

## DAVID JOPLING – Resources for Teaching *The Meaning of Life*

This presentation offers a few suggestions about how to teach a difficult and elusive topic, the meaning of life. It will cover primary and secondary readings, assignment design, discussion points, and philosophical resources.

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### THE MEANING OF LIFE

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#### Issues

- this presentation is based on a highly successful intro to phil course at York
- google it – 1.12 million hits
- problems with topic: nebulous, all-encompassing, full of gurus, know it alls, hustlers, sellers
- the question is part of Grade 12 course, located in Metaphysics unit
- where does the question fit in the world of philosophy? Metaphysics, ethics, history
- sub-topics: happiness, joy, death, suffering, pain, loss, wisdom, pleasure
- try for a balance of history of philosophy and contemporary work, western and eastern
- brief discussion in McGraw Hill Ryerson grade 12 textbook, and two good college-level anthologies
- what is rationale for teaching the question “What is the meaning of life? Why is this an important question anyways? Why bother? Some answers... A1: a fundamental practical question that affects you, that you can’t avoid or erase... A2: you already have an answer to it, or take a stand on it, embodied in the way you now live - even if you don’t know it... A3: somebody close to you might tell you that you are wasting your life, and you need to respond to him/her ... A4: you don’t want to wake up one day when it is too late only to discover that you have based your life on a mistake, an illusion, a false belief... A5: with this particular question, there are lots of gurus, metaphysical hustlers, know-it-all, and sophists – and they all want converts, and want you to buy into their systems uncritically – do you want to fall prey to them?... A6: it’s all about sex, drugs, music, getting your kicks – isn’t it?
- what is the point of teaching students this question? If you can’t learn the meaning of life by being taught it in a classroom, or by reading about it, then why bother? A1: Thinking about it and reading about it can be intrinsically rewarding... A2: students can pick up useful logical and philosophical and critical tools, useful conceptual distinctions, new angles... A3: learning to do philosophy can change people, can force

- them to revise their beliefs, question their assumptions – or give them support (e.g. Aristippus as the rebellious teenager’s philosophical hero)
- two problems in the ethics of teaching philosophy: a) problem of harming students with new, provocative, disturbing ideas, aka corrupting the youth, causing disenchantment; b) risk of proselytizing, guru-ship, intentional or unintentional dogmatism and paternalism
  - one limited solution: a balanced discussion of the pros and cons of philosophical positions, plus a reminder that there are no absolute and final answers, plus a Socratic disavowal of personal authority and expertise
  - how to present morally sensitive topics such as the meaning of life to students from widely different cultural, religious and moral backgrounds
  - differences between a philosophical and religious approach to the questions
  - ideal topic for multi-media resources, such as movies, songs, art, literature, poetry, drama
  - can science tell us anything about the meaning of life? Steven Weinberg (physicist): “The more the universe appears comprehensible, the more it appears pointless.” (The First Three Minutes). But see Einstein
  - applications of the question to everyday life: e.g., stoicism and physical suffering and pain of illness, disabilities; drugs and pleasure seeking; suicide, depression, feelings of hopelessness, and the meaning of life; the feeling of absurdity (e.g., Camus’ version of Sisyphus; Tolstoy’s crisis in his Confession; Pascal’s feelings of cosmic insignificance; Beckett’s Waiting for Godot)
  - interdisciplinary links (religious studies; literature; history; psychology; science)

### **Organizing the Topics**

- 3 basic versions of the question “What is the meaning of life?”
- i) Why does the universe exist? Why is there something and not nothing? Is there some meaning to it all?
- ii) Why do human beings exist? Are we here for some reason, or to serve some purpose?
- iii) What is the meaning of my life? Why do I exist? Is there some reason or purpose to my existing? If not, can my life still have meaning? Is it something I have to find, or do I make it up as I go along?
- 4 broad approaches to question iii):
- a) the theistic approach: the meaning of my life is found in the existence of a supreme being who gives me a purpose for existing, includes me as part of a larger plan
- b) the non-theistic approach: the meaning of life is found within/in terms of the natural universe, not beyond it in a transcendent supreme being... or, there is no objective or God-given meaning of life, rather, it is invented or made up by us...
- c) the “question the question approach”: the question “What is the meaning of life?” is ambiguous, conceptually odd, and perhaps misleading... questions of meaning make sense when applied to particular issues within life, but not when applied to life as a

whole... the feeling “nothing matters” is a failure to understand the logic of the concept “mattering” (see R.M. Hare’s essay in Klemke volume)

d) the skeptical approach: even if there is an answer to the question “What is the meaning of life?” we cannot know it, because a) our cognitive powers are too limited and b) our psychological make-up is incapable of actualizing it and embodying it  
- alternative starting-points from which to tackle the question: what is a meaningless life? What has to be taken away from life to render it more and more meaningless? How would we judge the worth of a life that is devoted exclusively to playing tiddlywinks, or exclusively to drugs?

- some secondary epistemic questions: Is the evaluation of the meaningfulness of a life entirely subjective and first-personal? If I have a strong conviction that my life is meaningful, am I right solely because it is my life, and my evaluation? Do I enjoy a kind of first-person privileged access? Or could I be mistaken? And could someone else override my evaluation? How reliable are sudden end-of-life realizations that one’s entire life had been based on a lie, a mistake or false ideals (as in the case of Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich)?

- below is a limited selection of some core topics, including readings

### **A Selection of Topics**

#### Stoicism and the Meaning of Life

- the meaning of life is found in identifying with the deterministic cosmos... Stoic distinction between things in my control vs things beyond my control... detachment and perfection of the soul; Stoic theory of the emotions... the Stoic sage... Stoic metaphysics; determinism and the sage’s identification with nature... common criticisms (a philosophy of sour grapes), misinterpretations, and objections to stoicism... rational-emotive therapy as a contemporary version of stoicism

- readings: Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Stockdale... Epictetus’ Handbook (aka Enchiridion) is a classic of Stoic thought - clearly written, short, some wonderful one-liners: “Do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well.” ... see also Stockdale’s “The World of Epictetus,” a story of how a top-gun US fighter pilot is shot down, imprisoned, and tortured during the Vietnam conflict - and how stoic principles saved his life

#### Epicureanism and the Meaning of Life

- the meaning of life is found in pleasure... Cyrenaic hedonism (Aristippus, hero to sex-drugs-rock-n-roll pleasure worshippers)... Epicurus’ life... sensual and reflective pleasures ... tranquility and ataraxia... seizing the moment... overcoming the fear of death ... the hedonic calculus... common misinterpretations and criticisms of hedonism...

- readings: Epicurus, de Botton... Epicurus' "Letter to Menoceanus" is a classic of Epicurean philosophy - short, well-written... de Botton's chapter is a witty, illustrated, and quite fun account of Epicureanism

Two Sages: Socrates and Lao Tzu

- how the lives of sages embody a stance to the question of the meaning of life
- Socratic wisdom as the disavowal of knowledge... Socratic questioning, irony... self-examination and care of soul... "The unexamined life is not worth living."
- Taoism: mysticism, the limits of logic and language, the ineffable Tao, yin/yang, the sage's inaction, the uncarved block
- readings: Plato's Apology, Lao Tzu's Tao de Ching

Religious Approaches to the Meaning of Life \*

- the meaning of life is to be found in non-rational faith... Tolstoy's autobiography Confession (reprinted in part in Klemke) documents a frightening existential crisis, a complete breakdown of meaning (see also Camus)... "I felt that what I was standing on had given way, that I had no foundation to stand on, that that which I lived by no longer existed, and that I had nothing to live by."... the counsel he received from priests, scientists and philosophers was empty, but the simple non-rational faith of Russian peasants saved him... a pantheist religion of unconditional life affirmation ... see also Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilyich
- other readings: Spinoza's Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect (first 5 pages) is quite accessible... Pascal's Pensées: "Kneel and you shall believe."...

Cosmic Insignificance and the Meaning of Life

- see T. Nagel's "Birth, Death and the Meaning of Life" on the irreconcilable clash between the subjective and objective points of view... very clear, well-written, well-argued
- see also T. Nagel's paper "The Absurd" (reprinted in Klemke); A. Camus's The Myth of Sisyphus; Sartre's Nausea; R.M. Hare "Nothing Matters" (in Klemke)

Existentialism and the Meaning of Life

- the meaning of life is invented by you, it is this-worldly, not God-given... atheistic existentialism: radical freedom, the groundlessness of existence... distinction between existence and essence... existential authenticity
- readings: Sartre's "Existentialism" from his Existentialism and Human Emotions is a good start (the first 20-30 pages): a famous public lecture, clearly written, with one good real life example of existential choice... see also Camus' The Stranger for a literary portrait of an existentialist anti-hero ("Nothing, nothing matters!")... see also V. Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning... music: "What's the Use?" By Phish (The Siket Disk)

The Nihilist Approach to the Meaning of Life

- life is utterly meaningless... see Schopenhauer's "On the Vanity of Existence" for an unrepentant nihilism that is so bleak it is comical... "We can regard our life as a uselessly disturbing episode in the blissful repose of nothingness.... Human existence must be a kind of error" ... Homework questions: a) is Schopenhauer's pessimism nothing more than a symptom of a serotonin disorder (as the psychiatrist P. Kramer suggests in Listening to Prozac)? b) is this philosophy practically and psychologically realizable?

- see also Dostoyevsky's Notes from Underground (first 40-50 pages)

### The Materialist Approach to the Meaning of Life

- there is no overarching general answer to the question "what is the meaning of life?" ... see A.J. Ayer's "The Meaning of Life," in which Ayer defends a materialist, atheist, and empiricist approach... some good Humean arguments against the concept of a divine plan and the argument from design... short, punchy, well-written, provocative... raises an excellent question: "How far should our judgement of the worth of a person's life be affected by the fact that we take it to be based upon an illusion?" ... Ayer discusses this in relation to the example of the nun who devotes her life to something that (according to Ayer) does not exist

### Self-Deception, Illusion and the Meaning of Life

- epistemic issues: is it possible to believe that one's life is meaningful, and yet be mistaken, deluded, or self-deceived? Could it be better to be deluded or self-deceived about the meaning of life? If there were an experience machine you could plug into to have any sequence of experiences you want (or, alternatively, a pill that would do the same thing), would you plug in? Would you plug in for life? Is this a meaningful life?

- see R. Nozick's "Happiness," which includes the Experience Machine thought experiment

- other resources: Plato's "The Simile of the Cave," from his The Republic; The Matrix... E. O'Neill's play The Iceman Cometh (about life-lies, pipe dreams, and other life-sustaining self-deceptions)... I. Yalom's clinical case history "Love's Executioner," a well-known psychiatrist's "cure" of a life-sustaining love obsession

### Death

- see T. Nagel's "Death," from his Mortal Questions, a clear, well-argued answer to the question "Is death the worst thing that can happen to us?" ... a popular essay topic in Phil 1100 at York University

- other resources: M. Ablom, "The Fourth Tuesday," from his Tuesdays with Morrie... J.P. Sartre's "The Wall," a powerful short story about the last minute reflections of a POW awaiting execution, who is then granted a last-minute reprieve... see also Heidegger's being-towards-death (Being and Time), or the relevant secondary literature... see also Spinoza's views on death and eternity in Ethics, or the relevant secondary literature

Eternity and the Meaning of Life

- see Nietzsche's "The Greatest Weight" in *The Gay Science* (aka *Joyful Wisdom*) for the concept of the eternal return/recurrence, and the moral and psychological reaction we have to finally understanding the eternal return (overwhelming despair or exhilaration)... Nietzsche's ideal: amor fati (love/acceptance of one's fate), or loving each moment unconditionally, eternalizing the moment, creative willing  
- other resources: *Groundhog Day*, for Bill Murray's comic version of the eternal return

### Selected Bibliography

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### Films and videos

This list was compiled on the basis of several dozen responses to a query on Philosophy (a philosophy listserv) about films that address the question of the meaning of life.

The Thought Gang, by Tibor Fischer (Minerva, UK): a philosophy teacher becomes a bank robber and reflects on the meaning of life.

Where the Green Ants Dream: Australian aborigines versus modern development, illustrates the cultural relativity of the question of the meaning of life.

Ikiru (To Live), by Kurosawa: described as a masterpiece on the subject.

Shadowlands: a Christian account of finitude and suffering.

Unforgiven: could be called "How to Philosophize with a Shotgun".

Dangerous Liaisons: on selfish and unselfish pleasures, and the value of different lives.

Robinson in Space: by P. Keiller, on post-modern vs Enlightenment worldviews.

Naragama bushiko (Ballad of Naragama): 1982, directed by S. Imamura

Smoking/No Smoking: by A. Resnais, 1993

Films by A. Kiarostami: T'am e guilass (Taste of Cherry) Iran, 1997; And Life Goes On;

Where is my friend's house? Through the Olive Trees

The White Balloon

Raise the Red Lantern

Equus

The Lover

The Virgin and the Gypsy

Babette's Feast

The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit

The Gods Must be Crazy

The Mission

Lust for Life

Blue

Pascali's Island

The Seventh Seal: by I. Bergman

The Sacrifice: by Tarkovsky

Nuridsany

The Sheltering Sky: by Bertolucci

Mrs. Dalloway

Ballad of the Sad Café

The Heart of the Matter

The Fisher King

Love and Death (Woody Allen)

Wings of Desire

The Unbearable Lightness of Being

The Plague

The Rapture

Big Bang

A Woman's Tale

The End of Violence

Microcosms: 1996, by C.

### Sample Essay and Test Questions

1. You are Hollywood's one and only philosophical screenplay writer. Sometimes you go by the title "conceptual designer." You are hired by MGM to write two two-page dialogues, which might serve as models for a full-length, full-budget film on the order of American Beauty. The first dialogue is between Epicurus and Ms. B. The second dialogue is between Epicurus and Mr. C.

Ms. B: 35, married, no kids, Vice President of a large national bank. A success. She is living the good life. She has it all: exciting career, massive salary, huge mansion in

Forest Hill, 3 luxury cars plus a Porsche 911, a multi-million dollar “cottage” on the most desirable lake in the Muskokas, a 5-bedroom chalet in Whistler, a condo in Bermuda, unlimited access to the company’s private jet, huge expense account, dinners at the finest restaurants. Last week alone she dropped \$35,000 on a bathroom renovation. She has little time for all these luxuries: the occasional weekend, a 2-week break in the summer. She has no close friends: no time. No time to cook or clean. She worries about her finances, about making the mortgage payments, about her line of credit. She works hard to maintain her lifestyle. Up at 5AM, at work by 7AM, back home by 9PM; long hours travelling. Most Saturdays are taken up with work. Her job is competitive, cut-throat, exhausting, anxiety-provoking. She is only as good as her last deal. If she does not perform, she can be let go at a moment’s notice. There are hundreds behind her who would give their left arm for her job. She believes she is living the good life. She tells herself that anxiety, stress, and the absence of free time are the price of leading the good life. Introduce her to Epicurus and construct a dialogue between them about the good life. What would he say about her life, what might he recommend, and what might she say in response. Keep in mind that she thinks philosophy is hogwash.

Mr.C: 28, single, no kids, under/unemployed construction worker, occasional car wash worker, high school drop out. He has nothing: lives in a small rent-subsidized apartment, no car, no possessions, no savings, no money for going out, no long term plans. He owns a mattress, a TV with 4 working channels, a few pots and pans. He has lots of time on his hands, which he spends by watching soap operas and sleeping. Often bored. No close friends. He envies people like Ms.B. He too “wants it all.” He is bombarded by images of the good life: billboards with pictures of Bermuda, TV commercials for \$90,000 cars, newspaper ads for cruises and \$25,000 watches, beer ads depicting happy fun-loving people. He is constantly reminded by these of how little he has. He longs for these things. He is bitter, resentful: he feels he is being left behind in the race of life. Life, he says, is unfair. He is anxious about his finances, when the next cheque will come in. He thinks he would be happy if he had it all. Introduce him to Epicurus and construct a dialogue between them about the good life. What would he say about his life, what might he recommend, and what might Mr. C say in response. Mr.C thinks philosophy is hogwash.

2. Imagine the following scenario, which could happen to anyone. You are at your doctor’s office, waiting to get the results from some fairly routine tests. You feel fine. The doctor comes in and warns you to brace yourself. The tests have shown that you have a chronic, degenerative, and potentially life-threatening disease. It has no known cure. It will be painful. Your life, she says, will never be the same. You will need painful treatments and medications, your lifestyle and habits will have to change, you will need to scale down all your plans and goals, and you will need to get your things in order just in case the worst happens.



After discussing treatment options, prognoses, symptoms, causes, and several other medical issues, the doctor offers a parting word of advice: "Do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well."

Question: Could her advice be helpful to you? If so, why? If not, why not?

(To explain her somewhat cryptic utterance, the doctor tells you that your disease is a part of nature, and that nature as a whole is perfect. She says that you should try to view nature – and yourself in it – as objectively as possible. The more you are able to do this, she says, the more you will be able to identify with the inevitable course of events, and overcome the unrealistic wish that things be otherwise. She says that to make your will and your desires conform to nature, you must start with small things and slowly work upwards.)

3. Can your life be meaningful if it is based on a massive and comprehensive illusion or deception about your real condition? If you are plugged into the Experience Machine or the Matrix, or are the victim of the evil demon, can your life be meaningful? Is it inferior to a life based on the truth? Is it a wasted life? Discuss with Nozick.

4. Can your life be meaningful if it is based on an illusion, deception or fiction about the nature of reality? If you are a devout believer in God, and God does not exist, then can your life be meaningful? Is the life of a nun inferior to a life based on the truth? Is it a wasted life? Discuss with Ayer.

5. Can your life be meaningful if it is based on an existentially lucid and anguishing awareness of the groundlessness of all values, and the absence of any transcendent source of meaning? If you are an authentic existentialist, can you live a meaningful life without comforting illusions and self-deceptions? Is it inferior to a life based on positive illusions? Discuss with Sartre.

6. Can your life be meaningful if nothing of you remains 500 years – or 500 million years – after your death? If time is that which reduces everything to nothingness, is your feeling of living a meaningful life right now an illusion? Is it possible to reconcile yourself to the destructiveness of time? Discuss with Schopenhauer.

7. Can your life still be meaningful if it is intrinsically absurd? That is, can your life be meaningful if there is an irreconcilable conflict between the seriousness with which you take your life, and the ever-present possibility of radical doubt about the values that underlie that seriousness (i.e., a conflict between the subjective view and the objective view)? Discuss with Nagel.

8. Is death the worst thing that can happen to you? Is it worse than being swindled by the evil demon? Discuss with Nagel.

9. Sartre claims that existentialism is a philosophy of optimistic toughness. It is a philosophy that enables us to give meaning to life, despite the objective meaninglessness of our situation and the feelings of despair we must endure. Is this plausible? Is it psychologically realistic? Do we have what it takes to embrace and affirm the groundlessness of existence? Are we capable of living this “heroism of disillusionment”?

10. For Plato, Spinoza, and Tolstoy, being in touch with some transcendent and timeless reality (Plato: the Form of the Good; Spinoza: God or Nature; Tolstoy: God) is an essential condition for finding meaning in life. Without such contact, life is characterized by illusion (as in Plato’s cave), the pursuit of hollow and futile life-ideals (as in Spinoza’s search), and drifting and despair (as in Tolstoy). Is it plausible to claim that the meaning of life can be had only through contact with some transcendent reality? Is this too exclusive? That is, does it set the bar too high for something - namely, meaningfulness - that (one would think) ought to be accessible to everyone? Does it demand too much of people - that is, too much of a conversion, too much of a commitment, too much of a break with one’s former life?

11. Spinoza suggests that there is great risk involved in the search for a supreme and lasting joy: a great deal of adaptive assumptions have to be put on hold, and there is no guarantee at the outset that one will be successful in one’s search... do you agree? Does Spinoza’s suggestion also apply to the other philosophies we have studied in this course - namely, Stoicism, Epicureanism

- \* The Existence of a Supreme Being
- ontological argument (Anselm)
- cosmological argument
- deism
- atheism
- agnosticism
- the wager argument (Pascal)
- E. Nagel, “An atheist’s critique of belief in God”
- F. Nietzsche, “God is Dead”