

## *Philosophy 235: Meaning of Life*

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<http://meaningoflife.cherkasova.org/>

### *Class Requirements:*

Students keep a folder containing all completed assignments marked with his/ her name, date, and assignment title. Students bring their folders to each class for discussion and review. Folders are collected and graded several times throughout the semester. All completed work, graded and ungraded, is kept in the folder. At the end of the course students submit a *Portfolio of their best work* revised throughout the semester.

### *Meaning of Life (MoL) Portfolio will contain:*

- ✓ MoL Profile (10%): students answer questions about their life goals, ideals, and values
- ✓ Collection of MoL questions and quotes (15%): students share their impressions of the texts and discuss memorable passages
- ✓ Reflection Papers (40%): in-depth, engaged exploration of a text or a key idea of the course
- ✓ Crisis of Meaning Interview (25%): students interview a friend, family member, or colleague about a turning point in their life

### *Meaning of Life Profile*

The initial profile is due early in the semester (3 points) and the revised and polished final version should be included in your portfolio (7 points). Submit a sketch of your MoL Profile. Respond to each question with three or four well-written sentences. If you cannot give an answer to a question, explain why.

Throughout the semester: save your initial Profile; create a document for additions and revisions; add to your profile, revise and polish it; choose 3 or 4 texts from the course which either affirm or challenge your initial answers; take note of relevant quotations and class discussions. Think about other questions that would make the profile more complete.

When you submit your course portfolio, your MoL Profile must include: 1) the original profile; 2) two additional questions with answers; 3) revised/expanded answers to each question with textual references (at least one direct quote per question)

### *Profile Questions:*

1. What does happiness mean to you?
2. A truly fulfilling, beautiful life must include...
3. Do you agree with the idea that people are fully responsible for where they end up in life? Why or why not?
4. Where would you like to see yourself in about 10 years (comment on whatever is relevant to your self-image: relationships, personal accomplishments, social status, emotional state, profession, finances, geographical location, etc.)

## *Collection of Questions and Quotes*

Create a document for quotes and questions and keep adding to it throughout the semester. Bring your collection of quotes to each class. For each text we study, enter at least two quotations (with full reference) and two questions. An entry must include: Author and/or Title of the Book; two direct quotations followed by chapter or page number; two questions which either refer directly to a quote or to the text as a whole.

A sample entry:

### Ecclesiastes.

1. “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had labored to do: and behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.” (Eccl., 2. 11);  
“As he came forth of his mother’s womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand.” (Eccl., 5.15)

What is the point of all human effort and labor if we are going to die?

2. “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to man of understanding, nor yet favour to man of skill; but time and chance happens to them all.” (Eccl., 9.11)

Will virtue, good works, and skill be duly rewarded?

3. “For man also knows not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them.” (Eccl., 9.12)

Is man the master of his destiny?

## *Reflection papers*

Reflection essay is a thoughtful, engaged, well-written exploration of a text or a key idea of the course. It may be written in any style as long as it demonstrates mastery of the material and reflects the depth and complexity of the discussed texts. Each reflection essay should include at least one direct quotation. Comparisons between texts, references to contemporary issues, and personal observations are encouraged. Illustrations and links to outside sources are also welcome. The best reflections will be revised and published on the website. Essay length: 250 words minimum, no max. An example of a successful reflection essay can be found here:

<http://meaningoflife.cherkasova.org/striving-or-letting-go/>

## *Crisis of Meaning Interview*

This assignment carries significant weight in your final grade. Please plan ahead and give yourself sufficient time to schedule, conduct, transcribe, and edit the interview.

### *Interview Prompt*

In order to conduct a successful CM interview you must first think about what it means to have a crisis of meaning. In this course, we define crisis of meaning as

- ❖ a crucial stage or turning point in someone's life characterized by a loss of purpose, feeling of pointlessness, rejection of values once taken for granted, or shattering of a familiar self-image. A crisis of meaning may be triggered by a traumatic event (e.g. injury), by a happy event (e.g. landing your dream job), or by a seemingly insignificant, mundane situation (e.g. a random conversation on a subway or a friend's passing comment). CM may or may not bring about changes in one's lifestyle, yet in all cases it involves a period of intense introspection and searching.

Interview someone (or have someone interview you<sup>1</sup>) about CM *with particular emphasis* on 1) what the "crisis event" was 2) how this person confronted meaninglessness/doubt/strife 3) how this person *lived through/recovered from* this event 4) what sorts of *re-evaluation* marks a difference in the person before and after the event?

Turn these 4 points into interview questions tailored to the person's particular situation. Over the course of the interview, add at least 3 more questions directly related to the person's story.

*Important:* this assignment is about stories of recovery from crisis; there should be a crisis-event but also a *narrative of recovery* –reconciliation, personal growth, deepened self-awareness, some indication of overcoming the crisis. In short, your interview should not be about spiraling deeper and deeper into meaninglessness, it should feature a person "on the way up and out."

*Ethical Considerations:* Choosing the right person to interview and the proper topic is the key. Please use your discretion when choosing a topic and approaching your potential interviewee with the chosen topic. Just because someone "has been through a lot" and seems to be doing fine does not mean that they are willing to share their story. Make sure the person you interview is comfortable talking about a particular event in his/her life. You should be very clear about the purpose of the interview and let the interviewee know that if he/she wants to delete any part or edit later he/she will have that option.

Please let me know if you would like to be partnered up with someone in MoL class for this assignment. If you have a good candidate for an interview outside of class, talk to that person first. If no one comes to mind and/or you would like to tell your own story, working with a classmate could be an excellent option.

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<sup>1</sup> This option is justified only if you want to share your own CM story. In this case, you will still be responsible for all the questions, recording, transcribing and editing of the interview, as well as writing the intro and concluding paragraphs.

### *Examples of events that may trigger a crisis of meaning*

Changing a major  
Moving to a new place  
Losing a house/foreclosure/being homeless  
Getting into a car accident  
Being arrested  
Confronting a sexual identity issue  
Experiencing a divorce/breakup  
Putting down/the loss of a pet  
Major accomplishment/ pressure of success  
Relationship pressures/ conflicts  
Bad drug experience  
Betrayal of a friend/ lover  
Chronic illness/ disability  
Mental health issue

### *Etiquette & Tips*

As part of this assignment you may be called upon to handle a potentially difficult, revealing story. You need to be able to listen carefully, respond to non-verbal cues, be mindful of signs of discomfort, and remain attentive and respectful at all times. Here are some useful tips adapted from

<http://www.legacyproject.org/guides/lifeinttips.html>

- During an interview, ask questions slowly, giving the person time to answer.
- You can use some “closed” questions (which prompt a respondent to give only a “yes” or “no” answer), but most should be “open” questions like: Tell me about...; Describe...; What was it like when...?; In what ways...?; Why...?; and How...?
- Start with easy, friendly questions and work your way up to more difficult or sensitive questions.
- Listen carefully to what the person says; don’t interrupt or correct.
- As you listen to answers, other questions will come to mind. Asking follow-up questions will enhance your conversation.
- If someone is talking about an unhappy or painful experience, show them empathetic understanding and compassion. If the person doesn’t want to talk about something, go to the next question.
- Expect moments of silence or emotion. A person’s life is important and a meaningful conversation is bound to have emotional gravity.
- Do not forget to thank the person you’ve interviewed. Let them know you value their time and their willingness to share their story. You may send them a thank you note and even a copy of the interview (for corrections and additions).

## *Interview stages and due dates*

Identify the issue and the person to interview. Contact the person, explain the assignment and schedule the interview.

**Mid-semester**            Submit interview outline describing the theme and listing your questions

Conduct the interview and record it. Transcribe the interview; show it to the interviewee, if this is what you agreed upon. Proof-read and edit the interview; write introductory and concluding paragraphs.

**End of semester**        Submit edited interview as part of your course portfolio

## *Assessment*

The interview will be assessed based on

- Understanding, originality, and depth: clear focus on a crisis of meaning (see CM definition); interesting, open-ended questions conducive to a meaningful conversation; respect for the interviewee and his/her story (see “Etiquette”); well-planned interview process.
- Formal requirements: minimum 7 questions (4 required and at least 3 optional); all core questions should be open-ended (requiring a more complex answer than “yes” or “no”); the final version must include a short paragraph introducing the person you interviewed, the interview itself, and two concluding paragraphs relating the interview to some of the themes or ideas introduced in MoL course.
- Quality of writing: thorough organization of the material; well-chosen, well-integrated questions; clear writing, no spelling mistakes or grammatical errors.

## *Extra-curricular*

You may use this assignment as a basis for a larger project. For instance, you may participate in the “Listen To A Life Contest,” get your story published online and even win a prize.

<http://www.legacyproject.org/contests/lta.html>