First-Year Seminar:
The Meaning of Life
Fall 2004
Syllabus

Fall 2004: MWF 11:50 - 1:05, Dow 329
Instructor: Dr. Ashley McDowell

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Office phone: 337-7077
Website: www.kzoo.edu/phil/McDowell/MoL.htm
Office Hours: Tuesdays and Wednesdays 4:00 - 5:00, Thursdays 9:00-11:00 (and by appointment)

Weekly meaning of life lunch: Fridays, 1:15 - 2:00, in the Marriott cafeteria
Coffee hour discussions: Thursday nights, even weeks. Time and place TBA.

Note: I will be sending announcements, handouts, assignments, and so forth to the class listserv. This listserv includes only your K email address, so make sure email sent there is forwarded to whatever email address you're likely to check frequently.

Texts:

Klemke, The Meaning of Life (2nd ed.) (will be referred to as "TML")
Timko & Hoff, Philosophies for Living (will be referred to as "PFL")
Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning
Kirszner & Mandell, The Brief Handbook (4th ed.)
coursepack

Course Description

The First-Year Seminar Program objectives basically boil down to two sides of a coin: learning information and skills useful to you as a college student (and as a person); and immersing yourself at the college level in a particular topic. In this class we will be working hard on both aspects.

In your course folder, you will find an outline of what I take to be the skills crucial for academic life (thinking, writing, reading, oral communication, and so forth). I am also including an outline developed here at K enumerating essential skills connected to a multicultural education. Many of these skills are also arguably crucial for living a truly meaningful life, but since that's the topic of our seminar I'll leave that for you to think about later. A lot of our work on these skills will just happen naturally, through practice and feedback. However, the unique thing about your first-year seminar is that we will be working on many of these skills explicitly as well, actively seeking principles, techniques, and self-assessment tools. If you don't think it's a good idea to do this deliberately and humbly, talk to someone truly good at something hard: an athlete, musician, or craftsman, for example.

The fun part, though, is that this will not be merely an extended self-help seminar on student skills. Primarily, we will be conducting a college-level class on the topic of the meaning of life. To that end, we will be working from a variety of source materials: chiefly academic philosophy papers, essays, and films.

I have divided our quarter up into eight rough topics, although there is a lot of overlap between them, as you will see.

1) Motivation: Why is this an interesting topic? Why are humans interested in meaning? What is it to study a topic like this philosophically, in particular?
2) Theistic and nontheistic arguments: Must there be a deity for the Universe or our lives to be meaningful? Must there be an afterlife and immortality?
3) Cynicism: What if there is no meaning to life? What if life is really just stuff happening and that's all there is to it? Should we give up on trying to find life meaningful?
4) Meaning in a scientific age: Does our current scientific understanding of the Universe have effects on the meaning of life? Does our insignificance in the cosmic scheme of things reduce meaning? Our being the result of random selection?
5) Finding meaning in other people: Is there meaning to be found in our relationships toward other people, or in their mere existence? How might this work?
6) Finding meaning in oneself: How might an individual find his or her own personal meaning of life? Is there a better or worse way to live a meaningful life? How might one's personal experiences shape the things one finds meaningful?
7) Multicultural meaning: How might what is meaningful differ from one culture to another? Could one cultural group get it "right" and another "wrong"?
8) How might we learn about meaning by looking to other cultures, and our own?
8) Philosophical analysis of meaning: What does "meaning" mean, anyway? Is "life" the kind of thing that can have "a" meaning? Are people even asking a coherent question when they're asking "what's the meaning of life?"

As you see, for each topic I have posed some puzzling questions. In particular, these are philosophical questions: they are questions that have to be answered through mental and conceptual work rather than empirical research. They are hard questions, but fascinating ones (at least I find them so). In this class you will study various ways to answer these questions, and learn to formulate views of your own.
Our seminar will be heavily discussion-centered, and no opinion will be derided or demeaned. However, this does not mean that every statement or view is equally legitimate. If I said, “the meaning of life is found only in working as an academic philosopher,” I would need to back that view up with convincing reasons. You would be perfectly right to question my view, and provide counterexamples or arguments against it. What we are after is real understanding and some approach to the right answers to the philosophical questions; with this as my goal, I would be happy to be shown that I have gotten it wrong. Of course, my view would be better than some - say, that the meaning of life is a nice mutton, lettuce, and tomato sandwich - so it is possible to make progress toward better and better answers. (By the way, we are interested in is reasonable answers to the questions that are on the basis of some principles other than personal inclination, not answers that an individual might just state and refuse to back up with theory.)

So in this course, we will be studying, formulating, comparing and contrasting arguments and views regarding different aspects of the meaning of life. You will be assessed on several dimensions. One is how well you have learned what the authors think, and their reasons and arguments. Another is how well you have integrated and gained mastery over the various source materials and their contributions to the overall issues. A third is your command of the academic and other skills outlined in the skills attachment. A final dimension is how well you have mastered philosophical thinking in coming to your own opinions.

Class Format
Class meetings will largely consist of guided discussion and seminar-style work on either issues or skills. There will also be regular lecture components of the class, but you will always be expected to be actively involved in the proceedings.

You will be responsible for completing the readings before each class, and being prepared to discuss those readings. I will provide you with study/discussion questions for each reading, and will expect you to have looked at those ahead of time. Some questions I will expect everyone to have prepared answers for - these won’t be “quiz” questions, but ways for you to record what you found puzzling, interesting, right or wrong, and so forth in the readings. You should be aware that some of the readings in this course will most likely be quite challenging for you. Give yourself plenty of time to do these readings carefully. Those who want to truly excel in this class will most likely want to read each assignment at least twice, and take notes on the readings.

In addition to regular class meetings, we will be meeting five times outside of class: four times to watch films, and once to see the K presentation of “The Threepenny Operah”. For the day following each of these extra meetings, there will be no readings assigned. However, on each of these days a group of three of you will do a collaborative presentation on the film or show. We will also spend part of these days working on particular skills.

Course Requirements and Grading Scheme
Response papers: 20%
Every Monday, you will write a response paper on an assigned topic related to the material currently being covered. This will be a typed, double-spaced short essay, and it should be about a page or two in length. Response papers will generally involve you thinking about the material we’ve been discussing or reading in a personal way, either grappling with your own view on a topic or applying ethical ideas to things in your own life. These response papers may be shared with the class, as a whole or in groups or pairs.

The point of the essays is to integrate your academic learning of the material into your personal life and thinking, and to have the experience of constructing statements of your own reactions to the topics studied. They are meant to help you see the material as relevant to your life, and to see yourself as able to take a place in the ongoing debate about philosophical issues. I will grade these on the basis of how well I see you trying to do those things, not on the basis of your ability to regurgitate facts from the readings, or parrot back to me thoughts I or the writers studied have expressed.

In Week 7, we will be visiting the library to do a research project there. The resulting paper will take the place of Week 8’s response papers. It will be averaged in with the rest of your response papers, except that it will count double.

Random assignments: 25%
I will frequently ask you to do an in-class or homework assignment, designed to help facilitate learning and/or discussion. I will let you know details of such assignments as they come up, but here are some possibilities:
- a question or two from a reading response sheet
- a question or two from a film/play response sheet
- a peer assessment of a presentation or some written work
- a draft of a thesis paragraph for your next paper
- an in-class short writing assignment to practice some skill

These assignments will generally be graded Pass/Fail/Honors.

Group presentation: 10%
This will be a 15-20 minute presentation on one of the films or the show that we will be seeing outside of regular class time. Your group should meet ahead of time to see the film, read the script, see a preview of the show, or do whatever you decide is adequate preparation. Each group will also meet with me before you do your presentation. The content of the presentation will be essentially anything the group decides, as long as it’s related to the current topic being studied. The point will be to do something that helps the other seminar members in their thinking about the topic, providing some illumination by way of the film or show. You will not need to summarize anything about the film or show, since everyone will have seen it. We’ll talk more about this as the time approaches.

Your packet includes a handout that tells you which group you are in, as well as the deadlines for papers that are adjusted for you (nobody turns in a paper on a day they’re doing a presentation).

After each presentation, each member of the group will assess himself or herself as well as the other members of the group for quality and quantity of participation. These assessments will play a role in the grades given.

First paper: 5%
You will write a short paper due in Week 3 on the issue of theistic and non-theistic arguments about meaning. This paper will be about 4 pages long, and will be on an assigned topic.

Second paper: 10%
This paper will be due in Week 5, and will incorporate the first paper as draft and foundational material. It will take the topic of whether the meaning of life depends on certain religious truths and expand this to include the topic of how science affects our understanding of the meaning of life. This paper will be about 7-8 pages long, and the way the topics are integrated will be assigned.

Third paper: 20%
The third paper will be about 8 pages long. You will first turn in a mandatory rough draft, and the final draft will be turned in with revisions. This paper will be on a topic relating to self and meaning, and you will choose the topic and thesis, with my approval.

The point of this paper is to construct and present an extended philosophical argument for a thesis of your own devising. One goal is to apply for yourself the principles of reasoning, insight, philosophical writing, and argumentation modeled and taught in this class. The other goal is to craft a carefully considered position on an issue, grappling with fundamental problems in your own way.

Assignment responsibilities:
For any assignment, I may require you to turn in an outline or draft, or have you exchange outlines or drafts with other students in the class. I will be able to look at rough drafts, either turned in or during office hours; I will let you know details as the time gets nearer. I also encourage you to run rough drafts by each other or your peers at the Writing Center, even if I do not require you to do so. Whether I look at them or not, rough drafts and outlines of each of your papers will be due along with the final drafts.

All assignments must be turned in as hard (paper) copies - no emailed assignments will be accepted except by special permission. It is your responsibility to retain copies of all assignments you turn in, in a reliable format. An assignment that is between one hour and 24 hours late will receive a ½ grade reduction. An assignment that is between one day and two weeks late will receive a full grade reduction. Assignments will not be accepted more than two weeks late. You will be permitted one “freebie”: an assignment turned in as much as two days late, no questions asked, as long as you let me know you’re taking your freebie. Be mindful not to use it lightly. The formal requirements for all assignments will be announced in detail well ahead of time, both in class and on the website, and most likely through the email listserv.

A note on changing grades: if you feel you have been assigned a grade unfairly or inaccurately, you should by all means talk to me about it. My only requirement is that you prepare an argument (a set of reasons and facts) before you do so.

A note on reading: don't succumb to the misconception that in order to read something you only have to move your eyes over the lines, or "read it out loud in your head," so to speak. What I expect is that you will read the material in a more sophisticated way, thinking as you go. You should be asking yourself the main points, making sure you understand the structure of the reading, thinking about how this reading relates to others you've done, and otherwise working to comprehend the material, not just to complete a technical "reading" of it. You might try highlighting, underlining, making marginal notes, or outlining - whatever helps you focus and understand. The study questions should help with this, as well. By the way, don't forget to read the footnotes or endnotes as well as the main text in your readings.

Participation, attendance, and class conduct: 10%
Attendance is expected: three or more unexcused absences will result in a full grade reduction for the course. Absences will only be excused for required sports activities or practices or for a dire personal circumstance.

Participation is one of your most serious obligations in this seminar. In a philosophy class, discussion is absolutely essential, and may be the way you learn most about the material. In addition, first-year seminars are explicitly intended to be discussion-centered. I know that participation is difficult for some people, but you can consider this a safe place to practice contributing to a group discussion, which you will surely need to do throughout your life. I will require and ensure that conversation in class, although probably critical of ideas, will not be critical of people.

I will keep general track of your contributions in class. Keep in mind that contributions can take various forms, including asking for clarification, participation in group work, and giving helpful examples. Keep in mind also that more does not necessarily mean better: those who excessively dominate discussions, speak disrespectfully, or otherwise use their voices in a negative way may be penalized for doing so. If you are in doubt, ask me.

Your conduct in this class includes improvement and effort. It also includes issues of respectful behavior, such as tardiness, distracting behavior, or disrespectful behavior towards members of the class. We will go over this in class.

Final portfolio
At the end of the seminar, you will turn in a portfolio consisting of all of your written work for the class. This will be due on the Monday of exam week, December 6.

Grading scheme:
20% Response papers
25% Random assignments
10% Group presentation
5% First paper
10% Second paper
20% Third paper
10% Participation, attendance and class conduct

Academic integrity and the Honor System
"It is always important to think of the intellectual world as a community of mutual dependance, mutual helpfulness, mutual protectiveness, and common delight. We take ideas from others and we give them to others. We are indebted to others, and others are indebted to us. In sharing and acknowledging the community, we define ourselves more certainly as individuals. The ability to describe our sources is also an ability to define our own originality and our own selves. All communities depend on generosity, trust, definition, and the proper use of sources is part of the mortar that holds the community of the mind together."
- Richard Marius, Expository Writing Program, Harvard University

In this class, as in all classes at Kalamazoo College, we will be operating under the Honor System. It is important that you familiarize yourself with that system, and so your course folder will include a copy of the College's statement of it. You should also familiarize yourself with proper procedures for collaborating, doing research, and citing sources. I expect each of you to visit my webpage and read the essay there called "Plagiarism and How to Avoid It" (http://kzoo.edu/~mcdowell/Academic_integrity_and_plagiarism.htm), and to read the sections of The Brief Guide relevant to this issue. Should you have any questions about citations, plagiarism, or honor system issues, please visit or contact me.

Any assignment you turn in that I find to violate academic integrity, either through dishonesty, plagiarism, lack of appropriate citations, or unauthorized collaboration, will receive a grade of 0. Any further instance of a violation of academic integrity will be punished by a failing grade in the class as a minimum sanction.
Special needs
If you have any special needs that I can accommodate, please let me know as soon as possible.

Office hours
My office hours are posted above. They will be conducted on a first-come, first-served basis, and by appointment, with appointments taking precedence. You should feel absolutely free to come to them and discuss the course, the material, the assignments, or philosophy. I request that each of you take a few minutes to visit me sometime in the first week or two of classes. It will be an opportunity for us to chat one-on-one for the first time, and to get to know each other a bit more. I will be passing around a sign-up sheet for appointments. I will also call each of you in for individual appointments at some later date during the quarter, to talk about your work and progress.

Schedule of Readings
This schedule is tentative. Any changes will be announced in class and on the website. The reading assignments listed for each day must be completed before that class.

WEEK ONE
M 9/27 Motivation
Bertrand Russell, "The Value of Philosophy" (PFL 32 - 35)
Penny Wolfson, "Moonrise" (packet)

W 9/29 Motivation
Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning (pages TBA)

F 10/1 Motivation
Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning (pages TBA)

WEEK TWO
M 10/4 Theistic arguments
Leo Tolstoy, "My Confession" (TML 11 - 20)
David Swenson, "The Transforming Power of Otherworldliness" (TML 31 - 39)

W 10/6 Theistic arguments
William Lane Craig, "The Absurdity of Life Without God" (TML 40 - 56)
Cynthia Ozick, "The Riddle of the Ordinary" (PFL 365 - 371)

F 10/8 Nontheistic arguments
Kurt Baier, "The Meaning of Life" (TML 101 - 132)

WEEK THREE
M 10/11 Nontheistic arguments
Julian Huxley, "The Creed of a Scientific Humanist" (TML 78 - 83)
Kai Nielsen, "Death and the Meaning of Life" (TML 153 - 159)

W 10/13 Cynicism
Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd" (TML 176 - 185)

Thursday, 10/14: Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead
8:30, Humphrey House seminar room

F 10/15 Cynicism
Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead presentation/discussion
Skills discussion
Paper 1 due

WEEK FOUR
M 10/18 Cynicism
Richard Taylor, "The Meaning of Life" (TML 167 - 175)

W 10/20 Meaning in a Scientific Age
Timothy Ferris, "Death Trip" (packet)
Richard Dawkins & Steven Pinker, "Is Science Killing the Soul?" (online)
http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/dawkins_pinker/dawkins_pinker_index.html

F 10/22 Meaning in a Scientific Age
Hans Christian von Baeyer, "Walking with Ted: or, A Physicist Contemplates Nature" (packet)

WEEK FIVE
M 10/25 Meaning in a Scientific Age
Eagle Man, "We Are All Related" (PFL 445 - 449)
Annie Dillard, "Total Eclipse" (online)  
http://pencible.tripod.com/pande/total_eclipse.htm

Tuesday, 10/26: **Blade Runner** 8:30, Humphrey House seminar room

W 10/27 Meaning in a Scientific Age  
**Blade Runner** presentation/discussion  
Skills discussion  
**Paper 2 due**

F 10/29 Finding Meaning in Others  
John Stuart Mill, "A Balanced Learning" (PFL 18 - 25)  
John Jay Chapman, "Coatesville" (packet)

WEEK SIX

M 11/1 Finding Meaning in Others  
Confucius, "Analects" (PFL 426 - 430)  
St. Matthew, "Jesus's Sermon on the Mount" (PFL 430 - 436)

Tuesday, 11/2: **Citizen Kane** 8:30, Humphrey House seminar room

W 11/3 Finding Meaning in Others  
**Citizen Kane** presentation/discussion  
Skills discussion  

F 11/5 Finding Meaning in Oneself  
Plato, "The Allegory of the Cave" (PFL 6 - 8)

WEEK SEVEN

M 11/8 Finding Meaning in Oneself  
Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus" (PFL 3 - 6)  
Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus" (PFL 422 - 425)

W 11/10 Finding Meaning in Oneself  
"**Survival in the Library**" Day  

Thursday, 11/11: **Groundhog Day** 8:30, Humphrey House seminar room

F 11/12 Finding Meaning in Oneself  
**Groundhog Day** presentation/discussion  
Thesis discussion  
Brief Handbook: "Choosing Words," 351 - 358  
Peter De Vries, "The High Ground, or: Look, Ma, I'm Explicating" (packet)

WEEK EIGHT [note: expect to meet with me this week about your third paper]

M 11/15 Finding Meaning in Oneself  
Owen Flanagan, "What Makes Life Worth Living?" (TML 198 - 206)  
Richard Wright, "The Library Card" (PFL 9 - 14)

W 11/17 Multicultural Meaning  
Donna Langston, "Tired of Playing Monopoly?" (PFL 221 - 228)  
Gloria Steinem, "Unlearning" (PFL 26 - 31)

F 11/19 Multicultural Meaning  
Chuang Tzu, "The Identity of Contraries" (PFL 82 - 87)  
John Mohawk, "Spiritualism and the Law of Peace" (PFL 135 - 146)  
The Mahabharata, "On the Origin and Value of the Four Castes" (PFL 205 - 206)

[everyone should see **The Threepenny Opera** presented here at K sometime this week or weekend.]

WEEK NINE

M 11/22 The Threepenny Opera presentation/discussion  
Skills discussion  
**Rough drafts of Paper 3 due**

W 11/24 Class cancelled

WEEK TEN

M 11/29 Multicultural Meaning  
Chief Red Jacket and the Missionary, "A Dialogue" (PFL 380 - 383)  
N. Scott Momaday, "The Way to Rainy Mountain" (packet)

W 12/1 Philosophical Analysis of Meaning
A. J. Ayer, "The Claims of Philosophy" (TML 219 - 232)

F 12/3 Philosophical Analysis of Meaning
Kai Nielsen, "Linguistic Philosophy and "The Meaning of Life" (TML 233 - 256)

Monday, 12/6: Final portfolios due