The Meaning of Life (PHI 191)

Room 216 (765 Irving Ave) Tuesday/Thursday 12:30-1:25pm

Josh Hunt (jhunt11@syr.edu)

Office Hours: Tuesday 2-2:50pm; Thursday 3-3:50pm

529 Hall of Languages

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Course Description (link to Schedule of Course Readings)

We will endeavor to discover the meaning of life. It is unlikely that we will provide an answer that satisfies everyone. Some of you will be disposed to find certain answers much more satisfying than others. Some of you will stubbornly refuse to find any answer satisfying. By the end of the course, you will hopefully be able to either (i) defend a positive account of the meaning of life or (ii) argue that the question is not well-posed. We will endeavor to dissuade anyone from believing that our lives lack value: we all have a lot to live for! At the very least, there are decisive reasons to have hope.

Historical description, from our esteemed course catalog: "Philosophical reflection on the question: *what is the meaning of life*? Surveys some of the most influential answers thinkers have given to this question, including God, happiness, work, action, play, mortality, and the absence of meaning [*gasp*!]"

Learning Goals:

- Learn about common sources of value and happiness, along with the nature of value!
- Practice identifying premises and intermediate conclusions of arguments, via careful reading
- Practice schematizing arguments into premise–conclusion form
- Learn how to object to a relatively weak premise of an argument, and object to your objection
- Become a more clear, thoughtful writer
- Become comfortable with critical dialogue in real time, learning how to be polite always

No Required Course Materials

No course fees; no additional costs! All readings will be posted on the *Blackboard* course webpage.

Key Assignment Due Dates (put these in your phones!!!)

Roughly every Thursday evening, a reading quiz will be due on *Blackboard*. **No extensions**!

Attempt EVERY quiz if you're aiming for an A in the course!	Thurs. Sep. 5th	First Reading Quiz	due 11pm
	Thurs. Sep. 12th	Second Reading Quiz	due 11pm
	Each Thursday	Quizzes 3 thru 9	due 11pm
	Thurs. Nov. 7th	10th Reading Quiz	due 11pm
Mandatory!	Thurs. Nov. 14th	Midterm Exam!	IN-CLASS EXAM!!!
	Thurs. Nov. 21	11th Reading Quiz	due 11pm
	Thurs. Dec. 5th	12th Reading Quiz	due 11pm

Choose **ONE** of the following:	Tues. Dec. 10th	Final Paper	due 11pm
	Mon. Dec. 16th	Final Exam! (12:45pm)	Location TBD

Course Requirements

1. *Reading Quizzes* (12 quizzes; 10-15 points each; 150 points total): Each Thursday, complete a reading quiz on that week's readings, so that you are prepared to discuss them in discussion section on Friday. Quizzes are due BEFORE discussion section, to prevent these sections from turning into boring, dull, and dreary attempts to get answers out of your instructors.

2. *Midterm exam* (Nov. 14th; 50 points): Most likely it will comprise a mix of multiple-choice questions and short answer. I will provide details in advance. We aim to defeat ChatGPT.

3. *Final paper or Final exam* (choose exactly one! See due dates below. 80 points):
    a. Final Paper (due Tuesday, December 10th, 11pm Eastern): write a 1500-1800 word essay, defending an answer to the question "What is the meaning of life?"
    b. Final Exam (Monday, December 16th; 12:45pm to 2:45pm): Will be similar in structure to the midterm. We aim to annihilate ChatGPT. Note: if you cannot attend the Final Exam in person (e.g. due to travel), you will *have to* write the paper.

4. *Participation in Discussions and Lecture* (from 10 to 120 points): earn 2 points every time you attend lecture (27 lecture meetings) and up to 4 points every time you actively participate in discussion section (14 meetings).

A note on attendance: per University policies, attendance is mandatory (as if you didn't want to come to class anyways!). Rather than track excusable absences, everyone will be granted 10 freebie points to use for sick days, religious observances, extra-curricular travel, emergencies, or days missed because you joined the class late. Hence, if you miss a lecture or discussion section for a legit reason, please *resist the urge* to email asking to make up points. Unless you end up having an *extended, multi-week* emergency, religious observance(s), or sports travel, there are ***no excused*** **absences**. This is a uniform policy across the sections.

Grade Breakdown:

- Reading Quizzes: 37.5%
- ☺ Midterm: 12.5%
- ♥ Final Paper or Final Exam: 20%
- Participation in Discussions and Lecture: 30%

Letter grade:	Minimum Points needed for this letter grade:	Max Points:	Percent of total points needed:
A	**350**	400	87.5%
A-	**330**	349.99	82.5%
B+	**316**	329.99	79.0%
B	**304**	315.99	76.0%
B-	**292**	303.99	73.0%
C+	**280**	291.99	70.0%
C	**268**	279.99	67.0%
C-	**256**	267.99	64.0%

D	**216**	255.99	54.0%
F	<	215.99	

GRADING TABLE AND CORRESPONDING GRADE POINTS:
330 ≤ A- < 350 ≤ A (3.667 and 4 grade points, respectively)
292 ≤ B- < 304 ≤ B < 316 ≤ B+ (2.667, 3.0, and 3.333 grade points, respectively)
256 ≤ C- < 268 ≤ C < 280 ≤ C+ (1.667, 2.0 and 2.333 grade points, respectively)
F (i.e. no credit) < 216 ≤ D (i.e. 1 grade point) < 256 points
"Pass" grades for pass/fail option require a grade of C or higher (excludes C-)

Course Schedule & Readings

Readings listed for a class meeting should be completed *before* that meeting. You are expected to discuss readings in discussion section. All readings will be linked on the *Blackboard* course webpage.

The reading schedule is linked here. It may be updated as the semester progresses, particularly with supplementary articles or media that might enrich your pursuit of the meaning of life.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

Students convicted of cheating in this course will receive *at most* a C. Forms of cheating include (but are not limited to) hiring someone to complete an assignment for you, using an AI algorithm to partially write or complete an assignment, and using someone else's work to complete an assignment (e.g. submitting work from past versions of this course). If there are some other fancy ways to cheat, I would appreciate learning about them. Let me know, and you'll receive some goodwill!

All generative-AI tools are prohibited in this course because their use inhibits achievement of the course learning objectives. This policy applies to all stages of project and writing processes including researching, brainstorming, outlining, organizing, and polishing. Do not use Generative-AI tools to create any content (i.e., images and video, audio, text, code, etc.). If you have any questions about a feature and whether it is considered Generative-AI, ask your instructor.

What are some rationales for not cheating? Instrumentally, there will be two in-class exams where it will be very difficult to cheat. Better to practice these skills the old-fashioned way! More distant in your futures (but still instrumentally): if you land a job through cheating your way through school, you could end up being uncomfortable conversing with your co-workers in meetings or solving problems in real time with them. You might worry that your co-workers will eventually expose you as a fraud. Basically, it'd be super annoying to not be able to solve problems in real time and always need to google or ChatGPT things. Imagine having a co-worker who refused to answer even simple questions before consulting a bot. That would be pretty strange, and you'd probably think they're unqualified for their job. At any rate, it's no way to live your life!

Cheaters, you will be found out!

Diversity, Disability, and Inclusivity:

In all course-related activities and communications, you will be treated with respect. I welcome individuals of all ages, backgrounds, beliefs, ethnicities, genders, gender identities, gender expressions, military backgrounds, national origins, religious affiliations, sexual orientations, ability, and other visible and non-visible differences. All members of this class are expected to help create a welcoming and inclusive environment for every other member of the class who respects this policy.

If you are a student with learning needs that require special accommodation, contact The Center for Disability Resources (CDR) at **disabilityresources@syr.edu** as soon as possible, to make an appointment to discuss your needs and to obtain an accommodations letter. Please e-mail me as soon as possible to set up a time to discuss your learning needs. As someone who has used these services in the past, you can assume that I will be HIGHLY sympathetic! A link to CDR resources.

In case the preceding left any room for doubt: Syracuse University values diversity and inclusion; we are committed to a climate of mutual respect and full participation. There may be aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion and full participation in this course. I invite any student to contact me to discuss strategies and/or accommodations (academic adjustments) that may be essential to your success and to collaborate with the Center for Disability Resources (CDR) in this process. If you would like to discuss disability-accommodations or register with CDR, please visit their website at https://disabilityresources.syr.edu/, call (315) 443-4498, or email disabilityresources@syr.edu for more detailed information.

> The CDR is responsible for coordinating disability-related academic accommodations and will work with the student to develop an access plan. Since academic accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact CDR as soon as possible to begin this process.

Links to Additional Syracuse University Policies:

- Code of Student Conduct
- Academic Integrity Documents and Report Process (and a free quiz! Gee whiz!)
- Religious Observances Notification Policy
- Orange Success
- Use of Turnitin

If you are interested in some introductory books on philosophy or the meaning of life, see below:

- Kolak and Martin (1995), *Wisdom without Answers: A Brief Introduction to Philosophy*.
- Nagel (1987), *What does it all Mean?: A very Short Introduction to Philosophy*.
- Blackstone (1971), *Meaning and Existence: Introductory Readings in Philosophy*.

Academic Integrity (Part 2):

As a pre-eminent and inclusive student-focused research institution, Syracuse University considers academic integrity at the forefront of learning, serving as a core value and guiding pillar of

education. Syracuse University's Academic Integrity Policy provides students with the necessary guidelines to complete academic work with integrity throughout their studies. Students are required to uphold both course-specific and university-wide academic integrity expectations such as crediting your sources, doing your own work, communicating honestly, and supporting academic integrity. The full Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy can be found by visiting class.syr/edu, selecting, "Academic Integrity," and "Expectations and Policy."

Upholding academic integrity includes the protection of faculty's intellectual property. Students should not upload, distribute, or share instructors' course materials, including presentations, assignments, exams, or other evaluative materials without permission. Using websites that charge fees or require uploading of course material to obtain exam solutions or assignments completed by others, which are then presented as your own violates academic integrity expectations in this course and may be classified as a Level 3 violation. All academic integrity expectations that apply to in-person assignments, quizzes, and exams also apply online.

Students found in violation of this policy are subject to grade sanctions determined by the course instructor and non-grade sanctions determined by the School or College where the course is offered. Students may not drop or withdraw from courses in which they face a suspected violation. Any established violation in this course may result in course failure regardless of violation level.

Blackboard:

This class will use the Blackboard Learning Management to house the syllabus, course content, links to external course materials, assignments, quizzes, exams, feedback, and grades. When submitting materials that the University's Blackboard Learning Management System is on Eastern Time. Information about Blackboard is available on Answers Blackboard; alternatively, you can contact Information Technology Services by sending an email to help@syr.edu, calling 315.443.2677, or in-person at the ITS Service Center, located at 1-227 CST in the Life Sciences Complex. Business hours for the Service Center can be found on the ITS Website at http://its.syr.edu/its_service_center/

Discrimination or Harassment:

The University does not discriminate and prohibits harassment or discrimination related to any protected category including creed, ethnicity, citizenship, sexual orientation, national origin, sex, gender, pregnancy, disability, marital status, age, race, color, veteran status, military status, religion, sexual orientation, domestic violence status, genetic information, gender identity, gender expression or perceived gender.

Any complaint of discrimination or harassment related to any of these protected bases should be reported to Sheila Johnson-Willis, the University's Chief Equal Opportunity & Title IX Officer. She is responsible for coordinating compliance efforts under various laws including Titles VI, VII, IX and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. She can be contacted at Equal Opportunity, Inclusion, and Resolution Services, 005 Steele Hall, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244-1120; by email: titleix@syr.edu; or by telephone: 315-443-0211.