

# THE MEANING OF LIFE

## SYLLABUS

CEPL 0909

Wilson 203

July 15 - 26, 2012

12:45 - 3:35

Instructor: Alex King ([Alexandra.King@brown.edu](mailto:Alexandra.King@brown.edu))

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### REQUIRED MATERIALS:

- *The Meaning of Life: A Reader*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., by Klemke and Cahn
- Coursepack (available at the Metcalf Copy Center in the Brown Bookstore building)

### COURSE INFORMATION

**Purpose:** You will gain the ability to understand and engage with philosophical texts, apply ideas to real and fictional situations, and (hopefully) achieve a broader understanding of the surrounding world and your place in it. (You will also come out knowing some particular views about the meaning of life.)

**Description:** We will explore different aspects of what is commonly discussed under the heading 'the meaning of life'. Topics include theism and evolution, nihilism, death, as well as a variety of particular suggestions about what the meaning of life might be.

**Assessment:** Since this course yields no letter grade, there is no strict rubric. Instead, you will receive written feedback on your performance through (1) classroom participation, (2) reading responses, and (3) two written assignments, with (1) and (3) weighted most heavily.

**A note about participation:** Some students are very outgoing, while others are simply quieter. But philosophy essentially involves discussion and interaction with the ideas of others, so vocalizing some ideas is required. However, *quality is preferred to quantity*. Don't be shy, but do think before you speak.

**Expectations:** It shouldn't need explicit saying, but here are the two basic things you absolutely must do: respect each other and respect the instructor and TA. This includes (but is obviously not limited to) the following: avoid both physical and verbal violence, do not plagiarize, attend *all* classes (there are only ten of them, after all!) and arrive on time, turn all electronic devices off (unless you have a pacemaker). In general, take the class and each other seriously, and take yourselves seriously. (Eating and so on is fine as long as it's not a nuisance.)

**A note about plagiarism:** Again, it should be clear what counts as plagiarism, but don't take chunks of things that aren't yours without citing the original source (yes, even if it's by a fellow student! and yes, even if you paraphrase!).

**A note about cell phones:** Don't.

**A note about computers:** It is my unwavering belief that computer use in class is bad, so please put your laptops and tablets away and take notes the old-school way. If you have a special need for a computer, please let me know. If you have any extremely compelling arguments for why computers should be allowed or are on the whole actually beneficial for classroom use, I'm very open to hearing them.

**A note about attendance:** The university policy requires all students to attend all classes. If you cannot do so, please let me know. Make-up work will be provided.

**Extra Support:** Please let me know if you have a physical or learning disability. I'm happy to meet with you and discuss what we can do. For students who would like help specifically with writing, the Brown Writing Center is a great resource, but you need an appointment, so plan ahead!  
See: [http://www.brown.edu/Student\\_Services/Writing\\_Center/](http://www.brown.edu/Student_Services/Writing_Center/)

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### DAY ONE

- **THE MEANING OF THE VERY QUESTION**  
What does it mean to ask "What's the meaning of life?" and what kind of an answer could we possibly be looking for?

### DAY TWO

- **PURPOSE**  
Are we asking about the purpose of life? What if there is some external thing that gives us a purpose (like a god or evolution)? Does that answer the question?

### DAY THREE

- **NIHILISM**  
*Nihilism* – the view that there is no meaning of life

### DAY FOUR

- **PESSIMISM**  
*Pessimism* – the view that life has a meaning, but we're all (alas, alas!) unable to fulfill it

### DAY FIVE

- **DEATH AND (IM)MORTALITY**  
Is death the real obstacle to achieving meaning in life? Would we be better off if we were immortal?

### DAY SIX

- **SUBJECTIVIST VERSUS OBJECTIVIST VIEWS/HAPPINESS VERSUS WELL-BEING**  
*Subjectivism* (about the meaning of life) – the view that if I choose a meaning of life, that's enough to make it the meaning of my life.  
*Objectivism* (about the meaning of life) – the view that there is something (or are some things) that are the meaning of life, and that these are the same for all of us.

### DAYS SEVEN THROUGH TEN

- **PARTICULAR VIEWS (THAT MIGHT CONTRIBUTE TO SUBJECTIVE/OBJECTIVE MEANING OF LIFE)**  
*Personal Sources* – knowledge and creativity, fulfilling your potential, being yourself, having a long-term impact  
*Interpersonal Sources* – family/relationships, love, maximizing others' well-being

## READING SCHEDULE

### WEEK ONE

#### **DAY ONE (Introduction; The Question)**

#### **DAY TWO (Purpose: God and Evolution)**

The Bible – Ecclesiastes (Coursepack)

Rick Warren – selections from *The Purpose Driven Life* (Coursepack)

Brian Boyd – article, “Purpose-Driven Life” from *The American Scholar Magazine* (Coursepack)

Hardin – comic (Coursepack)

A.J. Ayer – “The Claims of Philosophy” (Reader)

#### **DAY THREE (Nihilism)**

Albert Camus – selections from *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Reader)

Thomas Nagel – essay, “The Absurd” (Reader)

#### **DAY FOUR (Pessimism)**

Arthur Schopenhauer – essay, “On the Sufferings of the World” (Reader)

Mark Siderits – selection from *Buddhism as Philosophy* (Coursepack)

Patru Rinpoche – selection from *Words of My Perfect Teacher* (Coursepack)

#### **DAY FIVE (Death and Immortality)**

Kurt Baier – lecture, “The Meaning of Life”: Section 3 (Reader)

Bernard Williams – essay, “The Makropulos Case” (Coursepack)

Lord Alfred Tennyson – poem, “Tithonus” (Coursepack)

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley – short story, “The Mortal Immortal” (Coursepack)

(in class screening) last 40 minutes of Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*

### WEEK TWO

\*\*\* *First essay due on Monday!* \*\*\*

#### **DAY SIX (Subjectivism vs. Objectivism/Happiness and Well-Being)**

Richard Taylor – essay, “The Meaning of Life” (Reader)

E.D. Klemke – essay, “Living Without Appeal”: 193-end (Reader)

Robert Nozick – “The Experience Machine” from *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Coursepack)

Zach Weiner – *Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal* comic #2625 (Coursepack)

Susan Wolf – “Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life” (Coursepack)

#### **DAY SEVEN (Personal Sources I: Knowledge, Creativity)**

Aristotle – Book X, Chapters 6-8, of *Nicomachean Ethics* (Coursepack)

Bertrand Russell – “The Value of Philosophy”, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Coursepack)

Karl Marx – section XXIV from “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844” (Coursepack)

Friedrich Nietzsche – selections from *The Gay Science* (Coursepack)

#### **DAY EIGHT (Personal Sources II: Long-Term Impact, Being Yourself, and Fulfilling your Potential)**

Joel Feinberg – selections from essay, “Absurd Self-Fulfillment”: 169-end (Reader)

Percy Bysshe Shelley – poem, “Ozymandias” (Coursepack)  
Jonathan Franzen – Kenyon College graduation speech, “Liking is for Cowards” (Coursepack)  
Susie Steiner – “Top Five Regrets of the Dying” article from *The Guardian UK* (Coursepack)  
A.H. Maslow – Section II of “A Theory of Human Motivation” (Coursepack)

**DAY NINE (Interpersonal Sources: Family/Relationships, Love, Maximizing Others’ Well-Being)**

Peter Singer – selections from *How Are We To Live?* (Coursepack)  
Emily Esfahani Smith – “There’s More to Life Than Being Happy”, *The Atlantic* (Coursepack)  
Zadie Smith – “Joy”, *The New York Review of Books* (Coursepack)  
D.C. Lau – Introduction to *The Analects of Confucius* (Coursepack)

**DAY TEN**

Derek Parfit – “What Makes Someone’s Life Go Best”, Appendix I from *Reasons and Persons* (Coursepack)  
Oprah Winfrey – eulogy for Rosa Parks (Coursepack)  
EulogySpeech.net – sample eulogy for a friend (Coursepack)  
Hugh Moorhead – selections from *The Meaning of Life* (Coursepack)  
(handout) Amazon reviews of Moorhead meaning of life collection  
(handout) Dalai Lama speech