The Meaning of Life (Philosophy/Religion 108)

Spring 2013
MW 2:40–4:00

PROFESSORS: Ernie Alleva
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DESCRIPTION

This course asks the big question, “What is the Meaning of Life?” and explores a range of answers offered by philosophers and religious thinkers from a host of different traditions in different eras of human history. We will explore a variety of forms of philosophical and religious thinking and the ways that they can be directly relevant to our lives. We will take these texts and ideas seriously; we will approach them critically; and we will learn from them.

REQUIREMENTS

1. Read attentively. Finish the assignments for each class before class time and think hard about them.

2. Attend class regularly. Being present is an important part of your class participation grade, and more than two unexcused absences will put that grade in jeopardy.

3. Listen actively and speak thoughtfully. Although class is large, this is not simply a lecture course. We plan to discuss the materials with you, so be prepared to talk about them. Keep in mind Wittgenstein’s aphorism, “Even to have expressed a false thought boldly and clearly is already to have gained a great deal.”

4. Make regular postings on Moodle, responding to the readings, class discussion, and/or the postings of other students. Our hope is that conversations that begin in class can continue online and vice versa. We expect you to post 150+ words each week, though you can skip two weeks during the semester. Creativity is encouraged, rambling is not. Although you are welcome to focus on a particular passage within a week’s assignment, you should try to contextualize that material within the rest of the week’s readings. Postings for each week should be submitted by Saturday at midnight of that week, and all postings made during a particular week should be posted in the folder for that week.
5. Write three short papers on assigned topics. These should be 5 pages in length, double-spaced, with 1-inch margins, and in a 12-point font. These will be submitted on the following dates: **February 22, April 5, and May 7.**

In summary, you will be evaluated by your papers, each of which will count for 30% of your final grade, and your participation in class and on Moodle, which will count for the remaining 10% of your final grade.

**REQUIRED READING**


*Source Book*. (=SB)

The rest of the materials will be given to you as handouts, all of which will also be posted on Moodle.

•texts are available at Grécourt Bookshop, 585–4140
•the source book is available at Paradise Copies, 21 Conz Street, (413) 585–0414
SYLLABUS

WEEK 1 (1/28, 1/30)

i. INTRODUCTION

ii. When Should One Fight?
  The First Teaching–The Second Teaching, pp. 21–39

SUPPLEMENTARY READINGS
  chapter introductions (handout)
NOTE: You will find it helpful to read these chapter introductions along with each of the Teachings in Miller’s translation. For example, read Zaehner (pp. 120–122) and then Miller’s translation of The Second Teaching (pp. 29–39).

WEEK 2 (2/4, 2/6)

i. How Should One Act?
  The Third Teaching–The Ninth Teaching, pp. 41–87

ii. What Should One Think?
  The Tenth Teaching–The Eighteenth Teaching, pp. 89–154

WEEK 3 (2/11, 2/13)

i. What Is Human Happiness?
  Books I, II, and III (chapters 1–9), pp. 1–45

ii. Why Is Being Virtuous So Difficult?
NOTE: topic for first paper distributed
WEEK 4 (2/18, 2/20)
i. What Is The Best Life?
  Books VIII (chapters 1–8), IX (chapters 3, 4, and 8–12), and X (chapters 6–9), pp. 119–129, 140–143, 146–153, and 162–171

ii. Why Do Bad Things Happen To Good People? (guest lecture by Joel Kaminsky)
  *The Book of Job*, 749–796 (SB)

2/22: first paper due

WEEK 5 (2/25, 2/27)
i. How Does One Master Oneself?
  entire book

ii. What Is The Way To Live? (guest lecture by Peter Gregory)
  Book I, pp. 57–96
  Book 2, 99–143

WEEK 6 (3/4, 3/6)
i. How Does One Connect With God?
  “Conversations with Sufi Saints,” pp. 513–517 (SB)

ii. What Is Enlightenment?
  “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” pp. 41–48 (SB)
WEEK 7 (3/11, 3/13)
i. What Is Left Of It?
  - Introduction, pp. 7–17 (SB)
  - Excerpts, pp. 23–59, 85–96 (SB)

ii. What Are Our Obligations?
  - “Rich and Poor,” 191–215 (SB)

WEEK 8 (3/18, 3/20)
RELAX . . . SPRING BREAK

WEEK 9 (3/25, 3/27)
i. What Is Truth?
  - “Introduction,” pp. 3–25 (handout)

ii. What Does My Death Mean?
  - Complete story, pp. 35–134

NOTE: topic for second paper distributed

WEEK 10 (4/1, 4/3)
i. What Could We Become?

ii. What Is This World? (guest lecture by Rick Millington)
  - Selections, 1–13 (SB)

4/5: second paper due
WEEK 11 (4/8, 4/10)
i. **What Is Evil?**
  Excerpts, pp. 3–67, 83–111

ii. **How Abnormal Is Serious Evil?**
  Excerpts, pp. 112–150, 220–279

WEEK 12 (4/15, 4/17)
i. **How Does One Live With Compassion?**
  Chapters 1–8, pp. 3–131

ii. **How Does One Live With Compassion?**
  Chapters 9–16, pp. 133–237

WEEK 13 (4/22, 4/24)
i. **How Does One See the Divine?**
  Chapters 1, 3, 7, pp. 11–17, 42–71, 119–138 + photographs (SB)

**NOTE:** topic for third paper distributed

ii. **What Is Supreme Love?**
  **NOTE:** Listen repeatedly!
  “Poetry and Prayer, 144–147 (SB)
WEEK 14 (4/29, 5/1)
i. Do We Get a Second Chance? Can Happiness be an Illusion?
IN-CLASS SCREENING: “Reality Check.”

SCREENING OUTSIDE OF CLASS: The Seven Samurai (Shichinin no samurai). Directed by Akira Kurosawa. Written by Akira Kurosawa, Shinobu Hashimoto, and Hideo Oguni. 203 minutes. 1954.

NOTE: Sunday and Monday, 7 pm (location to be announced)
AND, IF YOU CAN MAKE IT: Tuesday, W. S. Merwin Poetry Reading!

ii. What Is The Meaning Of Life?
   discussion of The Seven Samurai

5/7: third paper due