



## **Meaning and Fulfilment 2021-22**

**Course Organiser:** Michael Ridge, [M.Ridge@ed.ac.uk](mailto:M.Ridge@ed.ac.uk)

**Delivery Information for this Course will be posted on LEARN.  
Friday 9-10:50  
DSB 1.20**

**Communication**

Students are responsible for checking their University email and the LEARN page for this course regularly (at least once per week) so that they do not miss any important announcements for the course.

### **Course Aims and Objectives**

This course examines the related concepts of meaning in an individual life (what makes one life more meaningful than another), “the” meaning of life (where this raises more “cosmic” questions about the meaning of life in general, rather than of an individual life), and sceptical challenges to the very idea of meaning in (or of) life. The course also investigates the related concept of fulfilment and the relationship between fulfilment, meaning and happiness.

### **Intended learning outcomes:**

By the end of this course students should:

- Have a grasp of fundamental issues in the philosophy of meaning and fulfilment.
- Be able to critically analyse and engage with literature by key philosophers in this field.
- Be able to present arguments clearly and concisely both within a classroom context and in a written essay.
- Gain transferrable skills in research, analysis and argumentation.

### **Outline of Topics:**

Week 1	Introduction and Absurdity
Week 2	Death
Week 3	The “Afterlife”
Week 4	Absurdity and Fulfilment
Week 5	Theological conceptions
Week 6	Subjectivity/Objectivity
Week 7	Fitting Attitudes, Meaning and Happiness
Week 8	Narrative Theories
Week 9	Achievement and “downshifting”
Week 10	Seizing the Day?
Week 11	Transcending Meaning?

### **Readings:**

There is a core textbook for the class: *The Meaning of Life*, ed. Klemke and Cahn, 2018 (first published in 1982), Oxford: Oxford University Press. Several readings will be drawn from this textbook, referenced simply as “Klemke” in the reading list below.

The other materials, primarily journal articles, are available online through JSTOR or the library’s collection of ejournals and ebooks. In some cases, readings are provided online through the dedicated webpage for this course on LEARN.

## **Week 1: Visions of Johanna: Introduction to the Course and the Absurd**

- Nagel, “The Absurd” in Klemke.
- Kahane, “Our Cosmic Insignificance,” *Nous*, 2014. 48: 745-772.

**Recommended Supplemental Readings:** Rorty, “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 73-95).

**Relevant references from literature/TV/film:** *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, Woody Allen, *Annie Hall*, Monty Python, *The Meaning of Life*.

## **Week 2: Don’t Fear the Reaper: Death**

- Williams, “The Markopulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” in Klemke.
- Fischer, “Why Immortality is Not So Bad,” in Klemke.
- Bortolotti and Nagasawa, “Immortality Without Boredom,” *Ratio*, 2009: 261-277.

**Recommended Supplemental Readings:** Chappell, “Infinity Goes Up on Trial: Must Immortality Be Meaningless?” 2007, *European Journal of Philosophy*: 30-44.

**Relevant references from literature/TV/film:** Capek, *The Makropulos Case*, Borges, *The Immortal*, the last season of *The Good Place*, *Forever* [a Fred Arneson and Maya Rudolph Netflix show], *When Harry Met Sally* (scene in the car discussing thinking about death), *Groundhog Day* (Bill Murray film), *Palm Springs* (film), *The Old Guard* (film), *Altered Carbon* (TV show), *Wings of Desire* (film).

## **Week 3: It’s the End of the World as We Know It: The “Afterlife”**

- Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, Oxford: OUP. 2016, parts 1 and 2. [available through Oxford Scholarship Online}
- Wolf, “The Significance of Doomsday” in Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*
- Scheffler, “Death, Value and the Afterlife: Responses,” in *Death and the Afterlife*
- Johnston, “Is Life a Ponzi Scheme?” *Boston Review*, 2014:  
<http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/mark-johnston-samuel-scheffler-death-afterlife-humanity-ponzi-scheme>
- Kauppinen, “Flourishing and Finitude,” *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* (JESP), 2014: <https://www.jesp.org/articles/download/flourishing-and-finitude.pdf>

**Relevant references from literature/TV/film:** *The Children of Men* (book by PD James; also made into a film)

## **Week 4: Is That All There is? Absurdity and Fulfilment**

- Feinberg, “Absurd Self-Fulfilment,” in Klemke.
- Smith, “Is That All There Is?” *Journal of Ethics*. 2006: 75-106.

- Kahane, “If Nothing Matters,” *Nous*, 2017:

**Relevant references from literature/TV/film:** Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, *Trainspotting* (film or book), *The Big Lebowski* (film).

### **Week 5: Spirit in the Sky [or Losing My Religion]: Theological Conceptions**

- T.J. Mawson “Recent Work on the Meaning of Life and Philosophy of Religion,” *Philosophy Compass*. 2013: 1138-1146.
- Baier, “The Meaning of Life,” in Klemke.
- Metz, “Could God’s Purpose be the Source of Life’s Meaning.” 2000. *Religious Studies*: 293-313.

**Recommended Supplemental Readings:** Tolstoy, “My Confession,” in Klemke.

**Relevant references from literature/TV/film:** *The Seventh Seal* (film), Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*.

### **Week 6: You Can’t Always Get What You Want: Subjectivity/Objectivity**

- Taylor, “The Meaning of Life,” in Klemke.
- Susan Wolf, “Meaningfulness: A Third Dimension of the Good Life,” 2016, *Foundations of Science* (253-269), where the subjective element is glossed as fulfilment.
- Burns, “Fulfillment and Fitting Fulfillment,” 2016, *Foundations of Science*.
- Wolf, “Meaning in Life: Meeting the Challenges.” 2016, *Foundations of Science*.

**Recommended Supplemental Readings:** Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus” (Klemke)

**Relevant references from literature/TV/film:** *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin film), *Shawshank Redemption* (film).

### **Week 7: Hooked on a Feeling: Fitting Attitudes, Meaning and Happiness**

- Kauppinen, “Meaning and Happiness,” *Philosophical Topics*, 2013: 161-185.
- Kauppinen, “The Experience of Meaning,” forthcoming in *The Oxford Handbook of the Meaning of Life* [available on LEARN]

**Recommended Supplemental Readings:** Langton, “Duty and Desolation,” *Philosophy*. 1982 [a splendid but very sad real-world tale of someone, Maria von Herbert, who seems to lose her sense of meaning in life and the deaf ear Kant turned to her in spite of being a Kantian saint]

**Relevant references from literature/TV/film:** *Fathers and Sons* (novel by Turgenev)

### **Week 8: Story of My Life: Narrative Theories**

- Kauppinen, “Meaningfulness and Time,” 2012, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*: 345-377.
- Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” *Ratio*, 2004.
- **Recommended Supplemental Readings:** Prinzing, 2021. “The Meaning of ‘Life’s Meaning”” *Philosopher’s Imprint*.  
Thomas, “Meaningfulness as Sensefulness,” 2019. *Philosophia*.

**Relevant references from literature/TV/film:** Will Farrell, *Stranger Than Fiction*, *The Entire History of You* [episode of *Black Mirror*], Sartre, *Le Nausee*.

[pure light relief: <https://www.theonion.com/woman-feeling-pressure-to-settle-down-with-man-just-bec-1846525302>]

### Week 9: Relax (Don’t Do It?): Achievement and Downshifting

- Levy, “Downshifting and Meaning in Life,” *Ratio*, 2005.
- Bradford, “Achievement and the Meaning of Life,” Forthcoming. [available online]
- Neil Levy, “Final Thoughts,” *Aeon Magazine*, 2021. [https://aeon.co/essays/why-is-the-deathbed-perspective-considered-so-valuable?fbclid=IwAR0abA0m0jysVo9b6NAoDCxpiJxgIr1-XP3\\_h0\\_qGaVK\\_LhcrjqzLgcXQls](https://aeon.co/essays/why-is-the-deathbed-perspective-considered-so-valuable?fbclid=IwAR0abA0m0jysVo9b6NAoDCxpiJxgIr1-XP3_h0_qGaVK_LhcrjqzLgcXQls)
- Schlick, “On the Meaning of Life” in Klemke.
- **(Strongly) Recommended Supplemental Reading:** Nguyen, T. *Games: Agency as Art*, chapter 2, “The Possibility of Striving Play.” Oxford University Press, available online via Oxford Scholarship Online.

### Week 10: Forever Young: Seizing the Day?

- Kauppinen, “Against Seizing the Day,” forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics* [on LEARN]
- Setiya, *Midlife*, 2017, chapter 6. Princeton University press.
- Milgram, *John Stuart Mill and the Meaning of Life*, 2019, chapters 1,5, 10 and 11 Oxford: Oxford University Press, chapter 12 [available through Oxford Scholarship Online]
- Ridge, “The Meaning of Life Meets the Philosophy of Play and Games,” forthcoming in *Cambridge Health Care Quarterly*. Available online via LEARN.

- **Recommended Supplemental Readings:** (same as last week) Thi Nguyen, *Games: Art as Agency*, chapter 2: The Possibility of Striving Play [available through Oxford Scholarship Online]
- **Relevant references from literature/TV/film:** Cusk, *Outline* (novel mentioned by Setiya), *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen), *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert)

### Week 11: Closer to Fine: Transcending Meaning?

- Milgram, *John Stuart Mill and the Meaning of Life*, 2019. Oxford: Oxford University Press, chapter 12 [available through Oxford Scholarship Online]
- Aarseen, “Darwinism and Meaning,” 2010, *Biological Theory*: 296-311.
- Visak, “Understanding ‘Meaning of Life’ in Terms of Reasons for Action,” *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 2017: 507-530.
- Woodward, “What Good is Meaning in Life?” 2017. *De Ethica*: 67-79.

**Bonus Topic [time allowing]:** Thomas, “Can Only Human Lives Be Meaningful?” 2018. *Philosophical Papers*. 265-297.

- **Recommended Supplemental Readings:** Metz, “The Concept of a Meaningful Life,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*. 2001.

**Relevant references from literature/TV/film:** Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (novel)

*If you have read this far, email me a picture of something you consider meaningful before the first class! – Mike ([mridge@ed.ac.uk](mailto:mridge@ed.ac.uk))*

### Assessment Structure

Assessment is via a 1500-word essay worth 45% due on 21 October, by 12pm, and a final 2500-word essay worth 55% due on 9 December by 12pm. Suggested essay topics are listed below.

Alternative topics can be arranged, but they **must** have the approval of the course organizer at least one week before the essay is due.

Senior Honours students may opt to write a long essay (5000 words) in lieu of the above, as part of their dissertation requirement in Philosophy. The title must be arranged with the instructor. You must notify the Teaching Office which course you will be completing the dissertation on by 18 October by noon. You should agree a title with your supervisor (me) by then as well. The dissertation itself is due (submitted to the Teaching office) by 14 December by noon.

Feedback on all assessed work will be provided within 3 weeks, unless otherwise notified by email.

### **Suggested Essay topics:**

Listed below are recommended essay topics. Students may, *with my explicit permission*, work on other topics, though they must be appropriately related to the content of the course. If you intend to propose an alternative topic, then please discuss it with me well in advance of the due date so that it can be agreed before you start working on it if it is an acceptable topic. Alternative topics must be agreed *at least* one week before the essays are due.

#### **Topics for essay 1:**

- Do radical forms of scepticism (in epistemology) make our lives absurd?
- Is immortality incompatible with having a meaningful and fulfilling life?
- Does the fact that humanity inevitably will go extinct at some point in the future diminish our prospects for a meaningful and fulfilling life?
- To what extent is absurdity (or meaninglessness) incompatible with self-fulfilment?
- Would the existence of God enhance or detract from the prospects for a meaningful life?

#### **Topics for essay 2:**

- What role, if any, should the concept of meaningfulness play in our practical deliberation?
- Is meaningfulness well understood in terms of fitting attitudes?
- What interesting connections, if any, obtain between meaning and well-being?
- Is meaning well understood in terms of narrative?
- Does “downshifting” provide a plausible means to a life with superlative meaning?
- Is a shift to atelic activities and/or the atelic analogues of telic activities sometimes provide a useful way to deal with a sense of meaninglessness?
- Is a desire for a meaningful life morally problematic?
- Does meaningfulness (as applied to life) have an opposite and if so what is it?
- Is meaningfulness merely instrumentally valuable or does it have final value?
- Can nonhuman animals have meaningful lives?

### **Feedback on drafts of essays**

I will provide feedback on first drafts of essays. Although this is not a requirement of the course, I *strongly* encourage students to take advantage of this opportunity. There are few steps you can take to improve your essay which are more effective than this, assuming you make a real effort with your first draft, anyway. However, in order for me to be sure to have enough time to provide quality feedback to you in time for you to make useful revisions based on that feedback, you *must* have a draft to me (via email) no later than 1 week before

the due date for the essay in question. In this case, for the first essay this means no later than 18 Feb at noon, and for the second essay this means no later than 8 April at noon.

### **Formative Work**

Although not strictly required, students are strongly encouraged to provide a weekly one-page critical discussion of a specific idea or argument from one of the readings for that week. Students may use either standard forms of philosophical writing or experiment with Socratic dialogue if they so choose for formative work. Such formative work should be emailed to the instructor at least 24 hours before the next class meeting.

