

Life, Death, and Meaning

PHIL 4830-001

Wes Morrison
Department of Philosophy
Hellems 280
303-492-8297
Wes.Morrison@Colorado.EDU

Office hours: TR 2:00-3:30 and by appointment
(After 3:30 on TR usually works for me,
but you need to let me know that you're coming.)

Class webpage

<http://www.colorado.edu/philosophy/wes/lm.html>

Description

At some point, many people fall into a certain kind of perplexity. They find themselves wondering whether, beyond the particular projects and goals of everyday living, their lives have meaning. Without an overarching, transcendent purpose, they worry that life may not be worth living. It is far from easy, however, to see whether there is any such purpose, or even what sort of purpose would make our lives fully meaningful. In some minds this produces a profound sense of absurdity.

Anxiety about the meaning (or absurdity) of life is often triggered by the thought of death. According to some, the inevitability of death makes the kind of purpose that would give a satisfying meaning to one's life unattainable. According to others, life would be meaningless *without* death.

This semester, we will wrestle with a series of questions closely related to the above-mentioned concerns. What would it take for a life to be fully meaningful, and what is the meaning of "meaning" here? Must one's life be meaningful in some especially robust sense in order to be worth living? Would it help if there were a God, and if our lives had an important role to play in God's plans? Or would God make no real difference?

Is death a destroyer - or is it perhaps an enhancer - of meaning? Assuming optimal conditions, would it be good (or bad?) for an individual to live forever? If death is an "experiential blank," how (if at all) can it be bad for the individual who dies? Can the dead be harmed by events subsequent to their demise? Is it rational to worry so much more about the nothingness that (we fear) comes after death, and not at all about the nothingness that precedes our birth? And why is the thought of death so closely linked to worries about the meaning of life?

Our assigned readings give (sometimes eloquent) expression to a wide variety of perspectives on these (and related) questions. Students are encouraged to develop their own views and to defend them both in class discussion and in the papers they will be writing for the course.

Class format

I'll usually give a summary of the main points in the assigned reading, and make a suggestion or two of my own. But I'm hoping for lots of participation from lots of different students. Let's do our best to learn from each other.

Assigned texts

Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

E. D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn, eds., *The Meaning of Life*

John Martin Fischer, ed., *The Metaphysics of Death*

Albert Camus, *The Plague*

Other required readings will be available online or circulated by email as pdf files.

Course requirements

Regular attendance and participation (twenty five percent of your course grade)

Being there, making an occasional comment, asking helpful questions, listening carefully to what others have to say and responding appropriately are all valuable contributions to the class. This includes the final examination period, which will be devoted to the viewing of a movie, followed by a short discussion.

Weekly short reaction papers (twenty five percent)

Each Tuesday (with a few exceptions that will be announced in advance), you will hand in a short paper reacting to some issue or argument discussed in class the previous week. Papers should take a position on the issue you have chosen to address and should give a reason for taking that position. Papers should be double-spaced and no more than one page in length.

First paper (twenty five percent) due in class on Thursday, March 19.

A four to six page paper on a choice of assigned topics. Topics will be drawn from the subjects we have discussed in the first half of the course. Papers should have a clear thesis, give an argument for that thesis, and show an awareness of possible objections and an ability to deal with those objections.

These are *not* research papers. Additional background reading for the paper is not required.

Second paper (twenty five percent) due at the beginning of the final exam period.

A *four to six* page paper. You will develop your own topic in consultation with me. You should have settled on a definite topic by the beginning of the last week of classes. Otherwise, the instructions are the same as those for the midterm paper.

Final exam period (Tuesday, May 5, 4:30pm - 7:00pm)

During the exam period, we'll view Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* and have a short discussion of it. Then we'll dry our eyes and say goodbye.

List of reading assignments (subject to revision)

1. Pascal, selections from his *Pensées*
<http://www.colorado.edu/philosophy/wes/pascal.assignment.pdf>
2. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*
3. Tolstoy, selection from *My Confession* (Klemke & Cahn [K&C], 7)
4. Pojman, “Religion Gives Meaning to Life” (K&C, 27)
5. Fackenheim, “Judaism and the Meaning of Life” (K&C, 31)
6. Quinn, “The Meaning of Life According to Christianity” (K&C, 35)
7. Klemke, “Living Without Appeal” (K&C, 184)
8. Nozick, “Philosophy and the Meaning of Life” (K&C, 224)
9. Russell, “A Free Man’s Worship” (K&C, 55)
10. Baier, “The Meaning of Life” (K&C, 82-4, 99-111, skipping section 2)
11. Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus” (K&C, 72)
12. Jeffrey Gordon, “The Triumph of Sisyphus” (A pdf file will be circulated.)
13. Taylor, “The Meaning of Life” (K&C, 134)
14. Nagel, “The Absurd” (K&C, 143)
15. Feinberg, “Absurd Self-Fulfillment” (K&C, 153)
16. Shopenhauer, “On the Sufferings of the World” (K&C, 45)
17. Schlick, “On the Meaning of Life” (K&C, 62)
18. Edwards, “The Meaning and Value of Life” (K&C, 114)
19. Dostoevsky, “The Grand Inquisitor”
<http://arthursclassicnovels.com/arthurs/dostoevsky/inqus10.html>
20. Rosenbaum, “How to Be Dead and Not Care: A Defense of Epicurus” (JMF, 119)
21. Unamuno, “Saint Manuel, the Good, Martyr”
<http://www4.gvsu.edu/wrightd/SPA%20307%20Death/SaintManuelBueno.htm>
22. Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality” (John Martin Fischer [JMF], 73)
23. Nagel, “Death” (JMF, 61)
24. Luper-Foy, “Annihilation” (JMF, 269)
25. Rosenbaum, “Epicurus and Annihilation” (JMF, 293)
26. Pitcher, “The Misfortunes of the Dead” (JMF, 159)
27. Parfit, “Reasons and Persons” (JMF, 193)
28. Feldman, “Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death” (JMF, 307)
29. Camus, *The Plague*

ADDENDA

Complaints?

God forbid that you should have any complaints about me or about my course! But if you do, you should speak directly to me about them. In the unlikely event that I can't satisfy you, my department Chair (David Boonin) would like you to contact him rather than, say, sending an email to the Dean of A&S or to the Provost or some other high university official. (Undergraduate students in *all philosophy courses not taught by me* are supposed to direct such complaints to me, since I am currently the Director of Undergraduate Studies in Philosophy. ☺)

Plagiarism statement

Plagiarism is copying any part of someone else's work and turning it in under your own name without quotation marks (or proper indentation of the quotation) and adequate citation of the source(s). It is often easy to detect, and the consequences for the plagiarist are quite serious.

Disabilities statement

Any student eligible for and needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a disability should speak to me about it as early as possible in the semester. Please note that to be eligible for such adjustments or accommodations you will need to provide documentation of your disability to the Disability Services Office in Willard 322 (tel: 303-492-8671).

Religious observances statement

Any student needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a religious holiday or other religious obligation should speak to me about it as early as possible in the semester. I'll do our best to accommodate you.