

PHIL 399.1 – Topics in Philosophy (The Meaning of Life)

Instructor: Ron Wilburn

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Office Hours: Tuesdays, Wednesdays 3:00 – 4:00

Location: Online and Asynchronous



Instructor: Ron Wilburn (“Ron” is OK)

Lectures: Online and Asynchronous

Office: In the Electronic Stratosphere

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Land Acknowledgment: The University of Calgary resides upon the traditional territories of the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta, which includes the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations), the Tsuut’ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda (including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations). The City of Calgary is also home to Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III. The University of Calgary is situated on land adjacent to where the Bow River meets the Elbow River; the traditional Blackfoot name of this place is “Moh’kins’tsis”, which we now call the City of Calgary.

ii’ taa’poh’to’p, the Blackfoot name of the University of Calgary’s Indigenous Strategy, was bestowed and transferred in ceremony by Kainai Elder Andy Black Water on June 21, 2017. The name signifies a place to rejuvenate and re-energize while on a journey. Traditionally, these

places are recognized as safe, caring, restful, offering renewed energy for an impending journey. In a traditional naming ceremony, transitioning into the new name is a journey of transformation towards self-actualization.

I. Introduction

This is an entry-level philosophy course with no pre-requisites. For this class, we can take philosophy as the systematic study of foundational issues concerning reality, value, and knowledge. The questions about the meaning of life we will address are best regarded as a second-level “meta-normative” questions, that is, questions about what people could even mean when they speak of seeking “the meaning of life.” While addressing these second-level questions, however, we will automatically find ourselves addressing first-order ones concerning what the “the meaning of life” is and how knowledge of it is best obtained – at least as these questions have been posed and addressed by some of the major philosophical and religious traditions of the western and eastern worlds.

The course is primarily philosophical. This means that, even though we will have occasion to look at a few influential religious texts, our goal in doing this is to distill philosophical content from them, using recent philosophers’ work to help us do so. The religious literature tends to be beautiful but cryptic; the philosophical literature tends to be dry but clear. We aim to sample the best of each world by looking at both.

II. Bureaucracy

Materials: There is only one text which I am asking you to buy for this class:

Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide, Joshua W. Seachris (Editor) with Thaddeus Metz, John G. Cottingham, Garrett Thomson, Erik J. Wielenberg, John Martin Fischer; ISBN: 978-0470658796, 512 pages, Wiley-Blackwell

There will be numerous other items that I will ask you to read or look at during the semester. However, all these items are public domain and available on the web. Moreover, there are various films I will suggest (but not demand) that you look at from time to time. Some of these are available through the UNLV campus library (the Films on Demand service). Others are available on the web or through American streaming services.

Course Objectives/Learning Outcomes:

- Broad knowledge of diverse philosophical issues, problems, traditions, and views
- Deep knowledge of one central area of philosophical inquiry
- Ability to critically digest, interpret, and analyze complex sources
- Ability to write a convincing argument that takes adequate account of alternative positions
- Ability to engage in constructive, respectful, oral and written argumentation

Grading: The grading will be modular, not comprehensive (e.g., exam #2 will deal only with the material covered since exam #1).

1. Two (2) essay exams, collectively worth 65% of the course grade. They will be paper assignments, in effect, but formatted in a way that allows you to submit them as series of short essays through the D2L quiz function.

2. Ten (10) discussion assignments, collectively worth 35% of the course grade. These are all available from the first day of the semester. Note that these discussion assignments consist of two parts:

Note that these discussion assignments consist of two parts:

(a) For merely responding to each discussion question with an original thread of your own, you will receive approximately ten (10) points (if I judge your response to be reasonably sincere and reflective, which is to say no snow jobs or obfuscation). Each such question requires a response of a couple of paragraphs (or one very substantive paragraph). However, I leave the paragraph length up to your own judgment.

(b) Reflective response commentary on at least two discussion entries by other students (or a single other student). This is a requirement for receiving full credit for your discussion assignments. These commentaries are worth approximately an additional five (5) points apiece. I score each of these assignment components (original thread, first commentary, second commentary) as they come in. What this means is that you may receive ten (10 points), only to see that raised to (fifteen) 15, only to see that increased to twenty (20).

This means that you can receive up to approximately twenty (20) points per discussion assignment.

Our grading scale will be a standard one (with appropriate plusses and minuses):

0-45	F	71-75	B-
46-50	D	76-80	B
51-55	D+	81-85	B+
56-60	C-	86-90	A-
61-65	C	91-95	A
66-70	C+	96-100	A+

What do letter grades mean? People have pondered this question from the beginning of time. And I, for one, will not pretend that grading is a science. But let's say the following:

- A Range: Excellent exposition, clearly and concisely written, well-argued, and displaying good original input from the student.

- B Range: Good exposition, but lacks clarity and concision, or doesn't have much original input, or offers poor support for essential claims. (For instance, a genuinely excellent expository paper will earn you a B+; a fuzzy but accurate one will earn you a B-.
- C Range: Fails to understand some aspects of the material or is very unclearly written.
- D Range Very problematic in all aspects mentioned above
- F Range: Papers: did not submit a paper; crassly plagiarized material; made no effort to understand the material or read it.

What else to note? There is no single assignment in the class that is required for passing it. But if you miss an exam, for instance, passing the course would obviously be difficult. I'm not a grammar Nazi, but you must submit work that is intelligible and coherent. Treat the following criteria as guides in your writing (of both case studies and discussion submissions). This is taken from the Berkeley Graduate Website at <https://gsi.berkeley.edu/gsi-guide-contents/grading-intro/before-you-grade/criteria/>

Course Organization and Lesson Plan

The schedule below is organized around a simple organizational scheme. For each block of material, you are asked to

- 1) Read the assigned material.
- 2) Think about the reflection questions that I pose to you.
- 3) Do the appropriate discussion assignment.

You can find these assignments and submit your responses through the discussion folder linked to the course desktop. These responses will be visible to all your classmates and me. All these discussion assignments are available from the beginning of the semester. What I am looking for in each of your submissions is a reasonable and honest effort that has been informed by the reading(s). That is, don't merely give me your opinions. Please give me the considered and sincere opinions you form after doing the pertinent readings.

- 4) Then and only then, listen to and look at the correlated narrated lecture presentation.
- 5) Comment on each other's discussion assignment entries for that block.

Needless to say, I don't expect you to comment on all of the posted submissions, as that would take years and cost millions of lives. But I would like to see at least two commentary entries from each of you in connection with each discussion assignment. As much as anything else, I am concerned in this course to encourage focused discussion of the issues we are dealing with. Thus, I take this commentary component seriously and may occasionally send entries of my own (anonymously) to stir up discussion. To repeat once again, your submission of these commentary entries factors into your own discussion assignment grade.

- 6) Once you have submitted a given discussion assignment, look at the set of "model responses to these discussion questions located on your desktop. There will also be model responses provided for your exam questions once you have submitted the appropriate exam and I have graded it.

Important Addenda:

Because students these days can have so many non-academic responsibilities (work, family etc.), I aim to make due dates flexible throughout this semester. Having said this, however, I urge you not to let yourself fall too far behind the pacing schedule recommended in the syllabus.

IF YOU DECIDE NOT TO FOLLOW THE RECOMMENDED SYLLABUS DEADLINES, MAKE SURE THAT YOU SUBMIT ALL COURSE WORK BY WEDNESDAY, 12/22 AT 11:59 P.M. THIS IS NECESSARY IF I AM GOING TO SUBMIT GRADES ON TIME.

Important Departmental, Faculty and University Information

Academic Accommodations: It is the student's responsibility to request academic accommodations according to the University policies and procedures. The student accommodation policy can be found at ucalgary.ca/legal-services/sites/default/files/teams/1/Policies-Student-Accommodation-Policy.pdf.

Students needing an Accommodation because of a disability or medical condition should communicate this need to Student Accessibility Services in accordance with the Procedure for Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: ucalgary.ca/legal-services/sites/default/files/teams/1/Policies-Accommodation-for-Students-with-Disabilities-Procedure.pdf. Students needing an Accommodation in relation to their coursework or to fulfil requirements for a graduate degree, based on a protected ground other than disability, should communicate this need, preferably in writing, to their instructor.

Absence or Missed Course Assessments: Students who are absent from class assessments (tests, participation activities, or other assignments) should inform their instructors as soon as possible. If the reason provided for the absence is acceptable, instructors may decide that any arrangements made can take forms other than make-up tests or assignments. For example, the weight of a missed grade may be added to another assignment or test.

Student Support and Resources: Full details and information about the following resources can be found at ucalgary.ca/current-students/student-services.

- Wellness and Mental Health Resources
- Student Success Centre
- Student Ombuds Office
- Student Union (SU) Information
- Graduate Students' Association (GSA) Information
- Emergency Evacuation/Assembly Points
- Safewalk

Academic Advising: If you are a student in the Faculty of Arts, you can speak to an academic advisor in the Arts Students' Centre about course planning, course selection, registration, program progression and more. Visit the Faculty of Arts website at <https://arts.ucalgary.ca/current-students/undergraduate/academic-advising> for contact details and information regarding common academic concerns.

For questions specific to the philosophy program, please visit arts.ucalgary.ca/philosophy. Further academic guidance is available by contacting Jeremy Fantl (Undergraduate Program Director jfantl@ucalgary.ca) or David Dick (Honours Advisor dgdick@ucalgary.ca). If you have questions regarding registration, please email Courtenay Canivet (Undergraduate Program Administrator phildept@ucalgary.ca)

Writing Assessment and Support: The assessment of all written assignments—and, to a lesser extent, written exam responses—is based in part on writing skills. This includes correctness (grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, etc.), as well as general clarity and organization. Research papers must include a thorough and accurate citation of sources. Students are also encouraged to use Writing Support Services for assistance. For more information, and other services offered by the Student Success Centre, please visit ucalgary.ca/student-services/student-success.

Required Technology: In order to successfully engage in their learning experiences at the University of Calgary, students taking online, remote, and blended courses are required to have reliable access to the following technology:

- A computer with a supported operating system, as well as the latest security, and malware updates.
- A current and updated web browser.
- Webcam (built-in or external).
- Microphone and speaker (built-in or external), or headset with microphone.
- Current antivirus and/or firewall software enabled.
- Broadband internet connection.
- Most current laptops will have a built-in webcam, speaker, and microphone.

Responsible Use of D2L: Important information and communication about this course will be posted on D2L (Desire2Learn), UCalgary's online learning management system. Visit <https://ucalgary.service-now.com/itfor> for how-to information and technical assistance.

All users of D2L are bound by the guidelines on the responsible use of D2L posted here: <https://elearn.ucalgary.ca/commitment-to-the-responsible-use-of-d2l/>. The instructor may establish additional specific course policies for D2L, Zoom, and any other technologies used to support remote learning. Instructional materials, including audio or video recordings of lectures, may not be posted outside of the course D2L site. Students violating this policy are subject to discipline under the University of Calgary's Non-Academic Misconduct policy.

Media Recording: Please refer to the following statement on media recording of students:
https://elearn.ucalgary.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Media-Recording-in-Learning-Environments-OSP_FINAL.pdf

Academic Misconduct/Honesty: Cheating or plagiarism on any assignment or examination is as an extremely serious academic offense, the penalty for which will be an F on the assignment or an F in the course, and possibly a disciplinary sanction such as probation, suspension, or expulsion. For information on academic misconduct and its consequences, please see the University of Calgary Calendar at ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/k.html.

Intellectual honesty requires that your work include adequate referencing to sources. Plagiarism occurs when you do not acknowledge or correctly reference your sources. If you have questions about referencing, please consult your instructor.

University Policies: The Instructor Intellectual Property Policy is available at ucalgary.ca/legal-services/sites/default/files/teams/1/Policies-Intellectual-Property-Policy.pdf

The University of Calgary is under the jurisdiction of the provincial Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIP) Act, as outlined at <https://www.ucalgary.ca/legal-services/access-information-privacy>. The instructor (or TA) must return graded assignments directly to the student UNLESS written permission to do otherwise has been provided.

All students are required to read the University of Calgary policy on Acceptable Use of Material Protected by Copyright (<https://www.ucalgary.ca/legal-services/sites/default/files/teams/1/Policies-Acceptable-Use-of-Material-Protected-by-Copyright-Policy.pdf>) and requirements of the copyright act (<https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-42/index.html>).