
PHI 191: The Meaning of Life

Fall 2020

T, TH 12.30-1.25pm

LS 105

Instructor:

Dr. Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson (she/her)

Office: 524 Hall of Languages

Student office hours (in person or by Zoom): T 11am-12pm and by appointment

Email: verlenbu@syr.edu

NOTE: Your first point of contact for emails is your TA. I check email once per day M-F, usually in the late afternoon. Please keep in mind that you may receive a reply up to 24 hours after emailing me. I do not check email during weekends.

Course Information

Course Description

For the past 18 months, our lives have been marked by crisis: from a global pandemic to rampant unemployment, homelessness, natural disasters and extreme weather events, police violence, and the violent suppression of protests for democracy and racial justice. Crises such as these tend to make us feel disempowered and exhausted. But the Greek word κρίσις (krisis), 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 this moment of crisis to reflect on 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 as well as on the role of pain and suffering, happiness and joy, love and friendship, work and play, faith, and mortality for a meaningful life. 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.

Course Goals

Upon completion of this course, you should be able to:

- explain some of the most important philosophical positions about the meaning of life;

- explain how the views examined in this course apply to your own life;
- demonstrate an ability to read and analyze philosophical texts;
- formulate arguments about the meaning of life.

Course Materials

All texts are available electronically. Please have a printed or electronic copy of the reading available for class.

Access

To make sure the learning environment in this course is equitable and conducive to achievement and learning for all students, we will use a range of strategies.

Universal Design in Learning (UDL)

This course follows principles of Universal Design in Learning (UDL). This means, in the first place, 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. Assignments are designed to allow for flexibility in completion. **I encourage all students who require accommodations beyond those covered under UDL to contact me.**

If you need accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), you should pursue them with the Office of Disability Services (ODS) as soon as you can. The approval process might take some time, so please also reach out to me to make sure I know what your needs are and that they are met. **If you're struggling for reasons that are not covered by the ADA, please reach out to me as well.**

Keep in mind that a whole range of things can be disruptive to your learning experience. If you're experiencing any form of harassment or discrimination based on your sex, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or disability, or if you're the first in your family to go to college and need advice, please let me know!

If you face challenges securing basic needs such as food or a safe place to live and believe this may affect your performance, please notify me, if you are comfortable doing so. This will allow me to share any resources I may have.

Technology

Given the usefulness of technology to enhance accessibility, we will rely on electronic devices like laptops and smart phones as well as software available through SU. Such technology is not only an important part of our lives but also facilitates learning for people with different strengths and abilities as well as non-native speakers of English. So I encourage you to explore which technologies and methods help you think and

learn best.

Keep in mind, however, that we are creating a shared space for learning, and what works for you might not work for others. So let's be respectful of others' needs and mindful of how our use of technology might be a distraction for or simply unavailable to others. During discussion, this might mean that being tuned out because your device alerts you to new text messages, emails, tweets, or social media updates inhibits everyone's success because you're not doing your part in making this class as productive and interesting as it can be.

If you encounter a problem, please draw attention to it. Keep in mind that the problem is probably not being created intentionally and be generous in pointing out issues, obstacles, and challenges.

Student-centered learning

While I will do what I can to make this course an enjoyable, rewarding, and productive learning experience, I cannot do this by myself. **I will need your help**, so here are some of the things you should do to get the most out of our time together:

- **Take responsibility for your learning:** Be prepared, which not only means that you have completed the reading and annotated the text, have questions and comments about the reading, have a copy of the text in front of you, have your devices charged, but also that you had sufficient rest and nourishment to think. Take notes, participate, ask questions, seek clarification, engage with other students, complete assignments, and seek help. Explore the technologies we'll use, participate in activities, and familiarize yourself with the different ways in which you can access and enter into this course. Make use of office hours.
- **Share responsibility for creating and maintaining a space** in which we can try out ideas, graciously accept criticism, challenge each other, and push each other to become better thinkers and writers. We will need our collective creative energy to design useful and productive assignments, activities, and opportunities for learning.
- **Allow yourself to be frustrated** when you're distracted from learning by everything else going on around us, when the technology fails, or when we work through difficult material that is not immediately intelligible. But be gentle with yourself and others when frustration takes over. Thinking, like any other activity, requires practice to get better at it—especially when we engage in thinking under conditions of a global pandemic, even as we're slowly beginning to recover.

Communication

Any important announcements, advice, changes to the class schedule, etc. will be communicated by email and on Blackboard. Please get in the habit of regularly checking your institutional email account (that's your username@syr.edu) as well as Blackboard.

If you have questions about the class, you can stop by or Zoom in for office hours or make an appointment with me.

Email is often not the best medium to discuss questions and concerns. But if you do use email, your first point of contact is your TA. Please make sure you follow basic rules of professional communication and allow for a 24 hour response time on weekdays, longer during weekends.

Assignments and Assessment

All students are expected to carefully work through all course materials and participate actively in all components of this course, including lectures and discussion sections.

To determine your grade, we will use 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.

The following list of assignments and the maximum number of points you can earn for completing them successfully should help you plan your assignments:

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	Reading Response 1-1	P/F	5	Sept 2, 12:25 P.M.
	Quiz 1	P/F	5	Sept 12, 11:59 P.M.
Week 2	Assignment 1 (reflection paper)	Graded	25	Sept 12, 11:59 P.M.
	Reading Response 2-1	P/F	5	Sept 7, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 2-2	P/F	5	Sept 9, 12:25 P.M.
Week 3	Reading Response 3-1	P/F	5	Sept 14, 12:25 P.M.
	Audio Response 3-1	P/F	5	Sept 15, 11:59 P.M.
Week 4	Reading Response 4-1	P/F	5	Sept 21, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 4-2	P/F	5	Sept 23, 12:25 P.M.
Week 5	Reading Response 5-1	P/F	5	Sept 28, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 5-2	P/F	5	Sept 30, 12:25 P.M.
Week 6	Reading Response 6-1	P/F	5	Oct 5, 12:25 P.M.
	Episode Reflection 6-1	Graded	20	Oct 10, 11:59 P.M.

Week 7	Reading Response 7-1	P/F	5	Oct 12, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 7-2	P/F	5	Oct 14, 12:25 P.M.
Week 8	Reading Response 8-1	P/F	5	Oct 19, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 8-2	P/F	5	Oct 21, 12:25 P.M.
	Mid-term quiz	Graded	25	Oct 24, 11:59 P.M.
Week 9	Reading Response 9-1	P/F	5	Oct 26, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 9-2	P/F	5	Oct 28, 12:25 P.M.
Week 10	Reading Response 10-1	P/F	5	Nov 2, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 10-2	P/F	5	Nov 4, 12:25 P.M.
Week 11	Reading Response 11-1	P/F	5	Nov 9, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 11-2	P/F	5	Nov 11, 12:25 P.M.
Week 12	Reading Response 12-1	P/F	5	Nov 16, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 12-2	P/F	5	Nov 18, 12:25 P.M.
Week 14	Movie Reflection 14-1	Graded	15	Dec 5, 11:59 P.M.
Week 15	Reading Response 15-1	P/F	5	Dec 7, 12:25 P.M.
	Reading Response 15-2	P/F	5	Dec 9, 12:25 P.M.
FINAL	Assignment 2	Graded	40	Dec 15, 11:59 P.M.

Grade rubric and scale:

Points	Letter grade	Rubric
> 300	A	Grades in the A range indicate excellent scholarship, mastery of the course material, and exceptional performance in class. Work at this level demonstrates thorough and critical understanding of the issues and subtly summarizes the major issues while also offering insightful interpretations of the positions examined. Written assignments feature outstanding argumentation, organization, and writing (grammar, vocabulary, etc.) and only minor mistakes. Work at this level is clearly above and beyond expectations.
285-299	A-	
260-284	B+	Grades in the B range indicate above-average scholarship, proficiency with the course material, and good performance in class. Work at this level is not as creative or exegetical as A work, nor does it capture all the complexities of an issue.
250-259	B	

240-249	B-	Written work features thorough recapitulation of the text and/or
		discussion, adequate argumentation, organization, and writing, with few mistakes. Overall, work at this level is adequate.
230-239	C+	Grades in the C range indicate scholarship that meets the minimum requirements of college-level work, satisfactory command of the course material, and adequate performance in class. Work at this level demonstrates basic understanding of the material, marked by one or more significant errors or misreadings. Written work at this level may be confused and/or disorganized and may address lots of information without interpreting it.
220-229	C	
210-219	C-	
200-209	D+	Grades of D indicate inadequate or incomplete scholarship, unsatisfactory command of the course material, and poor performance in class. Work at this level demonstrates a very basic grasp of the course material, presented in a highly confused manner.
180-199	D	
< 180	F	The grade F is reserved for work that shows no comprehension of the material and/or wholly incomprehensible work.

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 Schedule

Changes to this schedule are to be expected and will be communicated via email and on Blackboard.

Date	Topic	Course materials (read, watch, or listen before class)
Aug 31	Introducing the course	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Read the syllabus carefully
Sep 2	Why take this course?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Reading TBD
Sep 3	Discussion sections	
Sep 7	The good life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Read “Socrates’ Defense”
Sep 9	The good life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Read “Socrates’ Proposal for his Sentence” and “Socrates’ Comments on his Sentence”
Sep 10	Discussion sections	
Sep 14	The curious life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Read Arjun Shankar & Perry Zurn, “A Brief History of Curiosity”
Sep 16	The curious life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Listen to Perry Zurn, “Curiosity Is Political”
Sep 17	Discussion sections	
Sep 21	The just life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Read Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”
Sep 23	The just life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Cont’d.
Sep 24	Discussion sections	
Sep 28	The happy life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Read Aristotle, selections from Nicomachean Ethics
Sep 30	The happy life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Read John Stuart Mill, “What Utilitarianism Is”
Oct 1	Discussion sections	
Oct 5	The happy life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Read Zadie Smith, “Joy”
Oct 7	The happy life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">In-class movie
Oct 8	Discussion sections	

Oct 12	The working life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch David Graeber on bullshit jobs • Read Karl Marx, “Alienated Labor”
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Oct 14	The working life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Moritz Schlick, “On the Meaning of Life”
Oct 15	Discussion sections	
Oct 19	The working life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Sarah Jaffe, “It’s all fun and games”
Oct 21	The working life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Sarah Jaffe, “What is love?”
Oct 22	Discussion sections	
Oct 26	Collective life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Carrie Jenkins, “Love isn’t about happiness”
Oct 28	Collective life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Thomas Hobbes, selections from <i>Leviathan</i>
Oct 29	Discussion sections	
Nov 2	The life of faith	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Pascal’s Wager
Nov 4	The life of faith	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Leo Tolstoy, “My Confession”
Nov 5	Discussion sections	
Nov 9	Pain and suffering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Seneca, selections from <i>Moral Letters to Lucilius</i>
Nov 11	Pain and suffering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Viktor Frankl, selections from <i>The Meaning of Life</i>
Nov 12	Discussion sections	
Nov 16	The end of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch Elizabeth Price Foley, <i>The Law of Life and Death</i>
Nov 18	The end of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Felipe Pereira & Travis Timmerman, “The (un)desirability of immortality”
Nov 19	Discussion sections	
Nov 23	Thanksgiving break	
Nov 25		
Nov 26		
Nov 30	The end of (human) life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-class movie: This Changes Everything

Dec 2	The end of (human) life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cont'd.
Dec 3	Discussion sections	
Dec 7	The end of (human) life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Kyle Whyte, "Way Beyond the Lifeboat: And Indigenous Allegory of Climate Justice"

Dec 9	The end of (human) life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Todd May, "Would Human Extinction Be a Tragedy?"
Dec 10	Discussion sections, last day of instruction	
Dec 27	Grade reporting deadline	