

The Meaning of Life

(PHIL 207G – 03B)

Instructor: Dr. Alec Stubbs

Meeting times: TuTh 6:00-9:00 pm

Office Hours: email me at alec.stubbs@umb.edu and we will set up a time to meet!

What is this course?

This class focuses on questions related to life's meaning. Can life be meaningful without God? Is meaning subjective or objective? Is life absurd? Is meaning in life found in happiness, love, achievement, play, morality, or something entirely different? In order for us to answer these questions to the best of our ability, this class will require you to theorize philosophically with others in class. It will also ask you to attempt to intentionally live *meaningfully* throughout our time together. It is not enough to think philosophically, to simply theorize about what the meaning of life is. To find answers to these questions one must also *act*.

We will begin our inquiry into the meaning of life by investigating the question "What is the meaning of life". We will then question whether God is necessary for life to have meaning, or if atheists too can find meaning in life. We will confront the absurdity of human existence. We will also parse through several ways of thinking about meaning in life: is it subjective, objective, or some combination of the two? For the rest of the semester, we will be "trying on" various answers to the question of life's meaning –suffering and happiness, purpose and play, love, presence, and morality. We will then end the course by thinking through existential responses to meaning in life, namely, that to live meaningfully is to *create yourself*. The course will end with a meditation on death and its relation to meaning.

Throughout this course, you will develop your skills as a writer, thinker, and public speaker. You will be tasked with leading at least one class period through the reading for the day, you will be asked to be an active participant in our Socratic discussion and problem-based learning, and you will be asked to propose and act on an "experiment in meaningful living". This class will therefore not be your traditional lecture-based class. Instead, your learning will unfold during our time together, and you will be an active participant in the learning process.

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this course, all students will have developed the following knowledge and capacities:

- You will be able to identify and explain some of the dominant theories on life's meaning, both in the analytic and continental philosophical traditions.
- You will develop your ability to write and think philosophically using public speaking, an argumentative paper, and a final paper on your own experiment in living.
- You will develop your ability to respectfully debate and discuss core commitments and personal beliefs in concert with others.
- You will develop your own point of view about meaning in life.

Reading Schedule:

July 18 – The Question

Kauppinen: “The Experience of Meaning” (read together in class)

July 20 – Theism and Atheism

Tolstoy, “My Confession”

Nozick, “Philosophy and the Meaning of Life”

July 25 – The Absurd

Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”

Klemke, “Living Without Appeal: An Affirmative Philosophy of Life”

July 27 – Subjectivity, Objectivity, and Nature

Johansson and Svensson, “Subjectivism and Objectivism about Meaning in Life”

McShane, “Nature, Animals, and Meaning in Life”

August 1 – Suffering and Happiness

Schopenhauer, “On the Sufferings of the World”

Wilson, “Epicurus and the Meaning of Life” + Epicurus, “Letter to Menoecus”

August 3 – Purpose and Play

Levy, “Downshifting and Meaning in Life”

Schlick, “On the Meaning of Life”

August 8 – Love

Wolf, “The Importance of Love”

hooks, *All About Love*, Preface and Chapter 6, “Living by a Love Ethic”

August 10 – Presence

Wallace, “This is Water”

Hanh, *You Are Here*, Chapter 1

August 15 – Helping Others

Landau, “The ‘Why Be Moral?’ Question and the Meaning of Life”

Callcut, “Against Moral Sainthood”

August 17 – Creating Yourself

Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, selections

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, selections

August 22 - Death

Nagel, “Death”

Montaigne, “That to Study Philosophy is to Learn to Die”

Assignments:

Your grade in this course will be determined by 5 components (each worth 20 pts for a total of 100)

1. Reading Responses (20 pts. or 2 pts. each) – *due every Tuesday and Thursday*

- While you are expected to read both readings for each day, your reading response should only respond to **one** of the two readings. All responses should be completed **prior to class** (i.e., before 6 p.m. EST)
- Your response should be roughly 1-2 paragraphs and should answer the following questions:
 1. Which passage stood out to you the most for the reading of your choice?
 2. What does the passage say (briefly)?
 3. What is interesting to you about this passage?
 4. What question(s) or concerns do you have about this passage?
- Responses that show confusion, question assumptions, or irritation are welcome! These reading responses are meant to help you think through the reading, and that means being comfortable with asking tough questions, registering a dislike or admiration for certain ideas, or even just admitting that you don't quite understand something!
- Reading responses are not required on days that you present (see below).
- Reading responses can be "turned in" by filling them out on our shared Google Docs.
- Because we have 10 days of readings but you are not required to submit a reading response on the day of your presentation, each reading response is worth 2 points. Since $9 \times 2 = 18$ points, you will all start out with a free 2 points.

2. Presentation/Class Discussion Lead (20 pts.) – *due on the day of your chosen reading*

- You will give a **10-minute** presentation in the class of your choice (and the reading of your choice) that engages with an argument in the reading that you find particularly fascinating, troubling, or exciting. Your presentation must include the following and in this order:
 1. **Introduction of the Argument:** Identify and describe the central question that the argument addresses. Explain the context, the relevance of this question, and why it is important – this is also known as the 'so what?' question. Ensure you convey the significance of the topic and why the audience should care about it. (1 minute)
 2. **Explanation of the Argument:** Present a clear and comprehensive step-by-step outline of the argument you have chosen. This should include the premises and the conclusion they lead to. Try to elucidate this as lucidly as possible. Please include citations from the text (3 minutes)
 3. **Discussion on the Intrigue Factor:** Discuss why you find the argument fascinating, troubling, or exciting. Make sure you expound on the unique aspects or implications that make the argument interesting to you. (1 minute)

4. **Critique of the Argument:** Present a detailed critique of the argument, regardless of your personal agreement with it. Make sure to thoughtfully evaluate the argument's weaknesses or potential challenges. (1 minute)
 5. **Rebuttal of the Critique:** Here, you'll present a potential counter-argument or defense to your earlier critique. Evaluate whether this rebuttal effectively counters the critique or if it falls short, and explain why. (1 minute)
 6. **Personal Standpoint:** Now, take your personal stand on the argument. Discuss whether you think the argument is valid or flawed and why. If you agree, delve deeper into your agreement; if not, further build upon the critique you previously outlined. (2 minutes)
 7. **Thought-Provoking Question:** Conclude your presentation by posing an open-ended question that the argument brings to mind. This should not be a straightforward, easily answerable question; rather, it should be theoretical, stimulating debate and further discussion. (1 minute)
- **You should not summarize the entire paper.** Instead, you should isolate a **particular argument** from the paper.
 - Please email me a **written copy** of your presentation **right before or after class**. You can speak directly from your writing, or you can simply create an outline to work from. **This must include citation from the text.** This outline or rough draft will serve as the outline or rough draft of your argumentative paper (see below).
 - This assignment will not only enhance your understanding of the topic but also develop your critical thinking and public speaking skills. You'll need to support your points with evidence from the reading or related sources and make sure your presentation is engaging to keep the audience interested. Good luck!
 - Here you can find two sample outlines that I have created: [OUTLINE SAMPLE #1](#) and [OUTLINE SAMPLE #2](#)
 - Here you can find two sample presentation that I have created : [PRESENTATION SAMPLE #1](#) and [PRESENTATION SAMPLE #2](#)

3. *Argumentative Paper* (20 pts.) – *due a week after your presentation, can re-submit one additional time the following week if you wish to try for a higher grade*

- Your argumentative paper will be a rewrite of your presentation paper that incorporates feedback from me. You will have **one week after your presentation** to turn in your argumentative paper. The main difference with this paper is that you will center your own position on the topic from the start. More on this in class.
- You will be required to write the same components mentioned above, but in a full paper form (1250 words or more). I Have given you some example language for how each section might start:
 1. **Introduction of the Argument:** Identify and describe the central question that the argument addresses. Explain the context, the relevance of this question, and why it is important – this is also known as the ‘so what?’ question. Ensure you convey the

significance of the topic and why the audience should care about it. You should also note what *your* perspective will be – this is your **thesis**, i.e., what you will be arguing. “*After presenting Tolstoy’s argument that faith is necessary for meaning in life, I will argue that X...*”

2. **Explanation of the Argument:** Present a clear and comprehensive step-by-step outline of the argument you have chosen. This should include the premises and the conclusion they lead to. Try to elucidate this as lucidly as possible. Please include citations from the text. “*In ‘My Confession’ Tolstoy argues that faith is necessary for meaning in life. To do so, he starts by suggesting that death destroys meaning...*”
 3. **Discussion on the Intrigue Factor:** Discuss why you find the argument fascinating, troubling, or exciting. Make sure you expound on the unique aspects or implications that make the argument interesting to you. “*The argument that faith is necessary for meaning in life has troubling implications for the atheist...*”
 4. **Critique of the Argument:** Present a detailed critique of the argument, regardless of your personal agreement with it. Make sure to thoughtfully evaluate the argument’s weaknesses or potential challenges. “*One critique of Tolstoy’s argument that faith is necessary for meaning in life is...*”
 5. **Rebuttal of the Critique:** Here, you’ll present a potential counter-argument or defense to your earlier critique. Evaluate whether this rebuttal effectively counters the critique or if it falls short, and explain why. “*However, in response to this critique, Tolstoy is likely to suggest that...*”
 6. **Personal Standpoint:** Now, take your personal stand on the argument. Discuss whether you think the argument is valid or flawed and why. If you agree, delve deeper into your agreement; if not, further build upon the critique you previously outlined. You are welcome to bring in outside evidence if you wish. “*I believe that Tolstoy’s argument that faith is necessary for meaning in life is right/wrong because...*”
 7. **Thought-Provoking Question:** Conclude your presentation by (a) restating your thesis and (b) posing an open-ended question that the argument brings to mind. This should not be a straightforward, easily answerable question; rather, it should be theoretical, stimulating debate and further discussion. “*In this paper I have argued Y ... If Tolstoy is right/wrong on his position, then this raises the question ...*”
- Because this is a formal paper, this version of the paper should include in-text citations from the text in question. It should also include a works cited at the end, using [Chicago Author-Date style](#).
 - You can turn in both the first draft and the final version of this paper by **emailing it to me**.

4. **Experiment in Meaningful Living** (20 pts.) – proposal due in class Aug. 8th and essay due Aug. 24th

- The purpose of this class is not simply to have you *learn* about meaning in life, but also to *live* meaning in life. To that end you will be asked to conduct an experiment in meaningful living on yourself. You must choose an activity **that you have not done before or rarely do** that you believe can potentially confer meaning in your life. This can be a number of things, from physical activities, to meditation, to changes in eating habits, to artistic pursuits, to volunteer work, etc. What matters most is finding something that you believe might contribute to meaning in your life that is new or rare in your life.
- This assignment will be in four parts: (1) the proposal, (2) the act, (3) the essay, (4) the report-back.
 1. *The Proposal:* You will have until **Tuesday August 8th** in class to submit a roughly 250-500 word proposal that details the following about your experiment so that I might okay it:
 - What will you be doing?
 - Why do you think it will be meaningful?
 - What thinkers (as of right now) do you think would have something to say (either positively or negatively) about your experiment in meaningful living?
 - How will you report back to the class about it?
 2. *The Act:* Do it!
 3. *The Essay:* You will write 1000-1250 words about your experiment in meaningful living. It must contain the following parts:
 - A **description of the act** or acts that you engaged in for your experiment. (2 pts.)
 - Consider and explain whether your experiment was in fact **meaning-conferring** (Did it have the effect you expected? Does this kind of activity seem to confer meaning in your life? Why or why not?) (4 pts.)
 - Draw from **at least two philosophers** that we have read (this could include philosophers that we read *after* your proposal or *after* your experiment), and describe **how they might respond** to your experiment in meaningful living and your judgement about its meaningfulness. They might be supportive or critical of your judgment about whether your act was meaning-conferring. Please provide **at least two quotations** from each source to back up your claims. (8 pts.)
 - Conclude by commenting on **whether or not you will continue** to incorporate the experiment into your life. (2 pts.)
 4. *The Report-Back:* You will **present a description of the report** (in what ever format you would like) on the final day of class. This could be any number of things, from displaying your artwork, showing a video that you took, showing a series of photographs you took, handing out copies of poetry that you chose to write, etc. **Get**

creative! All that matters is you find a way to show us what you did and chat with all of us about whether or not it conferred meaning in your life. (4 pts.)

5. Class Participation (20 pts.)

Our class will be what is called a [“flipped classroom”](#), i.e., you will do the readings prior to class. In class, we will work together, and each day will be unique. Some days we will be having debates, others you will be asked to work on creative projects. The goal is that our classroom is a creative environment where we can practice philosophy. Doing philosophy this way requires us to be open and honest with each other. But, we should also cultivate a classroom culture that is safe and kind for folks. The way we arrive at truth is through collaborative knowledge creation, and we can only achieve this by hearing people’s true views, beliefs, and opinions. There will be contentious discussions, but I ask you to be respectful of those who contribute. I vow to do my best as a facilitator to be sensitive to a variety of views, backgrounds, contexts, and attitudes.

By the end of the semester, you will be asked to give yourself a grade based on your participation in class:

- *A (20-18) = Excellent:* Always showed up, engaged, developed a point of view, clearly demonstrate that you did the readings.
- *B (17-16) = Good :* Usually showed up, mostly engaged, had a decently developed point of view, demonstrate that you did most of the readings.
- *C (15-14) = Fair:* Sometimes showed up, a little engaged, did not develop a point of view, somewhat clear demonstrate that you did the readings.
- *D (13-12) = Poor:* Rarely showed up, not engaged, no developed a point of view, no demonstration that you did the readings.
- *F (11-0) = Did Not Show Up*

Grade Percentages:

A = 93 – 100%

A- = 90 – 92%

B+ = 87 – 89%

B = 83 – 86%

B- = 80 – 82%

C+ = 77 – 79%

C = 73 – 76%

C- = 70 – 72%

D+ = 67 – 69%

D = 63 – 66%

D- = 60 – 62%

F = 00 – 59%

Late work policy:

Late work will incur a 1-point penalty per day that it is late. Reading responses will not be accepted after the start of the class that it is due. This is because those reading responses are necessary for your learning in the class in which they are due. If, for some reason, you desperately need an extension, please talk to me 24 hours in advance. If you come to me, I will likely be happy to grant you an extension with no penalty, as long as you are honest.

Email Response Policy:

During weekdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. I will try my best to hastily respond to your emails. Outside of those hours and during weekends, although I will be checking my email, response times cannot be guaranteed to be as quick. Therefore, if you are in need of a quick response, please try to contact me during the week from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.—outside of these hours, I should be able to respond to you within the next day. I will also expect the same from you – **you** will not be asked to be available at all times to respond to **my** emails either. If I email you outside of those hours, I will not expect an immediate response either. I think this goes a long way to creating a culture of a healthy work-life balance – we all deserve more free time to play and enjoy our lives.

Students with Disabilities and Accommodation Needs:

If you are student with a disability or are in need of accommodations, please note that you can seek resources through The Ross Center for Disability Services. As they note: “The Ross Center for Disability Services is the entity that approves and coordinates academic accommodations. If you are a student at UMass Boston and have a disability, you may be eligible for accommodations available through the Ross Center. We also provide connections to services in our office, and both on-and off-campus. The Ross Center invites you to call 617.287.7430, email ross.center@umb.edu, or visit the office in Campus Center, UL Room 211, and inquire about eligibility and procedures.” Once you

meet with the Ross Center, please speak with me about your accommodation needs as soon as you can!

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is the use of someone else's work without proper attribution. It is a serious issue that you will be responsible for avoiding. Any works that you draw from, previous work you have written, texts, videos, and podcasts that you draw from, all of these must be cited in your written work in order to avoid plagiarism. Therefore, in this class, please note that you should always cite the material from which you draw either quotations or ideas. The best way to cite material is by providing a source and a page number if it is a text (see <https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html>). If you cite material, you must not only provide an in-text citation, but you must also provide a full bibliographic citation at the end of your work. Please take time to review the Student Code of Conduct on this issue.

The emergence of tools like ChatGPT means that plagiarism is even more difficult to spot than before. The use of large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT is allowable in our class only insofar as they are used for ideation and outlining purposes. ChatGPT and other LLMs should not be used to write your whole paper, and if you do use ChatGPT to give you feedback or help you outline, you need to cite its use. But be wary, LLMs like ChatGPT are not always accurate, can provide "hallucinations" of texts, and can lead to false information. This is a tough issue right now, and there are not good ways to track plagiarism using LLMs. So, suffice it to say, using LLMs to completely write your papers is plagiarism, full stop. Using them to ideate or help you think through issues is not plagiarism for the sake of this course. But just know, you should write for yourself, because it is your education and your life, not an AI's.

Mental Health Services Available via UMass Boston:

College can be a stressful time (and it shouldn't have to be!), and I encourage you all to take advantage of the many resources we have at UMB to help in any circumstance. For mental health needs and concerns, you can go to the Counseling Center in the Quinn Admin Building, 2nd floor, Room 7, or visit https://www.umb.edu/healthservices/counseling_center. You can also call them at 617-287-5690.