

Capilano University

PHILOSOPHY 301 COURSE OUTLINE

Term	Fall 2015	Course	PHIL 301
Name of Course	Ethics and the Meaning of Life	Section Number	
Instructor		Office	

COURSE FORMAT

Three hours of class time, plus an additional hour delivered through on-line or other activities for a 15 week semester, which includes two weeks for final exams

COURSE PREREQUISITES

45 credits of 100-level or higher coursework including PHIL 101.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Questions about the meaning of life are usually understood as evaluative questions about which purposes and states of affairs, if any, make our lives significant and give them point. Most philosophers reject the view that meaning is achieved by aligning our values with metaphysical purposes transcending the natural world, on the grounds that no such purposes exist. If they are right, the seriousness with which we take our projects and commitments may be absurd. Nevertheless, even if life is meaningless from any external standpoint, meaning “in” life is important to most people. This course examines (1) the concept of meaning in life as a feature of the good life, including the view that meaning provides reasons for acting irreducible to, and possibly in conflict with, reasons of self-interest or morality, (2) threats to meaning including values nihilism, desire-based theories of value, and deterministic explanations of choices, and (3) substantive views about what matters. Issues discussed in the course include the following: Should meaning be understood as subjective attraction meeting objective value, as Susan Wolf argues? What does objective value amount to? Is Derek Parfit right that if there are no irreducible normative truths nothing matters? Is Jean Kazez right that we can successfully identify objectively valuable goods necessary for a well-lived life, including ethical commitment, autonomy, and self-expression? Does meaning require the participatory stance that deterministic explanations of our actions rule out? When, if ever, should meaning trump morality as a reason for acting? Is “naturalized spirituality” meaning-making? Is John Cottingham right that meaningfulness requires an orientation towards a source of goodness which somehow transcends the natural world? Should we accept Ronald Dworkin’s view that ethical meaning is the only kind of meaning that can stand up to the fact and fear of death?

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will acquire an understanding of the issues and arguments about meaning and values outlined in the course content below. They will also improve their ability to think critically and to articulate good arguments of their own.

REQUIRED TEXTS

1. Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*. Princeton University Press, 2010. (bookstore)
2. Jean Kazez, *The Weight of Things: Philosophy and the Good Life*. Blackwell Publishing, 2007. (bookstore)
3. John Cottingham, *The Meaning of Life*. Routledge, 2003. (Cap library e-book)
4. John Cottingham, "The Fine, the Good, and the Meaningful." TPM, Oct 11, 2010. (online)
5. Galen Strawson, interviewed by Tamler Sommers. *Believer*, March 2003. (online)
6. Ronald Dworkin, "What is a Good Life?" NYRB, Feb 10, 2011. (online)
7. Derek Parfit, selected excerpt from *On What Matters*. Oxford University Press. 2011. (distributed in class)

COURSE CONTENT

1. Introduction

Aristotle on eudaimonia, Thomas Nagel on meaninglessness and absurdity, Richard Taylor on meaning as satisfying our deepest desires, Derek Parfit on irreducible normative truth, and Susan Wolf on meaning as subjective attraction meeting objective value.

2. Values

- (a) The right and the good. (Kazez, Chpt 1 and 2)
- (b) Ancient and modern views about what is good. (Chpt 3 and 4)
- (c) Necessary goods. (Chpt 5 and 6)
- (d) Incommensurable goods. (Chpt 7 and 8)

3. The concept of meaning

- (a) The fitting fulfillment view. (Wolf, Part 1)
 - i. The subjective requirement
 - ii. The objective requirement
- (b) Practical reason: reasons of meaning. (Wolf, Part 2)
 - i. Meaning as separate from self-interest or morality
 - ii. Implications for the concept of self-interest
 - iii. Implications for morality
- (c) What meaningfulness implies. (Cottingham, *Meaning of Life*, Part 1)

4. Threats to meaning

- (a) Values nihilism: science and normativity. (Cottingham, *Meaning of Life*, Part 2)
- (b) Desire-based theories of value. (Parfit on non-naturalist cognitivism.)
- (c) Determinism in relation to agency and reactive attitudes. (G. Strawson)

5. Ethics and meaning

- (a) Ethical meaning. (Cottingham, "The Fine ...")
- (b) Ethical meaning. (Dworkin)

ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION PROFILE

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| 1. Weekly comprehension tests | 60% |
| 2. Weekly one-page position paper and small-group discussions | 10% |
| 3. Portfolio of revised weekly papers | 20% |
| 4. Participation | 10% |

GRADE PROFILE

A+	90-100	B+	77-79	C+	67-69	D	50-59
A	85-89	B	73-76	C	63-66	F	0-49
A-	80-84	B-	70-72	C-	60-62		

OPERATIONAL DETAILS

Capilano University has policies on Academic Appeals (including appeal of final grade), Student Conduct, Cheating and Plagiarism, Academic Probation and other educational issues. These and other policies are available on the University website.

In addition, students are asked to familiarize themselves with the emergency procedures posted on the wall of each classroom. The following policies are specific to this course:

1. Missed tests: Each class starts with a short comprehension test. A mark of zero is recorded for absentees and anyone not in class for the full first half of the weekly session. To provide flexibility for illness and other emergencies, every student's two lowest marks (but only two) are ignored and a grade out of 60 is calculated from the remaining tests.
2. Participation: Everyone should respect and consider others, and fully engage in lectures and discussions. Good listening is essential. Please arrive on time, put cell phones away, and take breaks only at scheduled times. Avoid all private communications and other distractions.
3. Writing Portfolios should be typed and submitted in hard copy either on the last day of class, or in the Humanities drop-off box by 4:00 p.m. on Thurs, Dec 1. No email submissions can be accommodated. Late submissions lose 5 points, and must be handed in by 4:00 p.m. on Thurs, Dec 8. Please read the handout, "How to Do the Weekly Writing."
4. Cheating/Plagiarism: See Capilano University's policy.
5. I Grade: Not given.
6. English usage: Correct English is required for written work.

OFFICE HOURS

TBA