

What Makes for a Meaningful Life?

IDS 492-08

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Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays from 11:00am-12:00pm [via Zoom](#)

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Class Meeting Time and Location: 4-6:40pm on Mondays [via Zoom](#) (online synchronous course)

Class Purpose: This course is a senior seminar, which serves as the capstone course for your Hope College experience. This class is oriented around 10 Big Ideas. It is designed to provide a space for you to think about some of the big and deep questions of life: what makes life meaningful? How do I live a meaningful life? Where do I find purpose? In this class, you'll read four books, several academic journal articles, discuss concepts with fellow students, lead a discussion on a topic, reflect on your liberal arts education at Hope College, and craft a Life View Paper that will serve as an entry point for you to begin to formalize some of your thoughts about what makes a meaningful life.

Course Objectives: Upon successful completion of the course, students who have invested the appropriate effort should be able to:

1. Understand the various approaches to and sources of meaning in life
2. Critically analyze, evaluate, and reflect upon primary readings
3. Think critically about a meaningful life and how to pursue meaning
4. Cultivate a personal interest in developing a meaningful life in a global society
5. Lead a class discussion on what makes life meaningful
6. Articulate a (tentative) life view of what constitutes a meaningful life and how to pursue it

Texts:

- Becker, E. (1973). *The denial of death*. New York: Free Press.
- Eagleton, T. (2007). *The meaning of life: A very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Frankl, V. (1946). *Man's search for meaning*. Beacon Publishers.
- Kalanithi, P. (2016). *When breath becomes air*. New York: Random House.
- Additional primary readings provided by the instructor and posted to Moodle

Inclusive Classroom Statement: It is my sincere desire to create a classroom atmosphere that respects and values all students. My intent is to serve all students from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives, being attentive and respectful to diversity across a range of intersecting identities, including gender identity, gender expression, sexuality and sexual orientation, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, nationality, religion, and culture. I want you to know that you are welcome here. If there are ways that I can improve the effectiveness of this course, please let me know. I also acknowledge that I, too, am a learner and will not always do this perfectly. I am open to your suggestions, comments, and ideas of ways that I can engage in this process more fruitfully—so please feel free to reach out, as I am eager to learn. My hope for this class is that we can all learn from one another and engage in humble, thoughtful, and open dialogue.

University Policies: The last day to add or drop this class is February 3. The last day to withdraw from this class with the grade of "W" is April 8. Hope College values diversity, inclusion and equitable learning environments and strives to make all learning experiences as accessible as possible. If you anticipate or experience academic barriers due to a disability (including mental health, learning disabilities, and chronic or temporary medical conditions), please let me know immediately so that we can privately discuss options. To establish reasonable accommodations, I will request that you first register with Disability and Accessibility Resources (DAR) and then arrange with me to discuss approved accommodations so that we can implement them as soon as possible. Accommodations are not arranged retroactively. Students can call 616-395-7925 or visit the DAR website: <https://hope.edu/offices/disability-services/> to request accommodations. The only accommodations for tests (e.g., time, location) that I provide must come through the Academic Success Center.

Honor Code and Academic Integrity: This course adheres to the Hope College Honor Code: It is a violation to:

1. Give, offer, or receive aid on examinations other than that specifically allowed by the professor.
2. Do course work in a manner that is inconsistent with the standards of conduct set forth by the professor.
3. Falsify or fabricate data. This has particular applications to laboratory work and research.
4. Engage in conduct that destroys another person's work or hinders another in his or her academic endeavors. This has particular application to computer files, library resources, and laboratory or studio work.
5. Knowingly represent the work of others as his or her own. This includes, but is not limited to, plagiarism.

Any form of cheating or plagiarism will be dealt with severely. When you write papers, you should (a) use your own words to express your own ideas; (b) use your own words to express someone else's ideas and cite the source (in APA format); and/or (c) put quotes around someone else's words and cite the source. If you violate any of these rules, you will receive a zero on the assignment or fail the class, depending on the severity of the infraction. If you violate these rules on more than one assignment, you will fail the class. Students who are unsure about their use of citations, or are in need of general writing assistance, are encouraged to visit the Center for Writing and Research. You are responsible for understanding all forms of plagiarism; unintentional plagiarism is no excuse. Regarding all papers, the ideas and the writing must be your own.

Course Expectations: This is an intensive, discussion-based seminar. This requires you to be an active participant in all aspects of the class, be proactive to ask questions when you do not understand, and work efficiently to keep up with the demands of this course. You are expected to read all assigned material prior to its discussion in class, attend every class meeting, and participate in class discussions. The amount and range of reading is extensive, the required level of critical thinking is very high, and the nature of discussion is vigorous. The success of this course, and your own personal learning, is highly dependent on each student fully committing to the tasks of the course, completing and critically reflecting on the readings of the course, and taking serious the opportunity to articulate one's life-view in a way that is humble, open, and respectful to others.

Technology: You must have a Hope College email account and check your email daily.

Classroom Etiquette: Classroom discussion is a central part of this course. I already know what I think about these issues; I want to know what you think. Please share your ideas and opinions. Your feedback on the course is also welcome. Out of consideration for the other students, you are asked not to record lectures, to refrain from conversation during lecture, and to set cell phones (and other personal electronic devices) to silent. If you are persistently using your cell phone/texting in class, or otherwise distracted while in Zoom, I may ask you to leave (and you will be counted absent that day). Recordings that accommodate individual needs must be approved by me in advance and may be used for personal use during the semester only; redistribution is prohibited.

Participation and Discussion (20%): I expect that students will be actively engaged and participate in every class session, and I expect that they will demonstrate sufficient mastery over the concepts and material through discussion in class, and communicate their ideas with respect and humility. One of the primary goals of this course is to help you develop a sense about what makes life meaningful, reason about this view cogently, and express it humbly. Accordingly, you are expected to treat other students and their views with respect and open-mindedness. Because of the interactive nature of this class, your grade will suffer if you do not attend each class, and students are responsible for all material covered and assignments due during the class they miss. Attendance *and* participation equally comprise this category: merely showing up without contributing, simply for the sake of attendance, will earn you an F in this category.

Reading Responses (10%): Students are expected to read the weekly readings and prepare for class in advance. In order to facilitate a thoughtful discussion in class, students must post a reading response to **Moodle by 11am on Monday each week**. This response should be at least **200-300 words in length**. The response must do two things: (a) critically reflect on the readings, and (b) include at least one discussion question to be brought up during that week's class session. *You must go beyond simply whether you "liked" or "disliked" the reading; you should not be shallow in your analysis.* Rather, your responses to these readings needs to be thoughtful, engaged, and well-written, demonstrating a high level of understanding and critical thinking—moreover, you must write *concisely*. You must critically engage the material in ways that demonstrate connections to other themes in class or current culture and pose an interesting discussion question for the class to consider.

Leading a Class (10%): Students will be expected to pair up with another student to lead a class on a topic of their choice. They will be responsible for leading 30 minutes of the class discussion that day. (If you choose to show a film clip, the clip must not take more than 10 minutes of your time.) To lead class, you should (a) review all of the reading responses and discussion questions posted by your classmates on Monday morning, and (b) create an engaging way to discuss the course material (e.g., a game, activity, riveting discussion).

Liberal Arts Essay (10%): All senior seminar sections spend time reflecting on the Liberal Arts Essay that students wrote and archived during their FYS class. You'll write a reflection on your Liberal Arts experience at Hope College, as well as how you've seen yourself change in the time at Hope. Again, I am more concerned with the quality of the writing rather than the quantity of the pages, but this paper would likely be **3-4 pages**, and this is **due via Moodle before 11AM on April 19**.

Book Analyses (10% each; 30% total): In addition to the weekly readings, students will read a classic psychology book (Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*) and a current book with relevant content (*When Breath Becomes Air*) and provide a written book analysis of each. Each book analysis starts with the following sentences: **"I read the book in its entirety. The major themes I resonated with are..."** Then, students should (a) make detailed connections to specific concepts covered in the course, (b) discuss how the book is relevant to current culture and topics in our society, and (c) talk about what was personally meaningful to them in the book. The quality of the writing is more important than the quantity of the pages; I am more interested that you did a thorough and thoughtful job engaging with the material and making connections to the course material. Still, it is likely that this book review will likely be an average of **3-4 pages each**. These papers should be uploaded to Moodle before 11AM on their due date.

- **Book Analysis #1: *The Denial of Death*, due via Moodle before 11AM on March 1**
- **Book Analysis #2: *When Breath Becomes Air*, due via Moodle before 11AM on March 22.**
- **Book Analysis #3: *Man's Search for Meaning*, due via Moodle before 11AM on May 3.**

Life View Paper (20%): A culminating life view paper is the centerpiece assignment for this course. The paper should explore your particular resolution (tentative though it may be) of the issues raised in the course and the intellectual rationale for adopting that stance. Put differently, you should clearly and cogently explicate an answer to these questions reflecting on the **past, the present, and the future**, respectively:

1. How do you make sense of the world?
2. Where do you find your significance?
3. What is your purpose in life?

Your paper should include at least 7-10 references to material that we have covered in class, thoughtfully integrating a review of the scholarship that is relevant to this issue, as well as a discussion of how you personally envision living out these aspects of a meaningful life and the obstacles that preclude you from doing so. As with all assigned writing in this class, quality of thought and writing is more important than quantity of words. However, this paper is typically **20-30 pages** (e.g., 2-3 pages per question per time period x 3 time periods = 18-27 pages). You will turn in a draft of this paper, including a full outline of your paper and roughly 3-4 pages of writing, **via Moodle at 11AM by April 12** to receive feedback from the instructor. You must incorporate the feedback and address the issues provided by the instructor for your final paper. The final paper is **via Moodle by 4pm on Monday, May 10**.

Grading Criteria: The standard grading criteria will be used for this course:

A = 94-100%; A- = 90-93%; B+ = 87-89%; B = 83-86%; B- = 80-82%; C+ = 77-79%;
C = 73-76%; C- = 70-72%; D+ = 67-69%; D = 63-66%; D- = 60-62%; F = below 60%

Reading responses	10%
Leading a class	10%
Liberal arts essay	10%
Participation/discussion	20%
Book Reviews	30%
Life View Paper	20%

*Course-related papers will be kept for 31 days after grades are posted, after which time they will be destroyed.

Tentative Course Schedule

Week	Date	Class Topic	Readings/Activity Due
1	Jan 25 – M	Introduction, syllabus review	--
2	Feb 1 – M	What is Meaning?	Eagleton Chapters 1-2
3	Feb 8 – M	Big Idea #1: How to Be Free	Reading #1
4	Feb 15 – M	Big Idea #2: How to Be Alone	Reading #2
5	Feb 22 – M	Big Idea #3: How to Be Authentically Yourself	Reading #3
6	Mar 1 – M	Big Idea #4: How to Die	Reading #4 <i>Denial of Death</i> Book Review Due
7	Mar 8 – M	Big Idea #5: How to Find the Divine	Reading #5
8	Mar 15 – M	Big Idea #6: How to Have Great Relationships	Reading #6
9	Mar 22 – M	Big Idea #7: How to Make a Difference	Reading #7 <i>When Breath Becomes Air</i> Book Review Due
10	Mar 29 – M	Life View Paper Work	You will meet virtually in groups to work on your Life View Paper
11	Apr 5 – M	Easter Monday – No Class	
12	Apr 12 – M	Big Idea #8: How to Suffer	Reading #8 Life View Paper Outline and Rough Draft Due
13	Apr 19 – M	Big Idea #9: How to Grow	Reading #9 Liberal Arts Essay Due
14	Apr 26	Big Idea #10: How to Find Meaning	Eagleton Chapters 3-4 Reading #10
15	May 3 – M	Living Meaningfully	<i>Man's Search for Meaning</i> Book Review Due
16	May 10 – M	Life View Paper due by 4PM	

Reading List

Reading #1	Kay, A. C., Whitson, J. A., Gaucher, D., & Galinsky, A. D. (2009). Compensatory control: Achieving order through the mind, our institutions, and the heavens. <i>Current Directions in Psychological Science</i> , 18, 264-268.
Reading #2	Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. <i>Psychological Bulletin</i> , 117, 497-529.
Reading #3	Emmons, R. A. (2005). Striving for the sacred: Personal goals, life meaning, and religion. <i>Journal of Social Issues</i> , 61, 731-745
Reading #4	Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., & Solomon, S. (1997). Why do we need what we need? A terror management perspective on the roots of human social motivation. <i>Psychological Inquiry</i> , 8, 1-21.
Reading #5	Batson, C. D., & Stocks, E. L. (2004). Religion: Its core psychological functions. In <i>Handbook of experimental existential psychology</i> , edited by J. Greenberg, S. Koole, and T. Pyszczynski (pp. 141-55). New York: Guilford Press.
Reading #6	Mikulincer, M., Florian, V., & Hirschberger, G. (2003). The existential function of close relationships: Introducing death into the science of love. <i>Personality and Social Psychology Review</i> , 7, 20-40.
Reading #7	Van Tongeren, D. R., Green, J. D., Davis, D. E., Hook, J. N., & Hulseley, T. L. (2016). Prosociality enhances meaning in life. <i>The Journal of Positive Psychology</i> , 11, 225-236.
Reading #8	Taylor, S. E. (1983). Adjustment to threatening events: A theory of cognitive adaptations. <i>American Psychologist</i> , 38, 1161-1173.
Reading #9	Martin, L. L., Campbell, W. K., & Henry, C. D. (2004). The roar of awakening: Mortality acknowledgment as a call to authentic living. In J. Greenberg, S. Koole, & T. Pyszczynski (Eds.), <i>Handbook of experimental existential psychology</i> (pp. 431-448). New York: Guilford Press.
Reading #10	Heintzelman, S.J., & King, L.A. (2014). Life is pretty meaningful. <i>American Psychologist</i> , 69, 561-574.