**PHIL 168g: The Meaning of Life**

**Fall 2014** Course #49344RTTh 2:00 p.m.-3:20 p.m. SGM 124

This course carries General Education credit in Category GE-B (Humanistic Inquiry)

Professor Edwin McCann

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Office hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays 11:15 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. and by appointment.

**Course Overview:**

In this course we will study various philosophical responses to the question of the meaning, value, and purpose (if any) of human life, as this question is addressed in the modern period of the Western cultural tradition and in following centuries. The 'modern period' is generally defined as the late sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, i.e. the period following shortly after the Renaissance and Reformation and characterized by the rise of capitalism, the undermining of traditional structures of authority in politics and religion, and most important for the development of philosophy in this period, the rise of mechanistic science. We will trace how the problem of accounting for meaning in life provokes a revival of interest in classical Epicureanism as a basis for an atomistic and mechanistic worldview, and in reaction, a revival of ancient skepticism by Montaigne and others. Descartes and Spinoza, in very different ways, try to provide philosophical foundations for the new mechanistic natural science, and the mathematician and scientist Pascal develops a fideistic response which seeks to moderate and temper the rationalism of Descartes. With Hume we are squarely in the Enlightenment, and we examine the subsequent efforts of Hegel, the most important of the German Idealists (after Kant) to make religious belief a matter of reason rather than faith. Both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard responded critically to Hegel’s attempt, but in very different ways. Nietzsche famously proclaimed that ‘God is dead, and we have killed him’, while Kierkegaard, founder of Existentialism, rejected Hegel’s rationalist account of religious belief in favor of a conception of ‘truth as subjectivity’. In the twentieth century Heidegger and Sartre developed Existentialism in a quite different way, and Sartre in particular opposed Camus’s nihilism. We will end the course with a consideration of what is perhaps the most contested current controversy bearing on the question of the meaning of life, that concerned with the implications of Darwinian evolutionary theory for traditional creationist accounts of the origins and purpose of human life.

**Course Objectives:**

1. To introduce students to key works in the Western cultural tradition that have shaped the ongoing discussion of the problem of the meaning and value of human life. We’ll consider the variety of strategies of argument, or persuasion, that the different authors employ, and we’ll trace the ways they build upon, and argue with, their predecessors and contemporaries. We will place each work in its own historical and cultural context, and try to identify the lasting contributions that it has made to the ongoing discussion. By the end of the course students should have arrived at a solid understanding of the historical development of the Western philosophical tradition from the Renaissance through the Reformation, Scientific Revolution, Enlightenment, and Post-Enlightenment periods.

2. The student work for the course is designed to develop critical and analytical skills through close reading and analysis of complex texts, and communication skills in both contribution to group discussion and in argumentative and critical writing in essay form.

**Course Requirements:**

1. Regular attendance at lectures and your assigned discussion section and participation in the discussion section. Each class meeting will have a Short Writing period of 5 minutes so as to monitor attendance at lectures, which will count as 5% of the course grade, and attendance and participation in discussion sections will count as an additional 10% of the course grade, so that the total percentage of the course grade determined by attendance and participation is 15%.

2. Five unannounced quizzes given during the term to ensure that students keep current on the reading assignments; the average of the best four of the five grades will count for 20% of the course grade.

3. Three 1250-1500 word critical/analytical essays on set topics. Each of the three essays counts for 15% of the course grade, so that the three papers taken together count for 45% of the course grade.

4. Final examination: in-class essay exam with a sheet of five or six questions distributed in advance; on the day of the final I will indicate three of these questions as candidates for essays, and you will choose two of those questions on which to write essays . Final exam counts for 20% of course grade.

**Books for the course**

1. Lucretius, *The Nature of Things* tr. Martin Ferguson Smith. Hackett Publishing Co. ISBN: 978-087220-587-1

2. Michel de Montaigne, *Apology for Raymond Sebond* tr. Roger Ariew and Marjorie Grene. Hackett Publishing Co. ISBN: 978-087220-679-3

3. René Descartes, *Meditations, Objections and Replies* ed. and tr. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress. Hackett Publishing Co. ISBN: 978-0-87220-798-1

4. Blaise Pascal, [*Pensées*](http://www.amazon.com/Pens%C3%A9es-Blaise-Pascal/dp/087220717X/ref=sr_1_5?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1405107627&sr=1-5&keywords=pascal+pensees) tr. Roger Ariew. Hackett Publishing Co. ISBN: 978-0-87220717-2

5. Michael L. Morgan, ed., *The Essential Spinoza: Ethics and Related Writings*  tr. Samuel Shirley. Hackett Publishing Co. ISBN: 978-0-87220-803-6

6. David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* 2nd edition ed. Richard H. Popkin. Hackett Publishing Co. ISBN: 978-0-87220-402-7

7. Robert Bretall, ed. *A Kierkegaard Anthology* Princeton University Press. ISBN: 978-0691019789

8. Walter Kaufmann, ed. and tr., *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* Modern Library . ISBN: 978-0679783398

9. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* tr. Justin O’Brien. Vintage. ISBN: 978-0679733737

10. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* tr. Carol Macomber. Yale University Press. ISBN: 978-0300115468

11. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity.* Philosophical Library/Open Road. ISBN: 978-1480442801

12, Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton University Press. ISBN: 978-0691120362

**Schedule of Topics and Readings**

**Tu Jan 12** Introduction and overview of course

Part One: The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: the Reformation

The revival of Epicureanism and Skepticism

[Epicurus -- late 4th century BCE; Lucretius -- mid 1st century BCE [manuscript rediscovered in a German monastery 1417]]; [Montaigne -- late 16th century]

**Th Jan 14** Lucretius’s presentation of Epicurean atomisim. Reading: Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* Bk. I, lines 1-634 and 921-1117; Bk. II; Bk. III (Ferguson Smith, pp. 2-19, 28-98)

**Tu Jan 19** Reading: Lucretius on the soul and the conditions of human life. Reading: *On the Nature of Things* Bk. IV; Bk. V; Bk. VI, lines 1-94 (Ferguson Smith, pp. 99-181)

**Th Jan 21** Montaigne’s renaissance naturalism: man as an animal. Reading: Montaigne, *Apology* (Ariew and Grene, pp. 1-82)

**Tu Jan 26** Montaigne’s revival of ancient skepticism in the context of the wars of religion (Reformation). Reading: Montaigne, *Apology* (Ariew and Grene, pp. 82-164)

Part two: The seventeenth century: the Scientific Revolution

Descartes, Pascal, Spinoza

[Descartes -- early-mid 17th century, Pascal -- mid-17th century, Spinoza -- late 17th century]

**Th Jan 28** Descartes on skepticism and self: the cogito. Reading: Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* Letter of Dedication, Preface to the Reader, Synopsis of the Meditations, Meditations One and Two (Ariew and Cress, pp. 1-19)

**Tu Feb 2** Descartes on the proof of God’s existence and human limitation. Reading: Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* Meditations Three and Four (Ariew and Cress, pp. 19-35)

**Th Feb 4** Descartes on the refutation of skepticism and the nature of the human being. Reading: Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* Meditations Five and Six; *Third Set of Objections, with Author’s Replies*; *Letter to Clerselier* (Ariew and Cress, pp. 19-35, 100-115, 154-162)

**Tu Feb 9**  Pascal’s wager and the reasons of the heart. Reading: Pascal, S2-S277, S383-S414, S452-S459, S567-S568, S680-S687 [these section numbers correspond to the ordering of the fragments by Sellier, which Ariew follows] (Ariew, pp. 2-72, 103-108, 140-146, 172, 211-224 )

**Th Feb 11** Spinoza’s metaphysics: foundations. Reading: Spinoza, *Ethics* Part I, Definitions, Axioms, Propositions 1-15, (Morgan pp. 3-13).

**Monday February 15: FIRST PAPER DUE 11:59 P.M.**

**Tu Feb 16** Spinoza’s metaphysics: God and nature. Reading: Spinoza, *Ethics* Part I, Propositions 16-36 (Morgan pp. 13-29).

**Th Feb 18** Spinoza on the mind and emotions. Reading: *Ethics* Part II (entire), Part III, Preface, Definitions, Postulates, Propositions 1-13 (Morgan pp. 29-69).

**Tu Feb 23** Spinoza on human bondage and human freedom. Reading: Spinoza *Ethics* Parts IV and V (entire), (Morgan pp. 102-161).

Part three: The eighteenth century: The Enlightenment

Hume

[Hume -- mid- to late 18th century]

**Th Feb 25** Hume’s criticism of the design argument for God’s existence. Reading: *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* Pamphilus to Hermippus, Parts I-IX in Popkin pp. 1-57)

**Tu Mar 1**Hume’s treatment of the problem of evil and final thoughts on the reasonableness of religious belief. Reading: *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* Parts X-XII in Popkin pp. 58-89; , ‘Of Miracles’, Part X of *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* in Popkin pp. 107-125

Part four: The nineteenth century: Idealism and the beginnings of Existentialism

Hegel, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche

[Hegel -- early to mid-19th century; Kierkegaard -- mid-19th century; Schopenhauer—mid-19th century; Nietzsche—late 19th century]

**Th Mar 3** Hegel on religion and philosophy. Reading: selection from ‘The Absolute Religion’ in *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, available at:

http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/re/absolute-3c.htm

**Tu Mar 8** Kierkegaard’s ways of life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Reading: selections from *Either/Or* and *Edifying Discourses in Various Spirits* in Bretall pp. 21-108, 271-281

**Th Mar 10** Kierkegaard’s knight of faith and knight of infinite resignation; the story of Abraham and Isaac and the teleological suspension of the ethical; the authorship. Reading: selections from *Fear and Trembling* in Bretall pp. 118-134, 324-339

**March 14-20 Spring recess**

**Tu Mar 22** Kierkegaard’s conception of truth as subjectivity. Reading: selections from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* in Bretall pp. 193-258

**Th Mar 24** Kierkegaard’s analysis of despair as the sickness unto death. Reading: selections from *Sickness unto Death* in Bretall pp. 341-371

M**onday March 28: SECOND PAPER DUE 11:59 P.M.**

**Tu Mar 29** Schopenhauer’s pessimisn and nihilism; Nietzsche on the errors of science, philosophy, and religion. Reading: Schopenhauer *Studies in Pessimism* Essay 1: ‘On the Sufferings of the World’, available at:

<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/schopenhauer/arthur/pessimism/chapter1.html>

and Schopenhauer *Studies in Pessimism* Essay 2: ‘On the Vanity of Existence’, available at

<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/schopenhauer/arthur/pessimism/chapter2.html>

and

Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil* Preface and Parts I-III, (Kaufmann pp. 192-266)

**Th Mar 31** Nietzsche on the history of morality as an argument for immoralism. Reading: Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil* Part V (Kaufmann pp. 287-308) and Nietzsche *On the Genealogy of Morals* Preface and First Essay (Kaufmann pp. 451-492)

**Tu Apr 5** Nietzsche on the decadence of contemporary culture and the ascetic ideal.

Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil* Parts VI-IX (Kaufmann pp. 311-427) and Nietzsche *On the Genealogy of Morals* Third Essay (Kaufmann pp. 533-599)

Part five: The twentieth century: Existentialism, Absurdity, and Ambiguity

Sartre, Camus, De Beauvoir, Thomas Nagel

[Camus -- mid-20th century; Sartre -- mid-20th century; De Beauvoir -- mid-20th century; Nagel -- late 20th century]

**Th Apr 7** Camus’s absurdist nihilism and Nagel’s detached irony. Reading: Camus, ‘An Absurd Reasoning‘; ‘The Absurd Man’; The Myth of Sisyphus’ (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* pp. 1-92, 119-123); Thomas Nagel, ‘The Absurd’ *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 86, no. 20, October 21, 1971, pp. 716-727 (available through JSTOR: http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.usc.edu/stable/2024942)

**Tu Apr 12** Sartre on existentialism. Reading: Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (Cohen-Solal pp. 17-72)

**Th Apr 14** Simone de Beauvoir on freedom and ambiguity. Reading: *Ethics of Ambiguity* Parts one and two

**T Apr 19** Simone de Beauvoir on freedom and action

Reading: *Ethics of Ambiguity* Part three and Conclusion

Part six: The twenty-first century: Identity, authenticity, and human groups

Appiah [2005]

**Th Apr 21** Appiah on individual identity and autonomy.

Reading: *The Ethics of Identity* Preface and chaps. 1 and 2, pp. ix-xviii, 1-61

**T Apr 26** Appiah on identity and rights, the trouble with culture, and soul making. Reading: *The Ethics of Identity* Preface and chaps. 3, 4 and 25 pp. 62-212

**WEDNESDAY APRIL 27: THIRD 5-PAGE PAPER DUE 11:59 P.M.**

**Th Apr 28** Appiah on rooted cosmopolitanism. Reading: *The Ethics of Identity* chap. 6 pp. 213-272

**THURSDAY MAY 5: FINAL EXAM, 2:00 p.m.-4:00 p.m.**

**Course policies**

**Students with disabilities**

Any student who has registered with the office of Disability Services and Programs (DSP) and who has been certified by DSP as needing specific accommodations will gladly be afforded those accommodations. Please meet with the instructor as early as possible in the semester to discuss appropriate accommodations. I am very glad to work with you to tailor course requirements to your specific needs subject to considerations of general fairness for all students in the class.

**Academic integrity**

Be sure to familiarize yourself with Section 11 of *Scampus*, including Appendix A.

If you are unsure about what constitutes a violation of academic integrity, please see the instructor. Any violation of academic integrity standards will result in a grade of ‘F’ for the course and a referral to Student Judicial Affairs, so please be very careful about this. Note that during all in-class writing exercises (quizzes, final exam, short writing) all books, notes, devices, and other materials must be stowed away and out of line of sight.

**Paper submission, deadlines and format**

Please submit your papers through Blackboard. If your TA requires a hardcopy version of your paper, please submit it at the beginning of the class meeting following the due date, but be sure that you also submit an electronic version through Blackboard by the due date. Please format your papers as follows: at least 12 point font, double-spaced, at least one inch margins all around, your name as it appears on the class roster on the top right hand corner of the first page. All electronically submitted papers must have a filename of the format ‘<yourname> 155 paper <n>.doc’, e.g. ‘McCann 155 paper 1.doc’. If you have trouble submitting the paper, email an electronic version to your TA. Do not include your student ID number or any other possibly sensitive identifying information on your papers or any other correspondence with instructors.

Late papers will have their grade reduced by .5 of a grade point for each class session past the due date.

**Classroom protocol**

All students (and the professor) have a right to a classroom free of distractions. To accomplish this our classroom will be device-free (no use of laptops, cellphones, tablets, or other electronic devices) and distraction-free (no reading material other than the course material currently being discussed, no extended conversations, etc.). Violators will be asked to leave the classroom immediately and to not return that day; repeat violations will incur grade penalties. The use of laptops and other devices in the classroom is not only rude and disrespectful to the lecturer (which it is), it also hinders learning for the user and for nearby students; see Sana, Weston, and Cepeda, ‘Laptop multitasking hinders classroom learning for both users and nearby peers’ in *Computers and Education* Vol. 62 (2013) pp. 24-31. If you have become accustomed to taking notes on a laptop or tablet and are concerned that the device ban will adversely affect your note-taking, you should read this short article, which should allay your anxiety on this point: http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/04/140424102837.htm

**Communication**

We will strive to respond promptly to your e-mail inquiries, comments, etc. If you send an email to me and/or your TA, make sure the subject line starts with 155 and includes your last name as it appears on the roster. Examples: ‘168 <yourname> request for a meeting’ or ‘168 <yourname> question’. Given time constraints we can only answer questions that can be answered briefly, i.e. administrative questions; questions about content should be addressed in office hours.