

THE MEANING OF LIFE
SYLLABUS
Fall 2023

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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 the very purpose of life is to suffer, 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.

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.

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

September 29: 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>

(Note: we will not discuss the Shakespeare excerpts in lecture: they are there for your edification and to set the mood.)

October 2: 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

October 4: Scorn in the Face of Absurdity

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

October 6: Irony in the Face of Absurdity

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

October 9: Buddhism: The Cessation of Suffering

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

(Experiment in Living Proposal Due Before Lecture)

October 11: 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**)

October 13: 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>

October 16: Inner Compulsion

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

October 18: Play

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

October 20: Self-Fulfillment

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

October 23: Creativity

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

October 25: Poetry

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

Recommended (but not required): William Wordsworth, *Intimations of Immortality*

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

Recommended (but not required): 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>

October 27: The Example of Christ

John Cottingham, “Meaningful Life”

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

October 30: Ein Sof

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

November 1: Morality

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

November 3: Morality and Ideals

William James, “What Makes a Life Significant”

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

November 6: Transcendence and Knowledge of the Good

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

- November 8: Projects
Neil Levy, “Downshifting and Meaning in Life” (**Canvas**)
- November 10: VETERANS’ DAY – NO LECTURE
- November 13: Effective Pattern Imposition
Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith, “On Luck, Responsibility, and the Meaning of Life” (**Canvas**)
- November 15: Contouring Reason to Fundamental Objects
Thaddeus Metz, “The Good, the True, and the Beautiful: Toward a Unified Account of Great Meaning in Life” (**Canvas**)
- November 17: The Fitting Fulfillment View
Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life*, chapter 1 (**MIL**, pp. 1-33)
- November 20: Why Meaning in Life Matters
Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life*, chapter 2 (**MIL**, pp. 34-63)
- November 22: In-Class Discussion of Experiment in Living Assignment
[No reading, but be prepared to share what you did for your experiment in living, and whether you think it was meaning-conferring.]
- November 27: The Fitting Fulfillment View - Objections and Replies
Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life*, Comments and Response (**MIL**, pp. 67-132)
(Description and Evaluation for the Experiment in Living Due Before Lecture)
- November 29: Normative Outlook
Cheshire Calhoun, “Geographies of Meaningful Living” (**Canvas**)
- December 1: Meaning and Narrative 1
Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity” (**Canvas**)
- December 4: Meaning and Narrative 2
Helena De Bres, “Narrative and Meaning in Life” (**Canvas**)
- December 6: In-Class Discussion
[No reading, but be prepared to discuss and defend your own conception of life’s meaning, as informed by the course readings and your experiment in living.]
(Theory of Meaningfulness Due Before Lecture)
- December 8: Conclusion: What’s the Point of it All?
[No reading: I will explain and justify my own answer to the question of life’s meaning.]

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

Reflections on Course Readings	20% (15 total: 100-200 words each)
Experiment in Living Proposal	0% (due on Canvas, October 13, 11am)
Experiment in Living: Description/Evaluation	25% (due on Canvas, November 27, 11am)
Theory of Meaningfulness	5% (due on Canvas, December 6, 11am)
Take-Home Final Examination	50% (due on Canvas, December 14, 5pm)

Course Assessment Details and Instructions

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 (no fewer than 100 words, and no more than 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.

There are 25 lectures in the course for which you can write a reflection. You should not write a reflection for the first lecture and you should not write a reflection for the November 22 lecture or for the last two lectures. 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 write a reflection about. 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 musical instrument A don’t pick “learning how to play similar musical instrument B” as your activity. If you have already volunteered at non-profit institution A, then don’t pick “volunteering at similar 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.

When deciding what activity to engage in, be creative. Some of you might be tempted to do something easy or familiar, or some kind of activity that will be discussed in the first two weeks of the course. Resist the temptation to pick something familiar or something presented or suggested in the readings. Think of something totally new and different, perhaps something challenging but not dangerous, perhaps something creative or altruistic, something that picks up on who you are and take yourself to be, or something that helps define what kind of person you want to be, and, most importantly, something that connects to the kinds of activities that you think help (or helped) give meaning to the lives you think of as models of meaningfulness. Do not simply pick something that you think would make your life go better: this course is not about living well or learning how to manage your life better, but about meaningfulness. The course is also not designed to be therapeutic: I am not a licensed therapist and I am not trained to provide therapy. If your experiment in living happens to be therapeutic, that’s great. But that is not a good reason for you to have chosen it for this particular assignment.

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>

The proposal for your Experiment in Living must not exceed 300 words and needs to be posted on Canvas (in a format Canvas accepts, preferably Microsoft Word or PDF) before 11am on Friday, October 13. Your proposal must include a description of the experiment and an explanation of why you think the experiment will or might add meaning to your life. If your activity requires the approval or consent of others, you need to obtain that approval or consent before submitting your proposal. If your activity requires coordination with others, you need to explain how you have already coordinated with them. For example, if your activity will require you to coordinate with members of an organization, then, as part of your proposal, you will need to confirm that the organization has approved your activity and is willing to work with you to make the activity possible.

I will read your proposals over the weekend of October 14-15, and I will contact you by Monday, October 16 to let you know whether your proposal has been approved. Do not start your chosen activity before receiving my approval. If your proposal is approved, you will be able to start engaging in your chosen activity as soon as you receive approval. If your proposal is not approved, I will ask you to modify it, or provide more supporting evidence, or choose a different activity. At the time you submit your proposal, be prepared to propose at least two alternative activities, in case your first proposal is not approved. (Do not describe two or three possible activities in your proposal.) It is very important that your proposal be approved relatively quickly, because otherwise you will not have sufficient time between the end of your experiment and the deadline for the Description and Evaluation to complete the latter assignment.

You are encouraged to keep a diary of your activities. At the conclusion of the experience, you will need to describe it (this is the **Description**) and evaluate it (this is the **Evaluation**), in light of what you have read in the course up to that point. Everything included in the **Description and Evaluation (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**.

In the **Evaluation** portion of your essay, you need to consider what **THREE positive** theories of life's meaning (**among those we have studied in the course between October 9 and November 15, inclusive**) 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 between October 9 and November 15 (inclusive) 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 discussed between October 9 and November 15.

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, November 27.

3. Theory of Meaningfulness

Your theory of meaningfulness must answer the question of what, if anything, makes for a meaningful life. Your answer should fill in the blank: "Life is meaningful if and only if _____." Your answer is limited to 100 words. Remember that you need to be prepared to defend your theory when confronted with objections to it. Do not answer those objections in this assignment: just provide the theory. Your answer will be graded according to how well it can avoid fairly clear and obvious counterexamples to it (including potential counterexamples that will have been discussed in the course up to that point), and how well it can accommodate our considered judgments about which lives are meaningful and which lives are not meaningful.

4. Take-Home Final Examination

The take-home final examination (**due in Canvas by 5pm on Thursday, December 14**) 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.**

5. Extensions

An extension for the D&E or for the Take-Home Final Examination will only be given to those who present evidence of a valid excuse in a timely manner. If at any time you believe you have a legitimate claim to an extension, bring it to my attention as soon as possible. Unexcused late assignments will receive a grade of F.

6. ChatGPT and Other Forms of Artificial Intelligence

The use of ChatGPT or any other form of AI to write (or outline, or sketch, or provide ideas for) any of your work for this course is **strictly forbidden**. The point of this course is to get you to think and speak and write about the course content in intelligent and crafted philosophical prose. AI can be used to **mimic** this kind of activity, and if you use it **in any way**, then you will be cheating yourself, and you will be cheating other students because you will be denying them the opportunity to learn from you. **Use of AI is directly contrary to the purpose of this course**. Indeed, it will make taking this course meaningless (which, in this particular case, would be particularly ironic).

Note that using AI will also be singularly unhelpful and will very likely lead to receipt of a low grade. The assignments for this course require you to reflect philosophically on the course readings and on your own activities, something that AI cannot do because it does not **think** (and when it attempts to do so, it does very poorly). In addition, **AI regularly hallucinates**, in the sense that it makes stuff up when it tries to answer a question or say something interesting. In any work that you submit for a grade, hallucinations will stand out. So, please understand that, when it comes to **any** assignment in this course, no matter how small, the use of AI will put you at significant risk of a low grade and will significantly raise the likelihood that you will be found out. And if I discover that you used AI **in any way**, then you will receive an **F in the course** and I will refer you to the Academic Integrity Office for suitable sanction.

The most important thing here, though, is not punishment or sanction, but meaning. Presumably you are taking this course because you want to learn whether life has meaning and, if so, what that meaning is and how it may be achieved. Using AI, even in the smallest way, defeats the purpose of taking this course. Even if I tell you what I think about the course content, any use of AI will mean that you won't understand what I am saying, you won't understand what other students are saying, and you will be at a loss when it comes to understanding at least some of the readings. Getting AI to do work that you need to do in order to come to your own thoughtful views about the meaning of life is totally counterproductive. I will therefore adopt a mostly trustful attitude: I will assume that you have not used AI unless there are sure or clear signs that you have. But if you abuse this trust, my own disappointment in you will be incalculable.

Attendance, Lecture Participation, Accommodations, Honor Code

- Regular in-person lecture attendance is **mandatory**, unless you have a good reason to be absent from lecture as a result of personal emergency or personal obligation. Lectures will **not** be recorded. As insurance against missing a lecture (for whatever reason), please arrange (ahead of time) to borrow notes from another student enrolled in the course. If any part of your academic or work schedule (or any other aspect of your schedule) conflicts with any course lecture, then you need to change your schedule to make it possible for you to attend ALL lectures.

- **Lecture participation norms: During lectures, I expect students to participate and to engage in discussion with me and with each other. 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.**
- **If you need to make an appointment to see me outside of office hours, please do so by contacting me by email with at least two days' notice.**
- **The academic honor code must be observed in this course. Plagiarism or the use of AI will not be tolerated. Anyone caught plagiarizing or using AI 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).**
- **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>