

# Philosophy of Life's Meaning (PHIL 240)

Christopher Newport University, Spring 2025

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Professors

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Class: McM 314, 1:30-2:45  
Office hours: McM 202 TR 11-1:15

Textbook,  
Materials

There is no textbook for this course.  
Readings will be hyperlinked below or on Scholar.

Objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. be able to articulate various views of human nature, personhood, and life's meaningfulness, including views about our lives' purpose and the value of our lives,
2. provide an explanation of the foundations of western theories of human nature, personhood, and meaningfulness, with a reference to primary works,
3. describe how and when therapeutic interventions are appropriate by reasoning from the aforementioned views.

Description

This course is an introduction to theories about what makes human life meaningful. Topics include theories of personhood, the role of the body in human life, what it means to live a meaningful life, what it means to have a good death, whether humans have a purpose to their lives (and if so, what it is), and what makes life worth living. Discussions address the value and role of health care, medicine, life, and death in a well-lived life. Each class, we will ask: what would therapeutic interventions look like if the theory proposed in class were true?

## Schedule

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Readings are for the current class. Assignments are for the next class.

### **Introduction to the Meaningfulness of Life**

Jan 14

#### **Introduction to the Course, Objectivity and Subjectivity**

Introduction to the Course  
Syllabus & Classroom  
Is Meaning Subjective? (Or is there an objective meaning of life?)

Jan 16

#### **The World in Which We Can Have Meaning**

Materialism: the universe, us, our responsibility, therapy, and death  
Non-materialism: reasons, the universe, us, our responsibility, therapy, and death

-Reading: Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, "The Maniac" + an excerpt of "The Ethics of Elfland"

-Assignment: Before doing the reading, think about the scientific view of the universe. Describe the world according to the scientific viewpoint.

Jan 21

#### **Meaning and Purpose**

Aristotelian Explanations  
Purpose in Natural v. Artificial Things  
What is Meaning?  
Frankl Discussion: Logotherapy

-Reading: Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, "The Case for a Tragic Optimism"

-Assignment: Write a dialogue in which someone is considering suicide and asks you for a reason why he or she should not do so. (You may create a backstory.) Provide a reason, then pretend the person asks you “Why should I think that’s true?” Once you answer that, pretend the person asks you, again, “Why should I think that’s true?” Answer that question 3 times.

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Jan 23

**Meaning and Value**

Kinds of Value  
What is Bad for Us?  
List of Values  
The Shape of a Life

-Reading: Hurka, *The Best Things in Life*, Ch. 7: “Putting It Together”

-Assignment: Make a list of people who you think are living meaningful lives. Then make a list of people who are squandering their life. Then describe what it is that distinguishes the people on the meaningful list v. the people on the other list. Be prepared to share your answer in class.

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Jan 28

**Discussion: Sisyphus’ Life**

Sisyphus discussion  
Our Culture’s Vision of a Good Life  
Afterlife  
Kierkegaard’s Three Kinds of Lives

-Reading: Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”

-Discussion Prep: What could be added to Sisyphus’ life to make it more meaningful? Develop the best objection you can think of to your proposal and then reply to that objection. Prepare to share your proposal in class.

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**What Kind of Thing Are We?**

Jan 30

**Rational, Knowing**

What is Real, What We Are  
Relationship between the Non-Physical and Physical  
Platonic Theory of Improvement

-Reading: Plato, *Phaedo* 70a-84c

-Assignment: Imagine you are a soul that can exist on its own but is now only able to exist with your current body. If you knew how to improve, how would you and your body interact in order to improve? Use at least one specific example.

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Feb 4

**Willing, Loving**

Our Fundamental Desire  
System 1 & System 2  
Frankfurt’s Account of Personhood  
Willing, Love, Commitment, Consent  
Behavioralism in Therapy

-Reading: Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, “What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?” Sec. 17-18, 20, 28

-Assignment: What does it mean to will something? What is love? What is commitment? What is consent? Write a definition for each and give an example of each.

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Feb 6

**Emotional, Caring**

Emotions as Perception  
Parts within Us  
Embodied, Repressed Beliefs  
Your True Self  
Internal Family Systems Therapy

-Reading: Schwartz, “Internal Family Systems & Trauma”

-Assignment: What does Schwartz suggest doing when you do self-therapy? Write the answer specifically enough so that someone who hasn’t heard Schwartz can do it.

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Feb 11

**Temporal, Changing**

Time Investment  
Time Biases  
Reframing/Retroactive Perception  
Narrative Therapy

-Reading: Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Ch. 8

-Assignment: For one day, make a journal in 15-minute segments for the entire time you’re awake. For each segment, say what you’re doing, and say what the value of that activity is. After the day is over, list each value and how many minutes you spent on each value.

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Feb 13

**Discussion: Artificial Intelligence**

AI Discussion  
Introduction to the Next Section

-Reading: Cosmo, “Google Engineer Claims AI Chatbot Is Sentient,” *Scientific American*

-Reading: Noe, “Rage against the Machine,” *Aeon*

-Discussion Prep: What’s valuable about us that isn’t also valuable about AI? Develop the best reasons for your answer. Then give the best objection you can think of to your proposal and then reply to that objection. Prepare to share your proposal and reasoning in class.

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**What Does a Meaningful Life Look Like?**

Feb 18

**Preparing for Death**

What Does a Good Death Look Like?  
What is Death? Socrates, Epicurus, Hinduism, Christianity  
How Do You Prepare for Death?  
The Desire for Immortality  
“Memento Mori”

-Reading: Plato, *Phaedo* 63e-69e

-Assignment: What does a good death look like? What makes that death good? Answer these questions in as much detail as you can. Be prepared to share your answers in class.

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Feb 20

**Pursuing Happiness, Ultimate Aims**

Teleology: Eudaimonia, “Happiness”  
Virtue: Intellectual and Moral  
Aristotelian Psychological Models  
The Role of Friendship and Pleasure  
Teleological Therapeutic Interventions

-Reading: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 1

-Assignment: Which of the 3 lives is better?

- 1) Fashionable, clean house, lots of money, identity crisis so you enjoy none of it
- 2) Fashionable, clean house, lots of money, you enjoy it, but you have kids who don't like you or your values
- 3) Outdated, hodgepodge furniture, barely enough money, you're content, your kids love you and share your values

Create your own question like this to contrast goods in one's life. Then make a selection and state why it's better, using the Aristotle reading.

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Feb 25	<b>No Class – Ethics Competition</b>
Feb 27	<b>Midterm Test</b>
Mar 4-6	<b>No Class: Spring Break</b>
Mar 11	<b>Understanding, Being Understood</b> The Structures of Understanding Using the Structures in Relation to Others Understanding the World Understanding Ourselves  -Reading: “Introduction to the Structures of Understanding”  -Assignment: Is understanding different from hearing? Is it different from knowing what was said? Why or why not? What can a person do to prove that he or she understands?
Mar 13	<b>Becoming Virtuous</b> Class Discussion: Good Lives Virtue and Praise Control, Responsibility, and Attachment Imitation & Principles  -Reading: Seneca, <i>Letters to Lucilius</i> , TBD (on Scholar)  -Assignment: State at least 5 principles on how to live that you read in the Seneca reading. Be prepared to share some of these with the class.
Mar 18	<b>Worshipping God</b> Independent Reasons to Believe God Exists Grounding Meaning in God The Difference between Religious & Nonreligious Lives Pastoral Therapy  -Reading: Craig, “The Absurdity of Life without God,” <i>Reasonable Faith</i> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> ed., 71-90  -Assignment: Give Craig’s argument and explain his reasoning as if you were to describe it to a friend. Be as clear and accurate as you can.
Mar 20	<b>Experiencing Pleasure</b> Class Discussion: Pleasure

Hedonism: What it Means  
Different Kinds of Pleasure  
How to Experience the Most Pleasure  
Is Suffering Bad?  
Restoring Pleasure in Therapy

-Reading: Diogenes Laertius, “Principal Doctrines”

-Assignment: Write down five of the principal doctrines. For each one, state the impact it might have in how someone lives.

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Mar 25

**Exercising Freedom**

Freedom & Autonomy  
Philosophical Debates about Freedom  
Freedom & Meaning

-Reading: *Ecclesiastes*

-Assignment: What is freedom? What is freedom for? What does freedom do for us? Answer each of these questions and make the most compelling case you can.

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Mar 27

**Unbound by Luck or Fate**

Agency and Moral Responsibility  
Kinds of Moral Luck  
What We Can Have Agency Over

-Reading: Nagel, “Moral Luck”

-Assignment: List each kind of moral luck. For each kind, first describe how it prevents us from being morally responsible. Then state how it could prevent us from acting meaningfully.

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Apr 1

**Discussion: When a Life Goes Wrong and Help Is Needed**

What is Normal?  
Discussion: What Merits Therapeutic Intervention?  
What is Harm?  
Introduction to the Next Section

-Discussion Prep: List 3 things that merit intervention from a medical doctor. List 3 things that merit intervention from a psychologist. Why do each of these things merit intervention? Are there some things that should merit intervention but currently don't? If so, what are they?

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**The Most Valuable Things in Life**

Apr 3

**Nothing Is Intrinsicly Bad**

Intrinsic Value of Life  
The Non-Identity Problem  
The Manichean View  
Augustine's View  
Upshots

-Reading: Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.3-5

-Assignment: Does Augustine think anything is intrinsicly bad? Why or why not? Name something you think is the best candidate for something that's intrinsicly bad. Give a reason that it is or a reason that it is not intrinsicly bad.

Apr 8

**Knowledge, Objectivity**

The Value of Truth  
Believing Despite the Truth  
Objectivity  
Our Lives in the View from Nowhere  
Truth and Acceptance in Therapy

-Reading: Nagel, "Birth, Death, and the Meaning of Life," *The View from Nowhere*, Ch. 11

-Assignment: When we zoom out and look at our lives as a spec in the vast universe, does our life seem less meaningful? Why or why not? Make your reasons as detailed and compelling as possible.

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Apr 10

**Achievement, Life Projects**

The Value of Achievement  
The Means of Achievement  
The Value of Not Achieving  
Williams' View of Immortality  
Achievement Mindsets

-Reading: Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case," in *Problems of the Self*, Ch. 6

-Assignment: What, if anything, could make an everlasting life meaningful? What does Williams think? Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

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Apr 15

**Community, Home, Family**

What Makes a Community?  
The Value of Rootedness  
What Makes a Home  
Should We Have Children?

-Reading: Tosi & Warmke, "Roots" and "Home", *It's OK to Mind Your Own Business*, Chs. 5-6

-Assignment: According to Warmke, what makes a home a home? If you have children, what do you want your children to associate with home? What are some things a person can do to make a home into a home?

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Apr 17

**The Love of Wisdom**

Boethius' Situation  
Lady Philosophy's Consolation

-Reading: Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Bks. 1-4

-Assignment: What does Lady Philosophy say to console Boethius? How would these things work to console Boethius? Make sure to explicitly make connections between your answers and concepts we've covered in class so far.

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Apr 22

**Discussion: The Meaning of Life**

Discussion: What Is the Meaning of Life?  
New Insights  
Therapeutic Practice

Discussion Prep: What is the meaning of life? Use ideas from class to support your answer. What, if anything, from class has changed about your thoughts about life's meaning? Will you aim to

act differently as a result of what we've learned in class? If so, how so? Be ready to share your answers in class.

Apr 24

**Final Test**

**Assessments: 400 points total**

<p><b>Assignments</b> 90 points</p>	<p>Each non-test, non-discussion day will have a question at the bottom. You can turn in an answer to that question on paper at the beginning of that class. Answers should give a clear answer and contain reasoning for the answer. Maximum of 200 words per assignment. Each assignment can earn up to 10 points. The highest 9 assignments will be graded.</p>
<p><b>Discussion Prep</b> 40 points</p>	<p>For each discussion day, you must turn in a written, thought-out answer to the discussion question. You can turn in an answer to that question on paper at the beginning of that class. You should defend your answer with reasoning, using content from the course. Maximum of 200 words per assignment. Each discussion prep can earn up to 10 points.</p>
<p><b>Class Journal</b> 80 points</p>	<p>On the last day of class, you should turn in a handwritten class journal. The journal should contain an entry for each class (except test days), the date of that class clearly indicated for each entry. Each class entry should have four parts:  <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A brief summary of the reading for that day</li> <li>2. Some key takeaways or quotes from that reading</li> <li>3. A brief summary of what we learned in class for that day</li> <li>4. Some key takeaways or quotes from class</li> </ol> Only 20 entries will be graded out of a possible 24 entries.</p>
<p><b>Tests</b> 100 points</p>	<p>One midterm test and one final test on the dates indicated on the schedule above. These are taken in class on paper. 10 short answer questions each. Each question is worth 5 points. Each test is only over class material covered since the previous test.</p>
<p><b>Final Project</b> 90 points</p>	<p>Your final project should contain two parts.</p> <p>Part 1: Interview 3 people about what they take to be the meaning of life, and answer the questions below on the basis of your interview. (You don't have to ask the questions directly.) The interviews should be audio recorded but do not need to be formal. You should turn in written answers to both parts below for each interview, in addition to your audio files, on Scholar. Send all the written portions in one document. If the file sizes are too large, send the files to <a href="mailto:proftweedt@gmail.com">proftweedt@gmail.com</a> None of the interviewees can be in your immediate family or one of your friends. There should be no more than two interviewees from each age group: Below 12, 12-17, 18-22, 23-30, 31-39, 40-59, 60-69, 70+</p> <p>Background:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Name (if the interviewee wishes to remain anonymous, just say so)</li> <li>2. Age</li> <li>3. Career/Job</li> <li>4. Religious Identification</li> <li>5. Other important identification information</li> </ol> <p>Questions:</p>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are the most important things in your life?</li> <li>2. What should a person live for?</li> <li>3. What do you live your life pursuing? How so?</li> <li>4. Who do you admire or seek to imitate? Why?</li> <li>5. What is a decision you've made that has defined your life so far?</li> <li>6. Is there a choice you've made that you wish you'd made differently? If so, what is it, and why would you want it to be different?</li> <li>7. If you could give some life advice to someone in my stage of life, what would it be?</li> <li>8. These answers should be no more than 4 pages, single spaced.</li> </ol> <p>Part 2 should contain an analysis in which you relate the answers in part 1 to class concepts/views. Make any connections you can, showing that you can insightfully apply what we learned in class to your interviewee's answers to the questions in Part 1. This should be no more than 1 page, single spaced.</p>
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A	400-369	B+	359-352	C+	319-312	D+	279-272
A-	368-360	B	351-328	C	311-289	D	271-249
F	239-0	B-	327-320	C-	288-280	D-	248-240



## University Syllabus Statements:

Honor Code	<p>By being enrolled in this class, each student is expected to read, understand, and abide by the CNU's honor code. CNU reserves the right to penalize any student whose academic conduct at any time is, in its judgment, detrimental to the University. This conduct includes plagiarism, collusion, cheating, giving or receiving or offering or soliciting information in examinations, the use of AI or LLMs for assignments.</p> <p>Class Policy: You'll receive an automatic F in the course if you display any of the conduct in the above paragraph. The purpose of these assessments is to test your knowledge. If you provide other students with the questions or answers, it undermines the assessment process. If you have someone or something else do your work, it does not show me what you know. If you discover someone sharing questions and report it to me, I will buy you ice cream or a dairy-free equivalent. Also, I'll report all seeming-plagiarism to CHECS and give the seeming-plagiarizer a 0 for the course. I won't argue with you whether you did it intentionally. We all know how that will go. You'll argue that you didn't mean to do it, just like people who do it intentionally argue. So I'm not even going to ask. Please be intentional about not doing it.</p>
Copyright, Permissions	<p>All content created and assembled by the faculty member and used in this course is to be considered intellectual property owned by the faculty member and Christopher Newport University. It is provided solely for the private use of the students currently enrolled in this course. To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not make available any of the original course content, including but not limited to lectures, discussions, videos, handouts, and/or activities, to anyone not currently enrolled in the course without the advance written permission of the instructor. This means that students may not record, download, screenshot, or in any way copy original course material for the purpose of distribution beyond this course. A violation may be considered theft. It is the student's responsibility to protect course material when accessing it outside of the physical classroom space.</p>
Disability, Accommodation	<p>In order for a student to receive an accommodation for a disability, that disability must be on record in the Office of Student Affairs, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, David Student Union (DSU). If you believe that you have a disability, please contact Jacquelyn Barnes, Student Disability Support Specialist in Student Affairs (594-7160) to discuss your needs.</p> <p>Students with documented disabilities are to notify the instructor at least seven days prior to the point at which they require an accommodation (the first day of class is recommended), in private, if accommodation is needed. The instructor will provide students with disabilities with the reasonable accommodations approved and directed by the Office of Student Affairs. Work completed before the student notifies the instructor of his/her disability may be counted toward the final grade at the sole discretion of the instructor.</p>
Academic Support	<p>I want you to succeed in this course and at Christopher Newport. I encourage you to contact me during office hours or to schedule an appointment to discuss course content or to answer questions you have. During the Coronavirus pandemic, our conversations may need to be via electronic means. If I become concerned about your course performance, attendance, engagement, or well-being, I will contact you first. I also may submit a referral through our Captains Care Program. The referral will be received by the Center for Academic Success as well as other departments when appropriate (Counseling Services, Office of Student Engagement). If you are an athlete, the Athletic Academic Support Coordinator will be notified. Someone will contact you to help determine what will help you succeed. Please remember that this is a means for me to support you and help foster your success at Christopher Newport.</p> <p>The Center for Student Success (CSS) provides numerous free resources to help students succeed in their courses. These resources include individual peer tutoring and group/test review sessions. The Center also houses the Alice F. Randall Writing Center. Writing consultants can help you at any stage of the writing process, from invention to development of ideas, to polishing a final draft.</p> <p>You may contact the Center for Student Success to request a tutor, meet with a writing consultant, or make an appointment to talk with a staff member about study skills and strategies. The Center is located in Christopher Newport Hall, first floor, room 124. You may email <a href="mailto:studentsuccess@cnu.edu">studentsuccess@cnu.edu</a>, call (757) 594-7684, or visit <a href="https://my.cnu.edu/academicssuccess/">https://my.cnu.edu/academicssuccess/</a>.</p>
Diversity, Inclusion	<p>The Christopher Newport University community engages and respects different viewpoints, understands the cultural and structural context in which those viewpoints emerge, and questions the development of our own perspectives and values, as these are among the fundamental tenets of a liberal arts education.</p>

Accordingly, we affirm our commitment to a campus culture that embraces the full spectrum of human attributes, perspectives, and disciplines, and offers every member of the University the opportunity to become their best self.

Understanding and respecting differences can best develop in a community where members learn, live, work, and serve among individuals with diverse worldviews, identities, and values. We are dedicated to upholding the dignity and worth of all members of this academic community such that all may engage effectively and compassionately in a pluralistic society.

If you have specific questions, suggestions or concerns regarding diversity on campus please contact [Diversity.Inclusion@CNU.edu](mailto:Diversity.Inclusion@CNU.edu)

Public Health

The university will provide guidance on public health issues, and students will be expected to comply with university protocols.