

THE MEANING OF LIFE
SYLLABUS
Winter 2021

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Course Description

From an early age, I would stay awake after going to bed, thinking about the point of it all, about whether my existence means anything, and about whether death will rob my life of all meaning. I thought about innocent people caught in the crossfire of civil wars, about the ravages of diseases for which there are no cures, about deaths that result from natural disasters, or simply from inattention (e.g., driving while texting). Later, I faced the death of close family members, human beings cut down in the prime of life. And, because I am middle-aged, I now spend more time thinking about the limited time that I have left, about the inevitable decline of my physical powers and mental faculties, and about how death may mean total extinction with no prospect of survival. If my life has meaning, that is at least some form of consolation. But perhaps it doesn't. Perhaps it is possible to lead a happy or fulfilled life, but not a meaningful life. And even if life does have meaning, what *is* that meaning and is it possible to acquire it?

The purpose of this course is to consider whether human life has meaning, and, if so, what meaning it has and under what conditions such meaning may be secured. We begin with various negative thoughts: that life is nothing but suffering unto death for no purpose, that life has no meaning, or that life is absurd. We then discuss various positive answers to the meaning-of-life question: that meaning derives from the cessation of suffering, or from authoritativeness and ritual, or from free choices, or from some passion or commitment, or from spirituality or something transcendent, or from human relationships or purposeless play or open-ended activities. We will consider whether the meaning of life derives from some connection with morality, or creativity, or fundamentality. We will spend some time thinking about one of the more influential recent theories of life's meaning: Susan Wolf's "fitting fulfillment" view. And we will end the course by examining whether life has meaning only when it has a coherent narrative structure, and whether the survival of humanity is necessary for individual lives to have meaning.

Required Texts

MOL: E. D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn, *The Meaning of Life: A Reader*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

MIL: Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*. Princeton University Press, 2010.

DAA: Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

Other course readings will be made available either as links on this syllabus or on **Canvas**.

Warnings

1. Some of the course readings discuss suicide and examples of suicide, whether in real life or in fiction. If you think that this is something that will or may cause you to experience a traumatic episode, please speak with me in person as soon as possible.
2. Many authors of assigned readings for this course use gendered language to talk about human beings in general, sometimes use gendered language as if the only people who matter are men, sometimes presuppose that there are only two genders/sexes, and sometimes presuppose that parents must be of different genders/sexes. On occasion, you may find some authors using language that presupposes ethnic or racial stereotypes. These authors were creatures of their time, and were not sufficiently enlightened to transcend the assumptions with which they were raised or that dominated their social circles. It will be up to us to decide whether the prejudices of these authors infected their views about life's meaning, and give us reasons to reject those views.

Course Schedule

January 4: Introduction: Meaning, Happiness, and the Good Life

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene 5: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow..." – <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56964/speech-tomorrow-and-tomorrow-and-tomorrow>

William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene 7: "All the world's a stage..." – <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56966/speech-all-the-worlds-a-stage>

January 6: Nihilism and Pessimism

Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Sufferings of the World" (**MOL**, pp. 43-48)

Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Vanity of Existence" –

http://www.sophia-project.org/uploads/1/3/9/5/13955288/schopenhauer_vanity.pdf

Giacomo Leopardi, "Dialogue Between Nature and an Icelander" –

https://digilander.libero.it/il_leopardi/translate_english/leopardi_dialogue_between_nature_and_a_icelander.html

January 8: Scorn in the Face of Absurdity

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (**MOL**, pp. 66-75)

January 11: Irony in the Face of Absurdity

Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd" (**MOL**, pp. 137-146)

January 13: Buddhism: The Cessation of Suffering

Christopher W. Gowans, "The Buddha's Message" (**MOL**, pp. 27-34)

January 15: Confucianism: Authoritativeness and Ritual

Henry Rosemont Jr., "The Confucian Way" (**MOL**, pp. 35-40)

Richard Kim and Joshua W. Seachris, "Confucius and the Meaning of Life" (**Canvas**)
(**Experiment in Living Proposal Due Before Lecture**)

January 18: **NO CLASS – MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY**

January 20: Radical Freedom

Required: Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism”

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>

Recommended (but not required): David Foster Wallace, “This is Water” (excerpt)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eC7xzavzEKY>

January 22: Inner Compulsion

Richard Taylor, “The Meaning of Life” (**MOL**, pp. 128-136)

January 25: Play

Moritz Schlick, “On the Meaning of Life” (**MOL**, pp. 56-65)

January 27: Self-Fulfillment

Joel Feinberg, “Absurd Self-Fulfillment” (**MOL**, pp. 163-175)

January 29: Creativity

Richard Taylor, “The Meaning of Human Existence” (**Canvas**)

February 1: Poetry

John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, Chapter 5, excerpt (**Canvas**)

William Wordsworth, *Intimations of Immortality*

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45536/ode-intimations-of-immortality-from-recollections-of-early-childhood>

William Wordsworth, *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey...*

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45527/lines-composed-a-few-miles-above-tintern-abbey-on-revisiting-the-banks-of-the-wye-during-a-tour-july-13-1798>

February 3: The Example of Christ

John Cottingham, “Meaningful Life”

<https://www.johncottingham.co.uk/resources/Meaningful-Life.pdf>

February 5: Ein Sof

Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, pp. 585-610 (**Canvas**)

February 8: Morality

Laurence Thomas, “Morality and a Meaningful Life” (**Canvas**)

February 10: Morality and Ideals

William James, “What Makes a Life Significant”

<https://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/jsignificant.html>

February 12: Transcendence and Knowledge of the Good

Joe Mintoff, “Transcending Absurdity” (**Canvas**)

February 15: **NO CLASS – PRESIDENTS’ DAY**

February 17: Projects

Neil Levy, “Downshifting and Meaning in Life” (**Canvas**)

February 19: Effective Pattern Imposition

Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith, “On Luck, Responsibility, and the Meaning of Life” (**Canvas**)

February 22: The Fitting Fulfillment View

Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life*, chapter 1 (**MIL**, pp. 1-33)

February 24: Why Meaning in Life Matters

Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life*, chapter 2 (**MIL**, pp. 34-63)

February 26: Objections and Replies

Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life*, Comments and Response (**MIL**, pp. 67-132)

March 1: Meaning and Narrative 1

Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity” (**Canvas**)

(Description and Evaluation for the Experiment in Living Due Before Lecture)

March 3: Meaning and Narrative 2

Helena De Bres, “Narrative and Meaning in Life” (**Canvas**)

March 5: The Importance of the Survival of Humanity 1

Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, lecture 1 (**DAA**, pp. 15-49)

March 8: The Importance of the Survival of Humanity 2

Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, lecture 2 (**DAA**, pp. 51-81)

March 10: The Importance of the Survival of Humanity 3: Objections and Replies

Susan Wolf, “The Significance of Doomsday” (**DAA**, pp. 113-129)

Harry Frankfurt, “How the Afterlife Matters” (**DAA**, pp. 131-141)

Samuel Scheffler, “Death, Value, and the Afterlife: Responses” (**DAA**, pp. 177-191)

March 12: Conclusion: What’s the Point of it All?

Course Assessment (ALL ASSIGNMENTS NEED TO BE POSTED ON CANVAS)

Reflections on Course Readings	25%	(15 total: 100-200 words each)
Experiment in Living Proposal	0%	(due January 15)
Experiment in Living: Description/Evaluation	25%	(due March 1)
Take-Home Final Examination	50%	(due March 18, 5pm)

Course Assessment Details

1. Reflections on Course Readings

It is **imperative** that you read **all** the assigned course material **in advance** of lecture. Although you will sometimes find me lecturing, I will be asking **you** questions about the assigned course material, questions that I **expect** you to be able to answer (or, at least, try to answer). It is also possible that I will ask you to engage in **in-class activities** directly related to the readings assigned for that day. If you have read the course material for that day, you will derive far more from the in-class activities than if you have not read it. Education is not a passive process, but rather a process of active and thoughtful engagement with what you read and experience. If you expect or want this course to involve quasi-mechanically writing things down that I have written on a Powerpoint slide, then you should change your expectations or take a different course. Reflections on the course readings are designed to push you to **think** about what you are reading. In 100-200 words, explain what you take to be an important point or argument advocated by the author of the text, and then react to it philosophically in some way, either by giving a further argument for it (not already found in the text) or by objecting to it (in a way not already anticipated in the text). In each case, the purpose of your reflection is to take the conversation one step further in the direction of the truth. You will need to write **fifteen** reflections during the quarter. Every reflection that is in response to the reading for a particular lecture is due **before** lecture (no exceptions). It is up to you which readings you wish to reflect on. Unless you are facing a serious illness or personal emergency or personal obligation that makes it impossible for you to write all fifteen reflections, **you will not be excused for completing fewer than fifteen reflections**. If you do face a serious illness or personal emergency or personal obligation of this sort, **you need to inform me of it as soon as possible**. Each reflection will receive an A, B, C, D, or F grade. If you hand in x number of reflections, where $x < 15$, you will receive $15-x$ grades of F on your reflections. For example, if you hand in 10 reflections total, then 5 of your 15 required reflections will automatically receive a grade of F.

Whatever you do, read the course material in preparation for every lecture, regardless of whether you decide to write a reflection for that lecture.

2. Experiment in Living: Description and Evaluation

In Chapter 3 of *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), the British philosopher and political economist, writes of “experiments of living”, to which he elsewhere refers as “experiments in living”. An experiment in living is a self-conscious attempt to lead one’s life in a particular way. Mill thought that people should be free to try out different experiments in living, consistent with not harming themselves or others.

In this course, you will be required to engage in something that **resembles** what Mill describes. You must pick **an activity in which you have not previously engaged**, something you might have wanted to try but never got around to doing, or something that you have never previously thought of doing, and do it. Do not pick something that is close to something that you have already done. (For example, if you have already learned how to play the guitar, don’t pick “learning how to play the banjo” as your activity. If you have already volunteered at non-profit

institution A, then don't pick "volunteering at non-profit institution B" as your activity.) The point here is for you to choose an activity that is truly unlike anything you have done before.

The activity should be extended over time, lasting at least four weeks, and not merely a one-time occurrence. It should be regular. This means that it could involve several hours once a week, or smaller chunks of time every day. It should be something that you think might add meaning to your life. The activity need not be something that ends up adding meaning to your life, and you should not presume that your evaluation of it must be positive. **The proposal for your Experiment in Living is due on Friday, January 15, before Lecture.**

The following are very important constraints on the type of activity:

1. **The activity must not be in any way dangerous in itself, whether to yourself or to others.**
2. **The activity must not violate any local, state, or federal laws.**
3. **The activity must involve appropriate respect for yourself and for others.**
4. **The activity must fall within the guidelines of appropriate behavior expected of UC San Diego Students, according to the Student Code of Conduct, see esp. Section VII: <https://students.ucsd.edu/files/student-conduct/uc-san-diego-student-conduct-code-10-9-18.pdf>**

You need to chronicle the experience of the activity, in something like real time. This is the **Description**. This could take the form of a diary or an account written after the fact. At the conclusion of the experience, you will need to write about it and evaluate it, in light of what you have read in the course up to that point. This is the **Evaluation**. Everything included in the **D&E** must be presented in English prose: sentence fragments and bullet points are not permitted. No more than one-third of your paper should be devoted to the **Description**. So, at least two-thirds of your paper should be devoted to the **Evaluation**.

Your D&E must be between 2500 words and 3500 words long, double spaced, with one inch margins, and 12 point font. There should be a separate title page with your name and the word count on it, and your name should not appear anywhere else in your D&E (not in headers or footers). Your D&E should be uploaded to Canvas as a single document in a format that Canvas accepts (preferably Microsoft Word or PDF), and the deadline for upload is **before lecture on Monday, March 1**.

In the **Evaluation** portion of your essay, you need to consider what THREE different theories of life's meaning (among those we have studied in the course) would say about the meaning-conferring potential of your activity. In order to do a good job with this, you need to describe those three theories, explain what they take to be necessary and sufficient for life to have meaning, and then discuss whether those theories would count your activity as meaning-conferring. You should then consider whether you found your activity in the experiment in living to be meaning-conferring, and explain whether your evaluation of the activity speaks in favor or against each of the three theories of life's meaning. For example, if you think your activity was meaning-conferring but you find that exactly two of the three theories entail that your activity should not have been meaning-conferring, then you should conclude that your activity speaks against those two theories but in favor of the third. The purpose of the

Evaluation is to display your understanding of three theories of life's meaning, and apply that understanding to the particular activity in which you engaged in your experiment in living. In each case, you need to explain which aspects or features of your activity are relevant to the confirmation or disconfirmation of each of the three theories. Be sure, then, to include those aspects or features in your initial **Description**. If you can, pick three theories of life's meaning that would not all deliver the same verdict with respect to your activity. In other words, look for three theories that would not all entail that your activity is meaning-conferring, and look for three theories that would not all entail that your activity is not meaning-conferring. Please note that if you pick three theories that all deliver the same verdict about your experiment in living, but there is at least one theory on the syllabus up to and including Susan Wolf's theory that actually delivers a different verdict, then this will cost you points. This means that you need to have a good understanding of the positive theories of life's meaning up to the end of week eight.

The Description and Evaluation is due on Monday, March 1 before Lecture.

3. Take-Home Final Examination

This examination (due on **Thursday, March 18 before 5pm**) will consist of one or two papers, and will be based on a prompt provided at least one week ahead of time. You will not be able to answer the prompt questions unless you have read all the course material and have attended the course lectures.

Attendance, Lecture Participation, Accommodations, Honor Code

- **Regular synchronous lecture attendance is mandatory, unless you have a good reason to be absent from lecture as a result of the COVID-19 crisis or as a result of personal emergency. Lectures will be recorded for students who have a good reason to be absent from lecture, and lectures will be made available as soon as possible after they are concluded. Good reasons to be absent from lecture as a result of the COVID-19 crisis include: being in a time zone that makes it seriously inconvenient to attend lecture; needing to care for a dependent during lecture; being at work as an essential worker during lecture; being at work as a non-essential worker who needs to work during lecture because the COVID-19 crisis took away other sources of income; having no internet access or very unstable internet access during lecture; and being in a home environment that makes it practically impossible to attend lecture synchronously without excessive distraction. Good reasons to be absent from lecture as a result of personal emergency include: participation in an important family (zoom) gathering, such as a wedding or funeral; serious illness or incapacitation; needing to care for a small child, or for someone who is seriously ill or incapacitated. If you want to skip synchronous lecture attendance for all or part of the course, and you think you have good reason to do so, you must contact me by email in advance (preferably, well in advance) of the first day of the course to explain exactly when you would prefer to be absent from lecture and why. If you are unable to attend lecture synchronously as a result of a personal emergency,**

please contact me as soon as you can to let me know why you will be (or were) absent.

- **Synchronous lecture participation norms: I expect students in this course who attend lectures synchronously to participate and to engage in discussion with me and with each other. Your camera and microphone should be on, so that your face is visible to me and the other students, unless you have a poor internet connection or you are unable to find a location that enables you to maintain sufficient privacy. During lecture, I expect you to be fully present. This means that you should not be communicating with another person during lecture unless I ask you to do so, you should not be playing games or watching videos or working on a different course or otherwise doing something that will take your focus away from the lecture, and you should not leave the lecture except in case of emergency. I will occasionally talk for a while, but I will occasionally ask you questions with the expectation that you will answer them. In order to get something from the course, you need to be following what I am saying and be actively involved in thinking about it. I also encourage you to ask questions (or make comments) directly related to the course content under discussion, even when I have not prompted you explicitly to answer a question. One of the advantages of Zoom is that it permits you to ask questions both in person and by using the Chat function. If you would like to ask a question in person, simply raise your hand using the Raise Hand function in the Participants space, and I will call on you as soon as I can. If you would like to ask a question using the Chat function, please do so anytime by making your question visible to all, unless the question is private. I will consider your question as soon as I am able, but it may take me a little longer to get to a Chat question than to a Raised Hand question. If I forget to check the Chat, please remind me. If a student posts a question on Chat, please do not respond to it in Chat: it will take me too long to follow or catch up to a parallel thread on Chat. If I find a question in Chat, I may address it myself or open it up for responses from all students. If I do the latter, please don't hesitate to raise your hand and contribute to discussion. I may occasionally assign you (randomly) to Breakout Rooms in Zoom to discuss a question or engage in an activity, and I will trust you to stay focused on the question or the activity during the Breakout Sessions. My aim is to make the experience as close to a real time lecture as possible.**
- **The academic honor code must be observed in this course. Plagiarism will not be tolerated. Anyone caught plagiarizing will receive an automatic F in the course (not just an F on the relevant assignment) and will be referred to the Office of Academic Integrity and the Council of Deans for administrative penalties, which may include suspension or expulsion from UCSD. In Canvas, there is a tool that takes you to the Academic Integrity Website for UCSD, where you will find answers to questions you may have about academic integrity at UCSD, including helpful answers to questions about plagiarism. You may also find website link here (<https://academicintegrity.ucsd.edu>).**

- If you find yourself in need of psychological counseling and you do not already have a counselor, please check in with Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS): <https://wellness.ucsd.edu/CAPS/Pages/default.aspx>
- If you need a letter of accommodation because of a disability, please contact the Office for Students with Disabilities (<https://osd.ucsd.edu>) and provide me with the letter as soon as possible (preferably before the first lecture). Concerning the letter, please contact me to arrange a Zoom meeting by appointment.
- If you have a religious obligation or you are participating in an official UCSD-sponsored or UCSD-student-organization-sponsored event that you know will conflict with anything related to this course, please let me know as soon as possible. I will do my best to accommodate you.
- If you need help with your writing, please think of using the following resources:

The Writing Hub at the Teaching and Learning Commons:

<https://writinghub.ucsd.edu>

OASIS: <https://oasis.ucsd.edu>