

Philosophy and the Meaning of Life
FYC 14F - A TR 4:00-5:55 Netherlands Core 0016 crn#94422
Fall 2015

Instructor: Tony Dardis
Office: 207 Heger

email: Anthony.B.Dardis@hofstra.edu
Office Hours: TR 10:30-11:00, 2:30-3:50 or by appointment

Overview

What does it all mean? Why are we doing these things? Why are we alive? Does my life have any meaning? If the entire universe is only “atoms and the void” (as the Roman philosopher, poet and physicist Lucretius argued over 2000 years ago) then there’s really no point to anything.

That’s the problem of the meaning of life.

The *philosophical problem* of the meaning of life is to figure out what the problem is, and what the possible solutions are. About the problem itself: what would it mean for my life to have meaning?



Figure 1: <http://xkcd.com/167/>

why isn’t it enough that I do the best I can and get as much joy from life as I can? About possible solutions: is there a god, or gods, or God? does that matter? If there is a God, would that actually make my life even more meaningless? If there is no God, does that mean my life really is meaningless, that human life is meaningless? Should we worry if we think the universe will end in about 30 billion years? Should we worry if the human race is wiped out in 500 years? Should it trouble us to think that perhaps there will be intelligent life that descends from us but that it won’t be human?

Our goals in this class are to get clear on what exactly the problem of the meaning of life is, and to see whether there are any good solutions. Along the way we will spend a lot of time thinking about thinking itself. We’ll talk about what philosophy is, how to think and write philosophically, and why philosophy has an important place in everyone’s life.

Texts

- E.D.Klemke and Cahn, S. M., editors (2008). *The meaning of life: a reader*. Oxford University Press, New York, 3rd edition.
- Seachris, J., editor (2013). *Exploring the meaning of life*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Dardis, Anthony. “On Method in Philosophy”.
- Dardis, Anthony. “Logic, Philosophy and Argument”.

Requirements

- (1) 2 papers, 5-6pp (1500-1800 words); see “Paper Topics” sheet, each worth 20% of your final grade.
- (2) You must lead the classroom discussion at least once. (See below.) 10% of your final grade will depend on your presentation;

- (3) 5 quizzes, each worth 4% of your final grade;
- (4) Final exam, worth 30% of your final grade.

Class structure

Our class sessions will consist in presentation of the readings and critical evaluation of the readings. Some of the time I will take primary responsibility for the class presentation, and some of the time you will.

I will divide the class into pairs. Each pair will be assigned to a day and a reading. Each pair should meet to discuss the reading beforehand and decide what you plan to do with it. It would be a good idea to meet with me as well.

There are three phases to what you want your presentation to do.

1. Describe the “bottom line” or “take away” conclusion of the reading. This is the main idea or ideas that the author wants us to come to believe.
2. Describe the reasons that the author gives for believing that conclusion.
3. Evaluate the argument. This is the most important phase of the presentation. The Dardis handout on logic is a guide to how to think about this. You will want to have some idea of what *kind* of argument you are discussing), and what the standards for that kind of argument are. The key to evaluation is to ask, “should I believe this? what are the alternatives?” Be skeptical; be imaginative.

And there are two things you **really don’t** want to do:

1. **Don’t read a presentation!** It’s a very good idea to work out what you are going to say beforehand, in writing. But it’s generally a very bad idea to read from a prepared text.
2. **Don’t look at the text!** You must digest the reading and present it from your own point of view. You *do not* want to attempt to present the author’s arguments *from the text*. Your goal isn’t to summarize everything the author says. Your goal is to critically evaluate the overall argument that the author makes. Give yourself plenty of time: you and your partner may well want to consult with me before your presentation, and so you should schedule your time with that in mind.

Reading, writing and argument

Your job is to be disagreeable.

Of course, your job is also to know what we’re reading and talking about. Assume that’s already done. What are you supposed to do with it?

Being disagreeable doesn’t mean being unpleasant, or mean, or cruel. It does mean challenging what you encounter. It means asking why things are the way they are, asking whether there are other, better ways for things to be. It means asking what reasons people have for the things they say and believe, and asking whether they are good reasons. It does mean not letting other people off the hook: not our authors, not your professors, not your fellow students.

- Is what they say based on truths? Question: how do we know what is true? Who is to say? — Answer: you are. Use whatever you know and believe. Be disagreeable with yourself: if you believe it, are your reasons good?

- Does what they say follow from their evidence? Could what they say be wrong, even if the evidence really is what they say it is?
- Is there another way (are there many other ways) to think about what you're seeing? Are they preferable? In some ways rather than others?

Another name for being disagreeable is “critical thinking”. You’re trying to criticize. You’re trying to figure out what’s wrong with (some of) the thinking you are encountering. (Question: is there something wrong with it? Answer: there is always something wrong with human reasoning. Don’t worry. You’ll find something.)

I have put a couple of readings on Blackboard about logic, the science of being disagreeable. I will talk about them in class from time to time.

The result of your disagreeableness will be a collection of critical thoughts about our texts and things we’ve said about them. Often they will have the form of an explanation. You’ll find something odd or weird or just plain puzzlingly interesting about a text. Try to figure it out. You’ll spin out an *interpretation*, a theory of what’s going on. Perhaps I’ll say something about one of the texts, and you will find it puzzling, and you will think I’m just wrong about it.

Whatever you come up with, you will have reasons for what you think. These reasons shouldn’t be purely individual and “subjective”. They should be reasons that can persuade anybody willing to think things through with you. (Compare: “What Tolstoy said about the meaning of life is terrible and boring and I don’t like it” and “Tolstoy thought his life had no meaning because he thought his very positive relations with the world weren’t enough, he wanted something special and extra for himself. But that’s problematically self-centered.”) Feel free to use the word ‘I’, but just ask yourself whether you’re telling your reader about *you* or saying something that your reader is going to agree with (*whoever* your reader is).

Good papers have three features: good mechanics (spelling, grammar); good understanding (accurate and insightful description of the subject matter, in our case, what goes on in a text); good thinking (interesting, insightful, accurate critical response to the text). Good thinking is by far the most important. It is easy to hide good thinking with bad writing.

Reference and citation Your papers *must* include at least one bibliographic reference, in the form of a footnote or an endnote. I do not have any preferences about the form of the reference. If you are comfortable with some standard reference format (MLA, APA), use that; if you don’t have one that you are comfortable with yet, pick one, Google it (or use the Hofstra Library links to citation style guides http://www.hofstra.edu/Library/library_citation_style.html), and learn it cold. Suggestion: use/get a good reference management system for your computer.¹ You should also include a reference if you find yourself using or discussing the ideas of others, for instance ideas that have come up in class from me or from your classmates.²

If you prepare a separate file for references, I’ve noticed that it’s not unusual for people to *forget* to include this sheet when they turn in their papers. Better, however you manage your references, to have them in the same document as the paper itself.

¹Hofstra computer services is enthusiastic about Zotero. EndNote is a very good professional reference manager but expensive. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison_of_reference_management_software describes many alternatives, some of which (for example, JabRef, which can work with Microsoft Word) are open-source—free—software. This *Syllabus* was prepared using L^AT_EX along with its reference management system, BIB_TE_X. These are very stable, very solid, very powerful programs; they are available (free) for Windows, Mac OS X, and Linux.

²I want to thank James Wilkerson for discussion of ideas about how to organize a syllabus.

Policies

- All papers must be submitted **in hard copy only**.
- No late papers accepted.
- Any paper may be rewritten: a rewrite must be turned in by 2 weeks from the original due date.
- Excuse clause: stuff happens. If for some reason you are unable to hand in work, let me know as soon as possible, and be ready to provide documentation. Occasionally there may be a reason for you to email me a paper, but you **must** check with me first.
- A paper with no complete bibliographic reference will receive the grade of F.
- If you must leave class early, please inform me before class starts.
- If you cannot attend class, please inform me.
- **Disabilities:** If you believe you need accommodations for a disability, please contact **Student Access Services (SAS)** (Student Center 104, SAS@hofstra.edu, 516-463-7075). In accordance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, qualified individuals with disabilities will not be discriminated against in any programs, or services available at Hofstra University. Individuals with disabilities are entitled to accommodations designed to facilitate full access to all programs and services. SAS is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will provide students with documented disabilities accommodation letters, as appropriate. Since accommodations may require early planning and are not retroactive, please contact SAS as soon as possible. All students are responsible for providing accommodation letters to each instructor and for discussing with him or her the specific accommodations needed and how they can be best implemented in each course.
- **Academic dishonesty.** If I have reason to believe that any kind of plagiarism whatsoever has occurred I will request a discussion of the work. (See the *Hofstra Writer's Guide* for a definition of plagiarism. If you are in any doubt, consult with me.) If plagiarism has occurred, I will ask for the work to be completely rewritten. If rewritten work contains plagiarism, I will award the grade of F **for the course**. If there is plagiarism in the final paper, I will award the grade of F for the course. I will always file an academic dishonesty form with the Dean of Students if I believe that plagiarism has occurred. (These policies are in accord with the University's Policy on Academic Honesty as stated in the Hofstra University Bulletin. Procedures for Handling Violations of Academic Honesty by Students at Hofstra University are detailed in Faculty Policy Series #II (rev. 2004.) for undergraduates.)
- Attendance is required. I will take attendance. If you are absent more than 4 times you will receive the grade of F.
- **Computers (etc).**: Prohibited. Two exceptions: (1) if you have a documented need through SAS, show me the documentation; (2) reference to an electronic version of one of our texts during class. This includes laptops, phones, iPads, iPods, pocket mainframes, robots with brains the size of a planet, connected refrigerators . . .
- Turn off your phone while you are in class.

Schedule

We will discuss the following readings on the dates noted below. Do the reading before class.

Philosophy must be read **actively**. The aim of philosophical writing is to discover the truth—truth about something controversial and hard. **Read slowly**. Sentence by sentence, you must constantly question what you are reading, asking whether you think what the author says is true, and asking whether you think the author’s conclusions follow. Figure out why, why not, take notes, write down what you think (and ask yourself: am I right?). Read with someone else, maybe out loud.

“K&C” is the Klemke and Cahn anthology. “Bb” is Blackboard.

Date	Assignment	Topic	Readings
Sep 3		Introduction and Syllabus	
Sep 8		What is philosophy?	Bertrand Russell “The Value of Philosophy” http://www.ditext.com/russell/rus15.html ; Plato: <i>Euthyphro</i> (look on Blackboard)
Sep 10		What is philosophy? ‘The Question’ or ‘the questions’?	Plato <i>Euthyphro</i> Thomson (Seachris 1.2)
Sep 15	No class	No class	No class
Sep 17	Quiz 1	‘The Question’ or ‘the questions’?	Hepburn (Seachris 1.3)
Sep 22	No class	No class	No class
Sep 24		‘The Question’ or ‘the questions’?	Metz (Seachris 1.5)
Sep 29		The traditional answer: God Dean Porcelli @4pm	Tolstoy (K&C 1); Craig (Seachris 2.4)
Oct 1	Quiz 2	God and meaning Do traces matter?	Pojman (K&C 3) Trisel (Seachris 5.5)
Oct 6		Proving God exists	Aquinas (Bb); Edwards (Bb)
Oct 8		Proving God exists Meeting in Axinn	Paley, Hume (Bb); Anselm (Bb)
Oct 13		If God does exist, can God give our lives meaning?	Metz (Seachris 2.7)
Oct 15	Quiz 3	If God does exist, can God give our lives meaning?	Cottingham (Seachris 2.6), Nozick (K&C 226-9)
Oct 20		Immortality	Williams (Bb)
Oct 22		Immortality	Fischer (Seachris 5.3), Metz (Seachris 5.4)
Oct 27		Squirrels!	Wielenberg (Seachris 4.5)
Oct 29	Paper 1	Atheist answers Pessimism	Russell (K&C 7) Schopenhauer (K&C 6)
Nov 3		Pessimism Life is absurd	Edwards (K&C 11) Camus (K&C 9)
Nov 5	Quiz 4	Life is absurd	Camus (K&C 9); Taylor (K&C 12)

Continued on next page

Date	Assignment	Topic	Readings
Nov 10		Life is Absurd	Nagel (K&C 13); Feinberg (K&C 14)
Nov 12		Subjectivism	Baier (K&C 10)
Nov 17		Subjectivism Non-theistic objectivism	Martin (Bb) Kekes (K&C 22)
Nov 19		Non-theistic objectivism	Kekes (K&C 22)
Nov 24		Relationalism	Flanagan (Bb); Nozick (K&C 229-30); Scheffler http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/21/the-importance-of-the-afterlife-seriously/
Nov 26		Thanksgiving	
Dec 1		A genuine question?	Ayer (K&C 16); Edwards (Seachris 1.1)
Dec 3	Quiz 5	A genuine question?	Nielsen (K&C 17)
Dec 8		A genuine question? Meaningless lives?	Wisdom (K&C 18) Wolf (Seachris 4.3)
Dec 10	Final paper due	Ok, so what does it all mean?	
Dec 15	Final exam	4-6pm in Netherlands 0016	

Learning goals and objectives

This course has the following learning goals and objectives (drawn from the HCLAS General Education Learning Goals, at http://www.hofstra.edu/Academics/Colleges/Hclas/hclas_goals.html):

Goal 1. Students will demonstrate the ability to think critically and creatively.

- 1a.** Clearly and accurately summarize and evaluate the facts, presumptions, viewpoints, values, and arguments presented in a text or creative work.
- 1b.** Gather and assess relevant information, and apply appropriate cognitive methods in solving problems or answering questions raised in a text or creative work.
- 1c.** Construct well-reasoned solutions or conclusions; test and defend conclusions against relevant criteria and standards.
- 1d.** Critically analyze one's own thinking by identifying one's presumptions, values, and viewpoints as well as problems, inconsistencies, and unanswered questions.
- 1e.** Conceive and defend alternative hypotheses and viewpoints; offer and explain reasons for provisionally rejecting or accepting them.

Goal 3. Students will demonstrate proficiency in written communication.

- 3e.** Write an effective argumentative essay.