

Life, Death, and Meaning

PHIL 4830-001

FALL 2010



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.

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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.

Assigned texts

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

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

Albert Camus, *The Stranger* and *The Plague*

Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

A few other readings will be available online or circulated by email as pdf files.

Class format

I'll usually give a summary of the main points in the assigned reading, and then suggest some topics for discussion. I'm hoping for lots of participation from lots of different students. Let's do our best to learn from each other.

Course requirements

Regular attendance and participation (25%)

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 (25%)

Each Monday (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.

Two papers (50%)

You write on a choice of assigned topics for the first one, and develop your own topic in consultation with me for the second.

Important dates

First paper: Mon., Oct. 11

Second paper: Fri., Dec. 10

Final exam period: Wed., Dec. 15, 1:30pm – 4:00pm

List of reading assignments

(Subject to revision: we probably we won't have time for ALL of these.)

1. Tolstoy, selection from *My Confession* (Klemke & Cahn [K&C], 7)
2. Pojman, "Religion Gives Meaning to Life" (K&C, 27)
3. Fackenheim, "Judaism and the Meaning of Life" (K&C, 31)
4. Quinn, "The Meaning of Life According to Christianity" (K&C, 35)
5. Swenson, "The Dignity of Human Life" (K&C, 17)
6. Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism"
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>
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. Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus" (K&C, 72)
11. Jeffrey Gordon, "The Triumph of Sisyphus" (A pdf file will be circulated.)
12. Camus, *The Stranger*
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. Schopenhauer, "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. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*
20. Nagel, "Death" (John Martin Fischer [JMF], 61)
21. Rosenbaum, "How to Be Dead and Not Care: A Defense of Epicurus" (JMF, 119)
22. Luper-Foy, "Annihilation" (JMF, 269)
23. Rosenbaum, "Epicurus and Annihilation" (JMF, 293)
24. Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" (John Martin Fischer [JMF], 73)
25. Pitcher, "The Misfortunes of the Dead" (JMF, 159)

26. Parfit, "Reasons and Persons" (JMF, 193)

27. Feldman, "Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death" (JMF, 307)

28. Camus, *The Plague*