

Meaning and Existential Psychology

Dr. Travis Proulx

Tuesday, PZ50 12:45 – 14:30

Thursday, PZ49 12:45 – 14:30

Course Description

Research psychologists from a variety of disciplines have observed findings that converge with classic existentialist theory and lay the foundation for a novel understanding of human morality, motivation, and meaning. Cognitive psychologists are exploring the ways that we innately and automatically form expected connections from our experiences, along with the ways that these meaning frameworks allow us to make sense of ourselves, our world, and our relation to it. Novel techniques in cognitive neuroscience and psychophysiology are determining the unique arousal states that follow from violations of any meaning framework. Social psychologists have built a threat-compensation literature around the efforts we make to restore meaning in the face of absurdity. Finally, experimental psychologists across these fields have examined the ways that meaning intersects with self-control, aggression, and the shared moralities that govern our social interactions.

At present, there is a unique opportunity to summarize the experimental psychological literature as it affirms and surpasses what we thought we knew about mankind's acquisition and application of meaning.

This course constitutes a summary of relevant theorists in the domains of existential philosophy (e.g., Nietzsche, Camus) and psychology (e.g., Freud, Frankl), in addition to a comprehensive survey of empirical perspectives (e.g., regulatory focus, moral foundations theory) that follow from these traditions.

Learning Goals and Evaluation

1. Critical Thinking

The foundational texts covered in this course are conceptually dense works of philosophy. In general, the ability to unpack and critically evaluate complex material is important for professionals both inside and outside an academic setting. For academics pursuing a research career, this skill is essential as it is applied to texts that represent centuries of accumulated thinking on a variety of human needs, motivations and behaviors. Reading (and re-reading) these texts is the defining activity of this course, both in terms of the learning goals and the class discussion.

To facilitate your engagement with these texts, you will submit each week:

Questions for Tuesdays*: 10% of final grade – evaluated /5 marks.

- By Monday evening, 8pm, you will e-mail me 3 thoughtful questions related to the text we will be discussing for the Tuesday class. These questions can involve comprehension (e.g., “What does Nietzsche mean when he says...”), though ideally, they involve critique (e.g., “Does it make sense that Camus argues that absurdity is X when he argues elsewhere that it

is Y?”). Critique questions will be easier to generate as the course progresses, and the texts can be evaluated in relation to one another (e.g., “Nietzsche understands guilt as ABC and Freud understands it as XYZ; are they the same, and which position makes more sense?”)

- Discussing these questions will be the central activity of each Tuesday class.
- There will be no Questions for the final Tuesday. There will be a connections paper instead.

2. Making Connections

Most of the researchers leading the contemporary social sciences are familiar with these and other 19th/early 20th century texts, which they have mined for testable hypotheses. This has involved making connections between foundational texts and connecting these ideas to contemporary theory and research methods.

To develop your skills in this essential research task, you will submit each week:

Connections for Thursdays*: 70% of final grade – evaluated /10 marks

- Over the course of 2 double-spaced pages, you will select at least 2 passages from the foundational text discussed on Tuesday and connect them to the empirical or theoretical material assigned for the Thursday class. This could involve a simple comparison (e.g., Nietzsche’s notion of aristocratic values sounds a lot like XYZ theory in social psychology, and here is why...”). Ideally these connections will involve critique (e.g., Frankl’s understanding of ‘meaning’ is similar to Janoff-Bulman’s discussion of ‘assumptive words’ in ABC ways, however I think that Frankl/Janoff-Bulman’s understanding offers a more sensible account for XYZ reasons.”) or synthesis (e.g., “Nietzsche defines aggression as such-and-such and sees it as a good thing, while Freud defines it as this-and-that and sees it as a bad thing. They may be describing two different ideas, but here is a way of understanding aggression that underlies both of their definitions...”).
- There will be no Connection Paper for the class you give your presentation.

3. Generating Hypotheses

For researchers, operationalizing theoretical hypotheses is as practical a skill as running an appropriate data analysis. The ultimate aim of this course (and any research program) is to test novel hypotheses on important topics with a well-designed experiment. This aim is often achieved by 1) connecting a foundational text to a contemporary literature, 2) generating a hypothesis that synthesizes some aspect of this connection, and 3) applying appropriate research methods to assessing this hypothesis.

To approach this aim, your final assignment for the course will be an:

Experiment Presentation (scheduled for final 2 classes): 20% of final grade - evaluated /20 marks.

- Over the course of 20-25 minutes, you will connect one of the foundational texts covered in the course with a contemporary and relevant paper not covered in the course, devise a novel hypothesis that synthesizes these materials, and present an experiment that tests this hypothesis. This presentation will include:
 - an introduction that 1) outlines the research question, 2) summarizes relevant portions of foundational text 3) summarizes relevant portions of contemporary paper.

- a description of a novel hypothesis that 1) synthesizes the summary of foundational and contemporary materials 2) outlines a clear hypothesis that follows from this synthesis, making it clear that hypothesis is a) novel and b) important.
- a description of the proposed experiment that includes 1) subjects and appropriate power analysis 2) clear and detailed methods 3) proposed statistical analyses 4) summary of expected results.
- You will circulate your chosen contemporary paper to the class by the weekend prior to the presentation.

Expectations for the Class

1. **Do** the readings: there's not much to talk about if the readings aren't worked through every week. This will become especially apparent in our small group.
2. **Show** that you've done the readings: be prepared for the conversation every week.
3. **Bring** the readings: have your (highlighted, underlined, annotated) copies of the readings with you every week.
4. **Don't fear** the readings: some of these are dense texts that were not written for a conventional academic audience. They can be tough for any first-time reader, but you can get the general through-line with enough re-reading and contemplation.
5. **Join** the conversation: this is a seminar, not a lecture. Discussing these ideas in a supportive environment is the central learning activity of a graduate-level seminar.

Week 1: Control and Power	
Tue	Nietzsche's 'Genealogy of Morals': First Essay
Thur	Control: Rothbaum et al., 1982; Skinner, 1996 Power: Galinsky et al. 2003; 2008
Week 2: Guilt & Morality	
Tue	Nietzsche's 'Genealogy of Morals': Second Essay
Thur	BJW: Lerner & Miller, 1978 Moral Foundations: Graham et al., 2009; Gray et al., 2012
Week 3: Approach and Avoidance	
Tue	Freud's 'Civilization and its Discontents' Essays 1 - 4
Thur	Gray, 1990; Higgins, 1997; Shah et al. 1998
Week 4: Self-Control	
Tue	Freud's 'Civilization and its Discontents' Essays 5 – 8
Thur	Baumeister & Alquist, 2009; Hoffman et al., 2009; Inzlicht et al., 2014
Week 5: Worldviews and Trauma	
Tue	Frankl's 'Man's Search for Meaning' Parts 1 and 2
Thur	Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Davis et al., 2000; Wortman & Cohen-Silver, 2001
Week 6: Need for Structure and Closure	
Tue	Camus' 'An Absurd Reasoning/Myth of Sisyphus'
Thur	Neuberg & Newsom, 1993, Webster & Kruglanski, 1994; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996
Week 7: Behavioral & neuro-affective responses to meaning violations	
Tue	Zanna & Cooper, 1974; Greenberg et al., 1995; Proulx & Heine, 2008; Kay et al., 2010
Thur	Harmon-Jones et al., 2009; Proulx et al., 2012, Jonas et al., 2014