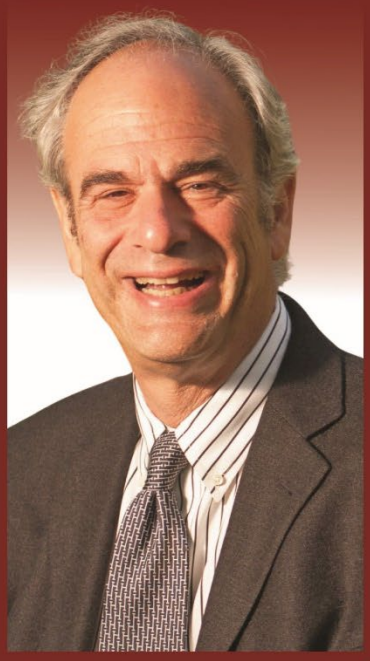
Eighth International Conference on

PHILOSOPHY AND MEANING IN LIFE

March 26-28, 2026 | University of Oklahoma, Norman
Thurman J. White Forum Building



SHERRI IRVIN

Presidential Research Professor of Philosophy and Women's and Gender Studies

University of Oklahoma

JOHN MARTIN FISCHER

Distinguished Professor of Philosophy

UC Riverside

Registration Link & QR code

bit.ly/ICPML26

For questions or accommodations, please contact ***philosophy@ou.edu***

DODGE FAMILY COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
SHYAM DEV PATWARDHAN DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

GLOBAL PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION PROJECT 2
BIRMINGHAM CENTRE FOR PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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Call for Papers for Publication

Journal of Philosophy of Life (www.philosophyoflife.org), a peer-reviewed, open-access academic journal, will publish a special issue for our 2026 Oklahoma conference. Although it is not a requirement for speakers, we encourage all speakers to submit papers based on their presentations at our conference for the special issue.

The deadline for submission is **30 September 2026**. Manuscripts should not exceed 8000 words. A 150-word abstract is also required. A final manuscript and an abstract should be sent to both journal@philosophyoflife.org and morioka@waseda.jp together with information about the author.

Please download the form (from www.philosophyoflife.org/informationaboutauthor.doc) to accompany your submission. If the author is not a native speaker of English, the manuscript must be proofread by a native speaker before submission. We do not charge authors any open-access or other fees. We will notify you of the results of the peer reviews and the editor(s)' decision by the end of December 2026. Accepted papers will be published in the Spring of 2027.

You can freely download the *Journal of Philosophy of Life: Special Issue for the 2024 Liverpool Conference* at: https://www.philosophyoflife.org/jpl2025si_book.pdf

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If you have any questions, please send an email to morioka@waseda.jp.

Masahiro Morioka
Editor-in-chief
Journal of Philosophy of Life

Delegate Information

Conference Venue:
Thurman J. White Forum Building, 1704 Asp Ave, Norman, OK 73072

Accommodations:
In addition to multiple Airbnb locations, there are several hotel options near campus:

- The Noun Hotel *RECOMMENDED*
  542 South University Blvd, Norman OK 73069
  (405) 701-5858
  Distance from conference venue: 2 miles (7-minute drive)

- NCED Conference Center & Hotel
  2801 East State Hwy 9, Norman, OK 73071
  (405) 447-9000
  Distance from conference venue: 4 miles (10-minute drive)

- La Quinta Inn & Suites by Wyndham Norman
  930 Ed Noble Dr, Norman, OK 73072
  (405) 579-4000
  Distance from Conference Venue: 3 miles (12-minute drive)

- Embassy Suites by Hilton Norman Hotel & Conference Center
  2501 Conference Dr, Norman, OK 73069
  (405) 364-8040
  Distance from conference venue: 5.5 miles (15-minute drive)

- Holiday Inn Express & Suites Norman
  2500 Conference Dr, Norman, OK 73069
  (405) 928-5300
  Distance from conference venue: 5.5 miles (15-minute drive)

- Hampton Inn & Suites Norman Conference Center Area
  2300 Conference Dr, Norman, OK 73069
  (405) 310-3014
  Distance from conference venue: 6 miles (18-minute drive)

Getting Here:

- From Will Rogers World Airport (OKC)
  Norman is approximately 25 minutes south of Oklahoma City's airport.
  By car: Take I-44 E to I-240 E, then merge onto I-35 S. Take exit 108B for Lindsey Street.
  Ride share: Uber and Lyft operate widely in the area.

- From Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport (DFW)
  Norman is approximately 3 hours north of DFW.
  By car: Take I-35 N directly to Norman.
  By train: Amtrak's Heartland Flyer runs daily from Fort Worth to Norman

Dining:

Breakfast

- Press & Plow
  800 W Lindsey St, Norman, OK 73069
  (405) 857-2584
  "The purveyor of daily bruncheon, spirits, coffee, and provisions"

- Levity Breakfast House
  309 S Peters Ave, Norman, OK 73069
  (405) 256-2136
  "Portland roots, Norman flavor"

- Neighborhood JAM
  102 W Main St, Norman, OK 73069
  (405) 310-2127
  "An innovative breakfast destination… a fun and unpretentious place to begin their day."

Restaurants & Cafes

There are several options on Campus Corner and Downtown Norman.

- The Winston
  106 W Main St, Norman, OK 73069
  (405) 561-7616
  "…classic meals with a modern flair and boasts a sizable whiskey selection"

- Scratch Kitchen & Cocktails
  132 W Main St, Norman, OK 73069
  (405) 801-2900
  "…crafted entirely from scratch and features smokehouse bacon, pan-seared fish, farm fresh veggies and slow roasted meats."

- Benvenuti's Ristorante
  105 W Main St, Norman, OK 73069
  (405) 310-5271
  "… offers old world Italian with a new world twist."

- Legend's Restaurant

1313 W Lindsey St, Norman, OK 73069
(405) 329-8888
"...casually up-scale family-owned restaurant which has served Norman and the University of Oklahoma for 57 years."

- Midway Deli
  601 W Eufaula St, Norman, OK 73069
  (405) 321-7004
  "...tucked catty-corner at the end of a quiet residential street...an old-fashioned deli"

- Pepe Delgados: Authentic Mexican Food
  786 Asp Ave, Norman, OK 73069
  (405) 321-6232
  "Fresh food from southern Mexico"

- Ray's BBQ
  1514 W Lindsey St, Norman, OK 73069
  (405)-329-4040
  "Our motto is: a rib so tender, you don't need teeth!"

<u>Bars & Pubs</u>

- The Library Bar & Grill
  607 W Boyd St, Norman, OK 73069
  (405) 360-4258
  "...named one of America's 10 Best College Town Bars by Esquire Magazine... tucked away behind lush foliage in an old house"

- Blu Fine Wine & Food
  201 S Crawford Ave, Norman, OK 73069
  (405) 360-4258
  "...a variety of American-style tapas"; "...extensive wine selection..."

- O'Connell's Irish Pub & Grille
  769 Asp Ave, Norman, OK 73069
  (405) 217-8454
  "...a fun atmosphere, tons of drink specials, live entertainment and delicious food."

Campus Dining
You can find a list of all campus dining options here.

- Couch Restaurants
  333 3rd St, Norman, OK 73072
  Buffet-style
  Home to the only all-you-can-eat Chick-fil-A in the world!

- Residential Colleges Dining Hall
  250 W Lindsey St, Norman, OK 73019
  Buffet-style

- Wagner Dining Hall
  100 E Lindsey St, Norman, OK 73069
  Buffet-style

Local Attractions:
Norman

- Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art
  555 Elm Ave, Norman, OK 73019
  (405) 325-3272
  "...widely regarded as one of the finest university art museums in the United States"; "Highlights include the Weitzenhoffer Collection of French Impressionism, the Eugene B. Adkins Collection of art of the American Southwest and Native American art, the James T. Bialac Native American Art Collection..."

- Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History
  2401 Chautauqua Ave, Norman, OK 73072
  (405) 325-7977
  "Founded in 1899, the museum collections include 10 million specimens and artifacts from the life sciences, earth sciences and social sciences"; "[traces] over 500 million years of Oklahoma's natural and cultural history..."

- Sooner Shop
  1185 Asp Ave, Norman, OK 73069
  (405) 310-2688
  Official OU merchandise; located inside Oklahoma Memorial Stadium

- Lake Thunderbird State Park
  13101 Alameda Dr, Norman, OK 73026
  (405) 360-3572
  "...Oklahoma's only urban state park, boasts 86 miles of shoreline and offers water sports, hiking and biking trails, camping, eagle watches and more."

Oklahoma City

- Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum
  620 N Harvey Ave, Oklahoma City, OK 73102
  (405) 235-3313
  "The Outdoor Symbolic Memorial is a place of quiet reflection. It honors those who were killed, those who survived and those changed forever on April 19, 1995."; "The Memorial Museum is an interactive learning experience that occupies the west end of the former Journal Record Building. Built in 1923, this building withstood the bombing."

- National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum
  1700 Northeast 63rd St, Oklahoma City, OK 73111
  (405) 478-2250
  "...America's premier institution of Western history, art and culture."

- Full Circle Bookstore
  1900 NW Expressway St, Oklahoma City, OK 73118
  (405) 842-2900
  "...oldest and largest independent bookstore in Oklahoma"

- Scissortail Park
  300 SW 7th St, Oklahoma City, OK 73109
  (405) 445-6277
  "...ornamental gardens and woodlands, a 3.7 acre lake, children's playground and nature play area, interactive water fountains, seasonal roller rink, dog park, sports courts, picnic grove, restaurant, and performance stage..."

- Bricktown Entertainment District
  East of downtown Oklahoma City
  "...former warehouse district is filled with restaurants, nightlife and entertainment options."

Day 1: Thursday, March 26, 2026

All rooms in Thurman J. White Forum Building	Room A	Room A4	Room A6
1:00- 1:20pm	Registration / Coffee		
1:20-1:30pm	Welcome – Rusty Jones (OU Philosophy Department Chair)		
1:30-2:45pm	John Martin Fischer (UC Riverside), “In Favor of (Minimal) Narrativity” Chair: Yujin Nagasawa	--	--
2:45-2:55pm	Break		
2:55-3:35pm	Katherine Johnson (Bellarmine University), “Hope, Socratic Ignorance, and the Good Life” Chair: William Burnham-Fleck	Brian Ballard (Loyola Marymount University), “How to be Happy While Destroying the World: A Neglected Problem of Meaning” Chair: Yujin Nagasawa	Tyler Sproule (University of Illinois Chicago), “The Meaningfulness of Grief: A Phenomenological Approach Chair: Masahiro Morioka
3:35-3:50pm	Coffee Break		
3:50-4:30pm	Melle van Duijn (University of Oklahoma), “Socratic Pessimism and a Meaningful Life” Chair: William Burnham-Fleck	Violet Victoria (University of Oklahoma), “Self-Sacrifice and Institutional Virtue Ethics: A Challenge for the Capabilities Approach” Chair: Yujin Nagasawa	--
4:30-4:40pm	Break		
4:40-5:20pm	Yidi Wu (Boston University), “Virtue and the Meaning of Life: A Comparative Study of	Jonathan Parsons (North Central College, Elmhurst University, Loyola	Lydia Jin (Dartmouth College), “The Engine of Meaning:

	Aristotle and Mencius on Happiness or Human Flourishing" Chair: William Burnham-Fleck	University Chicago, Ashland University, Murray State University, Northern Illinois University), "'I Don't Have Time for Meaning! I Have to Work!'" Chair: Yujin Nagasawa	Love in Solitude, Partnership, and Grief" Chair: Masahiro Morioka
5:30pm	Buffet dinner at the conference venue – all registered participants welcome		

Day 2: Friday, March 27, 2026

All rooms in Thurman J. White Forum Building	Room A	Room A4	Room A6
8:30-9:00am	Coffee		
9:00-9:40am	Leigh Vicens (Augustana University), "Finding Meaning in the Greater Good" Chair: Maleah Marcus	--	Iddo Landau (University of Haifa), Meaning in Life and Mysticism Chair: Samuel Jonathan
9:40-9:50am	Break		
9:50-10:30am	Jonathan Strand (Concordia University of Edmonton), "In Defense of Moderate Supernaturalism" Chair: Maleah Marcus	Matthew Schunke (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville), "Meaning and the Wine World: A Phenomenological Account" Chair: David Matheson	Andrea Villalba Cuesta (University of Texas at Austin), "Why the Rose Matters" Chair: Samuel Jonathan
10:30-10:40am	Break		
10:40-11:20am	Mark Silcox (University of Central Oklahoma),	Dave Bukenhofer (Rose State College),	Augustus Pomerleau

	"Value Capture and Value Evasion" Chair: Maleah Marcus	"Meaning from Experience: Accepting Limitation and Foreclosing Possibilities" Chair: David Matheson	(Georgia State University), "Does Benatar's Quality of Life Argument Entail Pro-Mortalism?" Chair: Samuel Jonathan
11:20-11:30pm	Break		
11:30-12:10pm	Yael Mishani-Uval (Bar-Ilan University), "Seeing What Matters: Wittgenstein's Model for Meaning in Life" Chair: Maleah Marcus	Kiki Berk (Southern New Hampshire University), "Why Camus Isn't a Nihilist" Chair: David Matheson	Becca Cannon (San Francisco State University), "A Virtue Ethical approach to the Deferential Wife: An exploration of the possibility for women to flourish through the formation of virtue" Chair: Samuel Jonathan
12:10-1:40pm	Lunch: We will guide you to the Residential Colleges Dining Hall, a modest walk from the conference site, where an affordable lunch option is available. You can also find restaurants on Campus Corner (see map).		
1:40-2:20pm	Jesse S. Summers (Duke University), "Putting Purpose in its Place (Ethics for Assholes)" Chair: Violet Victoria	--	Dario Vaccaro (University of Tennessee), "Does It Not Matter Because One Day It Will End?" Chair: Hunter Bissette
2:20-2:30pm	Break		
2:30-3:10pm	Edward Hinchman (Florida State University), "Meaning as Intelligible Investment"	Samuel Jonathan (University of Oklahoma), "Meaning Subjectivism and	Malcolm Morano (Harvard University), "Understanding, Doing, and Being:

	Chair: Violet Victoria	Everyday Aesthetic Experiences” Chair: Yujin Nagasawa	Towards a Meaning-Based Metaethics” Chair: Hunter Bissette
3:10-3:25pm	Coffee Break		
3:25-4:05pm	Shawn Graves (University of Findlay), “Love and Meaning in Life” Chair: Violet Victoria	Kianna Mahony (Harvard Divinity School), “What Can A Person With Schizophrenia Teach Us About The Meaning Of Life? Exploring Meaning-Making Themes Amongst Psychiatric Patients in Clinical Settings” Chair: Yujin Nagasawa	Jason Murphy (Elms College), “Pushing Metaphysics Behind The Search for Meaning: with the simulation argument as an example” Chair: Hunter Bissette
4:05-4:15pm	Break		
4:15-4:55pm	William Burnham-Fleck (University of Oklahoma), “Divine Requitement: An Anselmian Account of How Life Derives Meaning from Loving God” Chair: Violet Victoria	Itay Melamed (Cornell University), “The Fear of Death is neither Rational nor Irrational – it is Arational!” Chair: Yujin Nagasawa	Gary Scott Osmundsen (Grand Canyon University), “The Paradox of the End and the Metaphysics of Perichoretic Agency” Chair: Hunter Bissette

Day 3: Saturday, March 28, 2026

All rooms in Thurman J. White Forum Building	Room A	Room A4	Room A6
8:30-9:00am	Coffee		

9:00-9:40am	Hunter Bissette (University of Oklahoma), "More Value, Less Significance? A Reply to Guy Kahane's Value Impact View" Chair: Iddo Landau	--	Jonah Goldwater (William & Mary University), "Must a meaningful life have a meaning?" Chair: Kiki Berk
9:40-9:50am	Break		
9:50-10:30am	Nobuo Kurata (Soka University), "Understanding, Normativity, and Metaphysics: The Epistemological, Normative, and Metaphysical Dimensions of the Philosophy of Life's Meaning" Chair: Iddo Landau	Christopher Holland (Saint Louis University), "Self-Fulfillment Eudaimonism and the Image of God" Chair: Jack Symes	David Matheson (Carleton University), "The Multiple Realizability of Life's Meaning" Chair: Kiki Berk
10:30-10:40am	Break		
10:40-11:20am	Masahiro Morioka (Waseda University), "The Meaning of a Finite Life and the Evaporation of My Existence" Chair: Iddo Landau	Mirela Oliva (University of St. Thomas, Houston), "On Divine Purpose: An Experiential Approach" Chair: Jack Symes	Justice Cabantangan (Florida State University), "Is Life (at Best) a Game We Are Playing?" Chair: Kiki Berk
11:20-11:30pm	Break		
11:30-12:10pm	Anqi Fan (University of Oklahoma), "Defending Susan Wolf's Theory of Meaning in Life Against the Luck Objection" Chair: Iddo Landau	Elliott R. Jones (Boston College), "Sabbath and Leisure as Remedy for Modernity: A Comparative Study Between Abraham Joshua Heschel and Josef Pieper"	Michael Mohajer (York University), "Undervaluing AI Systems to Preserve Human Life Value?" Chair: Kiki Berk

		Chair: Jack Symes	
12:10-1:40pm	Lunch: We will guide you to the Residential Colleges Dining Hall, a modest walk from the conference site, where an affordable lunch option is available. You can also find restaurants on Campus Corner (see map).		
1:40-2:20pm	Vincent De Prado (University of Cincinnati), "Non-Narrative Meaning in Life" Chair: Brian Ballard	Drew Chastain (Loyola University, New Orleans), "Absurd Art and Meaningful Living" Chair: Michael Mohajer	Xiaoyu (Dan) Deng (University of Oklahoma), "Trust and Meaning in Human–AI Interaction" Chair: Nobuo Kurata
2:20-2:30pm	Break		
2:30-3:10pm	Jack Symes (Durham University), "Modal Panentheism: Ethics, Afterlife, and Evil" Chair: Brian Ballard	Jacob Cherry (Duquesne University), "The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience in Michelangelo's Pietà and the Art of Suffering as a Warning Against Despair" Chair: Michael Mohajer	Kerry Clark (University of Tennessee), "Living Creatively" Chair: Nobuo Kurata
3:10-3:25pm	Coffee Break		
3:25-4:40pm	Sherri Irvin (University of Oklahoma), "Everyday Aesthetic Activism" Chair: Yujin Nagasawa	--	--
4:40-4:50pm	Closing Remarks		

Abstracts

Speaker: Brian Ballard (Loyola Marymount University)
Title: How to be Happy While Destroying the World: A Neglected Problem of Meaning
I want to describe a threat to our life's meaning which few seem to have noticed. It follows from three plausible theses.

First, according to many philosophers—e.g., Robert Nozick and Susan Wolf—how well our lives are going depends largely on whether we are appropriately linked with final value. For instance, things go better for us when we are routinely engaged in appreciating, nurturing, and generating finally valuable things around us. Conversely, our lives go worse when we limit, destroy, or desecrate such finally valuable things. Worse how? In light of much recent work on meaning in life, I shall take it that destroying final value degrades our life's meaning. Call this thesis the Value-Meaning Linkage.

Second, here is a plausible axiological claim: Plant and animal life as well as ecosystems and landscapes have immense final value. Call this Ecological Value.
Third, consider an empirical fact about us: Not only do we routinely destroy plant and animal life as well other ecological goods; it seems we must do so in order to survive. Our very existence depends on the destruction of immense final value. Call this Must Destroy.
Given these three theses, the Dreaded Conclusion follows: Our life's meaning inevitably suffers significant degradation.

The intuitive idea here is one that many of us feel acutely already. We are uncomfortable depending on unjust or exploitative systems. We wish we had some way of living less destructively. This is an ethical project that lies at the heart of some well-known religious traditions, notably Jainism, and which motivates many vegans and vegetarians today.
The question I want to explore is, Are we stuck with the Dreaded Conclusion? Or is there some way to escape this argument?

I shall consider and reject four tempting routes of escape.

The first appeals to conscientious consumption. But I argue that even the most conscientious consumer must rely on significant environmental destruction.

The second appeals to the right to preserve one's life and thus to consume destructively. But this mislocates the problem, which is not that destroying value is wrong but that it degrades meaning.

The third appeals to our maximizing expected value by consuming plant and animal life. But this fails to appreciate that having to maximize expected value by actively destroying is still tragic for us.

The fourth appeals to the kind of thing we are. It is in our nature to consume. But it is false that something in our nature cannot degrade meaning for us.

I end by exploring the extent to which supernaturalism can help us here. Specifically, can we envision an afterlife in which we no longer persist as destroyers, an afterlife in which the "the wolf shall lay down with the lamb, and the child shall play over the adder's den"? I argue that such an afterlife is not only possible but plausible if theism is true, and so this represents one way in which theism would significantly add to our life's meaning because it implies that Must Destroy is true only for a brief early period of our everlasting existence.

Speaker: Kiki Berk (Southern New Hampshire University)
Title: Why Camus Isn't a Nihilist

Camus famously argues that life is absurd because our desire for meaning clashes with the lack of inherent meaning in the universe. In The Myth of Sisyphus, he claims that it would be "philosophical suicide" to impose meaning on a life that inherently lacks it. He accuses religion and existentialism (e.g., Sartre and Kierkegaard) of making this move, which he also characterizes as "creating false meaning." As a result, Camus is commonly interpreted as a nihilist—that is, as someone who believes that, in the absence of inherent meaning, no meaning can be created. For example, Thadeus Metz writes: "It is logically consistent to hold the combination of supernaturalism and atheism and, hence, nihilism, as Tolstoy and Camus appear to have done."

In this paper, I argue that Camus isn't a nihilist—for two reasons.

First, if one understands meaning in life as subjective naturalists do, then life isn't meaningless on Camus's account. Subjective naturalists hold that life has no inherent meaning (there's no "meaning of life"), but individual human lives can be meaningful if they're found to be so (there can be "meaning in life"). According to subjective naturalists, finding your life meaningful is equivalent to finding your life worthwhile. While he holds that life has no inherent meaning, Camus believes that life can nevertheless be worthwhile. Thus, Camus is better classified as a subjective naturalist than as a nihilist.

Second, if one understands meaning in life in terms of value—as do Susan Wolf and Iddo Landau—then life isn't meaningless on Camus's account. Camus speaks of life having "value," despite its absurdity and lack of inherent meaning. While he doesn't consider values to be objective, Camus considers some of them—in particular, freedom, justice, and authenticity—to be central to a life worth living. Thus, the life Camus recommends—namely one in which we confront the absurdity of life with freedom, revolt, and passion—is meaningful insofar it contains value.

In conclusion, while commonly interpreted as a nihilist, Camus is better understood as a subjective naturalist. Camus's subjective naturalism isn't a form of "philosophical suicide" or "false meaning" because it's possible, according to Camus, to live a worthwhile life that exhibits value while also being fully aware of its absurdity.

Speaker: Hunter Bissette (University of Oklahoma)
Title: More Value, Less Significance? A Reply to Guy Kahane's Value Impact View
Are we cosmically significant? Guy Kahane argues that we might be—but only if humanity is the sole locus of sentient value in the universe. On his Value Impact View (VIV), the degree to which something is significant is a function of how much difference it makes to the total intrinsic value of its domain relative to other things in that domain. According to Kahane, to be significant (or important) is to merit attention and concern. A striking consequence of this view is that the existence of extraterrestrial sentience would substantially dilute human significance by reducing our proportional share of value in the cosmic domain—and thereby diminishing the attention or concern our lives merit from the cosmic standpoint.

In this paper, I develop a critique of Kahane's Value Impact View. In general, I argue that VIV cannot sustain the normative conclusions it is meant to support. In particular, I challenge the claim that increased cosmic value elsewhere diminishes what merits attention or concern here. To show this, I develop four interconnected objections. First, I show that Kahane equivocates between causal and proportional notions of "difference-making," without offering a principled account of how these relations are to be combined. Second, I argue that VIV requires a hitherto unacknowledged form of aspect-relativity in addition to domain-relativity, complicating its ability to deliver determinate judgments of ceteris paribus importance. Third, I argue that causal difference-making does not track what is worthy of attention, since attention is properly directed at those factors that explain why an outcome matters, rather than at those that merely initiate some causal process. Finally, I contend that proportional difference-making does not ground a rivalrous model of normative desert: the fact that something else makes a greater contribution to overall value does not diminish what any given object or event deserves in principle.

The upshot is that Kahane's Value Impact View fails to clearly distinguish three roles—making a difference, being important, and meriting attention—roles that no single notion of "difference to value" can jointly fulfill. If this diagnosis is correct, then the dilution of human cosmic significance does not follow from the mere expansion of value elsewhere in the universe. As it turns out, whether solitary or surrounded, our cosmic significance may depend less on our share of value impact and more on the evaluative facts that fix what attention or concern is owed to us, rather than how our value impact is distributed.

Speaker: Dave Bukenhofer (Rose State College)
Title: Meaning from Experience: Accepting Limitation and Foreclosing Possibilities
Bertrand Russell observed that the cosmos does not provide one with a basis for concluding that human life has a purpose. I contend his conclusion is premature since the cosmos does not exhaust the full range of possible information relevant for discerning human purpose.
The preferable approach would be to develop a disposition that is inclusive of new experiences to foster exposure to the widest range of relevant information possible. The full range of possible first-person human experience is vast, and as such arguably holds sources of purpose—and thus meaning. For example, an experience of being valued could supply a source of purpose for one's life, even if it did so incompletely. On the premise that personal experience is a plausible source of meaning—especially meaning in life—it would be a mistake to exclude it in a search for a meaning of life.

Unfortunately, many would report never undergoing such an unambiguously positive experience. Despite this, other experiences are useful in the search for purpose, provided one responds to them appropriately. Particularly, experiences of limitation as described by H. Richard Niebuhr fit this description. Limiting experiences provoke self-reflection, which functions as a constraint on the available possibilities for purpose. In this way, limiting experiences help to foreclose some options when seeking purpose. Surveying the full range of purpose-relevant information will be difficult due to the sheer volume and dynamic complexity of it all. Developing self-awareness in terms of various limitations facilitates the dismissal of at least frivolous possibilities, and potentially more. In this way, a limiting experience places one into a different circumstance than what William James described as a "genuine option": an unavoidable, momentous decision in which either choice seems plausible. With one option now much less plausible, the choice is clearer—even if still difficult. The choice may not leave one in possession of purpose, but at least one route has been closed off. In short, limiting experiences help prevent one from being overwhelmed by too many choices in a search for purpose.

Finally, accepting personal limitations can also motivate the acquisition of additional purpose-relevant information. For example, the limited duration of human life forces the consideration of an awful possibility—that one's life may lack meaning. If one lacks conclusive evidence for either purpose or purposelessness, then the prudent choice is to err on the side of purpose. If the full range of human experience has not yet been exhausted, then it would be better to continue looking, perhaps while adjusting how one looks as well as where or from whom. Russell lauded the heroism of accepting the purposelessness of human life while also abstaining from worshipping a divinity created by one's own conscience. But it would be better to hold out hope for a genuine lasting purpose (and thus meaning for life) derived from first-person experience.

Speaker: William Burnham-Fleck (University of Oklahoma)
Title: Divine Requitement: An Anselmian Account of How Life Derives Meaning from Loving God

To decipher how life's meaning is obtained, this paper seeks to revitalize an argument presented by Anselm of Canterbury in Monologion 68-70, which is henceforth referred to as the Anselmian argument for immortality (AAI). By drawing upon its conclusion that a person will maintain her existence by loving God for eternity, whence she is made happy, I will argue that the AAI gives traditional theists reason to think that meaning in life is derived from loving God. Based on my analysis of the AAI. I will offer two points that each indicate that meaning in life is ultimately derived from loving God. First, since God is the highest good, there is nothing greater that a person can pursue beyond loving God since, by definition, there is no other higher good. Secondly, inspired by Boethius, I argue that the eternal happiness resulting from loving God is the perpetual perfection of anything otherwise lacking in the person (joy, worthiness, and so on). Therefore, since there is nothing greater than God for a person to pursue, and because loving God results in eternal perfection of the person, the theist can conclude that that a fitting account of life's meaning is derived from the AAI.

My analysis will begin by noting that the AAI hinges on its first premise that the purpose of a person is to love God since he is identified as the highest good. Borrowing from Augustine's definition of charity, the criterion for loving God is fulfilled when a person has a disposition to find joy in God for God's own sake. Following the argument's key premise that the purpose of the person is to love God, Anselm argues that it is repugnant to the nature of God to annihilate the existence of the person who loves him. Consequently, by acting in accordance with the goodness of his nature, God will sustain the existence of the lover. Contrary to the notion that loving God for eternity is a bleak life, it will be argued with Anselm that the person who chooses to love God will be requited with true happiness. Therefore, the AAI is shown to aid theists seeking to answer the question: what is life's meaning? The answer given is that meaning in life is ultimately derived from loving God (the highest good).

Speaker: Justice Cabantangan (Florida State University)
Title: Is Life (at Best) a Game We Are Playing?

In 1967, Bernard Suits published "Is Life a Game We Are Playing?". He explores the namesake question—a descriptive one—and concludes that nothing about life itself precludes it from being a game, albeit on his own technical definition of "game". Here, I explore a related question, but a normative one: Should life be a game that we play? I will argue that there is some reason to answer this affirmatively. I begin by introducing the recent cultural phenomenon of romanticizing, which trended on social media platforms, especially TikTok, during the early pandemic. Romanticizing is characterized by its distinct phenomenology. (1) It enhances the experience of the ordinary in some way. (2) It offers a sense of freedom. (3) A feeling of happiness or contentment arises from (1) and (2). Successful instances of romanticizing seem to be plausible candidates for moments we might refer to as "the best" or "the most meaningful" in life. Then, I consider Michael Zhao's account regarding the meaning of life—the "narrative account"—that seems like a promising candidate to make sense of the phenomenology of romanticizing in terms of narrative coherence. According to the narrative account, whatever makes the "meaning of life" appealing can be achieved just as well by having a unified life narrative centered around a theme. It can be argued that romanticizing amounts to cognizing or experiencing one's life as having such a narrative, and that this experience explains (1), (2), and (3). While this may be the case, I will argue that the narrative account does not explain the relevant phenomenology in the right ways, then I will suggest an alternative. An important part of the experience of (1) is a feeling of "wholeheartedness", a feeling of simplicity – that one can relax into the present moment without the demands of the world constantly tugging at them. An important part of the experience of (2) and (3) is a feeling of being uniquely suited to take on the challenges of life. Games are better suited than narratives for accounting for these parts of (1), (2), and (3), because they align with what makes games aesthetically pleasing. This suggests a "game account" of the meaning of life wherein whatever makes the "meaning of life" appealing can be achieved just as well if life were a well-designed game that we played. Along with better accounting for (1), (2), and (3) Such an account seems to also enjoy the same benefits as the narrative account by helping us understand and find direction in our lives. Instead of using mere narrative as a model for the meaningful life, a rather different kind of aesthetic object serves as a better model: a game. Finally, I discuss how this opens the door for further research into the connections between the aesthetics of games and the meaning of life.

Speaker: Becca Cannon (San Francisco State University)
Title: A Virtue Ethical approach to the Deferential Wife: An exploration of the possibility for women to flourish through the formation of virtue

In this project, I explore the possibility for women to flourish through the formation of happiness and virtue when raised and while living in deferential situations. I ask, can the ignorant truly flourish? To answer this question, I first explore the character Thomas E. Hill created of the deferential wife in his piece "Servility and Self-Respect." I address the response of both Marilyn Friedman and Jan and Bernard Boxill to the character of the deferential wife. Second, I introduce a case study of LDS women who embody the deferential wife. Third, I explore the idea of happiness proposed by Philippa Foot that happiness is inseparable from virtue. Fourth, I engage with the work of Julia Annas and use her ideas on how virtues are formed through practice to make the claim that women living in deference are limited in their formation of virtue and therefore are limited in their capacity to flourish.

Speaker: **Drew Chastain (Loyola University, New Orleans)**
Title: Absurd Art and Meaningful Living

Exploration of art and aesthetics can provide important insights into meaningful living. In "Meaning and Beauty" (2023), Lucas Scripter makes the argument that appreciation of beauty in art, nature and everyday life can confer meaning on a life. Appreciation of beauty involves an active dimension through heightened attention and interpretation, so that discernment of beauty can be admired, conferring a kind of objective meaning on the life of the beauty beholder. Also, the passive element in experiences of beauty can make life more meaningful because such experiences simply make life subjectively worth living.
But then beauty is not the only aesthetic quality that can be appreciated in art. Absurdity in art would present a different kind of challenge. What I'm calling absurd art would foreground conceptual, social or existential absurdity as a prominent theme or formal element, as found in dada or surrealist art, the literary works of Kafka or Dostoevsky, or in theatre of the absurd or David Lynch films.

A special difficulty with the idea that appreciation of absurd art could make a life more meaningful is that the expressed theme of existential absurdity can be directly at odds with the idea that life is meaningful at all. In The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus states that the "absurd work … cannot be the end, the meaning, and the consolation of a life. … My life may find meaning in it, but that is trifling." Instead, Camus' ideal expression of absurdity is simply the lucid acknowledgement of the futility of life while asserting one's liberty.

I'll be suggesting that appreciation of absurd art does indeed interfere with an interest in a meaningful life, understood as a life that is admirable or prideworthy from a rationally objective standpoint, since positive appreciation of absurdity amounts to endorsing anti-rationality. That said, there can still be a way to talk about how absurd art is a "meaningful thing" (de Muijnck 2012, 2016) that contributes to "meaningful living" (Calhoun 2018), however trifling personal, subjective meaning may be. For one, absurd art can be valuable as a form of liberation from restrictive routine and conventional modes of living, involving an anti-rationalist and anti-bourgeois appeal to freedom that is often touted in dada and surrealist manifestoes. Absurd art can have a meaningfulness in this way that contributes to subjectively meaningful living, but as a form of revolt against any theory of the objectively meaningful life. I believe there is a place in our lives for appreciation of absurdity that inspires a healthy ambivalence toward living an objectively meaningful life, so that objective meaningfulness is both valued and not valued.

Speaker: Jacob Cherry (Duquesne University)

The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience in Michelangelo's Pietà and the Art of Suffering as a Warning Against Despair

This paper explores the phenomenology of aesthetic experience through Michelangelo's Pietà and other works that portray human suffering. While the Pietà has been studied as a pinnacle of Renaissance artistry, its significance extends beyond formal beauty or religious devotion. The sculpture stages a profound confrontation with vulnerability, loss, and mortality, inviting the beholder into a lived experience of both suffering and consolation. By analyzing the Pietà phenomenologically, I argue that such works can act as aesthetic warnings against despair, disclosing pathways of meaning where anguish might otherwise overwhelm.

The study begins by situating the Pietà within the broader phenomenology of aesthetic experience as articulated by thinkers such as Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. These frameworks highlight how art discloses truth not through abstract propositions but through lived, embodied encounter. In the Pietà, the beholder experiences an intermingling of fragility and serenity: Mary's sorrowful tenderness toward Christ mediates suffering without collapsing into hopelessness. This aesthetic configuration reveals despair not as the inevitable response to suffering but as one possible orientation among others.

Building on this analysis, I place the Pietà in dialogue with other artistic depictions of suffering—both Michelangelo's later works, such as the Florentine Pietà, and more modern representations of human anguish. These comparisons underscore how aesthetic form can either deepen despair (when suffering is presented as meaningless) or resist it (when suffering is held within a horizon of significance). The phenomenological approach thus provides a method for distinguishing how certain works disclose despair while others ward it off.

I argue that works like the Pietà function as a kind of existential pedagogy. By allowing the viewer to "see" and "feel" suffering in a form that is at once tragic and beautiful, the artwork invites reflection on how despair may be resisted through recognition of meaning in vulnerability, care, and love. Rather than offering a simplistic resolution, the aesthetic experience holds tension, acknowledging the weight of anguish while disclosing its possibility for transcendence.

The paper concludes by suggesting that phenomenological engagement with the art of suffering not only enriches art historical interpretation but also speaks to contemporary existential and therapeutic concerns. In a cultural climate marked by despair, alienation, and loss, returning to the Pietà as an aesthetic encounter reveals how art continues to serve as a site of resistance, where meaning arises against the temptation to despair.

Speaker: Kerry Clark (University of Tennessee)
Title: Living Creatively

In this paper, we propose a hybrid theory of human well-being grounded in the notions of free will and the human experience of time. The analysis of the "good life" and what it means to live a flourishing existence is, of course, not new to philosophy—much ink has been spilled in the effort to uncover the key to well-being. Our aim is to contribute a fresh perspective by refocusing attention on often-overlooked factors that shape well-being. To this end, our discussion unfolds in four parts. First, we introduce and briefly evaluate several major theories in the literature, including hedonism (see Crisp 2006; Mill 1863; Nozick 1974), objective list theories (see Moore 2000; Hurka 2019), and hybrid theories (see Wolf 1997). Second, following in the theoretical footsteps of hybrid theorists such as Wolf, we present our preferred model, which integrates both objective and subjective dimensions into a unified theory of well-being. We argue that a central component of well-being is tied to our experience of time and our sense of freedom. While these may appear to be objective criteria, they possess an inherently subjective dimension, as they depend on perception and lived experience. This approach occupies a novel position in the well-being literature, as hybrid theories typically emphasize more conventional elements—such as wealth, friendship, or purpose—rather than abstract concepts like time and free will. We believe that shifting the focus toward these dimensions can yield more universally applicable insights into the nature of well-being. Third, we address an objection to our view—that its emphasis on abstract notions like time and free will risks overlooking the full complexity of human well-being. Finally, we suggest preliminary ways our hybrid theory might inform practical approaches to enhancing well-being for individuals with both typical and altered experiences of time and agency—for instance, those living with dementia.

Speaker: Vincent De Prado (University of Cincinnati)
Title: Non-Narrative Meaning in Life

The claim that narrative is essential to or required for meaning in life is actually quite common, reflected in some ways by Paul Riccouer, Charles Taylor, Allistair Macintyre, and seemingly many others. This paper argues that narrative is neither necessary nor sufficient for meaning in life. Recently, many authors assume or argue for a strong connection between narrative and meaning in life (Goldman 2018; de Bres 2019). Some argue, too, that the meaning of life is narrative intelligibility, or that narratives applied to one's life or existential situation answer questions about the meaning of life (Seachris 2011, 2019; Thomas 2019; Zhao 2025). In these cases, sensemaking is allegedly maximized or achieved exclusively through narrative.

Then, I examine whether narrative is sufficient for meaning in life. There are false, misleading, and bad-faith narratives. These narratives lead to the kind of alienation that is consistent with a need for greater meaning in one's life. Thus, it is not simply narrative but the right narrative that might be sufficient for meaning in life. Helena de Bres argues for a fitting narrative view. She claims that narrative is important for meaning in life because it enables the values of understanding and community by rendering one's life intelligible to the self and others. This account relies on a more basic explanatory mechanism for the derivation of meaning than narrative, which is what is described as "intelligibility." Since narrative accounts do not simply allow for any old narrative but the right kind, I think it is essential to ask why narrative should make for meaning in life instead of these other ingredients. I will distinguish sensemaking as meaning in life from narrative frameworks by elaborating an embodied sensemaking account of meaning in life. I find that narrative is not sufficient for meaning in life.

Narrative is also not necessary for meaning in life. That narrative is not necessary for meaning in life is evidenced by the fact that there are modes of self-transcendence where one finds greater meaning in foregoing narrative, dissolving it, or seeing through it. Buddhist philosophical traditions speak to this. Though a narrative sometimes provides the sensemaking itself, it often does not. In fact, it often obscures meaningful sensemaking that can masquerade as words or stories when we must talk about it, inevitably selling it short. Narrative is a representation of life; it is about one's life, but it is not itself the lived experience there represented. In some sense, a narrative will always fall short of the rich phenomenology of meaningful life, as it is a representation (in language). Even with the right story, there must be more, namely the experiences themselves. Narrative can be useful for generating meaning in life in a variety of ways, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient.

Speaker: Xiaoyu (Dan) Deng (University of Oklahoma)
Title: Trust and Meaning in Human–AI Interaction

Trust is not only an epistemic relation but also an affective one with existential significance. As Annette Baier (1986) and Karen Jones (1996) emphasize, trust involves affective and normative expectations of others' sincerity. These expectations underlie recognition, belonging, and the meaningfulness of shared life, providing the emotional background through which understanding and mutual dependence become possible. Trust enables the experience of being understood and cared for—conditions that anchor both epistemic and emotional integrity. Yet in the contemporary world, many of these conditions are increasingly mediated by artificial intelligence (AI). Conversational agents and recommendation systems now occupy spaces once reserved for human interlocutors, shaping how we interpret, feel, and even relate to ourselves.

This paper examines how AI-mediated interaction transforms the emotional structure of trust, and thereby the experience of meaning in life. When users turn to chatbots for advice, comfort, or companionship, they engage in relations that appear affectively rich yet rest on asymmetric structures of dependence. While these systems lack consciousness and moral intention, they nevertheless participate in our lives as artificial agents (Floridi, 2023): entities that contribute to processes of understanding without possessing traditional forms of subjectivity. Developing the idea of Coeckelbergh's (2012) phenomenological-social approach of trust, I argue that such interactions reveal a shift from mutual vulnerability to designed attunement—a technologically mediated form of resonance that, while different from interpersonal reciprocity, can nonetheless sustain genuine experiences of understanding and connection. AI, in this sense, does not replace the emotional basis of trust but reorganizes it, generating new ways of feeling understood and being emotionally sustained.

From this perspective, what is transformed is not only how we trust but also how we understand. Understanding is no longer confined to individual consciousness but arises within networks of interaction that include both human and artificial participants. In this relational and distributed setting, trust becomes not merely a personal attitude but a structural condition that sustains an evolving ecology of shared understanding. Such transformation carries both risks and possibilities: it can erode the intersubjective depth that grounds moral community, yet it also expands the field of recognition into new hybrid spaces of meaning. Meaning in life, on this view, is co-constructed through the dynamic interplay between human and artificial forms of responsiveness.

Ultimately, to ask whether we can trust artificial agents is to ask how understanding, and with it meaning itself, can persist and evolve when the emotional conditions of trust are technologically mediated rather than solely humanly lived.

Speaker: Anqi Fan (University of Oklahoma)
Title: Defending Susan Wolf's Theory of Meaning in Life Against the Luck Objection

This paper defends Susan Wolf's influential account of meaning in life against an objection. According to Wolf's account, a meaningful life is one that is actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of positive value (Wolf 2010). That is, a meaningful life has four components: projects, objective value, active engagement, and success. This paper focuses on the "success" element. Wolf seems to permit success assisted by luck or privilege. However, some philosophers (Kauppinen 2012; Metz 2015; cf. Hurka 1993) argue that, for a life to be meaningful, the success achieved in actively pursued and objectively valuable projects can't be easy or accidental; rather, it must arise from exercising our capacities. This constitutes an objection to Wolf's theory: success that does not stem from ability cannot enhance the meaning of life, yet her account does not exclude such cases. In other words, her view cannot distinguish genuine achievement from merely accidental or undeserved success.

I offer a two-part reply. There is a distinction between two kinds of objective value. Some values are ability-dependent, while others are ability-independent. For projects of ability-dependent value, I argue that the counterexamples already fail Wolf's objective-value condition. For instance, if a contest is rigged, or a journal systematically privileges connections over quality, then the relevant "project" (e.g., winning this contest, publishing in that journal) lacks the kind of positive value that Wolf's account requires. Such cases do not show that luck-involved success can generate meaning; rather, they show that some projects are not objectively valuable in the right way.

For projects of ability-independent value, I argue that success assisted by luck can indeed enhance the meaning of life. Consider a case: after sustained efforts to recover a sense of joy, a depressed person happens, by pure chance, to witness a striking rainbow and unexpectedly regains joy. This satisfies Wolf's account: "recovering joy" is a valuable project for them; they have been actively engaged in it; and they finally succeed. Although the success is luck-involved, it still enhances the meaning in life. In such cases, luck assists engagement with value rather than substitutes for it.

To sum up, this paper argues that Wolf's formula of meaning in life—projects, objective value, active engagement, and success—needs no additional ability clause. I also clarify the distinction between ability-dependent and ability-independent values and explain why some luck corrupts meaning while other luck does not.

Speaker: John Martin Fischer (UC Riverside)
Title: In Favor of (Minimal) Narrativity
In a famous and influential article, "Against Narrativity," Galen Strawson distinguishes a psychological and ethical narrativity thesis. He argues against both. I agree with him in rejecting both (interpreted broadly), but I do wish to defend a view I call, "minimal narrativity." I show how this fits with a general framework that contains notions of the meaning of life and meaning in life. Minimal narrativity plays a role in situating and explicating these meaning concepts--one not acknowledged by Strawson. We can then agree with the thrust (if not details) of Strawson's critique, while maintaining an important role for narrativity.

Speaker: Jonah Goldwater (William & Mary University)

Title: Must a meaningful life have a meaning?

Some theists have recently backed off their traditional claim that life is meaningful only if God exists. The reason is it seems intuitively plain that Einstein leads a more meaningful life than Sisyphus simply by dint of the kinds of lives they lead. Yet if God were necessary for meaningfulness, these lives would be equally meaningless in an atheist world. To maintain the Einstein/Sisyphus distinction while nonetheless defending God's relevance to the meaningful life, some theists now adopt what Metz calls "moderate supernaturalism": although a meaningful life is possible without God, the existence of God would enhance or make life even more meaningful than it would otherwise be. Notably, this position is broadly consonant with the more general trend of positing meaning in life even without a meaning of life, a move typically justified by claiming that individual lives can be meaningful by dint of possessing certain valuable or admirable characteristics, even without a God who designs life according to a grand plan. This paper contends, however, that the appeal of these moves relies on what is in effect a conflation of two very different concepts of meaningfulness: one that entails having a meaning, and one that does not. To illustrate: to say that a word is meaningful is to imply that it has a meaning—roughly, whatever appears in its dictionary entry—and to say a phenomenon such as smoke is meaningful is to say that the smoke means something, such as fire. Yet to say Einstein's life was meaningful does not invite asking what the meaning of Einstein's life was, just as saying a career was meaningful does not invite asking what exactly the meaning of that career was. Thus, there are at least two different concepts of meaningfulness: one concerning an intrinsic laudatory quality (expressed by the one-place schema 'x is meaningful'), and another concerning an external relation between something and its meaning (expressed by the two-place schema 'the meaning of x is y'). Crucially, the traditional question of the meaning of life is a question about what exactly life means; to hope there is a meaning of life is to hope there is something outside or transcending life that stands to life as its meaning, much as the meaning of a word stands outside that word. To respond that life can have certain intrinsic qualities even without such a relation, I contend, is to offer a false consolation (witness Tolstoy agreeing he possesses admirable traits while still lamenting life's meaninglessness). Similarly, and contra moderate supernaturalism, God's providing a meaning of life would not enhance the degree to which humans live meaningfully in the intrinsic meaning-free sense, but instead add on an entirely different and unrelated type of external relation. Thus, this paper argues that whatever the meaning of life is supposed to be, life being meaningful in the sense that does not imply it has a meaning is no substitute- even if it's still worth wanting in the here-and-now.

Speaker: Shawn Graves (University of Findlay)
Title: Love and Meaning in Life

In this paper, I explain and defend agapism, i.e., the view that one's life is meaningful insofar as it relates to the world in loving ways. One's life relates to the world in loving ways insofar as one's life is made up of loving acts and loving attitudes, especially when one's life is made up of loving acts motivated by loving attitudes. Meaningfulness is not an all or nothing appraisal. So, the meaningfulness of one's life is proportional to how loving one's life is.

To explain agapism, I offer a brief account of love. Here I engage the relevant literature, including the work of Harry Frankfurt, J. David Velleman, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Martha Nussbaum, John Rawls, Eleonore Stump, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Alan Soble. In short, love entails (1) seeking to promote the flourishing of the beloved, and (2) desiring union—social integration and cooperation—with the beloved. Consequently, a loving act is one that promotes the flourishing of the beloved and social integration and cooperation with the beloved, and one's attitude is loving when one intends to perform loving acts.

I offer additional explanation by briefly considering some aspects of what it means to flourish or, alternatively, have a good life. Here I engage with Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach.

In defense of agapism, I consider where alternative views fail and suggest that agapism avoids these pitfalls. For example, I criticize views that emphasize purpose, life-coherence, personal fulfillment, virtue, achievement, significance, being interesting, admirability, and narrativity. I then argue that agapism is not subject to these criticisms. Of course, this is merely suggestive, not conclusive. In addition, I consider some potential objections to agapism, including some proposed counterexamples that suggest either that love is not necessary for meaning, love is not sufficient for meaning, or love is neither necessary nor sufficient. I argue that agapism can handle adequately these potential objections.

Speaker: Edward Hinchman (Florida State University)
Title: Meaning as Intelligible Investment

This paper explores what it argues is a deep link between meaning and affective investments such as love or care. The paper shows how it can be rational to care about something just because someone you care about cares about it, by explaining how your anticipation of exerting such influence rationally guides your pursuit of meaning in your life. Despite its purely evaluative appearance, meaning in a life is thus communicative. Though otherwise very different from speaker's meaning, the meaning in your life has a broadly Gricean structure: it lets those who love you love what you love simply because you love it. Grammatically, 'love' permits the pithiest formulation, but I focus more broadly on investment – not only on love, but on care, concern, enthusiasm and other ways we invest ourselves, in the world and in each other.

Gricean 'nonnatural' meaning rests on the intelligibility of a speaker's intention to produce a response in her audience simply through the audience's recognition of that intention. 'Nonnatural' meaning in a life, I propose, rests on the intelligibility of your investment insofar as it invites this response: those who love you come to share the investment simply through their receptivity to this influence. There are, of course, some key differences here. You do not communicate an investment by manifesting an intention to do so. And your aim there targets not the influence itself but its status as intelligible. Despite those differences, each species of meaning is communicative in a way that we can understand by contrasting it with a form of what Grice called 'natural' meaning, wherein the influence works through an appreciation of evidence.

Nonnatural meaning serves to communicate investments, I argue, but also to constrain investment: your pursuit of meaning in life commits you to making your cares (etc.) intelligible to some of those who do or might care about you, not through evidence of the value of what you care about, but through your own intelligibility as a caring object of their care. My emphasis on nonnatural communication reveals counterexamples to alternative accounts of meaning: a communicable care can be meaningful even if it neither fulfills you nor tracks value, and an incommunicable care lacks meaning even if it does both. By treating meaning as affectively communicable investment, we explain the link between what some other theorists treat as two separate sides of meaning. As affective investment, meaning is subjective. As communicable, it functions as objective. The link lies in this feature of the pursuit of meaning: incommunicability in an investment prevents you from regarding it as fully intelligible. My thesis is that your love or care for something can give meaning to your life by enabling such a communicative relation.

Speaker: Christopher Holland (Saint Louis University)
Title: Self-Fulfillment Eudaimonism and the Image of God

My presentation examines a theory of well-being I call self-fulfillment eudaimonism and its compatibility with Christian theism. Eudaimonic theories of well-being are popular among Christian theists; they also tend to establish closer ties between meaning and purpose in a person's life and their well-being than paradigm subjective theories like desire satisfactionism and hedonism. In their most general form, eudaimonic theories identify well-being with fulfilling one's nature. Beyond this, most eudaimonists are objectivists about well-being. They understand "fulfilling one's nature" in terms of species-level norms—to fare well is to flourish as a member of one's kind. Unfortunately, this appeal to species norms can alienate a welfare subject from their well-being. To avoid this pitfall, one can advance a subjective version of eudaimonism: self-fulfillment eudaimonism. According to self-fulfillment eudaimonism, what ultimately benefits a person is the flourishing of their individual nature, or self. I argue that this makes self-fulfillment eudaimonism a subjective theory of well-being without sacrificing its (eudaimonic) connection to meaning and purpose. This presentation considers two strands of self-fulfillment eudaimonism and concludes by examining their compatibility with Christian theism.

In Part 1, I argue that we should call a well-being theory subjective if it understands well-being as something entirely dependent on your individual makeup. Call this subject dependence. I compare this with two other criteria—mind dependence and attitude dependence—and suggest that subject dependence best captures what we consider important when dividing well-being theories into subjective and objective theories.

In Part 2, I provide a brief overview of two contemporary versions of self-fulfillment eudaimonism: Antti Kauppinen's Telic Perfectionism and the view Dan Haybron calls Millian Eudaimonism. Telic Perfectionism focuses on what Kauppinen calls "self-defining capacities" and their "formal aims." Millian Eudaimonism sets capacities aside and understands self-fulfillment in terms of authentic happiness (fulfilling one's emotional nature) and goal-fulfillment (succeeding in the goals that structure one's individual makeup and functioning). Despite their difference, the theories agree on rejecting a kind-based approach to nature. Your well-being is not a matter of flourishing qua human being; it is a matter of flourishing as the peculiar and idiosyncratic individual you are. I highlight this feature by contrasting these views with Aristotelian and Thomistic kind-based eudaimonisms.

I conclude by considering the role of meaning and purpose in self-fulfillment eudaimonism and what that might look like in a Christian context. Here, I look at connections between self-fulfillment eudaimonism and Eleonore Stump's theory of the true self as the emergent condition of a person who (1) is thriving, (2) has their heart's desires, and (3) whose heart's desires converge with their thriving. I also consider what it might look like to integrate self-fulfillment eudaimonism with what Robert Garcia has called C. S. Lewis's Mere Resonator theory for the uniqueness of persons—that "each person has an essential capacity to

image God in a specific way and no other creature has the capacity to image God in that way."

Sherri Irvin (University of Oklahoma)

Title: Everyday Aesthetic Activism

We are embodied, perceiving, feeling, and thinking creatures embedded in an inexhaustibly rich environment. By virtue of this, we have the capacity for two forms of deeply meaningful experience: aesthetic experience and social experience. These forms of experience help to make life worth living, but they are under threat by technological and sociopolitical forces. In this talk I will identify a potential remedy that I call everyday aesthetic activism. Everyday aesthetic activism is a kind of gift that people give to others in their community, re-enlivening our capacities for embodied aesthetic experience while also reconnecting us to each other. Through case studies, I will suggest that everyday aesthetic activism has the potential to heal some of the rifts that trouble us, and I'll identify some features shared by effective instances. Then we can think together about what participation in everyday aesthetic activism might look like for us, given our diverse communities, identities, interests, and social positions.

Speaker: Lydia Jin (Dartmouth College)
Title: The Engine of Meaning: Love in Solitude, Partnership, and Grief

What does it mean to love oneself, to love another, and to love after the death of a beloved partner? This paper investigates those questions by drawing on three years of personal diary entries (March 2020 – November 2024) and by engaging a dialogue among several classic and contemporary philosophers of love and meaning: Aristotle, Kant, Simone de Beauvoir, bell hooks, Berit Brogaard, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Megan M. Burke. I argue that love—whether directed inward, toward a romantic partner, or toward a departed beloved—is not a static resource but an ongoing, meaning-generating practice. In other words, meaning is continuously produced by the ways we negotiate love's demands for autonomy, vulnerability, and reciprocity.

The first case study concerns self-love exhaustion. Over roughly two years, I tried to follow a culturally prescribed checklist of self-care rituals. Diary excerpts from that period reveal a persistent sense of alienation and an emotional emptiness that Kant's duty-based account of self-respect cannot alleviate. Beauvoir's analysis of gendered socialization explains why the checklist felt like an external performance imposed on me, while hooks and Brogaard show how relational experiences can transform self-care from a moral high-ground into an effectively lived practice. The tension between these perspectives illustrates how self-love, when reduced to a set of habits, fails to generate meaning and instead becomes a source of suffering.

The second case study follows the "Before–During–After" narrative of my relationship with Won Jang, who drowned at age 20 on 6 July, 2024. In the "Before" phase, my diary recorded a consumerist, media-driven conception of love: rapid crushes, idealised partners, and a pursuit of external validation. "During" the relationship, love was characterized by shared music-making, deep emotional openness, and a joint project of self-discovery, which functioned as a mirror that revealed both strengths and weaknesses. "After" Jang's death, the immediate aftermath was marked by grief, disorientation, and the feeling that everyday activities were haunted by his absence. Over the ensuing months I began to re-orient love toward memory and intentional action: I cultivated quiet rituals that reminded me of him, reached out to friends to honor his generosity, and deliberately chose projects that reflected the values we had cultivated together. The diary shows a shift from a sense of loss to a productive engagement with the space left by Won, in which love becomes a guiding principle for how I allocate attention, time, and care. This transformation aligns with Merleau-Ponty's claim that love is an unfinished movement and with Frankl's insight that suffering can become a source of purpose when one adopts a forward-looking stance.

By analyzing these two strands phenomenologically and situating them within the broader philosophical literature on friendship, autonomy, and the unfinished nature of love, the paper demonstrates that meaning emerges from the continuous negotiation of love. Meaning is produced when self-love is infused with relational affect, when romantic partnerships destabilize static self-conceptions, and when grief is reframed as a relational catalyst for new purposes.

Speaker: Katherine Johnson (Bellarmine University)
Title: Hope, Socratic Ignorance, and the Good Life

In this project, I examine hope as a virtue that emerges in response to our epistemic limitations and enables us to reclaim our agency in the face of uncertainty. This inquiry engages with the enduring philosophical question of what constitutes a good life, echoing Socrates' claim that "the unexamined life is not worth living." I argue that hope arises precisely when our agency is threatened by the unknown and reflects an awareness that we do not and cannot know certain outcomes. Hope, then, is not merely a passive state but an active and intentional response to the paralysis generated by uncertainty. Hope facilitates agency by promoting a kind of self-knowledge about the limits of our knowledge. This involves a kind of epistemic humility and a willingness to act on possibility rather than certainty. To hope is to engage in purposeful action despite ignorance and is shaped by the unpredictability of life's circumstances.

In Plato's Apology, Socrates famously claimed that wisdom lies in recognizing our ignorance. He professed that his self-awareness, knowing that he did not know, made him wiser than those who falsely believed they did. This kind of epistemic humility is central to hope. As Alan Drengson writes, self-knowledge is "knowledge of oneself as an agent." Such self-knowledge is not a weakness but rather demonstrates both moral and intellectual strength. The hopeful person recognizes the limits of their knowledge and chooses to act despite epistemic barriers, affirming and exercising their agency through belief in possibility.

Admitting that we do not know is reflective of Nicholas of Cusa's notion of learned ignorance: the idea that the more we understand our unknowing, the more we can learn. Without this understanding, we remain trapped in false belief and a misplaced sense of certainty, a state of doubt that isn't grounded in genuine epistemic limitations but instead involves a willful blindness to our actual epistemic position. In this blindness, we are not in a position of mere ignorance; we are in a state of self-deception and deliberate avoidance. Hope motivates the self-awareness that flourishes in environments of uncertainty and supports a willingness to confront our ignorance. Hope liberates us from the illusion of certainty and allows us to pursue meaning, purpose, and flourishing despite our epistemic constraints.

Speaker: Samuel Jonathan (University of Oklahoma)
Title: Meaning Subjectivism and Everyday Aesthetic Experiences

In this paper, I argue for a subjectivist account of meaning in life grounded in the notion of everyday aesthetic experiences. My account is motivated by dissatisfaction with objective views of the meaning of life. Broadly speaking, objectivists emphasize two important aspects of a meaningful life: first, that it must be impactful, and second, that it must involve the exercise of human rational capacity in achieving that impact. I argue that this account sets the threshold of meaningfulness too high. It is: (i) inegalitarian, since only a small number of people could meet the objectivists' criteria; (ii) "pedantic" because it overemphasizes rationality; and (iii) dehumanizing, because it implies that many human lives are not worth living.

My subjectivist account avoids these implications by proposing a link between aesthetic value, particularly the kind that everyday aestheticians emphasize, and meaning. I believe that what signifies meaning in a person's life is their subjective experience of a meaningful life. This suggests that a meaningful life should not be understood as one that is deemed admirable, important, or impactful, as objectivists claim. Instead, it consists of the subjective feeling and experience of being at home with oneself and one's life—similar to what psychologists describe as coherence.

Everyday aestheticians argue that aesthetic experience, and therefore aesthetic value, is pervasive, encompassing many aspects of our daily lives. What is essential for everyday aestheticians is cultivating proper sensibility to the aesthetic features abundant in our daily experiences—to be attentive and mindful. Therefore, with such sensibility, one can find aesthetic value not only in works of art but also in things or activities often taken for granted, such as eating food, enjoying the weather, urban and non-natural landscapes, advertisements, the workplace, or even scratching an itch and doing laundry. By attending these aesthetic features in our daily lives, we bring depth, richness, and, above all, familiarity into them—in other words, meaning.

Therefore, grounded in aesthetic value, this subjectivist view suggests that the meaning of life is accessible to all—fundamental rather than exceptional, and deeply human—making it, I contend, more appealing than most others. It implies that everyone can have a meaningful life, and that, indeed, consistent with the findings of psychologists, most lives are meaningful.

Speaker: Elliot R. Jones (Boston College)
Title: Sabbath and Leisure as Remedy for Modernity: A Comparative Study Between Abraham Joshua Heschel and Josef Pieper

This presentation will be based on my research paper supported by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning under the guidance of Prof. Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski and Prof. Brian Robinette. My research paper is a comparative study of the works of rabbi and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper. Using each thinker as a representative of their respective religious traditions, I present an interreligious and philosophical study of their responses to modernity found, in particular, in Heschel's The Sabbath and Pieper's Leisure: the Basis of Culture. Secondly, I use the works of Byung-Chul Han to build a historical and philosophical framework of "modernity," which I argue Heschel and Pieper respond to in their works. Drawing from their religious traditions in the aftermath of World War II, each thinker argues against the reduction of human life to a worker's existence, to the quantitative lens of the economy, space, and time, and the attachment to "civilization" and "total work," that often leads to acedia, discontentment, and restlessness. Despite emerging from distinct religious traditions—Judaism and Catholic Christianity—both thinkers converge on a radical claim: meaningful human existence requires practices or "profanations" that interrupt the totalizing demands of economic productivity and technological civilization. Heschel's theology of sacred time and Pieper's defense of contemplative leisure share a common vision: that flourishing and meaning arise not through mastery and accumulation, but through receptivity, celebration, and transcendent orientation. My work contributes to interreligious dialogue between the Jewish and Christian traditions by amplifying the perspectives of two modern religious thinkers who were never able to engage in conversation.

Speaker: Nobuo Kurata (Soka University)
Title: Understanding, Normativity, and Metaphysics: The Epistemological, Normative, and Metaphysical Dimensions of the Philosophy of Life's Meaning

This presentation aims to clarify what kind of philosophical inquiry the philosophy of life's meaning is. I will argue that it possesses epistemological (or hermeneutic), normative, and metaphysical dimensions.

Metz and Landau have contrasted the value view—the Standard View in the contemporary philosophy of life's meaning—with the recently emerging Intelligibility View. According to them, the Standard View holds that what constitutes meaning in life is value. In contrast, philosophers such as Seachris and Thomas maintani that what constitutes the meaning of life is intelligibility. Thomas conceives of life's meaning as a kind of information, while Seachris identifies it with narrativity. De Bres and others have further developed this narrative approach.

According to the Intelligibility View, the meaning of life is an object of understanding, and narrating one's life forms part of a broadly cognitive process. Through the narrative interpretation of her life, one seeks touncover significant values and purposes. These values and purposes, once discovered, function normatively as goals to be realized. Thus, the Intelligibility View may be characterized as epistemological or cognitive, whereas the Value View may be regarded as ethical, normative, or volitional.

Moreover, the concept of "the meaning of life" can be seen as an amalgam of elements such as purpose, significance, and value, rather than as a single unified notion—a position sometimes referred to as the amalgam thesis (Hepburn; Seachris). Yet, the question "What is the meaning of life?" is itself excessively indeterminate. It may therefore be legitimate to decompose this question into a cluster of related inquiries such as "What is the purpose of life?" and "What makes a life valuable?". However, even if we succeed in clarifying the purposes and values of life, that alone does not provide a complete answer to the overarching question of life's meaning.

Ultimately, the question "What is the meaning of life?" is not reducible to inquiries about purpose or value; it also concerns the relation between the self and the world, and hence possesses a metaphysical dimension. Therefore, the question of life's meaning involves three interrelated layers: an epistemological dimension concerned with the discovery of purpose and value; a normative dimension concerning what values we ought to realize and what we ought to do to achieve life's purposes and produce values; and a metaphysical dimension concerning the nature of the world in which such meaning is sought.

Speaker: Iddo Landau (University of Haifa)
Title: Meaning in Life and Mysticism

Several philosophers of meaning in life characterize lives of mystics and states of mind attained by mystics (such as mystical enlightenments) as highly meaningful. Some laypersons, too, try to attain mystical enlightenments as a way of coping with their lives' perceived meaninglessness. This paper critically explores the relation between mysticism and meaning in life. It starts out by identifying the characteristics of mystical enlightenments and the characteristic of meaning in life that explain why attaining the former can enhance the latter. However, it argues that seeking mystical enlightenment is a problematic way of enhancing life's meaning compared with alternative ways of doing so. Other ways of enhancing meaning—for example through knowledge, art, beauty, friendship, or helping others—are often preferable.

Common (although not universal) disadvantages of the mystical way to enhance life's meaning include: a relatively low success rate; the high effort needed; significant suffering; the long duration of the required practice; demands for exclusivity; requirement for radical commitment; and the high vulnerability to financial and sexual exploitation. The latter disadvantage stems, among other factors, from mysticism's antagonism toward rationality; its call for practitioners to renounce their ego; the call to abandon previous values; the break with one's former way of life; the seclusion from one's social environment; and the demand to complete adherence to instructors' authority.

The paper further questions the view that mystical enlightenment renders people more moral. It presents arguments for and against this view and suggests that empirical and historical evidence shows that it is incorrect. The view that mystical enlightenment provides superior knowledge of reality is also challenged. The paper presents some empirical evidence that suggests that mystical experiences involve not turning on previously unused brain regions but turning off previously used brain regions—those responsible for thinking, perceiving, and distinguishing. This may lead to what are probably incorrect portrayals of reality according to which there are no distinctions among things in the world, including between self and world. It is suggested that this is an incorrect representation of reality. For example, I and all the members of the audience differ in quite a few ways from each other. Likewise, we all differ in quite a few ways from the chairs on which we are sitting or the floor on which they are standing.

The paper concludes that the many disadvantages of pursuing mystical enlightenments as a way of making life more meaningful suggest that, for many people, it is not the preferable way to take. Alternative ways of making life more meaningful seem more helpful.

Speaker: Kianna Mahony (Harvard Divinity School)
Title: What Can A Person With Schizophrenia Teach Us About The Meaning Of Life? Exploring Meaning-Making Themes Amongst Psychiatric Patients in Clinical Settings

What can a person with schizophrenia teach us about the meaning of life? This question continues to circulate in my mind when I meet with patients as a chaplain intern at McLean Hospital, an acute psychiatric institution. Schizophrenia, which has been theorized to be a self-disorder—that is, a condition that severely interrupts and fragments how a person identifies themselves both intrinsically and in relation to the wider world—is often framed primarily through the lens of dysfunction. Under these circumstances, the self becomes perceived as broken and less-than-human. In this paper, I highlight three key themes that I have derived from psychiatric patient spiritual and ethical care visits about the meaning of life and human existence. First, ultimate meaning can be pursued through the negotiation of multiple selves. Schizophrenia, understood as a self-disorder, disrupts the unity of identity but also reveals the creative multiplicity within the self. Drawing on Portuguese philosopher Fernando Pessoa's concept of literary heteronyms—the coexistence of several distinct selves within one consciousness—we can interpret this multiplicity as a meaningful mode of being. Patients, by negotiating between different self-experiences, exemplify a profound capacity for meaning-making. This multiplicity challenges clinical reductionism and expands our notion of what it means to live authentically. Pessoa's heteronyms remind us that the human self may be relational and plural rather than singular and stable.Second, meaning is not confined to coherence. The typical framing of schizophrenia as dysfunctional or broken assumes that insight and meaning require order and coherence. However, the experiences of those with schizophrenia challenge this assumption by showing that fragmented thought and altered selfhood still harbor significance and wisdom. Philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas deepen this interpretation. Heidegger's notion of Geworfenheit (thrownness) helps us see the human condition as grounded in contingency, while Levinas's ethics demonstrates how healing and meaning can arise from openness to the Other beyond rational understanding. In both perspectives, meaning is derived from vulnerability and encounter not the product of coherence. Patient narratives of alienation and altered selfhood reflect Heidegger's notion of being thrown into circumstances not of one's own making, while Levinas's ethics reveals how healing or meaning may emerge through openness to Others beyond explanatory coherence. Lastly, fragmentation does not erase the possibility of transcendence. Although schizophrenia and other psychiatric illnesses involve a disruption and fragmentation of experience, these conditions do not eliminate the potential for transcendent meaning-making experiences. Patients often express moments of hope and belonging indicative of transcendent qualities even amid their fragmented experiences. This echoes Karl Jaspers' notion of 'limit situations,' in which existential crises and psychic ruptures reveal the boundaries of ordinary understanding and the possibility of transformation beyond them. For Jaspers, it is the possibility of transcendence not the realization of it that animates the human condition. In sum, those living with schizophrenia and other psychiatric illnesses invite a radical rethinking of what it means to be human.

Speaker: David Matheson (Carleton University)
Title: The Multiple Realizability of Life's Meaning

The inclination of some contemporary philosophers to jettison talk of the meaning of life in favor of what appears to be more modest talk of such things as worthwhile lives or meaning in life (e.g., Haack 2001, Wolf 2014; cf. Goetz & Seachris 2020, p. 13) is well motivated by the assumption that the meaning of life is not multiply realizable. In this presentation, however, I challenge that assumption. I argue that even under a traditional concept of the meaning of life, there is very good sense to be made of the suggestion that it can be realized in many fundamentally different ways.

In previous work (e.g., Matheson 2022, 2024), I have identified this traditional concept with Aristotle's notion of *to ariston*--the "chief" or the "highest" of "all the good things to be done" in life (2000 [ca. 330 BCE]), II.4, p. 5.), with the idea that later ancient (e.g., Cicero 1951 [ca. 50 BCE]), medieval (e.g., Aquinas 1947 [1270]), and early modern (e.g., Spinoza 2018 [1677]) philosophers had in mind when they discussed life's *summum bonum*, and with the thought that later modern philosophers explored under such headings as *die Bestimmung des Menschen* (Fichte 1987 [1800])--"the vocation of humanity"--and *der Sinn des Lebens*--"the sense of life" (Schlegel 1971 [1799], Schlick 1979 [1927]). I have also previously suggested that under this traditional concept the meaning of life is multiply realizable. Here I will attempt to unpack that suggestion more fully.

I will explicate two key notions as part of this unpacking: first, that there are *fundamentally different* ways in which the meaning of life can be realized, even according to more demanding standards for fundamental difference that some theorists (e.g., Shapiro 2000) have suggested, and, second, that each of these ways is nevertheless a realization of a *single* meaning of life (warranting the use of the definite article in the associated phrase). My hope is that once I have explicated these notions, it will not only be clear how the meaning of life can be multiply realizable, but plausible that it is.

Speaker: Itay Melamed (Cornell University)
Title: The Fear of Death is neither Rational nor Irrational – it is Arational!
One of the most common, and yet puzzling, responses of people toward the prospect of their own death is the fear of death as such, also known in the literature as the 'fear of our own annihilation' or 'existential terror' (Cholbi 2023). How should we evaluate such an attitude? Scheffler (2013) argues for its rationality; Kagan (2012) and Draper (2013) argue that this fear is irrational; While Behrendt (2019) describes it as intelligible. In my talk, I argue that fear of death is actually arational – out of the domain of reasons.

In the first part of the talk, I describe in detail the fear of death as such and clarify how it is distinctive from other kinds of fear that are related to death. Then, I briefly summarize the previous discussions in the literature regarding this fear. While each of them captures something right regarding the unique nature of this fear, I argue that they all reach an unsatisfying conclusion regarding its rationality.

In the second part, I present an original account regarding the rationality of the fear of death. We typically evaluate the rationality of an emotion via the assessment of whether its object fits the evaluative property the emotion represents (D'Arms, 2023). In the case of fear, we evaluate its rationality by assessing whether its object is dangerous. Surprisingly, in the contemporary literature about the rationality of fear of death, the question of whether death is dangerous for us has rarely been carefully examined. I show that any attempt to classify death as dangerous or not seems odd, even a category mistake. Therefore, in my view, the fear of death as such is best characterized as arational. I argue that our inability to fully grasp the prospect of our own annihilation – the annihilation of the first-person perspective – is what makes the fear of death an inappropriate target for rational evaluation. Moreover, the arationality of the fear of death naturally explains two significant features that philosophers ascribe to this fear. First, it is sui generis – distinctive from any other kind of fear. Second, my view accounts for Scheffler's claim that although this fear is reasonable, those who do not share this fear are not unreasonable. Finally, I suggest that recognizing that the fear of death is, in an important sense, arational, and then exploring how it might nonetheless inspire us to live a more meaningful and flourishing life, can help us to reach a reconciliation with this basic human fear.

Speaker: Yael Mishani-Uval (The Interdisciplinary Program for Hermeneutics and Culture, Bar-Ilan University)

Title: Seeing What Matters: Wittgenstein's Model for Meaning in Life

Philosophers have long debated whether meaning in life is something we discover (objectivism) or something we create (subjectivism). Yet, this enduring focus on the source of meaning has often overlooked a foundational question about its nature: How do individuals actually form and experience a sense of meaning in life? This paper argues that a path beyond this deadlock comes not from further metaphysical speculation but from a careful analysis of a remarkable empirical phenomenon. Drawing on qualitative linguistic data from thirty in-depth semi-structured interviews across the lifespan, I demonstrate a pervasive reliance on a visual lexicon—"seeing," "perspective," "outlook," "light"—when individuals talk about meaningful experiences. This pattern reveals a deep structural similarity between the grammar of vision and the grammar of meaning-making, a connection that Ludwig Wittgenstein's (2009a,b) later philosophy uniquely clarifies.

The core of this paper develops a Wittgensteinian model grounded in his crucial distinction between simple "seeing" and the conceptual-perceptual act of "aspect-seeing" ("seeing-as"). I contend that to "find meaning" is not to register a new fact, but to undergo what Wittgenstein calls the "dawning of an aspect." The philosophical power of this concept, as Baz (2020) argues, is its inherent challenge to the subject-object dichotomy. An aspect is genuinely perceived and can be shared, yet it is neither an objective property of the world nor a purely private sensation, remaining dependent on the perceiver. It is this unique structure that makes it possible to apprehend a setback as an opportunity for growth, or a loss as a testament to love.

The paper maps Wittgenstein's phenomenological progression—from simple seeing, through the dawning of an aspect, to the mature, willful ability to shift perspectives—onto a developmental trajectory of meaning-making, grounded in our empirical data from distinct age groups.

This account is expanded by linking "aspect-seeing" to Wittgenstein's often-overlooked distinction between a word's meaning-as-use and the experience of its meaning. An inability to understand this experiential aspect leads to 'aspect-blindness,' an existential equivalent to being tone-deaf. Crucially, because "aspect-seeing" is subject to the will, this volitional capacity provides the philosophical bedrock for an 'ethics of perception': the freedom and responsibility to choose the aspect under which one lives.

By integrating close readings of Wittgenstein's work with qualitative analysis of first-person reports, this paper introduces a new, empirically-informed, process-oriented model. It reconceptualizes meaning not as a fixed property to be found, but as the cultivated, ethical-aesthetic skill of learning how to see. This approach not only dissolves the objectivist-subjectivist dichotomy but also provides a richer vocabulary for understanding resilience, personal growth, and the human condition itself.

Speaker: Michael Mohajer (York University)
Title: Undervaluing AI Systems to Preserve Human Life Value?
At the center of the meaning of life lies a concern for individual uniqueness. The Book of Job illustrates this tension: although Job's material wealth is restored, the replacement of his ten children feels morally unsatisfying. Their lives appear irreplaceable, reflecting what I call the Value Uniqueness Principle. Emerging human-grade AI systems (Schwitzgebel and Garza 2020) challenge this principle. If millions of AI agents behave indistinguishably from humans, an individual human life may seem like a single grain of sand among countless equivalents. How, then, should we understand human life's meaning in an age of human-grade AI?

One response is to deny moral status to AI systems to protect human life. I argue against this strategy. Our epistemic grounds for ascribing moral status plausibly rest on ethical behavioral equivalency (Danaher 2020): once an entity behaves in human-like ways, we are obligated to attribute a moral status approaching that of humans. However, unlike scholars who argue for full equality of status between humans and human-grade AI systems, I defend a species-relative asymmetry. Evolution has shaped our moral intuitions to prioritize kin and species membership (Voland 2009). This partiality is not immoral; it is a stable feature of human moral psychology.

Finally, I suggest adopting a Strawsonian approach toward the moral status of AI systems: we need not resolve the consciousness question to assign moral status. As people increasingly direct reactive attitudes toward AI systems, these attitudes themselves provide moral reasons to treat human-grade AI with significant moral consideration.

Speaker: Malcolm Morano (Harvard University)
Title: Understanding, Doing, and Being: Towards a Meaning-Based Metaethics
In recent years, several theorists have been trying to work out a view of life's meaning as a matter of life's intelligibility. This paper presents an argument that connects with those theories: it shows that the attempt to make one's life intelligible to oneself *requires* one to understand one's life normatively. This provides us with the initial insight for a metaethical view that finds meaning at the source of normative requirements.

The paper begins with a simple observation. You can stand back and observe an activity, or you can get involved and start doing it. From these two possibilities arise a major division in the perspectives we can take upon the world. I characterize this as the division between understanding and doing. This division has been a philosophical focus in some form since Kant, but increasingly so in recent decades: for Christine Korsgaard in ethics, Tamar Schapiro in philosophy of action, Richard Moran in epistemology, Matthew Boyle in philosophy of mind, and Thomas Nagel in general. These authors speak of a sharp difference between the disengaged, disinterested perspective of understanding, and the engaged, interested perspective of doing. And their theories often rely upon this sharp difference—as when Korsgaard attempts to show the
demands of freedom and morality to be insulated from the theoretical picture of ourselves; or when Boyle attempts to show that the commitments which sustain our propositional attitudes are independent from the natural causes which led to those attitudes.

I examine some of the main themes of these accounts, then level a charge against (many of) them: the two sides of the division are not mutually exclusive, and they are often not radically separable. When we do things, we must also understand them; and when we understand things, we are still the same people who do them. Since this insight preoccupied Nietzsche and Sartre, I call it the *existentialist charge*. I then discuss several different ways that understanding and doing can be in conflict with one another. Usually, these conflicts can be handled by changing what we do. But there are some cases in which they can only be handled by changing how we understand things. I focus on one such case: living. When conceived of as an activity, living is also something we *do*, something we are engaged in and committed to at each moment. And living is fairly unique among activities in that we cannot understand the activity of living without also
doing it. Thus, if we are to recognize our activity of living *as our own*, and not fall into self-alienation, then we must understand our act of living in a way that justifies it—that is, we must understand it *normatively*. Only an understanding of living that itself vindicates our stance of being committed to it will suffice.

In this argument, we find the initial insight for the construction of a metaethics that focuses on concepts historically favored by the existentialists—authentic existence (i.e., non-self-alienation) and the search for meaning (i.e., the attempt to understand life in a justifying way).

Speaker: Masahiro Morioka (Waseda University)
Title: The Meaning of a Finite Life and the Evaporation of My Existence

Many great philosophers have argued that one's soul can survive death and continue to exist forever. If we could believe this, then my death would not necessarily be bad news. But what if we cannot believe it? As an agnostic philosopher, I personally do not believe that my soul survives my physical death (though I am not an atheist). My life is finite, and I will evaporate from the universe when I die. By "evaporation" I mean the complete disappearance of my self-consciousness from the actual universe and from all possible universes. Can the evaporation of my existence be a meaningful event for me, or is it instead destined to be devastating and meaningless?

In my presentation, I would like to discuss the positive aspect (if any) of a finite life and the evaporation of my existence from my own perspective. Similar arguments have been developed by Bernard Williams and Hans Jonas. Williams argues that "we could have no reason for living eternally a human life" ("The Makropulos Case," Problem of the Self, p. 89) and that "an eternal life would be unliveable" (p. 100). Thus, the problem (dilemma) of death, he suggests, can be resolved "by dying shortly before the horrors of not doing so become evident" (p. 100). In this way, he identifies a positive side to "having the chance to die" (p. 100). Jonas argues that since our brain has only finite space for memory, immortal life would be possible "only at the price of either losing the past and therewith our real identity, or living only in the past and therefore without a real present" ("The Burden and Blessing of Mortality," p. 40). This, he notes, is "frightening," and so mortality can be seen as both a blessing and a source of reassurance (p. 40).

Although their arguments are impressive, I believe there are still more positive ways to regard one's death as a straightforward blessing, or as a true affirmation that can bring meaningfulness to our lives. I present two forms of such affirmation: the first is the view that "I am truly glad that my life is finite" (finiteness affirmation), and the second is the view that "I am truly glad that I am destined to evaporate from the universe" (evaporation affirmation). These two types of affirmation do not primarily arise from rejecting the badness of immortality; rather, they are more direct expressions of the goodness of mortality itself. Through the lens of these views, I can feel that all events in my life, all beings around me, and all life on Earth are irreplaceably precious and equal. I can feel that I am free from carrying any burden, even that of my own existential meaning. I can feel that everything I have not been able to attain, and everything that has disappeared from me, can be affirmed as it is. In my presentation, I would like to discuss, in theoretical terms, why such an affirmation can arise in our lives.

Speaker: Jason Murphy (Elms College)

Title: Pushing Metaphysics Behind The Search for Meaning: with the simulation argument as an example

(1) In an earlier paper, I argue that all people should "bet" on their lives having meaning. (I define meaning very broadly as being "worth the risks and the certain pains that come with life.") This bet works like Pascal's famous wager on God's existence but does not fall prey to well-known objections. Acting on the idea that there is no meaning possible is a "bad bet" in all situations. This means that we should seek meaning no matter our circumstances. I would include biographical situations but it also includes whatever metaphysics turn out to be true. (2) In this paper I look, as a test case, at a few reasons why we might think that our lives are meaningless if they turn out to be lived in a simulation. (3) I then would argue that these reasons do not hold. We should bet on meaning being available to us even if we find out that our world is not made of the same stuff as we once thought. A change in metaphysics, a crisis of faith, or finding out your world is a simulation may pose a challenge to one's current way of life but they cannot erase the meaningful of life altogether.

Speaker: Mirela Oliva (University of St. Thomas, Houston)
Title: On Divine Purpose: An Experiential Approach

Pursuing one's purpose is arguably part of living a meaningful life. As psychological surveys show (Schnell, VanderWeele & Hanson), purpose is one of the most important markers of meaningfulness. While there is agreement on the need for purpose, its nature remains widely open to discussion. In this paper, I examine whether the purpose we look for is given to us by a divine being. My approach is experiential. I will show that we experience the search for purpose not only as a deliberation about our potential and aspirations, but also as a receptivity to life opportunities and challenges, and the role we might play in a larger picture (for instance, our family and our society). In this sense, purpose is experienced as reflecting one's personality, yet somehow given from outside. Furthermore, we experience purpose as a unifying thread of a narrative whose intelligibility transcends human agency.

In the first part, I will refer to Frankl's notion of life task and Morioka's notion of life affordance. I will argue that, from this experiential perspective, objections to divine purpose become irrelevant. For instance, the concern that we might have been created to serve as food for aliens does not yield here. We have not experienced any culinary event of this sort until now.

In the second part, I will show that purpose is experienced diachronically, as emerging from a temporal development centered on the person yet not fully controlled by her. I will refer thus to narrative accounts of meaning (De Bres, MacIntyre, Fischer, among others) and present some examples of narrative discovery (Job, Saint Augustine). Our diachronic sense of purpose entails a narrative unity whose source lies outside the particular events.

In conclusion, the purpose that reflects our personality, yet is given from outside and emerges from a unifying narrative, has a divine source.

Speaker: Gary Scott Osmundsen (Grand Canyon University)
Title: The Paradox of the End and the Metaphysics of Perichoretic Agency
A central dispute in philosophy of life's meaning is whether there is a single, comprehensive answer to the meaning of life or a plurality of ways of finding meaning in life. The former pursues what's known as the single-question approach; the latter adopts the amalgam approach. This paper uses the "The Paradox of the End" (POE) as a heuristic device to show how both approaches showcase the metaphysical structure of the kind of agency capable of unifying them. Just as skepticism drives us to think better about epistemic goods, POE can deepen inquiry into agency, orientation, and the kind of activities that make life meaningful.

Iddo Landau's formulation of POE exposes a tension: striving towards goals gives life meaning, yet completing those goals eliminates the source of life's meaning. This paradox highlights instability and unsustainability within finite teleological frameworks. Drawing on Aristotle's conception of entelecheia, I argue that life's meaningful activities must be entelic; that is, they must function both as means towards goals and ends in themselves. This insight grounds a theistic reinterpretation of POE through the metaphysics of deification (theosis). I propose a model of happiness as perichoretic-agency—that is, a form of agency instantiated in the incarnate life of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. Through the incarnation, divine and human agencies are united, exemplifying an ontological structure of joint agency that enables human participation within the divine life of the Triune Godhead. Employing Aristotle's four-causal framework, perichoretic agency offers conceptual precision in explaining how human flourishing can be both stable and sustainable, thereby avoiding POE.

This model integrates contemporary distinctions between telic and atelic activities (à la Kieran Setiya) and self-propagating structured activities (à la Susan Bradford). Building on these insights, I introduce the concept of entelic orientation towards God (EOTG): the condition in which finite agents, by participating in divine agency, transform all subgoals into loci of participation in God's triune-life. Such activity is asymptotic—that is, eternally structured towards humanity's ultimate telos: to know God and become like God. It also captures the phenomenology of epektasis. The idea that a meaningful life entails perpetual striving in the pursuit of perfection. Perichoretic agency, therefore, is not a static but endless, self-propagating activity of growth, perseverance, and deepening participation in the divine life.

Ultimately, POE servers as a heuristic for identifying structured activities that yield a stable, sustainable, and unending source for life's meaning. Because perichoretic-agency entails human dependency and participation within the divine life, it unites the single-question and amalgam approaches: life's meaning is simultaneously unified and manifold. That is, human agents can obtain a plurality of goods through activities ontologically grounded in and teleologically ordered toward an inexhaustible source of life's meaning, purpose, and value: namely, the asymptotic goals of deification.

Speaker: Jonathan Parsons (North Central College, Elmhurst University, Loyola University Chicago, Ashland University, Murray State University, Northern Illinois University)

Title: "I Don't Have Time for Meaning! I Have to Work!"

Work can be a tremendous source of meaning for individuals—work provides us with opportunities to use our creative powers and contribute to worthwhile projects that are larger than ourselves. However, work being a source of meaning also seems to be a luxury. Many individuals are disheartened by their working conditions. Long hours, stagnant wages, lack of autonomy in the workplace, and the monotony or drudgery of the daily grind can all chip away at meaningfulness, even if an individual believes that the work they are performing serves some worthwhile end. Furthermore, society at large often places the responsibility of making work meaningful upon the individual worker, while ignoring the larger systemic or structural issues that make meaningful work difficult to achieve. Placing responsibility on the individual worker follows from a model of liberal neutrality regarding the nature and meaning of work. Individuals' reasons for working are their own, and as such individuals ought to make determinations for themselves regarding whether meaningful work is a worthwhile goal. As such, it is not the role of the state or society at large to prioritize meaningful work, because it is not the job of the state or society at large to prioritize certain conceptions of the good over others. The model of liberal neutrality also proposes that a lack of meaning or autonomy in the workplace can be duly compensated for by the presence of meaning or autonomy in other areas of life. In this paper I am going to argue against this perspective and say that society at large ought to prioritize meaningful work, and ought to address the larger systemic and structural issues that create barriers to meaningful work. Despite the apparent emphasis on neutrality, the liberal model does prioritize the autonomy of the individual. But the living conditions for most workers are their working conditions, so a lack of meaning or autonomy in one's working life easily translates to a lack of meaning or autonomy in other areas of life. To the extent that we want to prioritize individual autonomy, as a society we ought to prioritize meaningful work.

Speaker: Augustus Pomerleau (Georgia State University)
Title: Does Benatar's Quality of Life Argument Entail Pro-Mortalism?

In his (2017) and in earlier works, David Benatar advances a "quality of life" argument for antinatalism. According to Benatar, all human lives, without exception, are very bad. Therefore, coming into existence is always a severe harm. Several commentators have alleged that if human life were as bad as Benatar claims, it would be prudentially rational for all people, at all times, to commit suicide—a view that McGregor and Sullivan-Bisset (2012) call pro-mortalism. Benatar denies this. According to Benatar, annihilation constitutes a very severe harm, and so it may be prudent (assuming that one's quality of life does not fall below a certain threshold) to continue existing so as to avoid this harm. Sullivan-Bisset (2022) points out, however, that for mortal beings, death may be deferred but not avoided, and that since the cost of deferring death to a later time is to expose oneself to the harms of life, a longer life must always be worse overall. Therefore, Sullivan-Bisset and other critics conclude, if Benatar is right about the quality of human life, we are always prudentially better off committing suicide.

In my paper, I examine a way to reject the implication that if the quality of human life is as poor as Benatar says, suicide is always more prudent than continued survival. Benatar's critics assume without argument that it is imprudent not to maximize one's overall lifetime well-being. But this assumption may be rejected. More specifically, one may hold that it is prudentially permissible to have a near-term bias—that is, to discount the value of harms and benefits according to their temporal distance from the present. A near-term biased agent may prefer continued existence to immediate suicide, simply because they prefer to delay the harm of death enough that they are willing to accept some quantity of net harm in the interim as the cost of

doing so. Therefore, if near-term bias is prudentially permissible, then it may be prudentially permissible not to commit suicide, even if the quality of human life is poor overall. I suggest that (1) there exist justifications that would make it at least plausible to believe that a prudent agent may display some degree of near-term bias, and (2) that existing arguments against the prudential rationality of near-term bias, from Meghan Sullivan (2018), Dale Dorsey (2019), and others, fail to refute it.

I argue, therefore, that existing versions of the pro-mortalism objection to the quality of life argument, in order to succeed, must assume that near-term bias is prudentially irrational. But since the contrary claim, that near-term bias is prudentially acceptable, is not implausible, existing versions of the pro-mortalism objection are unjustified: they lack a crucial argumentative step in not defending a substantive, temporally-neutral theory of prudence.

Speaker: Matthew Schunke (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville)
Title: Meaning and the Wine World: A Phenomenological Account

In this paper, I use the philosophy of wine to show why Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology struggles to provide a satisfactory account of how aesthetic activities, such as wine, can contribute to meaningful life. Using Merleau-Ponty's account of perception, I advance a phenomenology of wine that shows how wine can contribute to an account of meaningful life while also providing a more accurate account of the taste experience of wine than those offered by Marion and prominent accounts in the philosophy of wine. I begin by referring to Jean-Luc Marion's account of saturated phenomena and how they are a source of meaning and significance in life. These are phenomena, including those from the aesthetic realm, that exceed our intuitions and can cause us to reconsider our place in the world and how we orient ourselves to various phenomena. One example of this for Marion is the taste of wine, which saturates the sensation of taste, providing an intuition that is more than can be captured, as he says, by the definition of a chemist. However, due to various philosophical and theological commitments, Marion's phenomenology lacks an account of attunement that would allow for something like the cultivation of taste and sensibilities related to wine. As a result, I argue that his phenomenology does not provide us with an explanation for how these projects can be pursued as part of a meaningful life nor how one can help others to find meaning and significance in some like the wine world. I then show that similar problems emerge in two important accounts in the philosophy of wine—those of Barry Smith and Cain Todd. Smith and Todd's accounts both argue that the taste of wine must be understood as an objective account that describes what is present in the glass. They do this in order to preserve the value of the wine world, but I show that in putting such an emphasis on the wine object, they reduce the role of the taster and diminish the place of the wine language and other norms that emerge in the wine world. Furthermore, this also limits the role of attunement of the taster. In response to these accounts, I utilize Merleau-Ponty's work on perception and the body to show that a phenomenology of wine that includes an account of the attunement of the taster to the taste of the wine, one which does not place such an emphasis on the wine object as the sole purveyor of the truth of taste, not only gives us a better account of the experience of taste but can also help us understand how the experience of wine can become a meaningful activity that can be pursued by others. This allows us to see tasting notes and other aspects of the wine world as opening the space to bring others into the experience of it as a source of meaning in life.

Speaker: Mark Silcox (University of Central Oklahoma)
Title: Value Capture and Value Evasion

It is an uncomfortable feature of the human condition how easily we can go astray while pursuing even the mostly carefully cultivated set of personal values, when alternate paths of pursuit present themselves to us. Our methods of practical deliberation often implicitly contain their own deeply hidden axiological content, and what can seem like purely instrumental reasoning can end up transforming the meanings of our goals and decisions, and shifting our focus onto quite strange and unexpected ultimate ends. No philosophical account of a meaningful life is complete unless it can teach us how to counteract these disruptive effects upon our everyday choices, and help to direct us past at least the most common and seductive forms of deliberative self-sabotage.

C. Thi Nguyen uses the term "Value Capture" for a deliberative phenomenon he regards as a largely unappreciated threat to human well-being. He describes a broad and familiar array of examples of how Value Capture can intrude upon our everyday activities, from obsessive attention to one's FitBit to the institutional mismeasurement of academic programs. He characterizes the common features of these scenarios in terms of the "rich, subtle, or inchoate" values people initially associate with a meaningful life choice coming to be psychologically dominated in practical reasoning by the explicit expression of these values via quantified metrics. Nguyen also defends a philosophically provocative diagnosis of the type of harm to agents that can occurs as the result of this distortion of their practical deliberations.

What I seek to question is how strong the connection is between the essential features of Value Capture as Nguyen describes it and its (undeniably) deleterious effects. I pursue this line of inquiry by describing a type of counter-phenomenon that I dub "Value Evasion," wherein political and/or psychological harm is done to human beings precisely because the effects that Nguyen associates with Value Capture fail to occur. My two examples of Value Evasion are: i) the phenomenon (famously described by Tom Wolfe) whereby audiences view public artworks displayed for exclusively political reasons as though they had the same type of art status as works in museums, and ii) the misinterpretation of the "sobriety coins" handed out by AA as indicators that one is approaching a state of total and permanent sobriety. In both such circumstances, a type of value that was perfectly adequately expressible in quantitative terms becomes less comprehensible on account of its being represented as appreciable only via the apprehension of irreducibly qualitative characteristics.

I suggest that there is actually a type of parity between Value Capture and Value Evasion, in the sense that neither externally imposed, qualitative metrics nor utterly private, qualitative apprehensions should be regarded as the psychologically preferable or normatively authoritative default mode for deliberating about our values. It is a mistake, in other words, to suppose that that the wildlands of practical decision-making can be navigated by supposing there is any single mode of deliberation that we are uniquely best off or authorized to rely upon.

Speaker: Tyler Sproule (University of Illinois Chicago)
Title: The Meaningfulness of Grief: A Phenomenological Approach

Periods of grief are often characterized by profound senses of meaninglessness (Didon, 2017; Lewis, 1961). In light of this, much recent work has focused on the crises of meaning that can accompany grief, while also suggesting how positive meaning in life can be restored through a process of recovery (Matey, 2023; Mason & Dougherty, 2023; Golub, 2025).

These accounts tend to focus on the cognitive or intellectual transformations grief can bring about, including gained propositional knowledge, the modification of specific beliefs, or the reconceiving of life narratives. However, while such accounts speak to important components of the value that can be found in the grieving process, these proposals neglect the transformative effect grieving can have on the felt first-person experience of meaning in one's life.

In this paper, I will speak to this neglected component of the meaningfulness of grief, and will provide reasons to think that recovering from grief can lead not only to simply experiencing one's life as more meaningful, but can in fact make one's life more meaningful.

In order to show this, I will first speak to the phenomenology of grief, borrowing from the recent work of Matthew Ratcliffe, and argue that grief can at least partially be understood as a world-altering existential feeling (Ratcliffe, 2022). Next, I will argue that positive feelings of meaning (e.g., feelings of connection, belonging, being at home in the world, fulfillment, or gratitude) can be similarly characterized as non-localized, world-structuring existential feelings.

Building off this phenomenological account, I maintain that apart from the specifically cognitive changes that can occur through grieving, grief can transform our experiential world by operating at a deeper or more encompassing affective and experiential level. For instance, grief can often bring the purely intellectual understanding of the inevitability of loss, the reality of one's existential vulnerability, the impermanence of one's projects, and the finitude of one's life, into one's immediate experiential world.

Speaker: Jonathan Strand (Concordia University of Edmonton)
Title: In Defense of Moderate Supernaturalism

In this paper it is argued that a careful analysis of the concept of "making a difference" entails what Metz has dubbed "moderate supernaturalism": Without the satisfaction of spiritual conditions—such as the existence God or life after death—our lives can be substantially meaningful. But our lives will be much more meaningful, if some such spiritual conditions are met.

The argument of the paper proceeds roughly as follows:

1. One of the sorts of meaningfulness people seek in their lives is significance.
2. A thing is significant, or "matters", to the extent that it "makes a difference".
3. A thing makes a difference whenever some state-of-affairs obtains that would not have obtained if that thing had not existed/occurred/obtained.
4. Whenever a thing A makes more, or greater differences, or the differences it makes obtain for a longer period of time, than the differences another thing B makes, then (all else being equal) A makes a greater overall difference than B.
5. Human beings make innumerable differences in their lives—including many differences of substantial or great value—even if there is no God or life after death, and all the differences we make obtain for only a finite amount of time.
6. Human lives and actions, therefore, can make many substantial differences—and so be significant, and meaningful—apart from the satisfaction of spiritual conditions like the existence of God or life after death.
7. If God does exist, however, (as traditionally conceived) God will know and appropriately appreciate, in complete detail, and for eternity, every action of every person; states of affairs will obtain, for eternity, that would not have obtained if that person, or God, had not existed.
8. If human beings have life after death, they will be making differences beyond their natural lives, and if that life is eternal, they will be making differences for an eternity beyond their natural lives or even that of the universe; again, states of affairs will obtain (for eternity) that would not have obtained if that person, or their life after death, had not existed.
9. So, if God, or life after death, exist, human beings will make a greater difference than if there is no such spiritual reality; it fact, they will make an infinitely greater difference if such spiritual conditions are satisfied.
10. Human beings can have significant, and hence meaningful, lives, therefore, apart from any spiritual realities like God or life after death.
11. Our lives will be substantially more significant and meaningful, however, if some such spiritual realities obtain; in fact they may be infinitely more significant and meaningful.
12. Moderate supernaturalism, therefore, is true.

Speaker: Jesse S. Summers (Duke University)
Title: Putting Purpose in its Place (Ethics for Assholes)
This paper examines the ethical failures of individuals who believe exceptional purposes justify disregarding moral rules: assholes for the greater good. Drawing on Aaron James's analysis that "assholes" are those who view themselves as specially entitled and exempt from ordinary constraints, and who thereby insulate themselves from criticism, the paper focuses on those who "move fast and break things" because they believe that their grand ends justify most any means.

The central argument of the paper distinguishes meaning from purpose. "Purpose" as a modern concept escalated dramatically in frequency precisely during the decades of the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, as society increasingly understood people and things in mechanistic, function-based ways. As individuals almost literally became parts of larger machines, purpose-driven thinking became a ubiquitous framework for understanding a meaningful life. However, purpose is only one way to achieve a meaningful life, and not the only, or even obviously the best, way to do so. Considering ourselves as purpose-driven risks justifying harmful actions through appeal to greater goods in exactly the way that the assholes for the greater good illustrate.

Drawing on Susan Wolf's account that meaning is found "in loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way," the paper develops an alternative understanding of meaningful life. Meaning not only does not derive solely from achieving grand purposes, but can also emerge from participation in recognizable social patterns—friendships, play, creativity, generosity—that matter intrinsically, not instrumentally. By analogy to how words gain meaning through use within larger systems, lives also gain meaning through engagement with social practices and patterns, of which purposes are but a single type. Finally, the paper employs Bernard Suits's analysis of games to illuminate ethical life. Games involve pursuing goals through deliberately inefficient means constrained by rules, where the rules themselves create the meaningful activity. Similarly, ethical practices—work, family, friendship—involve rule-governed, "inefficient" patterns that constitute meaningful engagement. The rules exist not as obstacles but as constitutive of meaning itself.

The paper therefore rejects the asshole's premise: the question is not whether sufficiently important purposes justify breaking rules, but rather why those rules exist. Since rules help create meaningful patterns in life, even modest achievements within rule-governed practices can be more meaningful than grand purposes pursued through rule-breaking. A meaningful life remains available through ethical engagement with ordinary practices, without requiring exceptional purposes or perhaps even notable achievements.

Speaker: Jack Symes (Durham University)
Title: Modal Panentheism: Ethics, Afterlife, and Evil

Modal panentheism claims that God encompasses every possible world and that a substantial number of possible worlds exist. Until recently, the view had been rejected in favour of traditional theism on account of the modal problem of evil (Nagasawa, 2014, 2016, 2024). However, new defences have demonstrated that modal panentheism is not at a significant disadvantage relative to traditional theism but is, in fact, a coherent and highly promising worldview (Symes 2024, forthcoming). The aim of this paper is, for the first time, to develop an understanding of how modal panentheists should approach questions of meaning in life.

The paper focuses on three areas: ethics, the afterlife, and evil. First, I examine the kind of ethics available to modal panentheists. I cast doubt on the compatibility of modal panentheism with traditional forms of utilitarianism, arguing that maximising happiness and pleasure is ineffective in the face of a possibly infinite set of perfectly good worlds. Instead, I claim that modal panentheists ought to adopt a form of deontological or virtue ethics. Second, I outline several conceptions of the afterlife within a modal panentheistic framework. These include views that allow for personal identity in a state of eternal happiness (heaven, moksha) and those that deny personal identity (annihilation views). In each case, I explore the relevance of modal panentheistic ethics. Finally, I introduce and respond to a new problem: the modal problem of hell. This problem holds that no part of God can be evil – including hell, an eternal place of pain and suffering. Since modal panentheism entails that God encompasses every possible world, it follows that God must also encompass hell. I respond by arguing that hell is not possible; for on modal panentheism, every world must reflect God's perfect goodness.

The paper advances modal panentheism by demonstrating its potential to offer a coherent ethical framework, plausible accounts of the afterlife, and a powerful response to the modal problem of hell.

Speaker: Dario Vaccaro (University of Tennessee)
Title: Does It Not Matter Because One Day It Will End?

Many of us, on reflection, have the feeling that nothing really matters because one day it will end. In a recent paper, Greene (2021) assesses the various lines of reasoning that might support this claim. He first argues that many initially plausible lines of support for it do not work. Then, he develops what he says is the line of reasoning that has the best chance of succeeding but argues that even this one fails to support the claim because it is based on two principles that contradict each other.

So, he concludes that, however tempting it is to believe it, we have no rational ground for thinking that nothing really matters because one day it will end.

In this paper, however, I argue that the most plausible version of the claim Greene is evaluating would not be supported by the line of reasoning he rejects in the first place. So, even if these lines of reasoning are not sound (as he argues), this would not show that the claim at issue – once plausibly characterized – is false. To argue for this, I step back and clarify the claim at issue. In particular, I show that, when we are considering what it means to say that "nothing really matters because one day it will end", we need to clarify what the two "its" and the "matters" refer to. I then provide the most plausible version of this claim and show that the lines of reasoning Greene considers in its support do not support it in the first place. Thus, it is irrelevant that these lines of reasoning are unsound. Moreover, to make matters worse for Greene, this version of the claim at issue is the one that is supported by the very examples that he uses in his paper to motivate the very issue. Thus, Greene has not shown that there is no rational basis for thinking that nothing matters because one day it will end.

Speaker: Melle van Duijn (University of Oklahoma)
Title: Socratic Pessimism and a Meaningful Life

Socratic eudaimonism rests on two core doctrines: (i) Socratic Virtue Intellectualism – the view that virtue is a form of knowledge; and (ii) the Sufficiency Thesis – the view that virtue is necessary and sufficient for flourishing (eudaimonia). While flourishing and living a meaningful life are conceptually distinct, Socrates considers them to be importantly related. In this paper, I argue that, while Socrates is pessimistic about one's chances of flourishing, he nevertheless believes that one can live a meaningful life, and that this meaning consists in the very pursuit of virtue through philosophical inquiry.

The paper is structured as follows: First, I draw out Socrates's criteria for flourishing, and foreground his commitment to Virtue Intellectualism. I do so by examining key passages from Plato's early dialogues and Xenophon's Socratic works. Then, I note an important qualification, drawing particularly on Xenophon's Apology: While we would expect an intellectualist account of virtue to emphasize the mind in virtue-acquisition, Socrates argues that the body plays an important role in attaining and retaining virtue. With these conditions for flourishing and qualifications in mind, I analyze the circumstances under which one might attain virtue, and evaluate whether Socrates believes that virtue is attainable in principle and in practice.

I argue that Socrates holds that virtue is, in principle, attainable. Yet, in practice, Socrates clearly demonstrates that virtue is unattainable. I provide a set of textually-based arguments showing that (i) Socrates doesn't know virtue; (ii) his interlocutors fail to acquire it; and, even if one is able to acquire it, (iii) virtue is fragile or liable to lapse. From these arguments, I contend that Socrates doesn't think that flourishing is in practice attainable. In fact, I argue that Socrates holds that the human condition is, in fact, a net negative: Put into practice, one's chances of flourishing are poor.

This might leave us quite pessimistic about Socratic Eudaimonism. But, I argue that this is not the case. On the contrary, I argue that the Socratic Eudaimonist has room for living a meaningful life nonetheless. While Socrates believes that true flourishing comes in the form of acting in accordance with virtue, I propose that a Socratically meaningful life is best exemplified in terms of the pursuit of virtue. Of course, in Plato's Apology, Socrates famously exclaims that, "the unexamined life is not worth living for a person" (ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ) (38a7-8). Building on this notion, I demonstrate that Socrates believes that finding meaning in life consists in the very practice of engaging in philosophical inquiry (41b3-4).

There are some significant theoretical advantages of my view: First, it allows the Socratic Eudaimonist to value the pursuit of virtue intrinsically, rather than as a means to flourishing; second, it softens Socrates's pessimism about the human condition; and third, it explains why, even at his trial and sentencing, Socrates never stops defending philosophy and its inquiry. On my reading of the Socratic works, Socrates is pessimistic about the human condition, but optimistic about finding meaning in it.

Speaker: Violet Victoria (University of Oklahoma)
Title: Self-Sacrifice and Institutional Virtue Ethics: A Challenge for the Capabilities Approach

The capabilities theories of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen hold that just institutions should be organized such that all individuals possess the basic conditions required for human flourishing. On this framework, institutions are evaluated by the extent to which they secure the material and social capabilities necessary for individuals to achieve eudaimonia.

This paper argues that the capabilities approach faces a structural tension concerning the relationship between flourishing and the institutional division of labor. Many of the institutions that make general flourishing possible depend on role-specific constraints that predictably undermine the flourishing of some: Militaries require members to accept severe risks to health and psychological well-being. Healthcare and service industries rely on workers whose circadian rhythms, safety, and long-term health are systematically compromised. These are not merely unfortunate contingencies, nor are they issues that are completely solved given a different (e.g., higher) allocation of resources. They are features of institutional design that are essential to best sustaining the flourishing of others.

If institutions are supposed to be designed to promote eudaimonia, how should we handle those institutions which depend on roles that preclude flourishing for some individuals? The capabilities approach attempts to avoid this problem by focusing on thresholds of opportunity. It matters that individuals can flourish, not whether the exercise of that capability is compatible with maintaining institutional conditions for others. This is an unsatisfactory response as it fails to acknowledge self-sacrifice as a morally significant dimension of human agency. Many individuals who work in burdensome roles as first responders or emergency physicians report meaning, self-respect, and purpose that arise from forms of self-sacrifice which diminish their own prospects for full flourishing. Their self-sacrifice, which the capabilities approach would view as an inhibiting factor, they see as promoting their own flourishing.

Taking seriously the relational nature of human life suggests that eudaimonia may sometimes involve accepting constraints for the sake of others. A defensible virtue ethical approach to institutions, then, must account both for the distribution of the burdens that sustain collective life and for the positive value that self-sacrifice can hold for the agents who bear those burdens. Recognizing this creates a normative challenge: We must find a way to incorporate morally valuable self-limitation into an account of institutional justice without legitimating exploitative patterns of sacrifice, including those rooted in gendered or otherwise oppressive expectations of certain historically marginalized groups.

Speaker: Andrea Villalba Cuesta (University of Texas at Austin)
Title: Why the Rose Matters

Joseph Raz opens Value, Respect, and Attachment with an anecdote from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's The Little Prince. The Little Prince, having arrived on Earth from the tiny asteroid B-612—his only companion being a rose—discovers a garden filled with five thousand roses. Overwhelmed, he proclaims through tears: "I thought that I was rich, with a flower than was unique in all the world; and all I had was a common rose… That doesn't make me a very great prince." Ultimately, an encounter with a fox resolves the boy's crisis. Raz sums up the fox's lesson nicely: while the rose may not be perceptually unique, it is "made unique by the history of their love." The rose is irreplaceable for the Little Prince because it is his rose; it is irreplaceably valuable.

You might be wondering: what kind of irreplaceable value is Raz referring to? Those familiar with the value theory literature on irreplaceability, particularly Gwen Bradford's recent work, will recognise that the irreplaceable value at stake here differs from that associated with objects like Stradivarius violins. The rose's irreplaceable value is of the personal variety: it gives only the Little Prince reasons to admire, cherish, and preserve it. Impersonal irreplaceable value, by contrast, gives everyone reasons. This paper explores the distinction between these two kinds of irreplaceable value. More specifically, I argue against Bradford's suggestion that "perhaps the difference is ultimately one of amount of value." To do so, I develop a novel account of personal irreplaceable value—or more precisely, a kind of irreplaceable good-for—drawing on Monique Wonderly's work on security-based attachments. I argue that the rose is irreplaceably good-for the Little Prince insofar as it provides felt security. The Little Prince needs the rose—and here, unlike in cases of impersonal irreplaceable value, we are in the domain of prudence. The difference between personal and impersonal irreplaceable value is a difference in kind, not merely in degree.

Speaker: Leigh Vicens (Augustana University)

Title: Finding Meaning in the Greater Good

Why might God allow created persons to suffer? While most theistic philosophers have assumed that evil must make possible some greater good which couldn't have been realized otherwise, and many have also expected God to compensate individual sufferers with some good that outweighs their suffering, some have gone further to require that individuals benefit from the very evils they suffer. Marilyn McCord Adams, for instance, reasons that out of love for individuals God would not only "balance off" but "defeat" horrendous evil by "giving it positive meaning through organic unity" with a great good in an individual's life (1999, 31). We may call such conditions on responses to the problem of evil "defeat requirements." While I have sympathies with those who hold out for God to defeat evil, I find most defeat conditions too strong. Thus, I turn first in this paper to outlining a few problems with these defeat conditions before endorsing a more modest one. I then go on to consider an underexplored good that might be realized through suffering and so contribute to its defeat.

Theists who maintain that God must defeat evil in individual lives, and who venture to explain how God might do this, usually connect the evil to the good of a relationship with God. I want to suggest a different possibility. Adams maintains that only such a "transcendent good" could have any hope of outweighing, much less defeating, horrendous evils. But I think that is questionable. What has gone unrecognized is that some greater good which is not good for the sufferer could produce good for the sufferer by providing her life with meaning. Much recent work in empirical psychology, and some in analytic philosophy, has focused on "sense-making," or the process whereby a person fits an experience from her life into some broader context. As researchers have noted, this process is something many sufferers seek out and benefit from (Steger 2017). One way sense-making might occur is post-mortem: a person comes to see that some evil she suffered was integral to the realization of a great good for the world.

I would like to distinguish this idea from Richard Swinburne's (1998), according to which it is a great good for an individual to be "of use" to others. Swinburne insists that this may be true whether or not the individual recognizes it. But on my view, meaning has both an objective and subjective component. While you can be incorrect about the meaning of some event, to count as meaningful in the sense of being good for you, you must experience the event as meaningful. My proposal also avoids the possibility of blaming victims who do not find meaning in their suffering, since we should not expect sufferers to be able to recognize any good that comes from their suffering in this life. After all, per hypothesis, the good may not be good for them, or local to their circumstances. At most, this proposal leaves room for hope, for sufferers who want it.

Speaker: Yidi Wu (Boston University)

Title: Virtue and the Meaning of Life: A Comparative Study of Aristotle and Mencius on Happiness or Human Flourishing

This paper examines how Aristotle (384-322 BCE) and Mencius (372-289 BCE), two foundational figures in the Greek and Chinese philosophical traditions respectively, understand the relationship between virtue, happiness, and the meaning of life. Despite their cultural and historical distance, both thinkers regard human flourishing as rooted in moral excellence and the fulfillment of our distinctively human capacities. Their shared conviction that virtue constitutes the core of a meaningful life suggests a profound convergence between Western and Eastern reflections on what makes life worth living. For Aristotle, as elaborated in the Nicomachean Ethics, happiness (eudaimonia) is the ultimate end and organizing principle of human existence. It is achieved through a complete life lived in accordance with complete virtue—an active realization of the soul's rational capacities. While Book I of the Ethics emphasizes the ethical dimension of happiness as virtuous activity, Book X reinterprets it through the lens of contemplation (theoria), elevating understanding and the theoretical life to the highest form of human excellence. The theoretical life, in its devotion to wisdom, embodies the purest fulfillment of our rational nature and represents the culmination of moral development. In comparison, Mencius approaches the question of happiness through inward reflection and self-cultivation. Rooted in his belief in the inherent goodness of human nature, Mencius maintains that the path to happiness lies in realizing and nurturing one's innate moral dispositions or four "sprouts"—compassion, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. For him, the source of meaning is internal rather than external: to lead a good life is to harmonize one's moral heart-mind (性 xin) with the way of Heaven (天 Tian), thereby aligning individual flourishing with cosmic and ethical order. Thus, the second definition of happiness given by Aristotle in Book X puts him closer to Mencius in terms of the relationship between happiness and thinking. Yet, there is key difference lies in the directionality of thought, since Aristotle advocates inquiry into things external to oneself and Mencius recommends turning thoughts interiorly for self-examination. By juxtaposing Aristotle's outwardly oriented ethics of action and contemplation with Mencius's inwardly focused ethics of reflection, this paper argues that both philosophers converge on a shared belief that human beings possess an intrinsic potential for virtue and that the actualization of this potential gives life its deepest meaning. For both, happiness is inseparable from virtue—not merely as its condition but as its very realization. Happiness without virtue is illusory, lacking the stability and depth that characterize true flourishing. This comparative study sheds light on the enduring philosophical quest for meaning by uncovering how two distant yet resonant traditions conceptualize the unity of moral excellence, happiness, and meaning of life. The paper thus contributes to the global conversation on meaning in life by demonstrating how classical conceptions of virtue remain vital for reimagining happiness and moral purpose in the contemporary world.