

Reflection Essay 2 Instructions (due end-of-day Thursday 11/21):

- The reflection essay should be 800-1000 words (deviations more than 100 words will be penalized).
- **General Instructions:**
 1. For this reflection essay you will:
 - Provide a critical comparison of two philosophical approaches to meaning in life using **only** the assigned scholarly readings.
 - There are four *essential* elements to this essay: (a) introduction and thesis, (b) explanation and elaboration of one criterion for a theory of meaning, (c) a general exegesis and comparison of two proposals for what makes life meaningful, and (d) a critical discussion showing how one of the proposals does a better job of satisfying the criterion for a theory of meaning explained in part (b).
 2. *Thesis (1 paragraph)*: Explicitly state your goal in writing the reflection essay. Just 1-2 short sentences should work, e.g., “In this reflection essay, I will critically evaluate Wolf’s claim that meaning requires objective value by critically comparing it with Taylor’s view. I will first discuss one criterion for a theory of meaning. Then I will argue that...”
 - You do not need an elaborate introduction or historical background. But make sure you let the reader know *why your thesis matters* to the discussion.
 3. *Explanation and Elaboration of a Criterion (1 paragraph)*:
 - A criterion for a theory of meaning is a **standard** against which we judge whether a proposal for meaning in life is a good proposal or not.
 - You can use any criterion we have used so far in the course. However, I highly recommend using one of the following discussed in a number of the readings (e.g., Metz, Kim & Seachris, Mlunwana): (i) significance/value, (ii) purpose/goals, (iii) narrative/intelligibility, (v) praiseworthiness, (vi) self-actualization, (vii) authentic engagement.
 - You want to focus on **one** of these criterion (do *not* try to discuss all of them in detail).
 - **Important:** You must explain the idea in your own words and try make a **novel** observation about the criterion, i.e., an observation not discussed in the reading or class. For example, you might explain how that criterion helps us understand meaning or explain why it should be given greater consideration than some other criterion.
 4. *Comparison of Two Proposals (1-2 paragraphs)*:
 - Here you will explain two approaches to meaning in life covered in class *in your own words*. You should **avoid** using long quotes from the readings.
 - Importantly, you will compare and contrast the two approaches.
 - Specifically, you want to focus on what exactly makes them different (e.g., you could give an example of a life that is meaningful on one account and explain why it isn’t on the other).
 - One of the proposals can be any proposal discussed so far this semester (e.g., you could use the same proposal from Reflection Essay 1). However, the second proposal **must** be one of Nagel, Sartre, Beauvoir, hooks, or Jenkins (possibly Riggle). Feel free to build on one of your reading questions.
 - You want to make sure you **carefully explain all key terms and ideas**.
 - **All citations regarding philosophical claims, theories, positions, authors, etc. must come from the assigned scholarly readings only.** For all references to the assigned reading, you should provide a parenthetical citation with the form (Author’s Last Name, Page #).
 5. *Critical discussion (1-2 paragraphs)*:
 - You want to convince the reader that one of the proposals does a better job of satisfying the criterion you discuss above.
 - You should try to give 2-3 reasons why. You can use examples if necessary.

- Please do **not** put your name anywhere in the main body of the essay.

Key Advice:

- **Philosophical Evidence for Critical Synthesis or Evaluation:**

Important: These are just additional critical ideas/strategies you could use. If you use one of these critical approaches, stay focused on one or two. Do **not** try to discuss all five in one essay.

1. Does the author's claim (or argument) apply to a wide range of cases, or does it leave some important cases out or does it conflate important factors? (*applicability*)
 2. In what ways is the claim (or argument) intuitive or counterintuitive? Is there any reason why intuitions about this claim might be misguided? (*intuitions/preconsidered beliefs*)
 3. Does the claim (or argument) answer an important question, or does it raise more questions than it answers? (*explanatory power*)
 4. Is the claim (or argument) consistent with other areas of philosophy, academic disciplines, or political/social/practical realities? (*fit with theory and practice*)
 5. How does the author's claim (or argument) fit or fail to fit with personal lived experiences? (*fit with lived realities*)
- **Advice on writing clearly.**
 1. Try to be as concise as possible while still being informative. I suggest writing your reflection essay at least 3-4 days before you turn it in. Then after taking a break, read through your reflection essay again before turning it in. Additionally, you could try rewriting the reflection essay completely from memory, and then compare with your original.
 2. You can also pretend that you are going to teach your reflection essay to a friend or relative, or class of intro to philosophy students. (In fact, I encourage you actually verbalize your reflection essay out loud, perhaps even recording yourself.) How would you need to present the material so that your friend, relative, or students understand (a) the author's claim you are engaging with, (b) your goal/thesis of the reflection essay, and (c) your criticism of the author, especially *why* they are criticisms of what the author is claiming

Grading Rubric:

- **This essay is worth 100 pts.** A reading essay **grade that falls between 60.00 – 69.99** (in the D- to D+ range) will have few grammatical errors, but
 - (a) it is vague, hard to follow the line of thought, demonstrates very little comprehension of the material, the interpretation of the passage seems hard to attribute to the author;
 - (b) little to no critical evaluation is offered (the essay is just basically rewording the text in an unilluminating manner);
 - (c) the criticisms are not clear and uncharitable to the author.
 - (d) (Unsatisfactory work will be scored less than 60.00.)
- A reading essay **grade that falls between 70.00 – 79.99** (in the C- to C+ range) will have few grammatical errors, but
 - (a) while it is mostly clear and the interpretation of the passage is more or less attributable to the author, the essay only demonstrates minimal comprehension of the material;
 - (b) minimal critical evaluation is offered but not much (i.e., the essay is still just basically rewording the text in an unilluminating manner);
 - (c) the criticisms are somewhat clear but still not really charitable to the author.
- A reading essay **grade that falls between 80.00 – 89.99** (in the B- to B+ range) will have few grammatical errors, and

- (a) is very clear, demonstrates decent comprehension of the material, the interpretation of the passage can be plausibly attributed to the author;
 - (b) some critical evaluation is offered but is still a bit unclear or underdeveloped;
 - (c) criticisms are cogent and charitable it isn't clear that the essay offers anything novel to understanding the author or debate.
- A reading essay **grade that falls between 90.00 – 92.99** (in the A- to A range) will have few grammatical errors, and
 - (a) is very clearly written, is charitable to the author, demonstrates a good comprehension of the material;
 - (b) there is clear critical and insightful commentary on the reading;
 - (c) offers a clear and interesting critical evaluation of the author's position.
 - A reading essay **grade that falls between 93.00 – 100.00** (in the A range) will have few grammatical errors, and
 - (a) is very clearly written, is charitable to the author, demonstrates thorough and outstanding comprehension of the material;
 - (b) there is clear critical and insightful commentary on the reading;
 - (c) offers a clear and forceful critical evaluation of the author's position; **and**
 - (d) demonstrates original thought that could be expected of a mature philosophy major (96+).

Methods:

What do I mean by **charity**? A charitable explanation or criticism of an author's claim is one that presents the author's idea/argument in the best possible light. If you have to choose between two interpretations of an author's claim, choose the one that makes the author more difficult to criticize. If you have to choose between two responses an author might have to your criticism, choose the one that is more challenging to your claim. If the author seems to be missing a premise or information, grant the author that information and see if the author's point still holds.

What do I mean by **exegesis**? For a good exegesis, the selection from the reading needs to be difficult to interpret. So, a good exegesis helps us better understand what the author might be saying when they make an otherwise unclear claim. Very often you need to offer textual evidence to support your exegesis. Additionally, a good exegesis shows that when the obscure passage is made clearer, we can see that the author's overall position is either strengthened or weakened. This is what makes the exegesis critical.

What do I mean by **analysis**? A good analysis involves explaining the various components of a view *and* showing how they all relate and fit together. A good analysis of a philosophical view is one that can be reasonably attributed to the author and is justified with textual evidence (direct quotes from or detailed citations of the primary texts). Sometimes this involves reconstructing an argument. Sometimes this involves making clear what exactly an author's view is and commitments are. Again, a good analysis gives textual evidence as support when needed. Furthermore, a good analysis will show how an author's overall position is weakened or supported. This is what makes the analysis critical.

What do I mean by **synthesis**? A good synthesis takes two or more ideas from a reading and shows an interesting connection between them that results in a new idea. Again, this often involves providing textual support for your claims. For example, a good synthesis might show that two claims an author makes seem to be contradictory, but when we try to make the two claims consistent we end up with a new (and often surprising) claim that either strengthens or weakens the author's overall view. However, the two (or more) claims need not appear to be inconsistent. It might be that an author failed to notice a consequence of two (or more) claims, which again either strengthens or weakens the author's overall position. This is what makes the synthesis critical.