



ST. JEROME'S UNIVERSITY

St. Jerome's University in the University of Waterloo

Department of Philosophy

PHIL 120J - FALL 2020

The Meaning of Life

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Instructor: Professor Nikolaj Zunic
Office: SH 2003 [Sweeney Hall]
Phone: 519-884-8111 ext. 28229
Office Hours: By appointment only. Contact the professor to schedule a personal meeting.
Email: nzunic@uwaterloo.ca

The best and most effective way of contacting the professor is by e-mail.

E-mail messages will normally be answered within 24 hours.

Due to the extraordinary circumstances regarding the COVID-19 preventative measures in place at the university, the professor will not have regular access to his office or to his office phone. Therefore, please do not leave messages by phone at the number given above.

All office hours will be conducted remotely by means of Skype, Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

COURSE FORMAT

As everyone is undoubtedly aware, the University made the decision to have all courses in the Fall Term 2020 be delivered remotely, rather than in person or face-to-face, because of the risks associated with the COVID-19 virus. This course will, therefore, in accordance with these official regulations, be delivered entirely remotely, that is, by means of the Internet.

We will be relying on LEARN (D2L or Desire to Learn) as the primary means in the delivery of the course. Everything to do with this course will be conducted through LEARN. Therefore, students must have access to LEARN.

The professor will post all relevant course material – e.g. the course outline, assignments, links, announcements – to the LEARN site. However, e-mail will also be a mode of communication between the professor and students.

The course will be divided into four components:

1. **Lectures**
 2. **Readings**
 3. **Discussions**
 4. **Assignments**
-

1. *Lectures*

All lectures will be recorded by the professor and posted to LEARN in the **Content** section.

The mode of content delivery in this course will be entirely asynchronous (= there is no set time to listen to and view lectures) instead of synchronous (= when a scheduled time is set for live instruction). All the lectures will be recorded, and students will have the opportunity to listen to the lectures on their own time.

Each recorded lecture will be either an audio recording or a narrated PowerPoint presentation. The video lecture will not be the normal mode of content delivery.

Each lecture will be 20-30 minutes in duration.

There will be two audio or MP4 files posted regularly each week, one on Mondays and the second on Wednesdays, by noon at the latest. If for some reason the professor will be late in posting a lecture on a Monday or Wednesday, he will announce this in LEARN.

The lectures will focus on the important concepts from the prescribed readings and as such will be concise and targeted.

2. *Readings*

Students are required to read the prescribed books/texts/readings in accordance with the schedule contained in this course outline.

The readings for which students are responsible for studying are given in a weekly schedule.

The required books/texts/readings may be purchased at the University of Waterloo Bookstore or through some other seller, such as Amazon. In some cases, online versions of the readings are available in the public domain. The professor will inform students of acceptable online versions of the readings.

The readings play a pivotal part of this course, as all the lectures and assignments will deal with them centrally.

It is advisable that students follow the readings schedule and diligently do the prescribed readings.

3. *Discussions*

Each week forums for discussion on the week's main topics will be open for student engagement on LEARN.

- In LEARN go to **Connect → Discussions**.

The professor will participate in the discussions on Friday mornings from 10:00 am to 12:00 pm.

Participation in the discussions is optional and will not constitute any part of the student's final grade.

The purpose of the discussion forums is to allow students to dialogue with each other, to pose and answer questions related to the week's topics, and to facilitate the comprehension of course material. In short, it is an opportunity for students to ask questions and to offer and receive responses.

4. *Assignments*

There are four assignments in this course. The entirety of each student's final grade will be based on these four assignments.

Each assignment will be an argumentative essay.

A very good resource to consult in order to understand how to write an effective philosophy paper is the following website:

https://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/files/phildept/files/brief_guide_to_writing_philosophy_paper.pdf

**Please read through this document on how to write a philosophy paper before the first essay is assigned.*

Each essay should be 4-5 double-spaced pages (1200-1500 words). The essays will be based on topics corresponding to relevant sections of the course and thus will be specific to the readings

that we are covering.

The instructions and topics for each essay assignment will be posted to LEARN approximately 3 weeks before the due date.

All essay assignments must be submitted to LEARN in the Dropbox section.

- In LEARN go to **Submit → Dropbox**.

Each essay will also be submitted to Turnitin, a program that scans essays for academic integrity infractions.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In popular culture the discipline of philosophy is often described as being about nothing more than the question of the meaning of life. Although a widespread stereotype, there is nonetheless much truth to this suggestion. This course will deal principally with this concept of the meaning of life and attempt to give it some philosophical articulation.

The idea of the meaning of life deals with the intelligibility of existence, particularly the existence of living beings, such as human beings. By “intelligibility” is meant the possibility of coming to understand and know what life is about. Thus, the human mind or intellect is squarely involved in this endeavor. But the notion of “meaning” is a loaded one which requires much reflection to plumb its depths. It connotes significance, importance, purpose, and value. There is also the issue of what we mean when we speak about the meaning of life, for example, whether we are referring to our own individual lives or about life in general. Philosophers also address the problem of the coherence of such an idea, that is, whether it makes any intelligible sense to inquire into the meaning of something called life as such. This is why the philosopher’s chief task is one of thinking the problem through to its logical conclusions.

In this course we will address the question about the meaning of life from a variety of perspectives. First, we will compare and contrast ancient Greek and Roman philosophical views with more modern and contemporary views. In this way there will be a fruitful dialectical exchange occurring between different historical standpoints. Second, we will be studying the views of different thinkers in the philosophical tradition in order to gain a more comprehensive view of this question. And third, we will be attempting to integrate these ideas into our own lives as we try to make sense of the journey of life that each of us is on.

There will be seven major themes or topics in this course.

1. The course will begin with a study of E. F. Schumacher’s influential book *A Guide for the Perplexed*. In this book Schumacher provides a very useful and insightful “philosophical map”

of life. This book will lay the groundwork for the course as a whole and will introduce many of the key concepts that we will discuss later on.

2. The second part deals with Aristotle's vision of life as a pursuit of happiness. I have chosen to read a study of Aristotle's ethics by the renowned Canadian philosopher and humanitarian Jean Vanier because his contemporary interpretation of Aristotle can help us to see better how Aristotle's ethics can be relevant today. Many seminal ideas will be discussed in this first section: the nature of desire; happiness as the goal of life; the concept of virtue; the tension between the practical and theoretical life; the importance of friendship and community.
3. The third part looks at Charles Taylor's views on the modern turn towards and emphasis on the authenticity of the self. We will examine the chief tenets of the modern approach to life which include individualism, subjectivism, and the many problems that attend to these currents.
4. The fourth part will return to an older model of life as espoused by the Roman philosopher Seneca. The focus here will be on the philosophy of Stoicism. We will discuss topics ranging from the natural law and the brevity of life to suicide, death and the importance of inculcating a spirit of tranquillity in one's mind.
5. The fifth part will confront the negative dimension of life, as experienced in suffering. The modern German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer promoted a philosophy of pessimism and greatly emphasized the role that suffering plays in life. We will discuss his basic doctrines of the will and representation as well as the Eastern religious background of his thought in Hinduism. One experience that we will focus on is that of boredom. Schopenhauer singles out this mood as pivotal to our suffering in the world, but we will avail ourselves of the thought of Martin Heidegger, a twentieth-century thinker, who masterfully exposes three different kinds of boredom that afflict human beings.
6. The sixth part focusses on the idea of a religious interpretation of life. We will focus principally on three Biblical books which lie at the basis of Peter Kreeft's excellent overview entitled *Three Philosophies of Life*. The three archetypal philosophies will be that of vanity, represented by the book of *Ecclesiastes*, suffering, represented by the book of *Job*, and love, represented by the book of *The Song of Songs*.
7. The final part of the course will look at Josef Pieper's theory of festivity. This is a view of life which examines the human being's place in and relation to the world. Furthermore, it addresses the modern tendency to put work (gainful employment) at the centre of human life and to minimize, if not eliminate entirely, the transcendent nature of the human being's vocation in this world. Hence we will discuss the idea of celebration, time and the holiday, and once again, what life is really all about.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course aims to fulfill the following pedagogical objectives:

- To examine *philosophically* the concept of the meaning of life.
- To compare and contrast ancient and modern conceptions of life.
- To learn about different worldviews and ethical systems.
- To evaluate critically different arguments about the meaning of life.
- To deepen one's understanding of the meaning and purpose of one's own life.
- To develop skills in philosophical reflection.

REQUIRED TEXTS

The following books are required for this course. They may be purchased at the University of Waterloo bookstore.

E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*. Harper Perennial, 2015.

Jean Vanier, *Made for Happiness: Discovering the Meaning of Life with Aristotle*. Translated by Kathryn Spink. Toronto: Anansi, 2001.

Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*. Toronto: Anansi, 1991.

Seneca, *Dialogues and Essays*. Translated by John Davie. Oxford University Press, 2007.

Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Penguin Books, 1970.

Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989.

Josef Pieper, *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 1999.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND ASSESSMENT

There are four written assignments for this course.

The essays will be similar in focus and scope. Each will deal with a specific theme studied in this course.

The nature of each essay will be argumentative. What this means is that the professor will provide a selection of questions or topics to choose from and students will have to argue or defend a position by using logical reasoning and evidence from the texts and lectures. It is crucial that students learn philosophy by learning how to reason and argue their positions. Therefore, the essay assignments will aim to foster such argumentative and logical reasoning skills.

The detailed instructions for each assignment as well as the essay topics will be posted to LEARN approximately 3 weeks before the due date.

This course uses the Turnitin software, so all essays will be checked for plagiarism.

There is no final exam in this course.

The breakdown of the assignments with their corresponding due dates and weightings is given in the table below:

ASSIGNMENT	DUE DATE	VALUE
1. Essay #1	October 7 at 9:00 pm	25%
2. Essay #2	November 4 at 9:00 pm	25%
3. Essay #3	November 25 at 9:00 pm	25%
4. Essay #4	December 11 at 9:00 pm	25%

COURSE SCHEDULE

The following is a weekly schedule for this course. It lists the readings that students are responsible to study each week. The lectures, which will be posted to LEARN, will relate to the readings as they are listed in this schedule.

Please consult this schedule throughout the fall term.

WEEK 1: September 8-11

Introduction to the course

WEEK 2: September 14-18

E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, Chapters 1-5
Topics: The Levels of Being; *Adaequatio*

WEEK 3: September 21-25

E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, Chapters 6-10
Topics: The Four Fields of Knowledge; the problem of scientism

WEEK 4: September 28-October 2

Jean Vanier, *Made for Happiness*, Chapters 1-2
Topics: Desire; Ends vs. Purposes; the Good; Happiness; Pleasure; Friendship

WEEK 5: October 5-9

Jean Vanier, *Made for Happiness*, Chapters 3-5
Topic: Virtues; Truth; Life as Growth

ESSAY #1 is due on Wednesday, October 7 at 9:00 pm.

WEEK 6: October 12-16

READING WEEK

**There is no course activity from October 10 to October 18.*

WEEK 7: October 19-23

Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, Chapters I-V
Topic: Authenticity; the Post-metaphysical world; the Ionian Fallacy

WEEK 8: October 26-30

Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, Chapters VI-X

Topics: Values; The Great Disembedding; The Affirmation of Ordinary Life

WEEK 9: November 2-6

Seneca, "On Providence" and "On the Happy Life"

Topics: Nature and Natural Law; Fortune; Providence; Virtue and Vice; Happiness

ESSAY #2 is due on Wednesday, November 4 at 9:00 pm.

WEEK 10: November 9-13

Seneca, "On the Tranquillity of the Mind" and "On the Shortness of Life"

Topics: Peace of Mind; Boredom; Suicide; the Shortness of Life

WEEK 11: November 16-20

Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Suffering of the World"; "On the Antithesis of the Thing in Itself and Appearance"; "On Affirmation and Denial of the Will to Live"; "On the Indestructibility of our Essential Being by Death"; "On Suicide"; "On the Vanity of Existence"

Topics: Suffering; The Will vs. Representation; Suicide; Boredom

WEEK 12: November 23-27

Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life*

Topics: Life as Vanity (*Ecclesiastes*); Life as Suffering (*Job*); Life as Love (*The Song of Songs*)

Essay #3 is due on Wednesday, November 25 at 9:00 pm.

WEEK 13: November 30 – December 4

Josef Pieper, *In Tune with the World*

Topics: Work vs. Leisure; Festivity; Joy and Love; The Sacred and the Profane

The last day of lectures for the fall term is December 7.

Essay #4 is due on Friday, December 11 at 9:00 pm.

IMPORTANT DATES TO REMEMBER

September 8: Beginning of classes

October 10-18: Reading Week: No lectures or course activity

December 7: End of classes

December 9-23: Exam period [Please note that this course does not have a final exam]

COURSE POLICIES

Lateness Penalty: The penalty for late assignments is 3% deducted from the grade of the paper for each day that the paper is late.

Absolute Deadline: The maximum allowable amount of time for submitting essays beyond the due date is one week.

Illness: If a student is unable to participate in the course because of an illness, the student must complete a Verification of Illness form and report the illness to the instructor so that appropriate measures or accommodations made be made. For more information, please visit the following webpage: <https://uwaterloo.ca/registrar/current-students/accommodation-due-to-illness>

CORRESPONDENCE

As indicated at the beginning of this document, the best way to contact the professor is by e-mail at nzunic@uwaterloo.ca.

If you have any questions or concerns about any aspect of this course feel free to contact the

professor.

When you write to the professor please be sure to indicate your name and the course that you are enrolled in.

Use formal language and proper grammar in your correspondence.

OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Academic Integrity: In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo community are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. [Check www.uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/ for more information.]

Grievance: A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of their university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read the St. Jerome's University Policy on Student Petitions and Grievances, www.sju.ca/sites/default/files/upload_file/PLCY_AOM_Student-Petitions-and-Grievances_20151211-SJUSCapproved.pdf. When in doubt, please be certain to contact the St. Jerome's Advising Specialist, Student Affairs Office, who will provide further assistance.

Discipline: A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing an academic offence, and to take responsibility for their actions. [Check www.uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/ for more information.] A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about "rules" for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course instructor, academic advisor, or the Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under the St. Jerome's University Policy on Student Discipline, www.sju.ca/sites/default/files/PLCY_AOM_Student-Discipline_20131122-SJUSCapproved.pdf. For information on categories of offences and types of penalties, students should refer to University of Waterloo Policy 71, Student Discipline, www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm. For typical penalties, check the Guidelines for the Assessment of Penalties, www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/guidelines/penaltyguidelines.htm.

Appeals: A decision made or penalty imposed under the St. Jerome's University Policy on Student Petitions and Grievances (other than a petition) or the St. Jerome's University Policy on Student Discipline may be appealed if there is a ground. A student who believes they have a ground for an appeal should refer to the St. Jerome's University Policy on Student Appeals, www.sju.ca/sites/default/files/PLCY_AOM_Student-Appeals_20131122-SJUSCapproved.pdf.

Note for students with disabilities: AccessAbility Services, located in Needles Hall (Room 1401) at the University of Waterloo, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the

curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with AccessAbility Services at the beginning of each academic term, www.uwaterloo.ca/accessability-services/.

Turnitin.com: Text matching software (Turnitin®) may be used to screen assignments in this course. Turnitin® is used to verify that all materials and sources in assignments are documented. Students' submissions are stored on a U.S. server, therefore students must be given an alternative (e.g., scaffolded assignment or annotated bibliography), if they are concerned about their privacy and/or security. Students will be given due notice, in the first week of the term and/or at the time assignment details are provided, about arrangements and alternatives for the use of Turnitin® in this course. It is the responsibility of the student to notify the instructor if they, in the first week of term or at the time assignment details are provided, wish to submit the alternate assignment.