) What specifically do you find makes your life worth living? Under what circumstances, if any, would it not be? What, if anything, would you regard as worth dying for?**
- (2) Do you believe that *all* human lives—regardless of physical and mental health, socioeconomic status, degree of freedom, opinion of the individual about the quality of his or her own life—are worth living? Why or why not?
- (3) Do you believe that human beings survive death? How, if at all, does your belief

or non-belief in immortality affect your answers to (1) and (2)?

- (4) Do you believe that your life has a purpose beyond any goals you yourself hold? If so, why, and what is that purpose? If not, why not?**
- (5) Do you believe that human life *in general* (i.e., the human species) has a purpose beyond the purposes pursued by individual human beings? If so, why, and what is that purpose? If not, why not?
- (6) Are there any connections between your answers to these questions about purpose and your earlier answers to the questions about worthwhileness and immortality? If so, what are these connections?
- (7) Are there any personal experiences, people, books, movies, etc. that have influenced how you think about the meaning of life? If so, feel free to identify at least some of them and to indicate the ways they have influenced you.
- (8) State as clearly and fairly as you can one *objection* to your position on the meaning of life; then give your response to the objection.** Suggested (but not required) objections:

--For theists: Baier's Kantian argument that theism treats human beings as mere means (ML, Ch. 10)

--For non-theists: at least one of Pojman's arguments that a nontheistic worldview is much inferior to a theistic one (ML, Ch. 3)

Don't hesitate to let me know if you have any questions or problems. If, for example, you think that at least some of the questions of the meaning of life make no sense, there are ways you can incorporate your view into the paper.

NOTE TO STUDENTS WITH DOCUMENTED DISABILITIES:

I will work with you and the staff of the Office for Students with Disabilities to provide reasonable accommodations so that you have a fair opportunity to succeed in this course.

