

PHI 191: The Meaning of Life Fall 2022

Course description:

The past few years have been marked by crisis, and many of us feel disempowered and exhausted. But the Greek word κρίσις (krísis), from which our English word “crisis” comes, means “separation,” “decision,” “judgment,” and “a power of distinguishing.” A crisis, then, is a turning point with uncertain outcome. It is daunting, but it can also help us get a fresh perspective on what matters for us. In this course, we will use our moment(s) of crisis to think about what it can teach us about what matters in life. We will examine some of the most influential philosophical perspectives on the meaning of life:

- What is a good life?
- What is the role of justice for a meaningful life?
- What meaning do our lives gain from pain and suffering, happiness and joy, work and play, education, and faith?
- Does the meaning of life depend on the kinds of beings we think humans are? • Is our life meaningless because ultimately, we all die? Or is the end of human life a good thing, given the destruction humans cause to other living beings and the planet?

The philosophers we will discuss not only teach us how to live meaningful lives but also equip us with the skills to think independently and come to good judgments about what we value and how we want to live.

Access:

My goal is to make this course adaptive and flexible to ensure the course meets your needs. We will follow principles of Universal Design in Learning (UDL). This means that all required readings are available electronically and in accessible format; all videos are captioned; audio files include transcripts; alternative text is provided for all graphics. The use of technology is encouraged for the purpose of learning and building community in the classroom. Assignments are designed in order to allow for flexibility in completion. If you need accommodations beyond those covered under UDL, or beyond what is covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act, please let me know. **You do not need to disclose any personal information to receive accommodations.**

Course readings:

All readings are available electronically on Blackboard. Please bring a printed or electronic copy of the reading to class.

Assessment and grades:

This course uses a “total points” grading system. The maximum number of points you can collect towards your final grade over the course of the semester is 350. To earn a grade of A, you need a minimum of 300 points. This means that it is possible to earn a high grade without completing all assignments, or by receiving enough partial credit on all assignments. This model gives you flexibility in deciding which assignments you want to complete for the grade you want to earn. You can miss a few smaller assignments (or one bigger assignment) without jeopardizing your grade.

Please also note that the **deadlines for all reading/video responses are hard deadlines; no extensions will be given** for this type of assignment. This is because reading responses serve the pedagogical purpose of ensuring that all students have done the reading before class, thereby facilitating better understanding of the material and allowing for informed discussion. Keep in mind, too, that there are 120 students in this class, which makes extensions and exceptions very burdensome for instructors.

Week	Assignment	Assessment method	Max. credit	Due date
Week 1-15 SECTIONS	Check with your TA	Check with your TA	100	Check with your TA
Week 1	Syllabus Quiz	P/F	5	Sept 2, 11:59 P.M.
Week 2	Reading Response 2-1	P/F	5	Sept 6, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 2-2	P/F	5	Sept 8, 12:25 P.M.
Week 3	Reading Response 3-1	P/F	5	Sept 12, 12:25 P.M.
Week 4	Reading Response 4-1	P/F	5	Sept 20, 12:25 P.M.
	Video Response 4-2	P/F	5	Sept 22, 12:25 P.M.
Week 5	Reading Response 5-1	P/F	5	Sept 27, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 5-2	P/F	5	Sept 29, 12:25 P.M.
Week 6	Reading Response 6-1	P/F	5	Oct 4, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 6-2	P/F	5	Oct 6, 12:25 P.M.
Week 7	Reading Response 7-1	P/F	5	Oct 11, 12:25 P.M.

Week 8	Reading Response 8-1	P/F	5	Oct 18, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 8-2	P/F	5	Oct 20, 12:25 P.M.
Week 9	Mid-term	Graded	50	Oct 30, 11:59 P.M.
Week 10	Reading Response 10-1	P/F	5	Nov 1, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 10-2	P/F	5	Nov 3, 12:25 P.M.
Week 11	Reading Response 11-1	P/F	5	Nov 8, 12:25 P.M.

2

Week 12	Video Response 12-1	P/F	5	Nov 15, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 12-2	P/F	5	Nov 17, 12:25 P.M.
Week 15	Reading Response 15-1	P/F	5	Dec 6, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 15-2	P/F	5	Dec 8, 12:25 P.M.
Finals week	Final exam (cumulative)	Graded	100	Dec 14, 11:59 P.M.
Total max.			350	

Grade scale:

> 300	A	260–284	B+	230–239	C+	200–209	D+
285–299	A	250–259	B	220–229	C	180–199	D
		240–249	B	210–219	C	< 180	F

Grade grievances:

While effort is key to success in this course, grades do not primarily measure your effort but the outcome of your effort.

If you think you have been graded unfairly, you will need to take the following steps:

- (1) Wait 48 hours after receiving the grade before approaching your instructor.
- (2) Provide an explanation **in writing** for why the grade you received was unfair, considering the grading rubric above.
- (3) At the end of the semester, grades will be posted in the grade center on Blackboard to allow you to inquire about final grades **before** they are submitted to the registrar's office.

Course calendar: Changes are to be expected and will be communicated via email and on Blackboard.

Introducing the course

Week 1

Aug 30 Introductions

Sep 1 Read the syllabus carefully.

Sep 2 Discussion sections

The good life

Week 2

Sep 6 Read "Socrates' Defense"

3

Sep 8 Read "Socrates' Proposal for his Sentence" and "Socrates' Comments on his Sentence"

Sep 9 Discussion sections

The just life

Week 3

Sep 12 Read Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" Sep

15 No class. Instructor away for conference.

Sep 16 Discussion sections

The happy life

Week 4

Sep 20 Read Aristotle, selections from *Nicomachean Ethics*

Sep 22 Watch Toni Morrison, "Address to Rutgers University Graduating Class of 2011"

Sep 23 Discussion sections

The working life

Week 5

Sep 27 Watch David Graeber on bullshit jobs

Read Harry Frankfurt, "On Bullshit"

Sep 29 Read Karl Marx, "Alienated Labor"

Sep 30 Discussion sections

The life of play

Week 6

Oct 4 Read Moritz Schlick, "On the Meaning of Life"

Oct 6 Read John Wall, "All the World's a Stage: Childhood and the Play of Being"
(excerpts)

Oct 7 Discussion sections

The life of learning

Week 7

Oct 11 Read Robert Paul Wolff, "A Discourse on Grading"

Oct 13 No class. Instructor away for conference.

Oct 15 Discussion sections

Collective life

Week 8

Oct 18 Louis Pojman, *Who We Are* (excerpts)

Oct 20 Read Thomas Hobbes, introduction and chapter 13 of *Leviathan*

Oct 21 Discussion sections

Week 9

Oct 25 In-class movie TBA

Oct 27 In-class movie TBA

4

Oct 28 Discussion sections

The life of faith

Week 10

Nov 1 Read Pascal's Wager

Nov 3 Read Leo Tolstoy, "My Confession"

Nov 4 Discussion sections

The life of suffering

Week 11

Nov 8 Read Viktor Frankl, selections from *The Meaning of Life*

Nov 10 No class. Instructor away for conference.

Nov 11 Discussion sections

The end of life

Week 12

Nov 15 Watch Elizabeth Price Foley, *The Law of Life and Death*

Nov 17 Read Felipe Pereira & Travis Timmerman, "The (un)desirability of immortality"

Nov 18 Discussion sections

Week 13 Thanksgiving break.

The end of (human) life

Week 14

Nov 29 In-class movie: This Changes Everything

Dec 1 In-class movie: This Changes Everything

Dec 2 Discussion sections

Week 15

Dec 6 Read Kyle Whyte, "Way Beyond the Lifeboat: And Indigenous Allegory of Climate Justice"

Dec 8 Read Todd May, "Would Human Extinction Be a Tragedy?" Dec 9

Discussion sections, last day of instruction