

# Movies for a course on the Meaning Of Life

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In my course on the meaning of life, I assign several movies and then discuss them in class. (Ohio State has a digital library of movies that allows professors to assign movies as homework to students.) Here are some of the movies that in my experience work quite well:

## 1. **Hannah and Her Sisters**

This movie works well for discussing existential crises. Mickey Sachs (played by Woody Allen), the producer of a TV show, starts experiencing symptoms that doctors fear might be caused by a brain tumor. This plunges Mickey into a deep existential crisis. When it turns out to be a false alarm, he is initially thrilled. Yet, on the way home from the hospital, it suddenly occurs to him that it does not really make a difference whether he dies tomorrow or in 20 years. He will die eventually, and so will everyone around him on whom he might have an impact. Eventually, nobody will remember him. Thus, he concludes, nothing he does matters. Mickey quits his job and tries to find answers to his questions. First, he turns to religion, but that does not work for him. He nearly kills himself. Yet, in the end, his crisis slowly passes and he starts enjoying life again. He concludes that even though he does not know if there is a meaning, he might as well enjoy the good things that life has to offer.

The movie pairs very nicely with Tolstoy's autobiographical essay "My Confession." There are several intriguing parallels and differences. In fact, the movie generally contains a lot of material for class discussions. In addition to Mickey's story line, there are the story lines of Mickey's ex-wife Hannah, her two sisters, and their ageing parents. All of these characters are facing crises of their own, for a variety of reasons, and it is interesting to discuss these in class. Another interesting aspect of the movie is a scene in which Mickey and his father talk about death. Mickey's father appears to giving a version of Epicurus's argument that it is not rational to fear death. [Note: because of the controversies surrounding Woody Allen, it may also make sense to have a discussion with the class about whether the immorality of an artist undermines the value of their work.]

## 2. **Pleasantville**

In this movie, two high school students—the siblings David and Jennifer—get magically transported from their life in the late 1990s into the world of a black and white 1950s sitcom town "Pleasantville." As the name suggests, everybody and everything in this town is pleasant, at least in some sense: there is no crime, the weather is always perfect, everybody gets along, the basketball team always wins, etc. It is also a world that reflects very traditional values. David, who is a huge fan of the sitcom and used it as an escape from his real-world problems, is initially thrilled to get to live in Pleasantville. Jennifer, who has recently become popular in high school and likes to be rebellious, immediately hates it. She breaks some of the norms, and as a result, Pleasantville starts changing. Other characters start rebelling and little by little, the black and white world becomes colorful. Jennifer eventually changes as well: she discovers a passion for learning and stops worrying as much about being popular.

Things to discuss: Why are David and Jennifer's initial reactions so different? Is life in Pleasantville (the way it is initially presented) a good life? Would you like to live there? Why

or why not? What can we infer about the laws that determine when something changes from black & white to color in Pleasantville? (Come up with several hypotheses and then test them against the specific cases of color change that are portrayed in the movie. Can we rule out some of the hypotheses? Changing one's ways doesn't seem to be sufficient for color change; neither does showing emotion. One very plausible hypothesis is that color change is the result of someone living/choosing authentically in the existentialist sense. Another plausible hypothesis is that it's the result of someone living an Aristotelian life.<sup>1</sup> Thus, it makes sense to assign this movie after learning about authenticity and Aristotelianism.) Is the Pleasantville at the end of the movie a better or worse place to live than the Pleasantville at the beginning? In what ways? What seems to be the message of the movie?

### 3. Selma

This historical drama about the Civil Rights Movement (and particularly about Martin Luther King, Jr.) is great for discussing the societal and racial aspects of the good life. It pairs well with Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail." One cluster of issues to discuss is the extent to which societal factors—such as discriminatory laws, racism, the lack of opportunities, etc.—can make it impossible to live good lives. (Here, it can be fruitful to introduce students to the Capability Approach to well-being. One can also mention the Declaration of Independence's claim that every person has an inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness.) In addition to talking about the conditions in the 1960s, one can ask students whether there are still societal factors in our society today that make it impossible, or difficult, for particular groups (such as racial or ethnic minorities, socio-economic groups, people with disabilities, undocumented immigrants, etc.) to live good lives, and how the situation might be improved. Another discussion can center on the willingness of civil rights activists to risk their own lives and to give up on other life goals in order to effect societal change. They sacrificed their own well-being in order to allow future generations to live better lives. In this context, it can be interesting to ask whether Martin Luther King Jr.'s life illustrates that well-being and meaning can come apart and that one may have to choose what is more important. After all, it may well be the case that he would have lived a happier life if he had not become an activist; yet, it is also plausible that his life was more meaningful because of his activism. Finally, it is interesting to ask more generally what, if anything, the case study of Martin Luther King Jr. shows about the meaning of life. Students sometimes bring up his moral flaws (e.g. his infidelity) and wonder whether that should influence our assessment of how meaningful his life was. Likewise, one can wonder to what extent the impact that someone has after their death can determine the goodness or meaningfulness of their life. If after King's death the civil rights movement had collapsed and all of the civil rights legislation had been repealed, would that have made King's life less good or less meaningful?

### 4. Groundhog Day

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<sup>1</sup> See Eric Reitan, "Pleasantville, Aristotle, and the Meaning of Life," in K. Blessing and P. Tudico (eds.), *Movies and the Meaning of Life: Philosophers Take On Hollywood*, 213–227. Chicago: Open Court, 2005.

In this classic movie, Phil Connors, a TV weatherman, is forced to live through the same day over and over and over. Nobody else is aware of the repetitions. And even worse for Phil, the day he has to experience over and over is a day on which he reports on the Groundhog Day festivities in Punxsutawney, PA—a town and an assignment that he initially despises. The predicament can be interpreted as symbolizing the human condition: Phil is like Sisyphus; he is trapped in a life of boring repetitiveness. Phil's reaction to his predicament goes through a series of stages, each of which can be connected in fruitful ways to theories about the meaning of life, or the good life. (Hence, I use this movie at the very end of the semester, in order to review some course themes and theories, and to reflect on some big picture questions.) In one phase, Phil feels liberated by the absolute lack of consequences; one can connect this to existentialism. In another phase, Phil has an existential crisis and tries to kill himself. In yet another phase, Phil tries to take advantage of his predicament in order to get (through manipulation and theft, if necessary) everything he wants, such as money and sex. One can connect this to desire fulfillment theories of well-being. Finally, there is the phase in which Phil accepts his fate and starts making the best of it. Among other things, he starts to genuinely care about other people and be less self-absorbed; he unintentionally becomes a hero to many people in the town by helping them; he develops an appreciation for, and skill in, art and music; he even starts to enjoy living in Punxsutawney. This last phase could be connected to objective list theories, for example. At the end of the discussion, it's interesting to ask students what they think the message of this movie is.

## 5. The Truman Show

This movie's protagonist is Truman Burbank, a man who, without his knowledge, has spent his entire life on a reality TV show. Truman was adopted by the show immediately after his birth and was raised on camera by actors pretending to be his parents. He lives in an immense TV studio that contains a small island with a town; cameras are hidden everywhere and capture almost every second of his life. The show is broadcast around the clock to millions of fans. During the movie, Truman slowly starts discovering the truth about his situation, even though the show's producer works very hard to prevent it. When Truman tries to escape, the producer almost kills him. Yet, Truman manages, at the very end of the movie, to find a way out of the studio and into the real world. When he is at the exit door, the producer talks to him, explains the situation, and begs him to stay on the show. Yet, Truman decides to leave.

I use this movie for two main things. First, I use it for a discussion of whether it's possible to live a truly good or meaningful life if one's surroundings are, in an important sense, an illusion.<sup>2</sup> Before he discovers the truth, Truman lives in a fake world and he is deceived about almost every aspect of his life: his friends and family members are merely actors who get paid to pretend to like him. Their behavior and their conversations are scripted. The TV producer even manipulates Truman's behavior and Truman's mental life in several ways. Moreover, Truman's every move is broadcast to millions of viewers worldwide, without his knowledge. Even though Truman's life may seem good in many ways—he has a decent job,

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<sup>2</sup> Here, one can also draw connections to the movie *The Matrix* and the “Experience Machine” thought experiment.

lives in a beautiful town, is healthy, etc.—one may wonder whether the mere fact that his world is fake detracts from the goodness of his life. Is it sufficient that his relationships, for instance, *seem* real to him? Does it matter that they are not objectively real? Is there something wrong with his life even before he starts suspecting anything?

I also use the movie to discuss the possibility of deriving meaning from a divine creator. Christof, the producer of the TV show, is god-like in many ways: he has designed and created Truman's world, he has control over people's actions and over the weather, he can see everything that happens, and he even lives in the sky. After discussing some of these parallels, one can ask students whether the fact that Truman plays an important role in Christof's plan for the show makes Truman's life meaningful in any sense. Similarly, does the fact that Truman inspires and entertains millions of viewers make his life meaningful? If so, is this the type of meaning that many people long for? I ask students whether they think it's enough for meaning (in the relevant sense) that one contributes to the plan of a very powerful being—and if not, what other conditions have to be met.<sup>3</sup> They often come up with suggestions such as (a) the plan must be good, (b) we must know about the plan, (c) we must freely choose to contribute to the plan. When discussing the ending of the movie, it's interesting to ask students why they think Truman decided not to stay in the show.

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<sup>3</sup> Useful readings on this topic are John Kekes, "The Meaning of Life," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 24 (2000), 17–34 (particularly pp. 24f.); Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971), pp. 716–727 (particularly p. 721).