

THE MEANING OF LIFE

FALL 2021 | PHIL 194P | John Holliday

TUESDAY & THURSDAY 11:30–1:00 PST • IN PERSON 200-107

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What makes life meaningful? It's a question that pulls on many, if not most, people, particularly in light of our current global situation; and in this course, we will give this question rigorous consideration. We'll explore matters of identity, authenticity, accomplishment, social connection, love, attention, religion, and happiness. But first, we'll examine whether meaningfulness is a subjective or objective affair. Our readings will primarily be in philosophy. But writers of literature often explore the question of meaningfulness in life, and some philosophers argue that telling our own stories is key to living a meaningful life. So we will also examine literary texts and the practice of writing literature.

COURSE GOALS

DELIVERABLES

Complete an individual research project, one that you draft, present, revise, and could, in principle, (a) successfully submit to and confidently present at an academic conference or (b) place at a magazine that makes academic issues accessible to a broader audience.

LEARNING GOALS

(1) Think critically about what makes life meaningful. (2) Develop comfort with the academic research process. (3) Understand the expectations of (a) philosophy conferences or (b) public humanities outlets.

TEXTS

REQUIRED

Wolf, Susan. 2010. *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*. ISBN: 978-0691154503.

Additional required texts will be posted on Canvas.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

Course Requirement	%
Participation	15
Relaunch & Coda	10
Research Plan	5
Abstract & Outline	5
Extended Abstract	15
Extended Abstract Comments	10
Presentation	15
Final Paper	25

Note: All work should be typed in Times New Roman, 12-point font (double-spaced), with one-inch margins.

PARTICIPATION

The success of this class turns largely on your presence and contribution to discussion. You are generally expected to attend every class meeting. Absences will be excused *only* on account of medical reasons, religious observances, personal emergencies, or conflicts due to COVID-19. For any medical reason, you must notify me via email. For any religious observance, you must notify me *in advance*. Personal emergencies and COVID-19 conflicts will be addressed on a case-by-case basis. All students begin the course with a 100% participation grade (100 points). For every unexcused absence, your participation grade will be reduced 20 points. For every 15 minutes of unexcused lateness, your participation grade will be reduced 5 points.

RELAUNCH & CODA

During two class meetings, you are required to help shape discussion. This help comes in two forms: relaunching discussion in the second half of class and adding a brief coda to the class. Relaunchers should move discussion in a direction they find most promising, while being sensitive to the direction discussion has already taken. Coda-composers should tie together disparate threads, find connections that might have gone unnoticed, and point to interesting questions not yet answered. In either case, you are expected to have a thorough understanding of the texts to be discussed and to have reviewed and critically considered class commentary that week. Your performance will be assessed on a 2-point scale.

RESEARCH PLAN

You are required to submit a plan for your research project. This plan must articulate and motivate your research question and include an annotated bibliography of 3–5 key research texts and a standard bibliography of at least six additional texts. The research plan will be assessed against a 100-point rubric.

ABSTRACT & OUTLINE

You are required to submit an abstract for your research paper along with an outline for the paper's whole. The abstract should briefly articulate the research issue/problem and what you will argue in response to that issue/problem (100–175 words). The outline should list all headings and subheadings and give a brief description of each section's goal (50–150 words). The abstract and outline will be assessed against a 100-point rubric.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

You are required to submit an extended abstract for your paper (850–1250 words). This abstract should extend your discussion of the issue/problem and, most importantly, articulate the paper's primary argument in full. The extended abstract will be assessed against a 100-point rubric.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT COMMENTS

You are required to comment on two of your colleagues' Extended Abstracts (250–300 words). Each comment should include a brief explanation of what you understand the paper's goal to be (75 words max) and a discussion of the most pressing issues and objections you envision with respect to the paper's primary argument and/or aims. *Late comments will be penalized severely*. Each comment will be assessed on a 50-point scale.

PRESENTATION

You are required to present a working draft of your research project in class (in 7–9 minutes, with 8 minutes being your target time) and respond to questions from the class. You should present using either slides or a handout; you should not read a draft of your paper. *No late presentations are permitted*. You are also expected to actively participate in the Q&A period of your colleagues' presentations. Your performance will be assessed against a 100-point rubric.

FINAL PAPER

You are required to submit a final paper (2500–3500 words, not including references). Your paper should be in a state where it could, in principle, be (a) successfully submitted to and presented at an academic conference or (b) placed at a magazine that makes academic issues accessible to a broader audience. Your paper will be assessed on a 100-point scale.

GRADING SYSTEM

Grades for all assignments will be calculated in terms of raw %. Unless accommodations are made in advance, late assignments will be penalized at least 2.5% per day they are late. S/NC grades for the course will be calculated as follows: >70 = S; <70 = NC. Letter grades will be calculated as follows:

%	97	93	90	87	83	80	77	73	70	67	63	60	0
letter	A+	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	NP

GRADE DISPUTES

It is my job to grade as accurately and fairly as possible. I take that job seriously. But should you believe I've made an error in recording or assessing any of your assignments, please let me know as soon as possible. If you believe there is an error in recording, submit an email. If you believe there is an error in assessment, speak with me in person (during office hours or by appointment) *and* submit an email detailing why you believe reassessment should be considered. All disputes submitted in a timely manner will receive a response within one week. ***No disputes will be considered after Monday, November 23rd.***

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

All students are expected to comply with Stanford's Honor Code. Any violations of this Code will be confronted and reported. For more information, visit <https://communitystandards.stanford.edu>.

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES AND OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS

If you are unable to meet the deadlines of any course requirements due to religious observances, you are required to notify me of this *in advance*. If you are unable to meet the deadlines of any course requirements due to medical reasons, you must submit evidence documenting the date of a medical appointment or time during which illness prevented the completion of course requirements. If you are unable to meet the deadlines of any of the course requirements due to personal reasons, speak to me as soon as possible (some form of documentation will be required). *No requests for accommodation of any kind will be considered after the last day of class.*

SPECIAL NEEDS AND SITUATIONS

Students with Documented Disabilities: Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty. Unless the student has a temporary disability, Accommodation Letters are issued for the entire academic year. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: <https://oae.stanford.edu/>).

COURSE SCHEDULE

NOTE: THE DAY READINGS ARE LISTED IS THE DAY THEY WILL BE DISCUSSED.

WEEK 1: THE MEANING OF LIFE

T 9/21	WHAT DOES “THE MEANING OF LIFE” MEAN? Course Introduction
Th 9/23	Helena de Bres (2018) “Is Philosophy Absurd? Only when You’re Doing it Right” Kieran Setiya (2018) “Philosophers Should be Keener to Talk about the Meaning of Life” Thomas Nagel (1971) “The Absurd” George Saunders (2013) “Sticks” To Do: Select Relaunch & Coda date

WEEKS 2–4: MEANINGFUL LIFE

T 9/28	WHAT MAKES LIFE MEANINGFUL? Susan Wolf (2010) <i>Meaning in Life and Why it Matters</i> : “Meaning in Life and Why it Matters” Christine Vitrano (2013) “Meaningful Lives?”
Th 9/30	Marilynne Robinson (2004) <i>Gilead</i> [selections]
T 10/5	Susan Wolf (2010) <i>Meaning in Life and Why it Matters</i> : “Comments and Response”
Th 10/7	Stephen Dixon (2002) “The Saddest Story”
T 10/12	Richard Taylor (1970) “The Meaning of Life” Aaron Smuts (2013) “The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life” Laurence James (2010) “Activity and the Meaningfulness of Life”
Th 10/14	Zadie Smith (2009) “Ten Notes”

RESEARCH PLAN DUE Monday 10/18 @ Noon PST on Canvas

WEEK 5: HAPPINESS & MEANINGFULNESS

T 10/19	WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEANINGFULNESS AND HAPPINESS? Kieran Setiya (2014) “The Midlife Crisis” Baumeister et al (2013) “Some Key Differences Between a Happy Life and a Meaningful Life” Antonella Delle Fave and Marta Bassi (2009) “The Contribution of Diversity to Happiness Research”
Th 10/21	Roxane Gay (2017) “North Country”

WEEK 6: RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, & MEANINGFULNESS

	IS GOD OR SPIRITUALITY REQUIRED FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE?
T 10/26	T. J. Mawson (2013) "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life and Philosophy of Religion" Aribiah D. Attoe (2020) "A Systematic Account of African Conceptions of the Meaning of/in Life" Baptiste Le Bihan (2019) "The No-Self View and the Meaning of Life"
Th 10/28	Joy Williams (2015) "Taking Care"

ABSTRACT & OUTLINE DUE Monday 11/1 @ Noon PST on Canvas**WEEK 7: NARRATIVE, IDENTITY, & MEANINGFULNESS**

	IS TELLING YOUR STORY IMPORTANT FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE?
T 11/2	Helena de Bres (2018) "Narrative and Meaning in Life" Galen Strawson (2015) "I am Not a Story" <i>or</i> Strawson (2004) "Against Narrativity" [pages 1–12]
Th 11/4	Tressie McMillan Cottom (2019) "Thick"

EXTENDED ABSTRACT DUE Monday 11/8 @ Noon PST on Canvas**WEEK 8: PLANS, REGRET, & MEANINGFULNESS**

Last week to change grading basis for course.

	HOW DOES REGRET FIGURE INTO A MEANINGFUL LIFE?
T 11/9	Kieran Setiya (2016) "Retrospection" David Heyd and Franklin G. Miller (2010) "Life Plans: Do They Give Meaning to Our Lives?" Lisa Bortolotti (2010) "Agency, Life Extension, and the Meaning of Life"
Th 11/11	Sheila Heti (2018) <i>Motherhood</i> [selections]

EXTENDED ABSTRACT COMMENTS DUE Monday 11/15 @ Noon PST on Canvas**WEEK 9: SOCIAL CONNECTION & MEANINGFULNESS**

	DOES A MEANINGFUL LIFE REQUIRE SOCIAL CONNECTION?
T 11/16	Lambert et al (2013) "To Belong Is to Matter" [pages 1418–20 and 1424–26] Vlad Costin and Vivian L. Vignoles (2019) "Meaning Is About Mattering" [pages 864–67 and 877–79] Susan Wolf (2015) "The Importance of Love" Nick Riggle (2016) "High Five!"
Th 11/18	Catherine Lacey (2018) "Family Physics"

Thanksgiving Break 11/22 – 11/26

WEEK 10: YOUR TAKES ON MEANINGFULNESS

PRESENTATIONS & WRAP-UP

FINAL PAPER DUE Wednesday 12/8 @ 11:59 pm PST on Canvas