**Assignment: Initial and Final Reflection Essays**

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**Basic idea**: At the beginning of the semester,students write an Initial Reflection, answering a series of questions about their own initial views on death and the meaning of life. The questions are about issues that will be covered in the course. Students also write an email in response to a message from a fictional friend who is going through a life crisis. At the end of the semester,students revisit their initial reflection and write a Final Reflection. They compose a multi-part reflection essay that (a) explains how and why their views on these issues have changed; (b) describes and defends their current views on death and the meaning of life, (c) reflects on what their current views imply for how they should live their lives going forward, and (d) revisits the email they wrote to the fictional friend at the beginning of the semester and explains whether they would do anything differently if they wrote it now.

**Instructions for Initial** **Reflection**

Answer all of these questions, based on your current views (no need to rely on anything we have already covered in this course). Don’t consult any resources and don’t get other people to help you.

The **purpose** of this assignment is threefold:

* to get you to start reflecting on central questions related to our course topic,
* to find out what your views on death and the meaning of life are at the beginning of the course, and
* to serve as the basis for the final reflection

**Note**: this assignment is very different from the other assignments in the course because it is not supposed to test how much you have already learned. You will get full points for this assignment if you follow the instructions, give thoughtful answers to all of the questions, and complete this by the deadline. Getting full points for the other assignments is going to be much more difficult, obviously.

**PART A:**

For each of the following 10 claims, say to what extent you agree (e.g. “completely agree,” “completely disagree,” “agree a little bit,” “neither agree nor disagree,” etc.). Then explain why, in 2–3 sentences each.

1. A human life in a universe without God cannot be meaningful.
2. Death is usually bad for the person who dies.
3. It would be great to live forever.
4. If there is a God who created us for a purpose, our lives are automatically meaningful.
5. Whether someone’s life is meaningful depends entirely on how that person feels about their life.
6. How happy you are depends entirely on how much pleasure you experience.
7. The most meaningful life is a life in which you always get to do whatever you most want to do.
8. The only meaningful life is a life in which you make the world a better place.
9. The only meaningful life is a life in which you do something that you love and which is also objectively good.
10. When we live our lives, we write our own stories; if your life story is good, then your life is meaningful.

**PART B:**

Imagine that a friend from middle school, from whom you have not heard in quite a while, sends you the email below. Read the email carefully and then compose an email in response, doing your best to help your friend with this crisis. [roughly the same length as your friend’s email]

How are you doing? It's been forever since we last talked.

I'm not doing so great at the moment, to be honest. My life seems to be going nowhere and I don't know what to do. I've been working as a barista at a small coffee shop for a few years now, ever since I dropped out of high school. The pay is okay, but the work is incredibly repetitive. Super boring. I've thought about trying to get a different job, but it probably wouldn't make a difference. Most jobs are like this--it's the same routine day after day after day. I guess that's just life. Sometimes I don't even know why I get up in the morning; it all seems pointless. The only fun I ever have is getting drunk with my friends on the weekends, watching movies, or playing video games. But that can't be what life is all about, right?

Do you remember when we were in middle school and were so excited about our future? We imagined that adulthood would be filled with adventures and fun activities. How wrong we were! Life is so cruel and boring. Sometimes I wonder whether I should be more ambitious and maybe go back to school. But what's the point? It's not like making more money would solve all my problems. And in the end, whatever I achieve wouldn't matter. My dad worked so hard all his life and was eventually promoted to assistant manager. But what difference did that make? I don't think I've told you: he died last year, just months before he was supposed to retire. Cancer. So what did all of the hard work get him? Why do we even bother? We're all going to die sooner or later and will lose everything we have worked for. It's like some sick joke.

I'm sorry for sending you such a depressing email. It's just that this stuff has been on my mind for a while now and I can't shake it. I've talked to some people about it but nobody seems to have the answers.

**Instructions for Final Reflection**

The **purpose** of this assignment is:

* to reflect on how this class has affected your attitude toward death and the meaning of life
* to articulate your personal views on the meaning of life

## Section 1: “My Revised Email”

For the initial reflection, you composed an email to a friend who is going through a crisis.

* Re-read your email.
* Then write a short essay (**about 200 words**) explaining what, if anything, you would change about that email if you were to write it today. For instance, if you would now give the friend different advice, say what the new advice is and why you think it is better than the old advice. Or perhaps you would give the same advice but in a slightly different way, or with more details; in that case, explain how it would differ. Also say whether you think differently now about what your friend is going through.
* If you would not change anything, explain what advice you gave and why you still think that is good advice.
* Draw on course content if you find that helpful.
* **To get full points, your essay must be clear, well-written, on topic, and thoughtful.**

## Section 2: “How My Views Have Changed”

* Look back at your initial reflection, Part A. Find the claim on which your thinking has changed the most since the initial reflection. (E.g.: you changed your opinion about that claim; you changed your reasons for agreeing/disagreeing with the claim; you understand the claim differently than before). [Note: make sure not to have too much overlap between what you write about in section 2 and what you write about in section 3! Pick your claim with that in mind.]
* Then write a short essay (**about 400 words**) about your chosen claim, explaining what your current views are and how they differ from the views you expressed on the initial reflection.
* Explain why your current views are different. Say whether you have learned or encountered anything in this class that you find helpful in figuring out these issues.
* Also draw connections to at least one of the philosophical theories we have encountered. The connection must be strong and your essay must show that you have a solid and accurate understanding of that theory.
* **To get full points, your essay must be clear, well-written, on topic, thoughtful, and draw a strong connection to an assigned material.**

## Section 3: “My Theory of the Meaning of Life”

Write an essay (**about 600 words**) addressing **all** of the questions below. Don’t repeat what you wrote in Section 2!

* What are your current views on the meaning of life—can human lives be meaningful? If so, what precisely can make them meaningful? And if not, why not? You can agree with one or more of the theories we have discussed, or you can put forward views that you yourself came up with over the course of the semester, or you can do a combination. It’s okay if you are not completely settled on any theory; you can give a provisional answer (e.g. “I am currently inclined to accept Singer’s theory because…” or “I am currently torn between Aristotle’s theory and Susan Wolf’s theory because…”)
* Why do you currently think that those are the correct views on the meaning of life? Provide some reasons why you find these views plausible. In other words, provide a philosophical argument for your views.
* Has any theory, distinction, or assigned material in this class had a significant impact on your thinking? If so, which one, and how? If not, why not? You need to draw connections to at least one of the philosophical theories we have encountered. The connection must be strong and your essay must show that you have a solid and accurate understanding of that theory.
* How do your current views impact how you plan to live your life? Mention at least two concrete implications for how you intend to live.
* **To get full points, your essay must be clear, well-written, well-argued, on topic, thoughtful, and draw a strong connection to an assigned material.**