

Graduate Seminar on Meaning and Existential Psychology
Psychology 529a (3 credits)

Professor: Jessica Tracy

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Office hours: After class or by appointment

Seminar Description

I'm really excited to teach this new course on a topic I've been incredibly interested in for about 25 years, but which I am far from expert in. I designed this course by thinking about what I would like to read, think about, and discuss with a group of like-minded scholars, and I expect that in many (most?) cases, I'll be learning alongside you. My role will thus be more of discussion moderator than teacher, and certainly not lecturer. All of which means that the success of the class is entirely dependent on each of us doing all the readings and engaging deeply with them, with the goal of coming together to have high-level conversations about the Big Questions that keep us at night.

The course will be divided into three (roughly distinguishable) sections: (1) Meaning, (2) The Void, and (3) Transcendence. These sections will allow us to delve into questions about the meaning of life and how humans have sought to find it (or not find it); our often terrifying or at least anxiety-provoking confrontation with the absurd, free will, and death; and more and less viable approaches to transcendence. Each week we will read at least one psychology article or chapter, and at least one article or book chapter by a philosopher, or describing a philosophical approach or theory, and/or some other non-formally scientific take on a given topic. In many weeks we will read articles or chapters from trade books and magazines outside of psychology or philosophy. We will also watch several movies; I'll plan to show these in Kenny so we can watch together (we'll find an evening that works for all or most people in the class, and popcorn will be provided!), but anyone who prefers can watch on their own instead.

Learning Objectives

Course Format

This is a graduate seminar that will meet once a week. Class time will be focused largely on discussion of the readings, films, and (one week) podcast. Each week, one or two students serving as class facilitators will be responsible for reviewing additional optional readings—which in some cases are part of the syllabus and in some cases will need to be added by the facilitators—and teaching this material to the rest of the class. The facilitators will convey this supplementary material with a mini-lecture at the beginning of class; this mini-lecture should also BRIEFLY summarize the required reading. We will then spend the bulk of the class

discussing everyone's responses to the reading and other themes that emerge; facilitators are expected to play a role in guiding this discussion, along with me.

Readings

There will be about three required readings for each seminar, plus 1 optional but recommended reading. It is imperative that you keep up with the readings on a weekly basis. I will provide readings for all class members a week prior to their due date via email or dropbox, but of course you should feel free to track them down earlier on your own.

Course Requirements and Grading

Paper (35%):

An 8-12 page (double-spaced) paper will be due on December 12th. The paper will be a research proposal or the introduction (and method section if applicable) of an empirical or theoretical paper that the student could, potentially, submit for publication on a topic relevant to the course material. In grading your paper, I will evaluate the clarity of your writing, the originality of the ideas, and your ability to situate your ideas and theories in the context of the relevant prior theoretical and empirical literature.

****Note:** It would be a good idea to run your topic idea by me before you begin writing, to make sure it generally fits with the course content.

Weekly Responses (20%):

Each week, students will be required to write responses—typically in the form of questions or comments—based on the reading assignment. You should email these to me and the class facilitator(s) by 6 pm Sunday night, ideally as a word document. In your questions/comments, think about methodological, conceptual, and theoretical strengths and weaknesses of the research and theories covered in the readings. Also consider including your thoughts on follow up ideas, studies, or studies that might be conducted to address possible shortcomings in the research reported. The best responses will include novel insights on the relationships between different readings (within or between different class meetings), novel insights on the implications of the readings for other issues in existential psychology / research on meaning, and/or critiques of presented theories or studies. These responses will be graded for clarity of writing, the quality of your arguments, and the originality of your ideas. Responses that fulfill the requirement of the assignment will receive 2 pts. Comments that do not reveal a sufficient amount of time and thought will receive 1 pt. Exceptional comments that integrate information in a very novel way or expand upon the readings to make truly insightful and interesting predictions that could conceivably lead to a publishable product down the road will receive three points. Each

student is granted two free weeks, in which they can skip writing responses. Class facilitators do not need to write responses.

**Class facilitation
(20%):**

Each week, a student or student team will be assigned to facilitate the class and give a mini-lecture at the beginning of class, which should last no longer than 20-30 minutes and involve a BRIEF summary of the readings, with more in-depth coverage of an optional reading. Mini-lectures can include some class discussion; feel free to engage other students as you lecture. The class facilitator(s) will also be responsible for integrating other students' weekly questions/comments to come up with themes and topics for discussion, and should email me in advance of the class with a summary of these themes.

**Class
Participation (25%):**

The final 25% of your grade will be based on class participation; the extent to which you contribute thoughtful comments and questions to the class discussion. You will be expected to come to class each week having read the assigned articles and prepared to discuss them. The format for this course is strictly seminar. There will be no uninterrupted lecture, but rather in-depth discussions of the issues involved in each week's topic. To receive participation points, you will be expected to contribute to these discussions each and every week. I will often try to invite people to share some of the ideas they put into their commentaries but you are encouraged to share other ideas and thoughts during our discussion.

Course Calendar and Reading Assignments

Week 1: Introduction: What is existentialism and existential psychology?

Tuesday, September 13, 2022

Koole, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (2006). Introducing science to the psychology of the soul: Experimental existential psychology. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 15, 212-216.

Sartre, J.-P. (1956). Selected sections from *Existentialism is a humanism* (C. Macomber, Trans.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. (Reprinted from *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, 1956, Paris: Éditions Gallimard.)

Bakewell, S. (2016). *At the existentialist café: Freedom, being, and apricot cocktails*, Chapter 1: "Sir, what a horror, Existentialism!"

PART 1: Meaning

Week 2: The Human Search for Meaning

Tuesday, Sept 20, 2022

King, L. A., & Hicks, J. A. (2021). The science of meaning in life. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 72, 561-568.

Frankl, V. (1946). *Man's search for meaning*, Chapter entitled "Experiences in a Concentration Camp". NOTE: this chapter is really the majority of the book, and it's long, but I'd like you all to at least skim most of it, and ideally read it fully. It's a tough read, emotionally, but a real classic in the area of meaning, and definitely something you'll appreciate having read (if you haven't already).

Steve Heine book in prep Chapter 2, pp. 3-12 and pp. 35-44

Optional: Baumeister, R., & Von Hippel, W. (2020). Meaning and evolution: Why nature selected human minds to use meaning. *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture*.

Week 3: Meaning vs. Happiness (possible guest visitor: Prof Liz Dunn)

Tuesday, Sept. 27, 2022

Dwyer, Dunn, & Hershfield (2017). Cousins or conjoined twins: How different are meaning and happiness in everyday life? *Comprehensive Results in Social Psychology*, 2, 199-215.

Baumeister, R. F., Vohs, K. D., Aaker, J. L., & Garbinsky, E. N. (2013). Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8, 505-51

Bloom, P. (2021). *The Sweet Spot*, Chapter 5: "Meaning"

Optional: Kashdan, T. B., Biswas-Diener, R., & King, L. A. (2008). Reconsidering happiness: The costs of distinguishing between hedonics and eudaimonia. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3, 219-233.

Week 4: The self and meaning

Tuesday, Oct. 4, 2022

Schlegel, R., Hicks, J. A., Arndt, J., & King, L. A. (2009). Thine own self: True self accessibility and meaning in Life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96, 473-490.

Becker, Ernst. (1971). *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, Chapter 3: "The Distinctively Human"
[exact pages TBD]

Camus, A. (1942). *The Stranger* [novella, available for less than \$5 at <https://www.thriftbooks.com>]

Movie: *Wild* (2014). Dir: Jean-Marc Vallee; Written by Cheryl Strayed

Optional: Steve Heine book in prep Chapter 3

Week 5: Making Meaning with Self-Narrative [possible guest visitor: Prof Kate McLean, Western Washington University]

Tuesday, Oct. 11, 2022

Strawson, G. (2004). Against narrativity. *Ratio*, *XVII* (0034-0006).

McAdams, D. P. (2013). How actors, agents, and authors find meaning in life. In K. Markman et al. (Eds.), *The Psychology of Meaning*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Press.

Syed, M., & McLean, K. C. (invited revision). Who gets to live the good life? Master narratives, identity, and well-being within a marginalizing society. *Journal of Research in Personality*.

Optional: Dunlop, W. L., & Walker, L. J. (2013). The life story: Its development in relation to narration and personal identity. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, *37*, 235-247.

Part 2: The Void

Week 6: Existential Angst and Nihilism

Tuesday, Oct. 18, 2022

Yalom, I. (1980). *Existential Psychotherapy*, Chapter 10: Meaninglessness, pp. 419-460.

Costin, V., & Vignoles, V. L. (2019). Meaning is about mattering: Evaluating coherence, purpose, and existential mattering as precursors of meaning in life judgments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., & Greenberg, J. (2015). Thirty years of terror management theory: From genesis to revelation. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, *52*, 0065-2601.

Movie: *I Heart Huckabees* (2004). Directed by David O. Russell, Written by David O. Russell and Jeff Baena.

Optional: Yalom, I. (1989). *Love's Executioner*, Prologue and Chapter 1: "Love's Executioner", pp. 3-67.

Week 7: Free Will, Freedom, and Anxiety [Possible Guest Visitor Azim Shariff]

Tuesday, Oct. 25, 2022

Kirsch, A. (2020). Soren Kierkegaard's struggle with himself. *The New Yorker*, May 11, 2020.

Shariff, A. F., Schooler, J., & Vohs, K. D. (2008). The hazards of claiming to have solved the hard problem of free will. In J. Baer, J. C. Kaufman, & R. F. Baumeister (Eds.), *Are we free? Psychology and free will* (Oxford University Press).

Steve Heine book in prep, Chapter 5 pp. 24-54 (starting with the heading "Defending our Life Choices")

Week 8: Confronting the Absurd

Tuesday, Nov. 1, 2022

Camus, A. (1942). *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the Essay

Nagel, T. (1971). The absurd. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 68, 716-727.

Steve Heine book in prep, Chapter 4, "What is it like to experience the absurd?" (whole chapter).

Film: *Waiting for Godot* (2001). Dir: Michael Lindsay Hogg; Written by Samuel Beckett

Part 3: Transcendence

Week 9: Meaning within Death

Tuesday, Nov. 8, 2022

King, L. A., Hicks, J.A., Abdelkhalik, J. (2009). Death, life, scarcity, and value: An alternative approach to the meaning of death. *Psychological Science*, 20, 1459-1462.

Vess, M., Routledge, C., Landau, M. J., & Arndt, J. (2009). The dynamics of death and meaning: The effects of death-relevant cognitions and personal need for structure on perceptions of meaning in life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97, 728-744.

Thompson, E. (2015). *Waking, dreaming, being*. Chapter 9, "Dying: What happens when we die?"

Optional: Yalom, I. (2008). *Staring at the Sun*, Chapter 6: "Death awareness: A memoir".

Week 10: Myth making, Symbolism, and Religion [possible guest visitor: Profs Ara Norenzayan/Azim Shariff]

Tuesday, Nov. 15, 2022

Campbell, J. (1972). *Myths to Live By*, Chapter 1: “The impact of science on myth”.

Fromm, E. (1951). *The Forgotten Language*, Chapters 1 and 2: “Introduction” and “The Nature of Symbolic Language”.

Norenzayan, A., & Hansen, I. G. (2006). Belief in supernatural agents in the face of death. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32, 174-187.

Optional: Oishi, S., & Diener, E. (2014). Residents of poor nations have greater sense of meaning in life than residents of wealthy nations. *Psychological Science*, 25, 422-430.

Week 11: The Group Solution: Cults!

Tuesday, Nov. 22, 2022

Galanter, M. (1982). Cults and charismatic group psychology. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 139, 1539-1548.

Selected chapters from Festinger, L., Riecken, H., & Schacter, S. (1956). *When Prophecy Fails*. (TBD).

Becker, E. (1974). *The denial of death*. The Free Press. Chapter 7: “The spell cast by persons—The nexus of unfreedom.”

Film: *Fight Club* (1999). Dir: David Fincher, Written by Chuck Palahnuik

Optional: CBC Podcast: *Escaping Nxium* (2022). https://www.cbc.ca/listen/cbc-podcasts/436-escaping-nxium?cmp=DM_SEM_Listen_Titles.

Week 12: Transcendence Through Drugs: The New Science of Psychedelics

Tuesday, Nov. 29, 2022

Pollan, M. (2015). The trip treatment. *The New Yorker*, Feb. 9, 2015.

Timmermann, C., Kettner, H., Letheby, C., Roseman, L., Rosas, F. E., & Carhart-Harris, R. L. (2021). Psychedelics alter metaphysical beliefs. *Scientific Reports*, 11:22166.

Grof, S. (2000). *Psychology of the Future*, Chapter 8: “The Cosmic Game”.

Optional: Hartogssohn, I. (2018). The meaning-enhancing properties of psychedelics and their mediator role in psychedelic therapy, spirituality, and creativity. *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, 06. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnins.2018.00129/full>

Week 13: Is it possible to resolve existential angst (aka, Is meaning real?) [guest visitor: Ari Makridakis, UC Berkeley]

Tuesday, Dec. 5, 2022

Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass*, “Learning the Grammar of Animacy”, pp. 48-62.

Jung, C. J. (1952). *Synchronicity: An Acausal Principle*, “Chapter I: Exposition”, pp. 5-42.

Wulf, A. (2015). *The invention of nature: Alexander von Humboldt’s new world*. Vintage Books: UK. Chapter 19, “Poetry, science, and nature: Henry David Thoreau and Humboldt”.

Optional: Angell, R. (2014). This old man. *New Yorker*, Feb. 17, 2014, issue.

December 12, 2022: Final paper due by 5 pm; please email to me in word doc form.