

Death and the Meaning of Life

[University]

Class Information

Philosophy [Number] – [Semester]
T/R – [Time]
[Building Name] – [Room Number]

Contact Information & Office Hours

Jennifer Gleason
[Email]
[Office]
[Office Hours]

About This Class

At some point in our lives we are struck by the question: what is it all for? Do our actions ever really matter? Are our lives meaningful? While some philosophers claim that our lives are meaningless and nothing we do in this life, can have a lasting significance, others are far less pessimistic and argue that our existence can be meaningful for a variety of reasons. In this course, we will explore philosophical questions posed by our mortality. Some sample questions that we will address include: Is death bad, and, if so, why is it bad? What is the relationship between meaning and theism? Are our lives ever meaningful, and if so, what gives our lives meaning? You should think of this course as an avenue to explore both what philosophers in the past have had to say about these questions as well as what you yourself believe.

Just as important, or more important, than the content of this course are the skills and habits you will be developing. It is my hope that by the end of the course you will have honed your critical thinking skills, developed reflective thinking habits, and improved your capacity for clear and concise verbal and written communication. These skills are invaluable tools for anyone who wishes to think seriously about anything at all. (And, I might add, thinking seriously is important for anyone who wishes to lead a meaningful life!).

General Education Goals and Expected Learning Outcomes

[Course classification and university goals and expected learning outcomes]

[Description of how course meets these university goals and learning outcomes]

Grade Components

1. In Class Writing Exercises (10% of final grade)

The Writing Exercises will be administered during the lectures, unannounced. They consist of very basic questions about the assigned non-optional readings, or about other assigned materials such as movies or videos, or about material covered in the lectures. If you complete the readings and pay attention in lectures, these exercises should be easy for you. In sessions without assigned material, there can still be writing exercises; in those cases, the exercises will cover the latest assigned material or material discussed in the lectures. There will be at least 12 exercises in total, but only your 10 best scores count towards the final grade. The main purpose of these exercises is to incentivize you to attend, pay attention, and engage with the assigned material so that we do not need to waste valuable class time summarizing this material. It is also a way to keep track of your attendance.

2. **The Writing Project** (35% of final grade)

The writing project will have three parts, each with its own due date; each part needs to be submitted electronically through [site] by the deadline specified (no hard copies will be accepted).

- Part I will be completed on the first day of class. Part I is a questionnaire that you need to complete. Its purpose is threefold: (a) to get you to start reflecting on central questions related to our course topic, (b) to find out what your views on the meaning of life are at the beginning of the course, and (c) to serve as the basis for Part 3 (see below). The questionnaire contains a series of short-answer and essay questions; it does not presuppose anything we cover in the course. This part is ungraded, but is mandatory as it is essential for completing part IV.
- Part II requires you to analyze a philosophical argument. You will receive more detailed instructions beforehand. The purpose of this assignment is to practice philosophical argumentation and to explore a central issue in depth. This part will count for 5% of your final grade.
- Part III again requires you to analyze a philosophical argument. You will receive more detailed instructions beforehand. The purpose of this assignment is to practice philosophical argumentation by making your own argument exploring a central issue in depth. This part will count for 10% of your final grade.
- Part IV builds on Part I. It requires you to take a fresh look at the questionnaire that you completed at the beginning of the semester and reflect on what, if anything, you see differently after having taken the course. Furthermore, you will articulate your own views on several central topics and describe how your views relate to the theories about death and the meaning of life that we encountered in the course. You will receive more detailed instructions beforehand. The purpose of this assignment is to help you reflect, from a personal point of view, on the theories we have studied and to find out whether you have made any progress in thinking about these issues. If the course succeeds in its goals, your views on death and the meaning of life should become more developed and you should be able to articulate them much more precisely; your views may even change radically. This part will count for 20% of your final grade.

3. **Debates** (10% of final grade)

There will be three debates on [dates]; they are meant to be a fun way to practice philosophical argumentation and to get better acquainted with the pros and cons of a certain position. In order to receive full credit for the three debates, you must attend and participate in these debates. Participation either means being a debater or being an observer who submits a short written report on the debate. Details on what this amounts to will be posted closer to the date of the debates.

4. **Midterm Examination** (20% of final grade)

The midterm examination will be in class covering primarily conceptual material and applications. The midterm will be held on [date] during our regularly scheduled class period in our regularly scheduled classroom.

Make-up exams will be permitted **ONLY** in the case of prior arrangements due to unavoidable conflicts (e.g. travel to a professional conference, family emergency, etc.) or sudden and serious illness.

5. **Final Examination** (25% of final grade)

Like the midterm examination, the final examination will be in class covering primarily conceptual material and applications. The final will be on [date] from [time] to [time] in our regularly scheduled classroom. More details will be provided in class. Again, make-up exams will be permitted **ONLY** in the case of prior arrangements due to unavoidable conflicts (e.g. travel to a professional conference, family emergency, etc.) or sudden and serious illness.

Default Schedule

The following is a “default” schedule for the course. Specific topics and dates-of-coverage are subject to change, depending on how class progresses. Examination dates are firm. Readings will be posted online.

Week	Date	Topic	Reading/Videos (read/watch prior to class meeting)
1 Tu		Intro to Death & the Meaning of Life	Be familiar with your syllabus
2 Tu		Crisis of Meaning	<i>Hannah and her Sisters</i> [available here]
2 Th		Crisis of Meaning	Tolstoy – “Confession” (pp 7-11) Setiya – “The Midlife Crisis” (pp 1-6)
3 Tu		Crisis of Meaning	Setiya – “The Midlife Crisis” (pp 7-17)
3 Th		Crisis of Meaning	Kahane – “Our Cosmic Insignificance”
4 Tu		The Badness of Death	Kagan – “The Deprivation Account”
4 Th		The Badness of Death	Kagan – “Epicurus”
5 Tu		Immortality	<i>The Good Place</i> Season 1, Episodes 1-3
5 Th		Immortality	Rosati – “The Makropulos Case Revisited: Reflections on Immortality and Agency”
6 Tu		Meaning and Religion	Wielenberg – “God & the Meaning of Life” (pp 335-338) Tolstoy – “Confessions” (pp 12-16)
6 Th		Meaning and Religion	May – A Significant Life (pp 14-22) Kekes – “The Meaning of Life” (pp 22-26)
7 Tu		Meaning and Religion	<i>The Truman Show</i> [available here]
7 Th		Meaning and Religion	Mawson – “What God Could (and Couldn’t) Do to Make Life Meaningful” (stop on p. 44) <i>Existentialism: Crash Course Philosophy</i>
8 Tu		Relativism & Objective Meaning	Shafer-Landau – “Ethical Relativism (pp. 289-299)
8 Th		Relativism & Objective Meaning	Wong – “Relativism” Rovane – “Moral Dispute or Cultural Difference”
9 Tu		Review	No Reading Assigned
9 Th		Midterm Examination	No Reading Assigned
10 Tu		Meaning and Pleasure	Shafer-Landau – Chapters 1 and 2
10 Th		Meaning and Desire Fulfillment	Taylor – “The Meaning of Life”
11 Tu		Meaning and Rational Activity	Aristotle – Nicomachean Ethics (selection)
11 Th		Meaning and Achievement	Annas – “Happiness and Achievement”
12 Tu		Meaning and Altruism	Singer – “The Good Life”
12 Th		Meaning and Active Engagement	Wolf – “Meanings of Lives”
13 Tu		Meaning and Narratives	Rosati – “The Story of a Life” (pp 21-36)
13 Th		Meaning and Narratives	Rosati – “The Story of a Life” (pp 36-50)
14 Tu		In Class Debates	No Reading Assigned
14 Th		General Reflections	Landau – “Against Perfectionism”

15 Tu		General Reflections	<i>Groundhog Day</i> [available here]
15 Th		Review	No Reading Assigned
		Final Examination	

Class Policies

Attendance

You will not get much out of this course if you don't attend the lectures, pay attention, and take notes. First of all, class discussions are a crucial part of the learning process. Second, the lectures are not mere summaries of the readings; they offer interpretations of the readings and also introduce additional material that can be on the exams. Third, the course goals go beyond the mere memorization of facts, arguments, or theories. They include learning skills such as critical thinking, argument analysis, and argument evaluation; these skills will be modeled and practiced in lectures. As a result, attendance and participation are crucial for this class.

If you ever have to miss class, ask a classmate for his or her notes. It is your responsibility to obtain this material; I cannot catch up each of you individually. So don't contact me to find out what you missed; contact a classmate instead. If, after studying the classmate's notes, you have specific questions about the material, you may of course consult with me.

If you miss one of the writing exercises or an exam and you do not have an excuse (such as a doctor's note) for the absence, you will not get the chance to make up the exercise or exam.

Readings and Other Material

If you don't keep up with the assigned readings or other assigned materials, you will not get very much out of the lectures, and the discussions will be much less engaging. So, to make this class worthwhile for everybody, please come to class prepared, ready to discuss! You may find it helpful to jot down questions, objections, or summaries of the assigned material each week. The reflection questions are also supposed to help you get the most out of these materials. I made sure that the materials are of manageable length and difficulty, so I expect you to read (or watch) all of them carefully.

In Case of Emergency

You have a right to privacy and are never under any obligation to divulge personal information to me. In case of emergency (physical, mental, medical, emotional, familial, etc.), you can email me and say: **"Something important has come up that warrants an excused absence from class today."** No further details will be required. I trust that you know what warrants an excused absence, and I trust that you will not abuse this policy.

Should some sort of emergency get in the way of a deadline or due date, you can send an email of the following sort: **"I am dealing with something that warrants an extension of [Assignment] as it has prevented me from completing [Assignment] to the best of my abilities."** Once I have received this email, we will work together to determine the best course of action. I may ask a few questions (i.e. "Do you think that you will be in a better place by X date and able to complete the assignment by then?") to help determine the best course of action. Again, I trust that you know what warrants an extension of an assignment, and I trust that you will not abuse this policy.

Phone and Computer Use

Phones, computers, and other mobile devices are not permitted *unless* this is the device by which a takes notes or accesses the class readings. Use of phones for non-class purposes will result in an *unexcused absence*.

Packing Up

It has become fairly common among students to begin packing up belongings five or so minutes prior to class officially being over. This is incredibly distracting as it creates both (1) a flurry of motion, and (2) a fair amount of noise. This results in the last few minutes of each class period being wasted, and the loss adds up. To prevent a loss of class time, students are not permitted to pack up their belongings until class is officially over.

Late Work

Work that is submitted late will be accepted but will receive a 10% deduction **for each day that it is late**. Late assignments will not be accepted if the assignment grades have been posted.

Academic Misconduct

Plagiarism and other forms of cheating will not be tolerated in this course. Students are expected to be familiar with and adhere to the University's Code of Student Conduct. Any suspected violations will be reported to the Committee on Academic Misconduct. [Link to Code of Student Conduct]. Useful information about plagiarism is found here: [Did I Plagiarize?](#)

Diversity

[University] affirms the importance and value of diversity in the student body. Our programs and curricula reflect our multicultural society and global economy and seek to provide opportunities for students to learn more about persons who are different from them. We are committed to maintaining a community that recognizes and values the inherent worth and dignity of every person; fosters sensitivity, understanding, and mutual respect among each member of our community; and encourages each individual to strive to reach his or her own potential. Discrimination against any individual based upon protected status, which is defined as age, color, disability, gender identity or expression, national origin, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran status, is prohibited.

Mental Health

A recent American College Health Survey found stress, sleep problems, anxiety, depression, interpersonal concerns, death of a significant other and alcohol use among the top ten health impediments to academic performance. Students experiencing personal problems or situational crises during the quarter are encouraged to contact [counseling services] for assistance, support and advocacy. This service is free and confidential.

This course covers a variety of topics that may be triggering to some students due to descriptions of and/or scenes depicting acts of violence, death, catastrophe, or disregard for human life. If needed, please take care of yourself while watching/reading this material (leaving the computer to take a water/bathroom break, debriefing with a friend, contacting [resource], and contacting the instructor if needed). Expectations are that we all will be respectful of our classmates while consuming this media and that we will create a safe space for each other. Failure to show respect to each other may result in dismissal from the class.

Student Resources

College is hard. If everything was going perfectly behind the scenes, then college would still be hard. Unfortunately, for many students, things are not going perfectly behind the scenes. With that in mind, I want you to be aware that the university has numerous resources that can be incredibly useful in helping you navigate [University's] structure and resolve issues you encounter while here at the university. You have a right to privacy, and you are never under any obligation to divulge personal information to me. If you need an in class accommodation (more time on the exam, a note-taker, etc.) then you need to register with [disability services]. Once you have registered with disability services, then they can tell me what needs to be done on your behalf without you having to divulge anything personal to me. You can find [the office of disability services] online at [link] or at [Address], [phone number], and [Email].

I want you all to succeed both in my class and here at the university as students. If there is ever something that comes up that starts to get in the way of your education, health, and/or wellness, please know that the university has many resources that are here to help you in a variety of ways. I have included those resources below:

- Emergency Financial Resources: [link]
- Disability Resources: [link]
- Student Advocacy Resources: [link]
- Mental Health Resources: [link]

If you are experiencing a crisis that is not one of disability, hospitalization, mental health, or finance, I still strongly suggest reaching out to [link] to see what supportive resources they may be able to provide.