The Meaning of Life: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and More
PHI 91
Frederick M. Dolan

Required Books:


Required Film:

Available streaming at Amazon.

Grade Options and Requirements:

No Grade Requested (NGR): No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.

Credit/No Credit (CR/NC): Students must attend at least 80% of class sessions.

Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass): Students must attend at least 80% of class sessions and submit a written reflection of around 800-1000 words (or longer) focused on a reasonably precise question or problem explored in the course.

Tentative Weekly Outline:

**Week 1: Introduction: the big picture.**
There’s no assigned reading for the first meeting. I’ll talk about how the philosophical method can be applied to the question of the meaning of life, and explain two approaches to the problem: Externalism and Internalism.

**Week 2: Questioning the value of life.**
Is there a meaning of life? Maybe life is pointless, absurd, or evil.

**Week 3: From the meaning of life to the meaning of death.**
What is the significance of mortality? How should we think about living with death?
Shelly Kagan, selections from *Death* (on Canvas).
Phillip Larkin, “Aubade” (on Canvas).

**Week 4: An Externalist answer: Kierkegaard.**
Life offers us a stark choice between two alternatives: despair and inauthenticity versus faith and authenticity.
*Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling*: Preface, Attunement, Speech in Praise of Abraham, Preamble from the Heart.

**Week 5: An Externalist answer: Kierkegaard (continued).**
The moral ambiguities of the authentic life.
*Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling*: Problema I-III, Epilogue.

**Week 6: An Internalist answer: Nietzsche.**
Passive nihilism, active nihilism, and the “death” of God.
—. *Beyond Good and Evil*, §§ 199-201, 257-265.

**Week 7: An Internalist answer: Nietzsche (continued).**
Life as a work of art: the “free spirit.”
—. *Beyond Good and Evil*, §§ 24-44, 268-70, 272-73, 284, 287, 292.
Wallace Stevens, “Sunday Morning” (on Canvas).

**Week 8: Meaning, morality, and pleasure.**
The place of meaning in life as a whole.

**Week 9: Filming meaning.**
How to have a meaningful conversation about the meaning of life.

**Week 10: The ultimate question.**
Why is there something rather than nothing? Living with vital but unanswerable questions.
Derek Parfit, “Why Anything? Why This?” (on Canvas).