

2021 Fall WKU - RELS 242-701: The Meaning of Life: Atheism to Zen – Syllabus - DRAFT

Instructor: Paul Fischer

Office: ~~Cherry Hall 308~~ Student hours: T/Th 11-12 noon on Zoom (link is on Blackboard – Student hours)

Email: paul.fischer@wku.edu (please put “RELS 242” in the subject line of emails to me)

Class times: T/Th 9.35-10.55 on Zoom (link is on Blackboard – Zoom class): Attendance is not required for this class.

Course description:

This is a survey of some of the seminal ways that humans have used for giving ultimate meaning to their lives. These pursuits have informed global intellectual history across a variety of cultures over the past three millennia. These goals are important aspects of global cultural history and are thus relevant in our increasingly connected world. But, while certainly applicable to modern life, they necessarily grew out of specific contexts. For this reason, we will analyze these paradigms on both local and global scales. In this course we consider these influential theories through readings of both primary and secondary sources.

This course fulfills the Colonnade / Connections / Local to Global requirement.

Course goals:

To cultivate awareness of and appreciation for beauty, goodness, and truth; in particular, the *beauty* within global cultures and its effect on local-to-global social harmony, as well as on individual creativity and happiness; the *goodness* of open-mindedness and adequate ethical paradigms; and the *truth* manifested by reason and evidence, critical thinking, information literacy, and unbiased rhetoric.

Course methodology:

This course uses several readings to understand the 12 topics (and their goals) listed below. These readings span most of recorded history, and include a global diversity of viewpoints, from the Chinese naturalist Xunzi (c.250bce), to the Greek Stoic Epictetus (c.100ce), to the British physicist David Deutsch (2011). The most important part of the course is the interface between you and these thinkers, between your current understanding of the world and the worldviews articulated in these writings. Reading Questions (RQs) are provided to help you analyze and make sense of the readings; Written Participation Questions (WPQs) are asked in class to allow you to engage with the readings individually and (usually) subjectively; and the Colonnade assignment is an opportunity to tie several of the readings together in a creative way.

Grades:

Your grade derives from in-class topic quizzes (60%), written participation assignments (20%), and one 1-page (single-spaced) Colonnade assignment (20%). Given the large size of this Colonnade course, the instructor's primary feedback to you is in the proactive form of the Reading Questions, for the readings. See the “Grading details” section below for additional detail. I reserve the right to add or subtract points based on particularly good or bad classroom participation. (If you are shy, you can chat with me during my office hours.)

Topics:

1. Religion (God); 2. Morality (goodness); 3. Rhetoric (truth); 4. Hedonism (pleasure); 5. Amoralism (pluralism); 6. Mysticism (nonduality); 7. Atheism (rationalism); 8. Naturalism (nature); 9. Stoicism (detachment); 10. Virtuosity (groove); 11. Fallibilism (science); 12. Zen (suchness)

Texts:

Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Moral Fool: A Case for Amoralism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). [187pgs]

Edward Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try: The Art and Science of Spontaneity* (New York: Crown, 2014). [224pgs]

The WKU Library has eBook copies of both books, the Moeller book has unlimited access, the Slingerland book has limited access.

All other readings are in PDF form on Blackboard - Content.

* ~~Please print out all PDF readings and bring the relevant reading to class~~ (see the reading schedule below).

Please note: This is a reading and lecture course; if you dislike reading or coming to class, you may want to reconsider taking it. Also, laptops, tablets, and cellphones are not allowed in this class.*

* If you wish to know why, please see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/22/business/laptops-not-during-lecture-or-meeting.html>

“Great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people.”

– Henry Thomas Buckle

Reading schedule: (2021 Fall)

Week 01 (24, 26 Aug): Religion

01. Introduction

02. Religion (no reading) + Q#1 (Religion): practice quiz

Week 02 (31 Aug, 02 Sep): Morality + Rhetoric

03. Haidt ch.7 “The Moral Foundations of Politics” (2012), 128-154, 170-181 (32pgs)

04. Lakoff & Johnson (21pgs) + Q#2 (Morality + Rhetoric)

Week 03 (07, 09 Sep): Hedonism

05. Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus,” “Principle Doctrines,” and “Vatican Sayings” (7pgs)

06. Harari ch.19 “And They Lived Happily Ever After” (21pgs) + Q#3 (Hedonism)

Week 04 (14, 16 Sep): Amoralism I

07. Moeller, Intro + ch.1: pp.1-28 (25pgs)

08. Moeller, chs.2-3: pp.29-52 (21pgs) + Q#4 (Amoralism 1/3)

Week 05 (21, 23 Sep): Amoralism II

09. Moeller, chs.4, 8: pp.53-63, 107-120 (24pgs)

10. Moeller, chs.9-10: pp.121-155 (34 pgs) + Q#5 (Amoralism 2/3)

Week 06 (28, 30 Sep): Amoralism III + Review #1

11. Moeller, chs.11-12, Conclusion: pp.156-187: (31pgs) + Q#6 (Amoralism 3/3)

12. Review #1

Week 07 (05, 07 Oct): Mysticism

13. Meister Eckhart (9pgs)

14. Anderson (20pgs) + Q#7 (Mysticism)

Week 08 (12, 14 Oct; Fall Break: 14-15 Oct): Atheism

15. Wang Chong (7pgs) + Sam Harris (8pgs)

16. Fall Break

Week 09 (19, 21 Oct): Naturalism + Stoicism I

17. Xunzi (4pgs) + Emerson (12pgs) + Q#8 (Atheism + Naturalism)

18. Epictetus (23pgs)

Week 10 (26, 28 Oct): Stoicism II + Virtuosity I

19. HTDTCA (= How to do the Colonnade assignment) + Marcus Aurelius (23pgs) + Q#9 (Stoicism)

20. Slingerland, Intro + ch.1: pp.1-37 (36 pgs)

Week 11 (02, 04 Nov): Virtuosity II

21. Slingerland, chs.2-3A: pp.38-76 (38pgs) + Q#10 (Virtuosity 1/3)

22. Slingerland, chs.3B-4 pp.76-110: (33pgs)

Week 12 (09, 11 Nov): Virtuosity III

23. Colonnade assignment DUE + Slingerland, chs.5-6A: pp.111-141 (30pgs) + Q#11 (Virtuosity 2/3)

24. Slingerland, chs.6B-7A: pp.141-179 (37pgs)

Week 13 (16, 18 Nov): Fallibilism

25. Slingerland, chs.7B-8: pp.180-215 (35pgs) + Q#12 (Virtuosity 3/3)

26. Deutsch, ch.1: pp.1-33 (32pgs)

Week 14 (23, 25 Nov: “Thanksgiving”: 24-26 Nov): Zen:

27. Deutsch, chs.2-3: pp.34-77 (42pgs) + Q#13 (Fallibilism)

28. “Thanksgiving”

Week 15 (30 Nov, 02 Dec)

29. Sasaki, Suzuki, Sokei-an (20pgs) + Q#14 (Zen)

30. Review #2

Grading details:

This grading rubric is designed to encourage student participation and success. The percentages indicate the percentage that each activity contributes to your total score (of 100). [90-100 = A; 80-89 = B; 70-79 = C; 60-69 = D] Your grade is always available to you on Blackboard – Tools – My Grades, in the “weighted total” column.

1. **Topic quizzes** (60%): There are 14 quizzes, each with ten multiple-choice questions, but only 12 of them count: Quiz #1 is a practice quiz and does not count, and of the 13 remaining quizzes, the one with the lowest score is automatically dropped. Quizzes may be found on Blackboard – Quizzes. **All quizzes are due at 3pm on the day after the dates specified on the schedule** above. The questions all derive from either the assigned readings or the lectures. Answering the Reading Questions (RQs), which may be found in Blackboard – Content, is *not* required (and your responses will *not* be collected), but many of the questions in the multiple-choice topic quizzes are drawn from the RQs, so your answers to them make an ideal study guide for the quizzes.

2. **Written participation** (20%): The Written Participation Questions (WPQs) that are done during class are for your personal engagement with the ideas under discussion; there are 10 WPQs per class. They can be found on Blackboard – WPQs, grouped by week (i.e, WPQ #1 has the questions for both classes of week #1). **They are due every Friday at 3pm** (except for the last week). All of the WPQs *together* are worth 20% of your final grade.

3. **Colonnade assignment** (20%): The Colonnade assignment is a 1-page, single-spaced paper that addresses all of the relevant Colonnade prompts. Please **email** it to the instructor as an attached Word document before class time on the due date. (Do not send it to Blackboard.) See the “How to Do the Colonnade Assignment” (HTDTCA) PDF on Blackboard for instructions.

(Life pro tip: never hand in a first draft of the paper; always get someone to critique it before I do.)

Late work: If you miss a quiz or a WPQ assignment, you have one week to make it up (**except those in the last week of class**); no excuse needed. For example, if you miss a quiz on a Thursday, you have until 3pm on the following Thursday to do it. This late work policy means, unfortunately, that the instructor will not be able to go over the quizzes in class afterwards. **The deadline for the Colonnade assignment is hard.**

Extra credit:

Questions: 5%

If you have questions about the ideas considered in this course, you may visit the instructor during office hours to ask them, and you will get extra credit for doing so. (These extra credit points will be in the EC column in Grades on Blackboard.) Each question is worth ½ a point but, while you can ask as many questions as you want during office hours, you can only get a maximum of 1 point per visit. The maximum number of these kinds of point is 5 (over five visits, on five separate days).

*** The last day you can visit the instructor to ask questions is before class on 30 Nov.**

Writing: 5%

You can get 2.5 points if you go to the library, find the call numbers for a given topic relevant to this class (ask a librarian; for example, “atheism” is under “rationalism,” which has the call numbers BL2700-2790), browse the stacks, find a *relevant* book that interests you, check it out, look it over, and write a 500-word (about 2/3rds of a page, single-spaced) summary of the book. The summary must include your name, the call numbers of the topic, the author, title, and date of publication, and your 500-word summary. You do not have to read the entire book: reading the table of contents, the introduction, and/or the first few paragraphs of each chapter may be enough. ~~Print your summary out, and when you hand it in, also bring the book to show the instructor.~~ You can do this twice, for a total of 5 points.

*** The last day you can hand in such a summary is before class on 30 Nov.**

The instructor reserves the right to modify this reading schedule or grading rubric at any time.

Note: the key to doing well in this class lies in two things: (1) taking responsibility for understanding the readings and the lectures (and asking questions when you do not understand), and (2) using the RQs for creating your own study guide (and asking questions when you do not understand) for the quizzes.

孔子曰：“欲知則問，欲能則學，欲給則豫，欲善則肆。”

Kong Zi said: “(If you) want knowledge, then ask (questions); (if you) want ability, then study (for it); (if you) want sufficiency, then be prepared; (if you) want excellence, then practice (for it).” *Shi Zi* 尸子 12.1

Student issues:

Student-teacher relations in the Arts & Humanities:

I'm not here to sell you knowledge. If that is all you want, you can get it online or in the library. Selling knowledge to a customer may be the paradigm for some academic divisions, but not in the Arts. History, literature, philosophy, and religion professors are like football coaches: we impart knowledge, but we also show you what exercises to do to acquire certain skills, skills like information literacy, critical thinking, and objective communication, but *you do the actual work to acquire those skills*. You are not a passive receptacle of learning, but rather an active practitioner of skill acquirement. Thus we often say of our courses: the more you put into it, the more you get out of it.

Preparation for class:

It is generally accepted that students must study two to three hours outside of class for every hour spent in class. As this course meets 2.5 hours per week, you should expect to spend between five and eight hours per week reading and studying for this one course. Students who are unable or unwilling to commit this amount of time to this course should reconsider whether this course is appropriate for them. Try not to fall behind on the reading because it is very difficult to catch up. This is a survey course, and we move along quickly.

How to read in academia:

For the reading each week, first skim the appropriate chapters or pages in order to identify the main points, events, and individuals. Then re-read those chapters or pages in order to determine how examples are used to support those points, events, and individuals. Pay attention to chapter titles and subheadings to help guide you. As you read (just as when you listen in class), do so with pencil in hand so you can note those key points, events, ideas, themes, patterns, and individuals in the margins. Teach yourself to discriminate between important information (including analyses and conclusions) from unimportant information; practice determining why something is important, in the short run, in the long run, in other places, to other people, and for other events. Note causes, effects, and results. Review these notations regularly as you read the assigned pages. Reviewing in this fashion should enable you to see the direction a chapter (or lecture) is taking; it should also help to improve your concentration. With practice you should improve.

Attendance & Participation:

Timely, prepared, and engaged attendance is recommended. It is not necessary to obtain prior approval from the instructor when missing a meeting is unavoidable, but note that students bear the *entire responsibility* for the decision to miss class and for whatever effect that may have on their course grade and their learning experience. Participation in class discussions will be evaluated on quality, quantity, and appropriateness of student questions and comments. Please note: it is just as possible to talk *too much* as it is to talk too little in class. Likewise, there is such a thing as active listening, and yes, your professors are capable of distinguishing this from passive listening. If you are worried about the level and/or quality of your participation, the best thing to do is to come to office hours, where the professor can give you direct feedback throughout the semester, rather than at the end (when it is too late).

Classroom behavior:

I expect you to be not only on time and prepared, but also to demonstrate initiative by asking interesting questions and otherwise engaging the topic at hand. You may have thoughtfully read all of the assignment, but I won't know this unless you give me evidence of this by talking with me about it. An Arts classroom is also like a corporate boardroom: there is protocol to be followed (e.g., raising your hand for a question), there are other people in the room deserving of your respect (e.g., by not distracting them), and there is the fact that you are being judged on your behavior and participation.

Talking in class:

You should not talk in class when others are speaking. Not out of respect for me, but out of respect for the other students trying to focus. I see the class period as an opportunity for you. If you do not wish to participate, that is fine with me: you may put your head down and go to sleep, or you can quietly pass notes to one another, or you can lean over and whisper to one another. *But if I can hear that you are talking, even if I cannot hear what you are saying, that means you are distracting other students*. Please don't do that. (Yes, this will affect your grade.)

Email communication:

At times I will communicate with the entire class using campus email systems, so it is essential that you regularly check your WKU email address or forward your WKU account email to your preferred email address. I encourage you to contact me via email with questions about the course, the material we cover in class, and assignments. You are expected to be professional in all communication with the instructor. All email communication should be in complete sentences with a proper salutation and conclusion. Treat the email more as a letter and less like a text message. Include a comprehensible subject heading (e.g., "REL 242-001 paper question"), address and sign the email, making sure to identify what class you are in (usually instructors are teaching more than one class) and explain clearly what it is that you are inquiring about. Failure to do these will increase the odds that you will not get a response. Also, unless I've explicitly stated otherwise, I generally check my email only during normal business hours (more or less M-F from 8am to 5pm). Finally, here is a short list of things to which **I may not respond**:

- Questions that can be answered by checking the course syllabus or looking online.
- A request to know **if** you missed anything during an absence. (The answer is yes.)
- A request to know **what** you missed during an absence. (Instead of asking this through email, take the appropriate next steps to catch up: ask a classmate for notes, meet with me in my office hours, etc.)

The Library:

I like Google as much as the next guy. Probably more so. But as wonderful as Google is, there are still lots of things the library has that cannot be found with a Google search. Two spring immediately to mind: librarians and books. Librarians know all kinds of things about how to access useful and relevant information, both online and in dead-tree format. Go talk to one! The other thing is books. I know Google Books is making good progress, but there are still a great many texts that are only accessible by browsing the stacks. Browsing the stacks is a key part of the university experience. Don't miss out!

Studying together:

Studying together can be a good thing or it can be a bad thing. If you do the work and want to deepen your understanding by discussing it with other students to gain their perspective, that's great. This course is a rare opportunity for you to talk about potentially divisive issues without upsetting someone in the room. But if you do not do the work, meet up with other students, divide the reading, then meet back up to plagiarize each other's notes, that is not a good thing. It's just cheating.

Plagiarism:

Whenever you submit work to me, of any kind and for any assignment, either oral or written, if the words that you use in your work match uncited words anywhere else in the universe (except your own notes, written in your own words): that is plagiarism. This includes any webpage, any monograph in any language anywhere, and even other students' notes, past or present. If you were sick one day and got notes from another student, you must first put them in your own words if you are going to submit them as your own work. I am the judge of what constitutes words that "match." Any work that includes plagiarized words will receive a zero, and may result in failing the class and expulsion from the university. If this concept is unclear to you, please see me or a WKU librarian for explanation.

The Learning Center (TLC):

Should you require academic assistance with your WKU courses, The Learning Center provides free supplemental education programs for all currently enrolled WKU students. TLC @ Downing Student Union and TLC @ FAC offers certified, one-on-one tutoring in over 200 subjects and eight academic skill areas by appointment or walk in. Online tutoring is offered to distance learners. TLC also has four satellite locations. Each satellite location is a quiet study center and is equipped with a small computer lab. These satellite locations are located in FAC, Douglas Keen Hall, McCormack Hall, and Pearce Ford Tower. Please contact TLC @ Downing Student Union for more information or to schedule a tutoring appointment.

Writing Center:

The Writing Center on the Bowling Green campus will have writing tutors available to offer advice to current WKU students on any stage of their writing projects. In-person tutoring is available in Cherry Hall 123 from 9-4 Monday through Friday and in the Cravens Commons (at the horseshoe-shaped reference desk) from 5-9 on Sunday through Thursday evenings. Students may also request feedback on their writing via email or arrange a real-time Zoom conference to discuss a paper. See instructions and how-to videos on the website (www.wku.edu/writingcenter) for making appointments. Walk-in feedback is available unless we are booked up. Students may also get short writing questions answered via email; just put "Quick question" in the subject line to (writingcenter@wku.edu).

Student Disability Services:

In compliance with University policy, students with disabilities who require academic and/or auxiliary accommodations for this course must contact the Student Accessibility Resource Center located in Downing Student Union, 1074. SARC can be reached by phone number at 270-745-5004 [270-745-3030 TTY] or via email at sarc.connect@wku.edu. Please do not request accommodations directly from the professor or instructor without a faculty notification letter (FNL) from The Student Accessibility Resource Center.

This course has ten learning outcomes articulated in the underlined sentences below:

WKU Colonnade Program: Essential Learning Outcomes:

1. Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, including
 - a. An informed acquaintance with major achievements in the arts and the humanities
 - b. An appreciation of the complexity and variety of the world's cultures;
 - c. An understanding of the scientific method and a knowledge of natural science and its relevance in our lives;
 - d. A historical perspective and an understanding of connections between past and present.
2. Intellectual and practical skills, including
 - a. The capacity for critical and logical thinking;
 - b. Proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking;
 - c. The ability to understand and apply mathematical skills and concepts.
3. Personal and social responsibility, including
 - a. An understanding of society and human behavior;
 - b. An understanding of factors that enhance health, well-being, and quality of life.
4. Integrative Learning, including
Synthesis and advanced accomplishments across general and specialized studies.

WKU Colonnade Program: Foundations, Explorations, Connections:

Social and Cultural, **Local to Global**, Systems:

Connections courses direct students to apply and integrate discipline-specific knowledge and skills to the significant issues challenging our individual and shared responsibility as global citizens. Students will learn to analyze and evaluate cultural contexts, examine issues on both a local and global scale, and apply system-level approaches to the stewardship of our social and physical environments.

In Local to Global, students will examine local and global issues within the context of an increasingly interconnected world. Courses will consider the origins and dynamics of a global society, the significance of local phenomena on a global scale, and/or material, cultural, and ethical challenges in today's world.

Students will demonstrate the ability to:

1. Analyze issues on local and global scales.
2. Examine the local and global interrelationships of one or more issues.
3. Evaluate the consequences of decision-making on local and global scales.

[source: https://www.wku.edu/colonnade/colonnade_plan_document.pdf; emphasis is mine]

This too shall pass.
We are our choices.
Let go or be dragged.
Hurt people hurt people.
Language creates reality.
Luck favors the prepared.
The map is not the territory. – Alfred Korzybski
Only the closed mind is certain.
Do you listen or just wait to speak?
Don't believe everything you think.
People don't get what they deserve.

The axe forgets; the tree remembers. – Zimbabwean proverb
 Hope for the best; plan for the worst.
 Everyone is somebody else's weirdo.
 No one is the villain in their own story.
 No matter where you go, there you are.
 The unexamined life is not worth living. – Socrates
 We are all the bad guy in someone's story.
 People see the world not as it is but as they are.
 Some people die at 25 and aren't buried until 75. – Ben Franklin
 Integrity is what you do when no one is watching.
 Never let your schooling interfere with your education. – Mark Twain
 If there is a God, he will have to beg for my forgiveness. – carved into concentration camp wall
 The universe is under no obligation to make sense to you. – Neil deGrasse Tyson
 The cure for anything is salt water: sweat, tears, or the sea. – Isak Dinesen
 Everybody wants to go to heaven but nobody wants to die.
 And now that you don't have to be perfect, you can be good. – John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*
 There's someone out there that would kill for your bad days.
 Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness. – Mark Twain
 Art is how we decorate space, music is how we decorate time.
 The religious are atheists to every other religion but their own.
 Silence is the language of God, the rest is just poor translation. – Rumi
 Don't take criticism from someone you wouldn't ask for advice.
 We judge ourselves by our intentions but others by their actions.
 Experience is what you get when you didn't get what you wanted.
 Be humble, for you are made of earth. Be noble, for you are made of stars.
 The world is a tragedy to those who feel, but a comedy to those who think.
 When you do things right, people won't be sure you've done anything at all. – God, on Futurama
 The world needs a lot of things right now; another human isn't one of them.
 Everybody wants to change the world. Nobody wants to help their neighbor.
 Whenever you find yourself among the crowd, it is time to pause and reflect.
 You don't notice your progress in life because you are always raising the bar.
 Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity. – Hanlon's Razor
 Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not who someone else is today.
 It's easy to fool someone; it's hard to convince them that they've been fooled.
 Sometimes a hypocrite is nothing more than a man in the process of changing.
 The 10/90 rule: Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it.
 From my rotting body, flowers shall grow and I am in them and that is eternity. – Edvard Munch
 Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better. – Maya Angelou
 It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.
 The best whiskey is the one you like and the best way to drink it is the way you enjoy it.
 Never argue with a fool, they'll bring you down to their level and beat you with experience.
 Before you speak let your words pass through three gates: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?
 Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, and today is a gift... that's why they call it the present.
 It's no use wasting time worrying what other people think about you. No one is thinking about you.
 Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need.
 Living in the future is anxiety, living in the past is depression. Only good way is to live in the present moment.
 Build a man a fire, and he'll be warm for a day. Set a man on fire, and he'll be warm for the rest of his life. – Terry Pratchett
 I will miss you too, but you are wrong if you think that the joy of life comes principally from the joy of human relationships.
 Just because you lost me as a friend doesn't mean you gained me as an enemy. I still want to see you eat... just not at my table.
 The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts.
 – Bertrand Russell
 Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. – Viktor Frankl
 Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. – serenity prayer
 We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the universe. That makes us something very special. – Stephen Hawking
 When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy.' They told me I didn't understand the assignment, and I told them they didn't understand life.
 Through our eyes, the universe is perceiving itself. Through our ears, the universe is listening to its harmonies. We are the witnesses through which the universe becomes conscious of its glory, of its magnificence. – Alan Watts