

PROBLEMS IN PHILOSOPHY: THE MEANING OF LIFE

Philosophy 120. Section 01

Fall 2011

Mondays and Wednesdays, 10:00-11:30

McDonnell 362

Instructors

Mr. Eric Brown
Wilson 213
office hours: MW 1-2,
and by app't.
office phone: 935-4257
eabrown@wustl.edu

Mr. David Winchell
Wilson 116
office hours: TTh noon-1,
and by app't.
office phone: 935-7913
dswinche@wustl.edu

Description

General description: Introduction to philosophical methods and concepts through an investigation of major issues in Western philosophy such as: what counts as knowledge; truth and belief; the existence of God; the mind-body problem; materialism and idealism; moral theory and concepts of justice. A range of historical and contemporary views on these issues will be considered. The aim of the course is to prepare students to think and write about philosophical problems on their own.

Specific: In this section, all of the methods, concepts, issues, and readings we investigate will pertain directly to the question of whether life has meaning and if, so, what it might be and how we might know and achieve it.

Goals

We would like every student who completes this course to understand better what philosophy is and to believe more fully that philosophy is a worthwhile human pursuit, even if we do not all pursue it to the same degree. (We'd be tickled if a few of you decided that you wanted to pursue it a bit more yourselves. But you don't have to love something for yourself in order to value the activity, and our primary goal is that you value philosophical activity.)

We would also like every student who completes this course to be better at thinking critically, at reading difficult material, at presenting thoughts orally, and at writing effectively and efficiently. These are skills central to philosophy, but of course not merely to philosophy.

Finally, we would like, for ourselves, to get a little clearer about whether life has meaning and if so, what it is. We expect that thinking through these questions with some smart readings and some smart readers and discussants (you!) will help.

Prerequisites

Curiosity. Willingness to treat others' views seriously, respectfully, and sympathetically. Commitment to work hard reading puzzling essays, thinking about difficult questions, and writing up to very high standards. Courage to think through difficult matters and volunteer thoughts that one might later come to reject.

One more thing. Our central question—does life have meaning?—might deserve a negative answer. If you are prone to depression, please be sure that your depression is under control, lest this class trigger a depressive episode.

We will be happy to accommodate those with disabilities, in accordance with the university's established procedures. Please contact us confidentially.

Grading and Requirements

The requirements and grading procedures are designed to foster the development of those skills the course aims to improve.

Preparation (reading, thinking). To prepare for our discussions, we need to study the readings carefully. Try to outline what the author's main claim is, what her principal reasons for that claim are, what alternative position(s) she considers, and the reason(s) why she does not adopt those alternatives. To reward you for doing this work, there will be seven unannounced quizzes during the course of the semester. Each quiz will comprise ten true-false or multiple-choice questions about the required reading for that day's class. Each question will count for two points, and the top five quiz scores will count toward the preparation grade. *100 points*

Participation (presenting orally, thinking). The class will proceed largely by discussion. Everyone is expected to raise questions (about the issues, about the reading, about what someone else in the class said), to offer possible answers to any such questions, and to point to the text both in asking and answering questions. We will keep track of participation, and we will reward those who participate regularly with especially succinct, clear, and stimulating remarks and questions. Conversely, we will penalize those who fail to participate regularly or whose participation falls short of expected succinctness, clarity, and stimulation. Quality counts more than quantity. Also, though we doubt we will need to invoke this, we reserve the right to penalize still more harshly any who manage to disrupt the classroom. Causes of disruption include arriving late or departing early (without a written excuse), leaving the room during class without a medical emergency,

talking without being recognized during class, having a cellular phone or other electronic device beep or ring during class, or otherwise engaging in activities other than attending to class during class. *100 points*

Essays (writing, thinking). Each week, we will fix on at least one question for that week's essays, based on the discussions in class. These questions will be distributed by email Wednesday afternoon. If you are interested in one of these questions and have the time, you should write an essay addressing it, and submit the essay as a .doc file attached to an email to David Winchell (dswinche@wustl.edu) by **noon on Sunday**. (If you especially would like to write on a particular question, you should raise it in class. If the question only occurs to you after Wednesday's class, email us to clear the question.) Every student is required to submit three essays by the end of the term (i.e., by the Sunday after the last class), and everyone is encouraged to write when they have the time and interest to write well. Each essay, worth 100 points, should be between 900 and 1200 words in length (shorter or longer essays are subject to penalties) and will be assessed in accordance with the guidelines appended to this syllabus. Because everyone has choices about when to submit their essays, there will be no excuses for tardy submissions. Any essay that is late will be penalized by 10 points for every 24 hours or fraction thereof. *300 points*

Revised essay (writing, thinking). Everyone is required to revise one of their essays and submit it as a .doc file attached to an email to David Winchell (dswinche@wustl.edu) by **noon** on the **Sunday** two weeks after the original was submitted. Revised essays are graded on their own terms, with adjustment for the extent of improvement. Note well that good essays that show very little improvement will receive lower grades than they did originally. Revision is a matter of rethinking the essay from the ground up; it goes far, far beyond mere copy-editing. See the guidelines appended to this syllabus. *100 points*

These factors yield 600 possible points, and the scale used to convert the scores into quality grades will be at least as generous as the standard (98% A+, 93% A, 90% A-, 88% B+, etc.). We reserve the right to disregard a student's grade on one paper in exceptional circumstances (e.g., death in the family or severe medical difficulties) or to disregard the grade on a student's first paper if that student shows remarkable progress.

Pass/fail students must achieve at least 450 points to pass.

Any student who submits any work that does not conform to the University policy on academic integrity, printed in the Course Listings, will automatically fail the course, and will be subject to University disciplinary action. Each assignment you turn in must be your own work, and it must have been written specifically for this class. This should not be difficult, as you should not be doing extra research on any of these assignments. If you feel you must read other sources, be sure to cite them for any point you borrow (even when you have thoroughly paraphrased the point). To fail to cite sources for their points is one way of plagiarizing.

Texts

The following seven required texts have been ordered at the Mallinckrodt bookstore. Please take care to have these particular editions, so that we will all be using the best available translations and editions and will all be referring to the same page numbers.

E. D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn, eds. The Meaning of Life: A Reader. Third Edition. Oxford University Press. ISBN13: 9780195327304.

Albert Camus. The Myth of Sisyphus: And Other Essays. Vintage. ISBN13: 9780679733737.

Iris Murdoch. The Sovereignty of Good. Second edition. Routledge. ISBN13: 9780415253994.

Plato. Five Dialogues. Second edition. Hackett Publishing. ISBN13: 9780872206335.

Jean-Paul Sartre. Existentialism is a Humanism. Yale University Press. ISBN13: 9780300115468.

David Foster Wallace. This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life. Little, Brown & Company. ISBN13: 9780316068222.

All assigned readings that do not appear in one of those six volumes will be easily accessed via Olin library's website, either in an "e-journal" or in Ares, the electronic course reserve site. For Ares, you'll need to search for this course at ares.wustl.edu, and you'll need the course password, which will be distributed in October. E-journals are a tab for the online searches of Olin's resources. Select that tab, and enter the name of the journal. Then select a database that contains the volume of the journal you need; a couple more intuitive clicks and you'll find the article. I recommend that you download a pdf of the article, so that you have your own copy. Please note that to access e-journals, you must be on campus or using Olin as a proxy server.

Syllabus of Readings

QUESTIONS

W 8-31	Introduction
M 9-5	NO CLASS - Labor Day

W 9-7	Tolstoy, "My Confession," in Klemke and Cahn, 7-16. Flew, "Tolstoy and the Meaning of Life," <u>Ethics</u> 73 (1963): 110-118. (e-journal) strongly encouraged: Read the full text of Tolstoy's confession (not long) online.
-------	--

SUPERNATURALIST ANSWERS - for and against

M 9-12	<u>Ecclesiastes</u> (readily available in multiple translations online; read it in the King James Version and, if you prefer, one other)
W 9-14	Pojman, "Religion Gives Meaning to Life," in Klemke and Cahn, 27-30. Fackenheim, "Judaism and the Meaning of Life," in Klemke and Cahn, 31-34. Quinn, "The Meaning of Life According to Christianity," in Klemke and Cahn, 35-41.
M 9-19	Metz, "The Immortality Requirement for Life's Meaning," <u>Ratio</u> 16 (2003): 161-177. (e-journal)
W 9-21	Nussbaum, "Mortal Immortals," <u>Philosophy and Phenomenological Research</u> 50 (1989): 303-351. (e-journal)
M 9-26	Metz, "Could God's Purpose Be the Source of Life's Meaning?" <u>Religious Studies</u> 36 (2000): 293-313. (e-journal)
W 9-28	Plato, <u>Euthyphro</u> , 2a-11a (in <u>Five Dialogues</u>)
M 10-3	Plato, <u>Euthyphro</u> , 11a-16a (in <u>Five Dialogues</u>)
W 10-5	Plato, <u>Apology of Socrates</u> (in <u>Five Dialogues</u>)
M 10-3	Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," <u>Mind</u> 64 (1955): 200-212. (e-journal) Dostoevsky, <u>The Brothers Karamazov</u> , Part V, chapters 4-5 (chapters 35-36 overall) (the Constance Garnett translation is available online)
W 10-5	Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil," <u>American Philosophical Quarterly</u> 14 (1977): 109-117. (e-journal)

NIHILIST ANSWERS - for and against

M 10-10	Schopenhauer, "On the Sufferings of the World," in Klemke and Cahn, 45-54
W 10-12	Camus, <u>The Myth of Sisyphus</u> , 3-65 and 119-123
M 10-17	Edwards, "The Meaning and Value of Life," in Klemke and Cahn, 114-133.
W 10-19	Nagel, "The Absurd," in Klemke and Cahn, 143-152.

NATURALIST ANSWERS - for and against

M 10-24	Sartre, <u>Existentialism is a Humanism</u> , 17-72
W 10-26	Taylor, "The Meaning of Life," in Klemke and Cahn, 134-142.
M 10-31	Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About," <u>Synthese</u> 53 (1982) 257-282. (e-journal) Starkey, "Meaning and Affect," <u>The Pluralist</u> 1 (2006): 88-103. (e-journal)
W 11-2	Nozick, "The Experience Machine," <u>Anarchy, State, and Utopia</u> , pp. 42-45. (Ares) Brogaard and Smith, "On Luck, Responsibility, and the Meaning of Life," <u>Philosophical Papers</u> 34 (2005): 443-458. (Ares)
M 11-7	Murdoch, <u>The Sovereignty of Good</u> , Part One
W 11-9	Murdoch, <u>The Sovereignty of Good</u> , Part Two
M 11-14	Murdoch, <u>The Sovereignty of Good</u> , Part Three
W 11-16	Schlick, "On the Meaning of Life," in Klemke and Cahn, 62-71.
M 11-21	Feinberg, "Absurd Self-Fulfillment," in Klemke and Cahn, 153-183.
W 11-23	NO CLASS - Thanksgiving Break
M 11-28	Mackie, "The Subjectivity of Values," in <u>Ethics</u> , 15-49. (Ares)
W 11-30	Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," <u>Pacific Philosophical Quarterly</u> 72 (1991): 48-77. (Ares)
M 12-5	Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning," <u>Social Philosophy and Policy</u> 14 (1997): 207-225. (e-journal)

FINAL THOUGHTS

W 12-7	Wallace, <u>This is Water</u> Optional: You can find the audio of him delivering this address on the web.
--------	--

There is no final exam for this class.

SOME GUIDELINES FOR WRITING

These guidelines should help any writer who seeks to persuade his or her audience of a contestable point. They also explain the grading priorities in this class.

MATTERS OF FORM

1. There is no excuse for typographical, orthographical, or grammatical **errors**. Nor is there any excuse for those errors of diction that are not easily ensnared in the nets of grammar and orthography. You can avoid most of these errors by sticking to words that you know very well in their written form, remaining on friendly terms with a good dictionary, and editing carefully. When you edit, you should look for the common errors of grammar and style that William Safire summarizes as follows:

No sentence fragments. Avoid run-on sentences they are hard to read. A writer must not shift your point of view. Reserve the apostrophe for its proper use and omit it when its not needed. Write all adverbial forms correct. In their writing, everyone should make sure that their pronouns agree with its antecedent. Use the semicolon properly, use it between complete but related thoughts; and not between an independent clause and a mere phrase. Don't use no double negatives. Also, avoid awkward or affected alliteration. If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times: Resist hyperbole. If any word is improper at the end of a sentence, a linking verb is. Avoid commas, that are not necessary. Verbs has to agree with their subjects. Avoid trendy locutions that sound flaky. And don't start a sentence with a conjunction. The passive voice should never be used. Writing carefully, dangling participles should be avoided. Unless you are quoting other people's exclamations, kill all exclamation points!!! Never use a long word when a diminutive one will do. Proofread carefully to see if you any words out. Use parallel structure when you write and in speaking. You should just avoid confusing readers with misplaced modifiers. Place pronouns as close as possible, especially in long sentences—such as those of ten or more words—to their antecedents. Eschew dialect, irregardless. Remember to never split an infinitive. Take the bull by the hand and don't mix metaphors. Don't verb nouns. Always pick on the correct idiom. Never, ever use repetitive redundancies. "Avoid overuse of 'quotation "marks."'" Never use prepositions to end a sentence with. Last but not least, avoid clichés like the plague.

Editing can be tricky business. Seek out a friend for a fresh perspective on your writing or the Writing Center in Eads Hall 111 (935-4981) for help in learning how to learn to edit.

2. Writing that is free from error is not yet good writing. Prose **style** is difficult to cultivate except by practice, but there are some general guidelines worth learning. Great prose is concise (it wastes no words), precise (it says what it means), and concrete (it does not use hazy concepts whose meaning is contested). Several guidebooks provide

helpful advice about how to achieve concise, precise, and concrete prose; in particular, Joseph Williams' Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace is worth reviewing periodically.

Among the most helpful general pieces of advice are these:

- avoid passive constructions in favor of active ones;
- forgo the verb 'to be' for more determinate verbs;
- be wary of abstract (Latinate) nouns and prefer concrete (Anglo-Saxon) words;
- shun jargon and technical vocabulary except where nothing less wieldy will do
(and in these cases explain each term that you introduce);
- prefer simple constructions to more ornate ones; and
- use similes, metaphors, and intensifying adjectives and adverbs (e.g., 'very') sparingly.

Some common advice is potentially corrupting, though. You might have heard the following lies:

- (1) Formal writing avoids the first-person pronoun. Wrong. If you receive an invitation in the third person, you should reply in the third person. But this arcane etiquette does not apply to persuasive writing, and anyone who tries to make it apply will struggle to avoid pomposity.
- (2) Good writing needs a catchy introduction. Misleading. Good writing catches its intended audience's interest. But what will do that depends upon the intended audience's interests. We, for example, respond well to a crisp statement of a problem we find interesting.
- (3) A thesaurus is a great tool. Misleading. A thesaurus can help you find the right word if you use it to jog your memory or alongside a dictionary. Too many students use the thesaurus to find apparently impressive words that they barely understand.

In addition to collecting and reviewing advice, one who aspires to write great prose should cultivate taste for great prose. Make a habit of reading in The New Yorker, Harper's, or The Atlantic Monthly, and seek out the essays of past masters of English prose such as Orwell and E.B. White.

MATTERS OF CONTENT

3. Of course, you are responsible for writing on **themes** of this course.

4. You are also responsible for showing an **understanding** of the assigned readings. This requires two things. First, it requires that you not misinterpret what we are reading. Do not fail to distinguish one character's views from the author's views, and heed the context of every remark. Second, it requires that you cite the relevant text for any claim that you attribute to someone or for any claim or argument that you borrow from someone. Your citations should follow a style sheet in Gordon Harvey's Writing with Sources: A Guide for Students (Hackett, 1998) or The Chicago Manual of Style.

5. The most essential ingredient in a well-written argumentative paper is a clearly formulated **thesis**, that is, a contestable claim that the author intends to support. You should explicitly state the claim you are arguing for, and most of the time, you should state the thesis at the start of the paper. You should also organize your paper around the defense of your thesis, so choose your thesis carefully.
6. The first part of an adequate defense of any interesting thesis is a clear **argument** (or set of arguments) that supports the thesis. It should be obvious to the reader how many arguments you think you have in your favor, and what the premises of each argument are. Paragraphs should be constructed in such a way that the skeleton of the argumentative structure is obvious. Note that the kind of argument you need depends upon the kind of thesis you are advancing. Sometimes, a piece of textual evidence counts as an argument. Sometimes, it does not.
7. The second part of an adequate defense of any interesting thesis is a consideration of the best possible **objection(s)** to the thesis and a reply to the objection(s). Considering and responding to objections is like showing your work on a math exam. If you are making textual claims, you should consider textual evidence that raises doubts about your claims. If you are making more fully developed arguments, you should consider possible objections to one or more of your premises (but hopefully not to your inferences, which should be unimpeachable). And you should always consider the best reason to deny your thesis itself.
8. If the thesis is clear, the argumentative structure well-conceived, the objection(s) and reply(ies) present, and if all of this is presented concisely and precisely and without errors, then the paper is very good. The difference between the very good papers and the great ones lies in the interest of the thesis, the style of the prose, and the cleverness, imagination, insight, and sheer intelligence of the argumentation.

ABOUT REVISIONS

To revise an essay requires far more than editing it to correct its most obvious flaws. Revision requires rethinking the entire essay from ground up. What exactly is the thesis? Do I have at least one good argument to support exactly this thesis? How would someone argue against my thesis, or object to my argument(s), and how can I answer them? With distance from one's essay, and with criticisms from another reader, one should recognize ways in which one can improve one's thesis, argument(s), or response to objections. The goal is not to minimize or maximize the number of changes one makes. The goal is, as it ever was, to craft a persuasive essay.

SUMMARY OF AVAILABLE HELP

Do not skip on the background help available in the guidebooks mentioned here.

For help organizing your thoughts and editing your paper, use the Writing Center, located in Eads 111. It provides free writing help for all Wash U students; to make an appointment, call 935-4981. I am also available to help you organize your thoughts. Unfortunately, I cannot read drafts. But if you have some ideas but no clear thought about how to organize them, seek me out.

To test your prose style, read it aloud. Better: have someone else read it aloud to you.

To test the clarity of your thesis and argumentation, ask a friend to read the paper, and ask him or her what your main point is and why you advance it.