

**The McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts  
Duquesne University  
Spring 2011**

**Basic Philosophical Questions: The Meanings of Life—Ancient Visions**  
**UCOR 132-62**  
**T 6:00—8:40 PM**  
**223 COLLGH**

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**What Is This Course About?**

This course is a quest to decide what the meaning of our lives should be, in critical dialogue with the visions of a meaningful life given by great books of the ancient world. Reading and discussing these books will help us answer for ourselves: What does it mean for us to live a meaningful life, a life worth living? Nothing less than our souls and the quality of our lives are at stake in this inquiry.

**How Does This Course Tie In To What Am I Doing Studying the Liberal Arts?**

The liberal arts are studies that mean to give us liberty—freedom. Yet the presupposition of studying the liberal arts in order to attain freedom is that too often we live lives that are not free. The meaning and purpose of our lives—our thoughts, actions, and feelings—are often not our own. We think, act, and feel the ways that we have been taught to think, act, and feel by our culture, parents, friends, media, nation, religion, and schools. In a liberal arts education we learn to reflect critically on the meanings of life that we have been given so that we can have the freedom to make a decision about whether we shall embrace the particular vision of the meaning and purpose of life we have inherited or whether we will search out a different meaning and purpose to our life. Either way, our thinking, feeling, and acting become our own. We become more free to choose our life path.

But we need guides in the search for a meaningful path on which to live. These guides will not give answers, but they will offer rich resources to enter into dialogue with to answer the question of what a meaningful life looks like for us. Hence our use of great books in our journey.

**How Does “The Meanings of Life: Ancient Visions” Fit Into Studying Philosophy Generally?**

Philosophy is a conversation, based on giving reasons, about the truth or falsity of beliefs about what meanings our lives should have. What does this mean?

A great philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, said that “in the world, we are condemned to meaning.” The presupposition of philosophy is that we are all always already living lives that

are meaningful and have a purpose. We live for honor, fame, pleasure, money, power, status, justice, freedom, love, country, or God—and these are only some of the purposes or meanings that shape our lives.

Philosophy is the branch of the liberal arts that critically reflects on the meanings our lives should have if they are to be good, true, and authentic lives. It starts with rationally analyzing the meaning and purpose our lives currently have, and it gives us a chance to decide what meanings our lives should have if we want to live good, true, and authentic lives. I may discover that I am living to enjoy bodily pleasures—food, sex, and drink—and in the course of reflecting on this meaning I may begin to wonder if this kind of life actually leads to the most happiness and joy in life? So another famous philosopher, Socrates, said that “This discourse (philosophy) is not about just anything, but is about how to live.”

The means by which we ponder the meaning of life in philosophy is rational conversation. If someone says that we should live for bodily pleasure, then we start wondering what reasons can be given for and against this belief. Is the pursuit of bodily pleasure really the best meaning and purpose for our life? What is gained and lost in such a life? What are the good and bad consequences of such a life? Is a human being only a body? Are there non-bodily pleasures we want to pursue? And so on.

We will therefore have a rational conversation about the strengths and weaknesses in pictures of the meaning and purpose of life in great works of literature and philosophy of the ancient world. Ideas of living for glory, for nation, for emotional tranquility, for beauty, for virtue, for pleasure, and for God will be examined, embraced, or rejected.

### **How Does This Course Fit Into Duquesne’s Mission?**

In the Christian and Catholic tradition, the Holy Spirit is the Person of the Trinity who leads the world into all truth so that the world can enjoy newness of life. This course will seek knowledge of the human condition and human experience through discussing ideas proposed by ancient writers and philosophers about the human condition and experience so that we can be led deeper into truth and deeper into joyful life. We will pay especial attention to issues and questions of faith and reason: how do the ideas of ancient philosophy and epic about truth, selfhood, and the meaning of life harmonize or conflict with the Christian tradition’s views about these subjects?

### **What Is My Main Goal In This Class?**

The main goal of this course is for you to become a more autonomous and happy person through participating in the rational conversation to develop a more meaningful life. In this class we will read great books or works by Homer, Sappho, Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Epicurus, Augustine to wrestle with their ideas about how to live a meaningful life. The ultimate goal of wrestling with these texts is for you to come to a more coherent and satisfying account for yourself of how your life should be lived if it is to be a life worth living.

### **What Is Expected Of Me And How Will I Be Rewarded For Meeting These Expectations?**

The expectation is that you will energetically embrace the journey to live a more meaningful life by participating in rational conversation about the visions of the meaning and purpose of life in

the great books we will study. You will be rewarded when you pursue and achieve this goal. Therefore:

- 1) You have a chance to earn up to 13 points by bringing your response paper to class.
- 2) You have the chance to earn up to 13 points by coming to class each day and participating energetically in discussion. You do not win points simply by attending.
- 3) You can earn up to 4 points (1 point each time) by coming to office hours to further discuss the material.
- 4) You can earn up to 3 points (1 point each lecture) for every extra credit philosophy lecture which you attend and of which you write a one-page summary due on the last day of class. (Lectures will be announced in class and by e-mail.)
- 5) You have the chance to earn up to 30 points (10 points each debate) by participating intelligently and energetically in debates.
- 6) You will have the chance to earn up to 10 points on your 5 page "Epistle"
- 7) You will have the chance to earn 30 points on your 5 page "Treatise"
- 8) The total possible points is 103. Final grades will be based on the following scale:
  - i. A (94 points and above)
  - ii. A- (90-93 points)
  - iii. B+ (87-89 points)
  - iv. B (84-86 points)
  - v. B- (80-83 points)
  - vi. C+ (77-79 points)
  - vii. C (74-76 points)
  - viii. C- (70-73 points)
  - ix. D+ (67-69 points)
  - x. D (64-66 points)
  - xi. D- (60-63 points)
  - xii. F (59 points or below)

Classroom space is also a space where the following expectations will make our class experience more pleasant:

- 1) Please enjoy beverages discretely, but eat snacks and meals before you come to class.
- 2) Please finish and dispose of gum or tobacco products before you come to class.
- 3) Please create a focused learning space by turning off cell phones and all electronic devices and placing them in pockets or backpacks with sound and vibrate off.
- 4) Please have your desk clear other than your text and your notebook.
- 5) Please practice civility, politeness, and charitability. It is expected that students will bring strong convictions to the class debate. It is therefore of the utmost importance that students practice generous listening and conversation. Belittling comments or angry outbursts will not be tolerated. Try sympathetically to understand what the interlocutor is saying, which does not necessarily entail agreeing with him or her.
- 6) Please sit up and stay alert. What one does with one's body one does with one's soul. Slouching or sleeping of the body implies slouching or sleeping of the soul. If you need help staying alert, bring a caffeinated beverage to help you stay awake and alert.

### **How Will My Professor Help Me Achieve These Goals and Expectations?**

I am here to do everything in my power to help you succeed. You can expect me to help initiate you into the practice and substance of rational conversation about visions of the meanings of life as displayed in the texts of ancient philosophy and literature. I will do my best to model philosophical conversation in how I speak with you and evaluate you. I will encourage and praise you when you are engaging in philosophical conversation in your speaking and writing, and I will try to guide you back on the path when you are doing something different from philosophical conversation. I will also do my best to model what it means to be a student by learning with you and from you. I am available to meet with you during office hours and other times in the week. I am on campus almost every day. You can stop by with or without an appointment (though I recommend appointments) to ask questions and continue conversations begun in class. You are also welcome to call me at home at night (until 9 PM) or on weekends if you have a question that cannot wait until the next school day.

### **What Is A Response Paper? (Or, How Am I Going to Do All this Reading?!?)**

Writing a daily response paper will help you understand the reading and come prepared to discuss it. It will also help you read the text in an easier, more focused way. In a class with a good amount of reading like this one, we cannot learn everything there is to know about every text we read. We have to read intensely and with a question in mind, or we will get lost. You have a daily prompt question that you will try to answer in a half- to one-page typed essay. These will not be graded, but will be checked to see that they have been completed. After you answer the question, you will want to ask how the answer affects our lives. This is the So What part of the question.

Reading is not about obsessively reading every word on every page—it is about coming to the text with a particular question, and letting the text speak an answer to you as a kind of response to the question you ask. Reading in this way—instead of just reading all the words on all the pages with the general and vague goal of “understanding the text”—is more enjoyable and rewarding, and perhaps in a way easier. Eventually you will read texts with your own questions in mind. In this class we are asking: “What is the vision of the meaning of life in this text?” I also have given you more specific questions to guide your reading. Please read in this focused way, and you will be much less overwhelmed with the admittedly large number of “pages”.

### **What Are the Debates?**

The class will be split into two debate teams, each of which will be responsible for arguing for one side of the debate question. Anonymous votes will determine the winners. Participation of all involved is required.

### **What is the Epistle I Have To Write?**

You will pretend to be the author of one of the texts we have read in the first half of the semester who is writing to another author of a different text. You will try to convince your recipient that your position is superior to his or hers. The epistle should be five double-spaced pages.

### **What is the Treatise I Have To Write?**

Having had a test run in making an argument in writing your epistle, you can now write a brief 5-7 page treatise arguing for the superiority of the meaning of life you find most compelling, which may or may not have been covered in the class, in dialogue with at least two other visions of the meaning of life we have studied this term. You will try to explain to readers what your vision of the meaning of life is and why it is superior to other visions on offer.

### **What Do I Need To Know About Plagiarism and Cheating?**

Your work has to be your own. Cheating on any assignment will mean failure of the course and possible expulsion from the university. A commitment to honesty is crucial in philosophy, where the goal is for you to deepen your own wisdom about how you will live a meaningful life. Further questions can be answered by going to <http://www.studentlife.duq.edu/handbooksec5.html>. If you do not know what cheating or plagiarism are, please come speak to me *before* you turn in work.

### **Will I Use Blackboard And E-Mail?**

We will not use Blackboard, but we will use e-mail. You are welcome to e-mail me with questions. Please check first, however, to see if your question is answered on the syllabus.

### **What If I Need Special Assistance?**

If you have a learning disability or a chronic mental or physical health condition, or a childcare or family situation, please speak with me immediately and contact Special Student Services at once at x6657 or by going to 309 Union to provide documentation. I am happy to make life as easy as possible while still ensuring that you complete the requirements of the course. If there is something else I can do to help you succeed, please speak with me the first week of the course.

### **What Books Should I Buy?**

Homer, *Iliad*, tr. R. Fagles (Penguin, 1998)

*Greek Lyric Poetry*, tr. S. Santos (Norton, 2005)

Thucydides, *On Justice, Power, and Human Nature: The Essence of Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War*, tr. P. Woodruff (Hackett, 1993)

Plato, *Symposium*, tr. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff (Hackett, 1989)

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. T. Irwin (Hackett, 1985)

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, tr. G.M.A. Grube (Hackett, 1983)

Epicurus, *The Epicurus Reader*, tr. B. Inwood and L. Gerson (Hackett, 1994)

Augustine, *Confessions*, tr. H. Chadwick (Oxford, 1991)

### **What Are the Daily Assignments?**

Jan. 11—Syllabus and Introductions

Jan. 18—Homer's *Iliad*, Books 1-12

*Response Questions:* What are Achilles and Agamemnon really fighting over?

What does Homer think of the Trojans?

Is war ever a good thing? A moral thing even?

Jan. 25—Homer, *Iliad*, Books 13-24

*Response Questions:* What role do the gods have in Homer's world?

What is glory, and why is it important?

Did Achilles make the right choice to pursue glory?

- Feb. 1—Poetry of Sappho in *Greek Lyric Poetry*, tr. S. Santos  
*Response Question:* How does Sappho's vision of happiness contrast with Homer's?  
 Selections from Thucydides, *On Justice*, etc.  
*Response Question:* What is the relationship between power and right and wrong?
- Feb. 8—**Debate #1: Glory or Ordinary Life and Love?**  
**\*\*\*Drafts of Epistles Due Today—Optional\*\*\***
- Feb. 15—Plato, *Symposium*  
*Response Question:* Why do we look at beautiful things in the world?  
 What is the goal of life as it is related to knowledge?  
**\*\*\*Epistles are Due Today!\*\*\***
- Feb. 22—Aristotle, *Ethics*, Book 1-5  
*Response Questions:* What is happiness?  
 What is bravery? What is bravery not?  
 What is generosity? How can it be practiced?  
 What is justice? What are the different kinds?
- March 1—Spring Break
- March 8—Aristotle, *Ethics*, Book 6-10  
*Response Questions:* Why is friendship a good? What kinds of friendship are there?  
 What is the point of thinking/contemplation
- March 15—**Debate #2: Contemplation of Ideas or Public Life/Life in Service to Nation?**
- March 22—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Books 1-5  
*Response Question:* How can we stop suffering from resentment?
- March 29—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Books 6-10  
*Response Question:* What is tranquility, and why is it a good thing?
- April 5—Epicurus, Selections  
*Response Question:* What does Epicurus mean by pleasure?
- April 12—Augustine, *Confessions*  
*Response Question:* Why does Augustine use such erotic and romantic language to  
 describe the proper relationship (his and ours) with God?  
**\*\*\*Drafts of Treatises Due Today—Optional\*\*\***
- April 19—**Debate #3: Pleasure as Tranquility or Passion for God?**
- April 26—**\*\*\*Treatises are Due Today!\*\*\***