

NHS2083: What is the Meaning of Life?

Instructor: Christine Abigail L. Tan

E-mail: christine.tan@nus.edu.sg

Office: RC3-02-05G (Faculty Office 23)

Office hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays (Please make an appointment in advance via: <https://calendly.com/christine-tan-office-hours/consultation>)

Course Rationale:

This course is a systematic inquiry into the question of whether life has any meaning, and if so, what that is and how it can be attained. The course will engage with academic readings from philosophy, psychology, anthropology, as well as various literary media, to attempt to answer this question. We start with exploring what “meaningfulness” means: What is meaning and why do we create it? Do we have meaning only when our lives has a coherent narrative structure which we can clearly make sense of? The next five modules will then grapple with the question of where and how we can find meaning. Is meaning derived from a higher Being? Does the secret to a meaningful life lie in the age-old Nietzschean advice of being creative and, perhaps, being true to one’s “authentic” self? Is it more straightforward though, and actually has to do with being economically and socially fulfilled, or does it have more to do with being good and doing good? Alternatively, does our life’s meaning come from our relationships and doing things out of love? These are the questions we will be asking. Finally, however, we will delve into the question of whether or not meaning is necessary at all to live a fulfilling and satisfactory life.

By the end of the course, you will have acquired conceptual tools to examine and evaluate meaning and narrativity across different perspectives and cultures.

Upon successful completion of the course, students should be able to:

- Understand and appreciate key thinkers on the meaning of life from a variety of perspectives and forms
- Systematically articulate and analyse the concept of the meaning of/in life both academically and creatively
- Critique and evaluate differing forms of media and writing which demonstrates their critical thinking

Assessments:

Participation – 15%

Class discussion is a significant aspect of learning in this class so students are required to attend and verbally participate in all classes.

Student-led Discussions – 10%

You will lead a discussion for ~30min on your chosen topic. This is not a summary of the topic but is meant to generate thought-provoking questions and discussion on the topic through activities on which you will take the lead. The aim is to encourage you to really relate the material to real lives and experiences.

Meaning in Media Log – 15%

You will complete three short entries (200–250 words each) on topics of your choosing where you connect an instance of the “meaning in/of life” theme from media or daily life to one of our course texts. This assignment is meant to keep our readings at the centre while encouraging you to see how philosophical ideas about meaning resonate in the world around you. Each log should be submitted *at most* 48 hours after we discuss the assigned text in class.

Creative Project – 25%

This is creative project similar to an option you had/have in Global Narratives. You will be tasked to create a literary/artistic piece, plus a 700-word reflection justifying your literary/artistic choices in terms of the

concepts that are used, the message you are trying to deliver, and the arguments inherent in the work. A brief check-in consult with me before recess week is required to confirm your proposed topic and project direction.

Experiment on Living – 35%

This is inspired from John Stuart Mill's (*On Liberty*, ch.3) concept of "experiment on living" where he explains that we should be free to make our own conscious decisions in choosing how to live in order to learn from life. The idea is for you to choose a specific activity which you must commit to for at least 4 weeks, describe it, and assess whether or not this added meaning to your (or other participants', as determined by [participant observation ethnography](#)) lives. It can be participating in church, charity, or a new hobby, among others, so long as it is legal, adheres to the university's code of conduct, and is not harmful to your own well-being. I will require you to consult with me first for your proposed "experiment" to be approved (The output for this activity would be three 400-word journal entries per week and a 4th entry of 800-words evaluating the activity as meaningful or not)

Course Structure/Schedule:

Week	Required readings T – Th		Assessments due
Meaningfulness and narrative			
1 Mon, 12 Jan – Fri, 16 Jan What is meaning and why do we crave it?	➤ Abraham Maslow, <i>A Theory of Human Motivation</i>	➤ Abraham Maslow, <i>A Theory of Human Motivation (cont.)</i>	
2 Mon, 19 Jan – Fri, 23 Jan What is meaning and why do we crave it?	➤ Leo Tolstoy, <i>A Confession</i> (sections 4 and 9)	➤ Viktor Frankl, “The Existential Vacuum” and “Meaning of Life,” in <i>Man’s Search for Meaning</i>	
3 Mon, 26 Jan – Fri, 30 Jan Is narrative necessary for a meaningful life?	➤ Connie Rosati, <i>The Story of a Life</i> (sections 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7)	➤ Galen Strawson, <i>Against Narrativity</i>	
Religion and the Sacred			
4 Mon, 2 Feb – Fri, 6 Feb Can life’s meaning be	➤ Mark Bernier, “Kierkegaard and the meaning of life” in	➤ Sigmund Freud, <i>Future of an Illusion</i> (chapters 3 and 6)	

found in a higher Being?	<i>Meaning of Life and the Great Philosophers</i>	Suggested reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Walter Kauffman, <i>Reinventing the Sacred</i> (chapter 19)	
Individuality and Creativity			
5 Mon, 9 Feb – Fri, 13 Feb Or is meaning not outside, but inside of us, and can be found in individual authenticity?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Friedrich Nietzsche, <i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i> (prologue)➤ Ursula Le Guin, <i>The Flyers of Gy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Richard Taylor, <i>Time and Life's Meaning</i>	
6 Mon, 16 Feb – Fri, 20 Feb How does our authenticity affect others, though?	Chinese New Year (no class)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ <i>Synecdoche New York</i> (Kaufman, 2008) – discussion	Creative Project
Sat, 23 Feb – Sun, 1 Mar	Recess Week		
Morality and Society			
7 Mon, 2 Mar– Fri, 7 Mar Is meaning found in objective moral standards?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Richard Kim, Joshua W. Seachris, “Confucius and the Meaning of Life,” in <i>The Meaning of Life and the Great Philosophers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Thaddeus Metz, <i>The Good, the True and the Beautiful: Toward a Unified Account of Great Meaning in Life</i>	
8 Mon, 9 Mar – Fri, 13 Mar Does meaning consist in our social relations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Arribiah Atoe, A Systematic Account of African Conceptions of The Meaning of Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Paul Goodman, “Introduction,” and “An Apparently Closed Room,” in <i>Growing up Absurd</i>	Proposals for <i>Experiment on Living</i>
Money and Work			

<p>9 Mon, 16 Mar – Fri, 20 Mar</p> <p>Does being economically well-off make our lives meaningful?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Tibor Scitovsky, <i>The Joyless Economy</i>, ch. 4: “Comfort Versus Pleasure” ➤ <p>Suggested readings: Wingen, T., English, B., Estal-Muñoz, V. et al. Exploring the Relationship between Social Class and Quality of Life: the Mediating Role of Power and Status. <i>Applied Research Quality Life</i> 16, 1983–1998 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-020-09853-y</p> <p>Belmi P, Neale MA, Reiff D, Ulfe R. The social advantage of miscalibrated individuals: The relationship between social class and overconfidence and its implications for class-based inequality. <i>J Pers Soc Psychol</i>. 2020 Feb;118(2):254-282. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000187</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Karl Marx, <i>Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844</i>, “Estranged Labour,” and “The Power of Money in Bourgeois Society” in <i>The Marx-Engels Reader</i>, ed. Robert C. Tucker ➤ David Graeber, On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant 	
Love and Relationships			
<p>10 Mon, 23 Mar – Fri, 27 Mar</p> <p>Is to live meaningfully to do things for love?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Harry Frankfurt, <i>The Reasons of Love</i> (Part 2, sections 1-9) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Susan Wolf, “The Importance of Love,” in <i>The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love</i> 	First journal entry for <i>Experiment on Living</i>
<p>11 Mon, 30 Mar – Fri, 3 Apr</p> <p>Does meaning consist of our relationships with others?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Her</i> (Jonze, 2013) – viewing 	<i>Her</i> (Jonze, 2013) – discussion	Second journal entry for <i>Experiment on Living</i>
Meaning and Ideology			
<p>12 Mon, 6 Apr – Fri, 10 Apr</p> <p>Is meaning even necessary to live a fulfilling life?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ William James, <i>What Makes A Life Significant?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Tracy Llanera and James Tartaglia, ch 4: “Nihil Sine Deo,” in <i>A Defence of Nihilism</i> <p>Suggested Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Brook Ziporyn, “Meaningfulness Revisited,” in 	Third journal entry for <i>Experiment on Living</i>

		Experiments in Mystical Atheism: Godless Epiphanies from Daoism to Spinoza and Beyond	
13 Mon, 13 Apr – Fri, 17 Apr	Conclusion	Consultation Hours	
	Evaluation Report for <i>Experiment on Living</i> due 30 April		

Course Policies:

1. Plagiarism and AI Use

This is a course that focuses on developing strong competencies in reading comprehension, analytical and critical thinking skills. Your original analysis and evaluations are valuable, therefore all work submitted in this course must be your own. Any form of academic dishonesty, including plagiarising sources, passing off AI-generated work as your own, or resubmitting work you did for other courses, will be subject to disciplinary action, which may range from failing the assignment to failing the entire course. Please carefully review the university's [policies](#) on academic honesty and the use of AI tools for academic work.

If you are unsure of the differences between a library/web search and the use of image-and text-generating softwares, please check in with me on how to consult online sources in a fair and ethical way.

2. Public domain/Limited Open Access

Student work submitted in this course may be reproduced in anonymised form for pedagogical purposes within NUS College (e.g. to serve as sample essays). If you prefer to not have your work shared, please let me know at the start of the semester.

3. Attendance

Please notify me in advance if you cannot make it to class. There will be no penalty for absences, but keep in mind that this will affect your participation grade. Each class that you do not attend is a class where you miss the opportunity to participate. Additionally, it is your responsibility to follow up with your peers about discussion notes and announcements, or to email me to make arrangements when you miss class. I will not accommodate requests to participate in class via Zoom.

4. Late Submission and Extensions

Please observe the prescribed deadline for the submission of all your requirements. Late submissions are accepted with a MC or note from a counsellor/academic advisor; otherwise, it will be docked one step (e.g., A to A-, A- to B+, etc.) per day. In some extenuating circumstances however, I may grant extensions even without a note if requested in advance, and within a reasonable timeframe.

5. Accessibility Support

I am more than willing to work with students who have accessibility needs to ensure the class is open and welcoming to all. If there are aspects of this course that form barriers to your learning or inclusion, please let me know as soon as possible. I am open to accommodating undocumented accessibility needs if informed in advance, but if you need official accommodation, I encourage you to visit [NUS' Accessibility Support](#) website to make arrangements. There is also a wide range of resources in NUS College that you can tap into, such as the Residential Team in your Residential Colleges, as well as [NUS' Writing and Communication Hub](#).

Some of our class topics may be emotionally challenging. I hope we can work together to create a classroom dynamic where even difficult topics can be discussed openly and honestly. If you require content warnings, please let me know during the start of the semester.

6. Respect and Dignity

I expect all students in our class to conduct themselves with dignity, civility, and propriety. Our class will have a diverse range of topics and some may feel personal. However, please refrain from making any personal attacks, or from attacking any culture or religion. The university is a diverse space comprising of people from different backgrounds – it is important to respect and foster this diversity. As such, please remember to always only engage with and challenge ideas and arguments, and never attack specific people or groups of people from backgrounds that are different from yours.

The instructor reserves the right to modify this syllabus at her discretion.