ANTH2350/UGED2980 FALL 2026

MEANINGS OF LIFE

Lecture: Thursday 1:30-3:15, Humanities Building 115
Tutorials: Thursday 3:30, 4:30, 5:30, TBA, T.C. Cheng Bldg 102, 114
Teacher: Gordon Mathews cmgordon@cuhk.edu.hk
Tutors: Jad De Guzman deguzmanjad@gmail.com, Bailey Quinn Hardt 1155244217@link.cuhk.edu.hk

In this course, you will learn about the processes through which individual meanings of life are formed and negotiated between individuals and their societies. You will learn this through reading and analysis of individual life stories in Japan and the United States. You will also learn about the evolution of senses of meaning in different societies across human history, from prehistory up until the present and future. These two areas of learning will enable you to think about societies past and present and about lives lived within these societies from a new perspective. You will also learn about how to think about your own life and meaning in a deeper and more conscious way. Although this course is academic, it transcends the academic, to have a potential impact on your own thinking about your life. This course examines meanings of life from an anthropological perspective, but no prior knowledge of anthropology is required: you can apply what you learn in this course to a wide range of disciplines and endeavors.

Learning Outcomes
After taking this course, you will be able to:
1) think analytically about meanings of life within your own and other societies, and understand the complex linkages between individuals and society in creating meaning,
2) comprehend the broad panorama of the evolution of meaning over the course of human history, and
3) understand your own life in a more insightful way.

Grading
The course will be graded on the basis of:
1) A handwritten notebook of your reactions to what we have learned in class, combining discussion of class lectures, tutorials, and readings with your own insights about your life and society. This will be preliminarily examined on Oct. 8 and optionally on Nov. 19 but are conclusively due Dec. 7 (40% of grade).
2) A take-home mid-term examination (6 pages long: 20% of grade). This will be handed out on Oct. 15 and due Oct. 29
3) A take-home final examination (9 pages long: 30% of grade). This will be handed out on Nov. 26 and due Dec. 10.
4) Class participation (10% of grade)

Do not use AI for the notebook or for the take-home midterm and final exams. Late submissions beyond two days may be penalized. Required readings are all available on Blackboard. Students are required by university policy to submit soft copies of all papers to VeriGuide. Check http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/ for how to submit papers through VeriGuide.

Grade Descriptors

A Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes, through work that has creatively synthesized course materials and key ideas, to the extent that you show a great depth of understanding. Your arguments in your work are logical and cohesive, the discussion is well-organized, and the writing is clear. All relevant course materials have been fully utilized in your work, and additional material as well has been used from your own research.

A- Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes, through work has creatively synthesized course materials and key ideas. Your arguments in your work are logical and cohesive, the discussion is well-organized, and the writing is clear. All relevant course materials have been fully utilized in your work, and perhaps additional material as well from your own research.

B+ Substantial performance on all learning outcomes. Your arguments in your work are largely logical and cohesive, the discussion is generally well-organized, and the writing is clear. Most relevant course materials have been fully utilized in your work. There are areas for improvement with respect to building a cohesive argument, organizing the discussion, communicating clearly, and/or identifying relevant evidence and using all course materials, but by and large you have turned in good, solid work.

B Satisfactory performance on all learning outcomes, OR high performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall satisfactory performance. Your arguments in your work are somewhat logical and cohesive, the discussion is somewhat well-organized, and the writing is somewhat clear. Much relevant course materials have been fully utilized in your work. There are areas for improvement with respect to building a cohesive argument, organizing the discussion, communicating clearly, and/or identifying relevant evidence.

B- Adequate performance on all learning outcomes, OR satisfactory performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall largely adequate performance. Your arguments in your work are partially logical and cohesive, the discussion is partially organized, and the writing is somewhat clear. Some relevant course materials have been fully utilized in your work. There are areas for improvement with respect to building a cohesive argument, organizing the discussion, communicating clearly, and/or identifying relevant evidence.

C+ Adequate performance on the majority of learning outcomes. Your written work shows some effort, but course materials have not been sufficiently engaged. The argument and the writing is not clear, and/or there is less than full evidence for statements and claims made. There are areas for improvement with respect to building a cohesive argument, organizing the discussion, communicating clearly, and/or identifying relevant evidence.

C, C- Barely adequate performance on a number of learning outcomes. These grade will be awarded to students who have missed a large number of classes and have failed to use course materials in their written answers.

Part One: Meanings of Life Between Self and Society

Sept. 10: Introduction to Course: Meanings of Life in Anthropological Perspective
--Thomas Nagel, *What Does It All Mean?,* p. 95-101
--Gordon Mathews, *What Makes Life Worth Living*? *How Japanese and Americans Make Sense of Their Worlds,* p. 3-11, 47-53

Sept. 17: Meanings of Life in Work and Family
--Gordon Mathews, *What Makes Life Worth Living*? p. 70-82
--Alain de Botton, "Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person," *New York Times*, May 28, 2016
--Gordon Mathews, "Being a Man in a Straitened Japan: The View from Twenty Years Later." In S. Kawano, G. Roberts, and S. Long, eds., *Capturing Contemporary Japan: Differentiation and Uncertainty,* p. 60-80.

Sept. 24: Youth, Age, and Meaning
--Mary Pipher, *Another Country: Navigating the Emotional Terrain of Our Elders*, p. 39-56
--Gordon Mathews, *What Makes Life Worth Living*? p. 118-131
--Gordon Mathews and Bruce White, "Introduction: Changing Generations in Japan Today." In G. Mathews and B. White, eds., *Japan's Changing Generations: Are Young People Creating a New Society?,* p. 1-12

Oct. 1: National Day—no class

Oct. 8: Meaning in Creation and Religion
--Gordon Mathews, *What Makes Life Worth Living*? p. 155-180, 193-203
--FiveThirtyEight, "Religious Diversity May Be Making America Less Religious," Aug. 23, 2016

Hand in Notebooks for preliminary examination Oct. 8

Oct. 15: Meanings of Death
--Gordon Mathews, Yang Yang, and Miu Ying Kwong, *Life After Death Today in the United States, Japan, and China,* pp. 1-25
--David Eagleman, *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlife*, p. 23-25, 47-49, 52-53
--"How Psychedelic Drugs Help Patients Face Death," *New York Times*, April 20, 2012

I will hand out Take-Home Midterm Exam Oct. 15

Oct. 22: Self, Society, and Meaning
--Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning,* p. 65-74
--Sheldon Solomon, et al., *The Worm at the Core*, p. 100-123
--Roy Baumeister, *Meanings of Life* p. 360-367

Part Two: Meanings of Life in the Evolution of Human Societies

Oct. 29: Meanings of Life and Cultural Evolution
--Robert Ornstein and Paul Ehrlich, "The World We Made," in *New World, New Mind*, p. 40-65
--Sheldon Solomon, et al., *The Worm at the Core*, p. 63-81

Take-home Midterm Exam Due Oct. 29

Nov. 5: The History of Meanings in Europe
--Franklin Le Van Baumer, *Main Currents of Western Thought* (4th edition): p. 190-192, 326-329, 454-455, 576-583, 710-711 (Calvin, Galileo, Condorcet, Huxley, Freud).

Nov. 12—Graduation Congregation. We will have this class on Zoom at 8 pm on the evening of Nov. 12, and will record this for later viewing for students who cannot attend.
The History of Meaning in Japan and China
--Patricia Buckley Ebrey, ed. *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook* (2d edition), selections: p. 17-26, 27-31, 142-145, 258-262, 442-446 ("Confucian Teachings," "Daoist Teachings" "Book of Rewards and Punishments," "Li Zhi's Letters," "Lei Feng")
--Kenkō, *Essays in Idleness*, pp. 3-12.

Nov. 19: Meanings of Life and Happiness Around the World
--Naomi Adelson, "The Shifting Landscapes of Cree Well-Being," William Jankowiak, "Well-Being, Cultural Pathology, and Personal Rejuvenation in a Chinese City 1981-2005," in G Mathews and C. Izquierdo, eds., *Pursuits of Happiness: Well-Being in Anthropological Perspective*, p. 109-123,147-166.

Optional: hand in Notebooks Nov. 19

Nov. 26: Meanings of Life in Contemporary Societies
--Robert Wright, "The Evolution of Despair," in *Technology and Society: A Bridge to the 21st Century*, p. 24-29
--Gregg Easterbrook, "More of Everything Except Happiness," in *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Wors*e, p. 163-187
--Yuval Noah Harari, "Equality: Those Who Own the Data Own the Future," in *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, pp, 73-81

I will hand out Take-Home Final Exam Nov. 26

Dec. 3: Review of course; The Future of Meaning
--Michio Kaku, *Physics of the Future: How Science Will Shape Human Destiny and Our Daily Lives by the Year 2100*, p. 109-119, 157-165, 191-195
--Max Tegmark, *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, pp. 22-30, 161-163
--Discussion of take-home final exam

Notebooks due Dec. 7: hand in to Dept. box

Take-home Final Due Dec. 10

Assigned and Recommended Readings

Baggini, Julian. 2004. *What's It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Baumeister, Roy. 1991. *Meanings of Life*. New York: Guilford Press.

Baumer, Franklin L. 1978. *Main Currents of Western Thought: Readings in Western European Intellectual History From the Middle Ages to the Present.* Fourth Edition. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Becker, Ernest. 1971. *The Birth and Death of Meaning: An Interdisciplinary Perspective On the Problem of Man.* Second edition. New York: The Free Press.

Becker, Ernest. 1973. *The Denial of Death*. New York: The Free Press.

Brim, Gilbert. 2000. *Ambition: How We Manage Success and Failure Throughout Our Lives*. Lincoln NE: iUniverse.com.

Cave, Stephen. 2017. *Immortality: The Quest to Life Forever and How It Drives Civilization.* New York: Skyhorse.

Easterbrook, Greg. 2003. *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse.* New York: Random House.

Eagleman, David. 2010. *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlife.* New York: Vintage Books.

Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, ed. 1993. *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*. Second Edition. New York: The Free Press.

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1976. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Frankl, Viktor. 1963. *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy.* New York: Washington Square Press.

Gerber, William. 1994. *The Meaning of Life: Insights of the World's Great Thinkers.* Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Grayling, A. C. 2021. *The Frontiers of Knowledge: What We Now Know About Science, History, and the Mind*. London: Penguin

Gilbert, Daniel. 2006. *Stumbling on Happiness.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Harari, Yuval, Noah. 2011. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind.* New York: HarperCollins.

Harari, Yuval Noah. 2017. *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow.* New York: HarperCollins.

Harari, Yuval Noah. 2018. *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.

Harari, Yuval Noah. 2024. *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI.* New York: Random House.

Haybron, Daniel M. 2013. *Happiness: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jackson, Michael. 2012. *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kaku, Michio. 2011. *Physics of the Future: How Science Will Shape Human Destiny and Our Daily Lives by the Year 2100*. New York: Doubleday.

Kawano, Satsuki, Glenda Roberts, and Susan Orpett Long, eds., 2014. *Capturing Contemporary Japan: Differentiation and Uncertainty*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Kenkō. 1981. *Essays in Idleness* [Tsurezuregusa]. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle.

Kleinman, Arthur. 2007. *What Really Matters: Living a Moral Life Amidst Uncertainty and Danger.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Layard, Richard. 2005. *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science.* New York: Penguin Press.

Mathews, Gordon. 1996. *What Makes Life Worth Living? How Japanese and Americans Make Sense of Their Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mathews, Gordon, and Carolina Izquierdo, eds. 2009. *Pursuits of Happiness: Well-Being in Anthropological Perspective.* New York: Berghahn.

Mathews, Gordon, and Bruce White, eds. 2004. *Japan's Changing Generations: Are Young People Creating a New Society?* London: Routledge.

Mathews, Gordon, Yang Yang, and Miu Ying Kwong. 2023. *Life After Death Today in the United States, Japan, and China.* London: Routledge.

Nagel, Thomas. 1987. *What Does It All Mean?* New York: Oxford University Press.

Ornstein, Robert and Paul Ehrlich. 1989. *New World New Mind: Moving Toward Conscious Evolution.* New York: Simon & Schuster, Touchstone.

Pinker, Steven. 2011. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined.* New York: Viking.

Pipher, Mary. 1999. *Another Country: Navigating the Emotional Terrain of Our Elders*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Pollan, Michael. 2026. *A World Appears: A Journey into Consciousness*. New York: Penguin.

Sapolsky, Robert. 2023. *Determined: The Science of Life Without Free Will*. London: Vintage.

Solomon, Sheldon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski. 2015. *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life.* New York: Random House.

Tegmark, Max. 2017. *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence.* New York: Penguin.

Tolstoy, Leo. 1971. "The Death of Ivan Ilyich." In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories.* London: Oxford University Press.

Wright, Robert. 2000. "The Evolution of Despair," in L. Hjorth, B. Eichler, A. Khan, and J. Morello, eds., *Technology and Society: A Bridge to the 21st Century.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Wright, Robert. 2009. *The Evolution of God.* New York: Little Brown.

Zuckerman, Phil. 2008. *Society Without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment*. New York: New York University Press.