

PHI 191: The Meaning of Life

Summer 2025

Instructor: Antonio Freiles	Place & Time: Online Asynchronous
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Course Description: In a 1982 article of the [Boston Review](#), Daniel Dennett, commenting on Robert Nozick's *Philosophical Explanations*, states:

There was once a chap who wanted to know the meaning of life, so he walked a thousand miles and climbed to the high mountaintop where the wise guru lived. "Will you tell me the meaning of life?" he asked.

This course aims to survey a series of answers philosophers have offered to the chap above: the role of rationality and justice, happiness and pleasure, love and friendship, God and faith, death, and human extinction. Plato, Mill, Aristotle, Nozick, Protasi, Street, and many others will guide us in this journey. The answers we will discuss shed light on what philosophers think are the viable ways to live a meaningful life, but most importantly, these answers will teach us how to reason independently about *what we value* and *how we should want to live*.

Course Materials: All the required readings and lectures will be posted on Blackboard under the heading 'Content'. Original class materials (handouts, assignments, tests, etc.) and recordings of class sessions are the intellectual property of the course instructor. You may download these materials for your use in this class. However, you may not provide these materials to other parties (e.g., websites, social media, other students) without permission. Doing so is a violation of intellectual property law and of the student code of conduct.

There are two ways to combine the content of readings and lectures and thus correctly follow the pace of this class. The first is to read the assigned passages *before* the lectures. The advantage of this method is that it allows you to better follow the lecture content, while the disadvantage is that you will need to go back to the reading to understand which passages are relevant for completing the assignments. The second is to read the assigned passages *after* the lectures. The advantage of this method is that it allows you to recognize the salient passages of the reading faster, while the disadvantage is that you will have more difficulty following the lecture. Which method to employ is up to you. However, you should complete each reading and watch the corresponding lecture in the assigned order. It would be very challenging to understand the material and complete the assignments if you do not do so.

Finally, reading and writing philosophy are not easy tasks. Readings are often complex and very time-consuming. Allocate some time of your day to read philosophy on the days the lectures are in session. Here is a very brief guide on what to look for when reading [philosophy](#). Writing philosophy requires a different approach than other disciplines. You will be assessed on how *clear* your writing style is and how *accurate* you are in reconstructing arguments and objections. Here is instead a guide on how to write [philosophy](#).

Learning Objectives. By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- (1) Become familiar with the main philosophical views on the meaning of life, paying particular attention to the arguments offered in their favor and the most prominent objections against them.
- (2) Read, interpret, and critically engage with the main arguments and concepts in philosophical texts.
- (3) Formulate philosophical arguments in premise-conclusion format.
- (4) Pick your own view about what the meaning of life is while defending it from potential objections.

Assessment: The assessment is in three parts.

1. *Quizzes:* 35% of your course grade. There will be five weekly content quizzes; each quiz is worth 7% of your final grade. All quizzes will be taken on Blackboard at a time of your choosing before a set deadline; they are posted in the respective unit folders under 'Content'. Deadlines are listed in the course schedule below. You cannot take quizzes after the deadlines. The quizzes are not cumulative; they cover only one unit per week. Quizzes are open-book.

2. *Writing Assignments:* 35% of your course grade. There will be five weekly writing assignments (max 3 pages); each writing assignment is worth 7% of your final grade. Writing assignments will span from reading responses and reflections to specific argumentative prompts. You will receive a prompt for each assignment ahead of time. Writing assignments will be submitted on Blackboard; they are posted in the respective unit folders under 'Content'. Deadlines are listed in the course schedule below. Writing assignments cannot be turned in after the deadline.

3. *Final Paper:* 30% of your course grade. You will write a 5-7 page, 12pt font, double-spaced argumentative philosophy paper. This paper allows you to analyze a meaning of life of your choosing and defend your own position. The final paper prompt and instructions will be provided ahead of time. The final paper is due on June 27 at 11:59 pm ET.

Deadlines and Extra Credit: Extensions for deadlines will not be granted unless a doctor's note is provided. Extra credit will not be granted. The assignments already provide you with an opportunity to excel and improve your grade.

Letter grade: A 93 - 100; A- 90 - 92.99; B+ 87 - 89.99; B 83 - 86.99; B- 80 - 82.99; C+ 77 - 79.99; C 73 - 76.99; C- 70 - 72.99; D+ 67 - 69.99; D 63 - 66.99; D- 60 - 62.99; F 0 - 59.99.

Course Policies: the following policies will be applied throughout the course.

Academic Integrity: Do not cheat! It's unfair to your instructors and fellow students. Any established academic integrity violation may result in course failure, regardless of violation level. Using websites or AI tools like ChatGPT to complete the writing assignments or obtain solutions in the quizzes violates academic integrity expectations. Remember to cite your sources in an appropriate way; a failure to do so will also result in a course violation. For details on SU's academic integrity expectations and policies, visit: <http://class.syr.edu/academic-integrity/policy/>. All work submitted for quizzes and writing assignments must be yours alone. Communicating about quiz questions with anyone during the quiz period violates academic integrity expectations.

Religious Observances: If you need to miss a class or deadline due to religious observance, you will be entitled to make-up opportunities if you provide notice by the end of the second week of class. You must do so through MySlice. You can find the relevant information [here](#).

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: 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 the Center for Disability Resources. Please call (315) 443-4498 or email disabilityresources@syr.edu for more detailed information.

Health: Mental health and overall well-being have a significant impact on academic success. It is important to develop skills and resources to effectively navigate stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns. Please familiarize yourself with the range of resources the [Barnes Center](#) provides and seek out support for mental health concerns as needed. Counseling services are available 24/7, 365 days a year, at 315.443.8000, and I encourage you to explore the resources available through [the Wellness Leadership Institute](#).

Email Policy: I will reply to your emails within 24 hours on weekdays.

Schedule: All weekly materials, readings, video lectures, quizzes, and writing assignment prompts will be posted on Blackboard by the Sunday before the beginning of each unit, except for the final paper, which I will post two weeks in advance. In the first five weeks, quizzes are due every Friday by 11:59 pm, and all writing assignments are due every Saturday by 11:59 pm. In the final week, the schedule changes. All posted readings and corresponding video lectures are required. The tentative schedule is on the next page.

Week 1, Rationality and Justice

- May 20, Syllabus & Guides on [reading](#) and [writing](#) philosophy.
- May 21, E.D. Klemke, the Introduction of *The Question of the Meaning of Life* (4 pp.).
- May 22, Plato, *Apology* (15 pp.).
- May 23, Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (6 pp.).
- May 23, Quiz on *Week 1* (due by midnight).
- May 24, Written Assignment #1 (due by midnight).

Week 2, Happiness and Pleasure

- May 27, Aristotle, Book I of *Nicomachean Ethics* (12 pp.).
- May 28, John Stuart Mill, *What Utilitarianism Is* (6 pp.).
- May 29, Robert Nozick, excerpts from *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, “[Experience Machine](#)” (6 pp.).
- May 30, Quiz on *Week 2* (due by midnight).
- May 31, Written Assignment #2 (due by midnight).

Week 3, Love and Friendship

- June 3, Sharon Street, *Does Anything Really Matter, Or Did We Just Evolve To Think So?* (8 pp.).
- June 4, Carrie Jenkins, *Love isn't about happiness* (4 pp.).
- June 5, Sara Protasi, *Love your Frenemy* (3,100 words).
- June 6, Quiz on *Week 3* (due by midnight).
- June 7, Written Assignment #3 (due by midnight).

Week 4, God and Faith

- June 9, Blaise Pascal, *The Wager* (4 pp.).
- June 10, Leo Tolstoy, excerpts from *My Confession* (7 pp.), contained in E.D. Klemke's *The Question of the Meaning of Life*.
- June 11, Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* (5 pp.) and Fyodor Dostoevsky, Chapter III of *The Brothers Karamazov* (7 pp.).
- June 13, Quiz on *Week 4* (due by midnight).
- June 14, Written Assignment #4 (due by midnight).

Week 5, Death and Human Extinction

- June 16, Steinhäuser et al., *Factors Considered Important at the End of Life* (7 pp.).
- June 17, Pereira & Timmerman, *The (un)desirability of immortality* (12 pp.).
- June 18, Ezra Klein, *Your Kids Are Not Doomed* (4 pp.) and Todd May, *Would Human Extinction Be a Tragedy?* (4 pp.).
- June 20, Quiz on *Week 5* (due by midnight).
- June 21, Written Assignment #5 (due by midnight).

Week 6, Conclusion

- June 27, Final Paper (due by midnight).

The schedule might change in the course of the summer session.

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