

Philosophy 147: Death and the Meaning of Life

January Interim, 2013

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Office hours: M-F, 3-4pm, and by appointment.

Class email alias: 2012-13-interim-philosophy-147@stolaf.edu

An introduction to philosophical ideas and methods through reading, discussing, and writing about some basic questions that arise when we reflect on the human condition. What is meant by “meaning” when one asks whether (a person’s) life has meaning? How do our beliefs about human nature, religion, and morality affect how we ask or answer the question? What is the role of work and vocation in living a meaningful life? How does the fact that we inevitably will die or that our universe eventually will disappear affect one’s outlook? We will analyze classical and contemporary writings--philosophical and autobiographical--to develop clearer, more informed, and better reasoned views about the questions, if not the answers. Since some important conflicts are likely to arise, we will discuss the ethics of compromise and the difficulties of living a principled and committed life in a pluralistic society that requires appropriate toleration and even respect for views with which one disagrees.

Texts include Leo Tolstoy’s *Confession* (T) and *Great Short Works of Leo Tolstoy* (LT), Thomas Morris’ *Making Sense of It All* (M), Victor Frankl’s *Man’s Search For Meaning* (F), Langdon Gilkey’s *Shantung Compound* (G), E.D. Klemke’s (and Steven Cahn) anthology *The Meaning of Life*, 3rd ed. (K), Langerak’s *Civil Disagreement: Personal Integrity in a Pluralistic World* (L) and handouts (H). This course satisfies the WRI requirement so you should have easy access to a writing guide, such as those used in English 11.

Student contributions: (1) Regular attendance and participation (10% of course grade); (2) Six response paragraphs and questions (100-200 words), due by e-mail before 10am on either even dates (last name A-J) or odd dates (last name K-Z:) (10%); (3) Quizzes (5%); (4) Test on Jan 13, (15%); (5) Dialogue inquiries: a shorter paper due Jan 18 (10%) and a longer paper due Jan 30 (25%); and (6) Final exam (25%). Please do not eat food in class (beverage is fine).

Websites: This web site is an excellent encyclopedia with articles on most of the thinkers, concepts, and topics that we discuss: <http://plato.stanford.edu/contents.html>

This comprehensive site has many resources and links: <http://dir.yahoo.com/arts/humanities/philosophy>

This is an excellent philosophy encyclopedia: <http://plato.stanford.edu/contents.html#r>

Here are two excellent annotated bibliographies from the Oxford site, one on death and the other on the meaning of life:

<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396577/obo-9780195396577-0028.xml?rskey=nmJKE9&result=22&q=>

<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396577/obo-9780195396577-0070.xml?rskey=xXFb38&result=76&q=>

Honesty: here are some links to St Olaf’s policy on academic integrity and the honor system:

<http://www.stolaf.edu/stulife/thebook/academic/integrity.html>

<http://www.stolaf.edu/stulife/thebook/academic/honor.html>

Academic accommodations: Any student with a documented disability needing academic accommodations should talk with me during the first three days of class. All discussions will remain confidential.

Schedule

January 3: Introduction to philosophy. References to sections of L1, which should be read today.

- 4: Crisis of meaning; suicide? T, I-VIII; M, 1-4; Epicurus (H); Poems (H); Epictetus (H); Melchert (H); Buddhism (H). Recommend: *Ecclesiastes* (Bible). **E**

- 7: Searching and “wagering”. T, IX-XII; M, 5-7. Recommend: Descartes (H); Pojman (K3). **O**
- 8: Tolstoy’s effort. T, XIII-XVI; Tolstoy’s “Father Sergius” (LT); Quinn (K5). **E**
- 9: Tolstoy’s “Death of Ivan Illich” (LT). **O**
- 10: Pluralism. L2; Christian (H); Nussbaum and Barber (H); Bok (H). **E**
- 11: Civil Disagreement. L3&4. **O**

- 14: Frankl’s experience. F, “Experiences in a Concentration Camp.” Debate about using *Man’s Search for Meaning* (H). **E**
- 15: Catch up and review.
- 16: **Test**
- 17: Gilkey’s experience. G, I-VIII.
- 18: Gilkey con’t. G, IX-X; Langerak, “Duties to Others” (H). **Shorter paper due, 5pm.**

- 21: Gilky on a meaningful life. G, XI-XIV; Schlick (K8); Nozick (H); Hardy (H). **O**
- 22: Gratitude. Berry(H); Aronson, etc. (H). Catch up and elaborations.
- 23: Secular humanism and meaning. Russell (K7); Nielsen (K17, pp.203-08); and Baier (K10,pp.99-113); and Hepburn (H). **O**
- 24: Humanism and meaning, con’t: Nozick, Wolff, Cahn, Kekes (K19-22) **E**
Longer paper outline due, 5pm.
- 25: The human condition is absurd, and it’s a good thing? Camus (K9); Taylor (K12); Nagel (K13); Feinberg (K14); Poems (H). **O**

- 28: Everlasting life? Keestenbaum (H), Swenson (H); Jantzen (H); and Taliaferro (H). Recommend: Walls (H). **E**
- 29: Conclusion and review. **Longer paper due, 5pm.**
- 30: **Final Exam**, 10:30-12:30.

