I. Course Overview

As Harvard psychologist Robert Kegan notes, we are, at our core, meaning-making creatures. Being a person is as much an activity as a thing. Given this, what can we say about how we make meaning? In this course we will examine various ways that humans have attempted to make meaning of the human experience. Rather than taking the traditional approach of attempting to explain the process of making meaning, we will read books (novels), watch films and take trips that are, in themselves, an attempt to make meaning, of life, of tragedy, of love, of what it is to be human. In this way we will try to engage directly the process of making meaning that lies at the core of what it is to be human.

The Quest for Meaning in Life, Literature and Art is designed to cross traditional disciplinary boundaries. In fact, the very nature of the questions asked presupposes the crossing of intellectual boundaries, for what discipline can claim sole proprietorship of the human quest for meaning? In crossing disciplines, students will be required to read primary source material, to analyze material critically, and to communicate their understanding both orally and in writing within the rich cultural and intellectual context of Oxford. The overarching goal is to provide a context within which you can answer questions about meaning for yourself.

This course is designed to connect naturally with the Oxford team-taught course, Religion, Science and the Quest for Meaning. As a result, many of the ideas we discuss in this class will bear directly on the discussions we have in the Religion and Science class. The principal difference between the two classes will be on our singular focus on human meaning in this class, and a dialectic focus on the two dominant meaning systems (science and religion) in the Religion and Science class, with particular emphasis on the contrast between Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis.

II. Student Learning Objectives

A. Instructor objectives for students who complete the course include the following:

1. To encourage students to consider literary and artistic perspectives on the question of human meaning.
   - Analyze, compare, and critique various perspectives to making meaning.
   - Identify major similarities and differences in the way humans frame questions of meaning.
2. To challenge students to examine their own meaning structures and the processes whereby they developed them.

- Reflect on how you construct and communicate your sense of meaning to others, paying special attention to the language you use (literal, metaphoric, graphic, etc.).
- Formulate a personal statement about how you make sense of life and communicate this through written and/or artistic expressions.

3. To examine and question the various ways that people give their lives meaning.

- Contrast the ways of knowing examined in this class with those from the Science and Religion.
- Assess the extent to which these ways of knowing converge or diverge.
- Identify similarities and differences between various cultural systems for conveying meaning.

4. To make the human quest for meaning concrete by delving into experience as embedded in fiction.

- Explore the experiences of seminal figures (authors and their fictional characters) who rely on various systems as the foundation upon which to build their personal structure of meaning.
- Analyze the antecedents in the lives of seminal figures that appear to have contributed to the assumptions, problems, challenges, and resolution of their personal quest for meaning.

B. Student learning objectives often vary considerably; please list three objectives for this course both below and in your course journal. In other words, after taking this course, what do you hope to have accomplished?

1.

2.

3.
III. Course Content

A. Meaning and Memory—

Book: The Things They Carried, Tim O’Brien
Poem: On Seeing the Elgin Marbles, John Keats
Memorial Day for the War Dead, Yehuda Amichai
Film: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind
Activity: The British Museum

B. Meaning and Nature—

Book: Siddhartha, Herman Hesse
Poems: Landscape With The Fall of Icarus, William Carlos Williams
A noiseless patient spider, Walt Whitman
One time more, my love, the net of light extinguishes, Pablo Neruda
Film: Baraka
Activity: The Isle of Wight / Stonehenge

C. Meaning and Morality—

Book: The Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis
Poems: The Divine Image, William Blake
The Diameter of the Bomb, Yehuda Amichai
Film: Dogville
Activity: C.S. Lewis House and Oxford sites

D. Meaning and Society—

Play: The Handmaid’s Tale, Margaret Atwood
Poem: anyone lived in a pretty how town, E. E. Cummings
Film: Away we Go
Activity: Globe Theater—London

E. Meaning and Belonging/Relatedness/Love–Despair

Book: When Nietzsche Wept, Irvin Yalom
Poems: I Am Much Too Alone in This World, Yet Not Alone, Rainer Maria Rilke,
Guilty of Dust, Frank Bidart
The Waltz We Were Born For, Walt McDonald
Film: American Beauty
Activity: Tate Britain/Globe Theatre

F. Making Meaning/ Meaning as Creating—

Book: Jitterbug Perfume, Tom Robbins
Poem: The Waking, Theodore Roethke
Film: Waking Life
Activity: Design/Create your own…
IV. Course Requirements

A. Class Participation: Students are expected to read all assigned material prior to its discussion in class, attend every class meeting, and participate in class discussions. Please read carefully The Seminar Experience (attached). The amount and range of reading is extensive, the level of critical thinking is demanding, and the quality of discussion is vigorous. Of course, these attributes are in direct alignment with the expectations and standards of Oxford University.

B. Journal: The purpose of the intellectual journal is to promote continued thinking about topics covered in the course, especially applying what you learn to your life events and integrating what is learned in this course with learning acquired in your other Oxford course, our excursions, daily conversations, and the like. Journal writing also provides a way to continue the dialogue between student and professor.

In keeping a journal, the student writes relatively informal, but reflective comments (daily) about course content—whether from course discussions, reading, group work, films or excursions. By writing about that content, and applying it within the crucible of life, the student can develop a refined understanding or perspective from which to view the human quest for meaning. And because the professor reads and responds to the entries, the student gains a more individualized approach to learning.

Generally there should be a minimum of two pages or so (assuming 12-point font) for each assigned reading or seminar session, plus additional entries of the student’s own choice. Although an entry should be at least one-to-two pages long, quality of the entry (thinking/reflection/probing) is more important than the quantity of words. These guidelines are meant as minimum standards, of course; a student is always free (encouraged) to exceed the recommendations. Do note that, in the Oxford setting, access to computers and printers is limited; therefore, you may hand write your entries, but please do so in a manner that can be easily read. Type of entries:

a. Entries in which you apply course readings, discussions, and insights to your own life and experience, or to the lives of others.

b. Entries in which you relate information in this course to information learned from other academic disciplines.

c. Entries that make connections between what you learn in this course and what you observe in “popular culture,” that is, movies, television shows, magazines, newspapers, etc. Feel free to photocopy such material and include it in your journal. (You may even think of the journal as an “intellectual scrapbook,” and include photos, drawings, clippings, and the like.)

d. Entries in which you identify and reason (in greater depth) about problems or issues that are raised by your reading or our discussions.

e. Entries in which you explore an emotional reaction that you are having to the course material, thereby clarifying what you are experiencing. For example, if you react negatively to a text reading or seminar discussion, pin down the reasons for your reaction.

f. Entries in which you recognize the implications of what you have read for yourself personally or for society as a whole.

g. Entries that ask for clarification of statements in the text, the meaning of a lecture or discussion, or the purpose of a groupwork exercise.
These descriptions are suggestions; make the journal your own! Journal entries may be collected at the beginning of every class session, to verify that you are keeping up; you are expected to keep the journal current throughout the course, a task that simultaneously ensures that you keep up with all assigned readings. To the extent that all seminar participants have read the material and reflected on it via journal entries, the discussion sessions should be of high caliber.

C. Presentation: A formal presentation will be required of all course participants. The presentation will consist of an analysis/appraisal of one of the “primary sources” of the course; in other words, it will be your responsibility (a team of two students, actually) on a given day to set the stage for our seminar discussion.

D. Paper/Project: A culminating paper or project will also be required. The paper or project should explore your particular resolution (tentative though it may be) to issues raised in the course (see: student learning objectives) and the intellectual rationale for adopting that stance. The paper/project will serve as your “final examination.”

V. The Seminar Experience

As a form of educational process the seminar can be traced to German higher education, especially to Gottingen. But it was not until the early 1800s that the seminar came to America when Harvard (who else?) attempted to establish a seminar after the German pattern.

As a pedagogical device, the seminar has a checkered and controversial history. Even today the term means many different things to many different people. Some professors and students consider it to be the acme of didactic projects. Others consider it a wasteful, irrelevant device where students waste time sharing ignorances.

Since this essay is my notation on the seminar and is being written for participants in my seminars, I might as well confess my bias on the issue: I believe the seminar to be the most viable and productive form of instruction for advanced students—once certain conditions are met.

But first, by seminar I mean essentially what the dictionary means: “a small group of advanced students in a college or graduate school engaged in original research under the guidance of a professor who meets regularly with them for reports and discussions” (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language).

Given this definition, there is surely a sense that much of our education militates against the seminar approach to learning. For a variety of reasons, our elementary schools, high schools, and colleges tend to approach the educative process in a quite different manner—more like a
spectator style than a participant style. This may be one of the reasons that some students, even those in professional and graduate schools, prefer a “classroom” atmosphere where “listening to an expert” is the modus operandi. They prefer to receive information communicated via an authoritative—if not an authoritarian—source.

The seminar form, on the other hand, approaches learning more as a process of participation and exposure. It assumes that hearing oneself is itself a learning experience, and that hearing the responses of peers to what we say can be a way of sharpening our self-perceptions as well as a way of dealing responsibly with a particular subject matter.

But there are problems. Like any educational procedure, the seminar can falter, even fail. Certain conditions need to be met, including the following minimal ones:

1. The climate of the seminar needs to be such that participants feel free to share their ideas, questions, and resources. Fear and intimidation are the natural enemies of an authentic seminar experience.

2. Participants—students and professor—must want to be part of the seminar. A seminar member who doesn't really want to be present can sabotage the learning process. (The ideal seminar participant, I believe, is primarily a self-directed learner who values and uses the seminar context for the expression of his or her ideas.)

3. Seminar participants need to place high values on responsibility and honesty. The seminar is no place for a “con-person,” or someone who simply can’t say, “I don't know.”

4. The seminar itself ought to be seen essentially as a place and process for sharing intellectual matters. Although the human qualities of participants enhance the seminar, the setting is not a group therapy setting or a sensitivity training - personal growth group. Although human qualities are integral to the process, the intellectual factor must retain its priority.

Because a true seminar is relational, each seminar evolves its own personality and style, bringing together many factors and forces beyond those listed above. That is why a seminar is always something of an adventure, with surprise and uncertainty inevitable (and we know that not everyone likes surprises and uncertainties!).

So, how about you? Are you ready for the seminar experience?
VI. The Seminar in Action

It is expected that it will take more than one class session to work through each topic as listed in the weekly reading schedule, and in a sense, we will never “abandon” a topic. Rather, you should think in terms of carrying forward each week’s topic/reading/discussion to subsequent sessions. Although there will always be some flexibility in the way in which each class unfolds, the general approach for a seminar is as follows.

1. **Openers.** I will begin each session with a set of opening remarks designed to raise the issue(s) of the day and set the stage for what follows, highlighting material from the assigned readings, from prior class dialogues, from advanced reading of student journal entries, and perhaps in reference to a current social issue that is pertinent.

2. **A Main Event.** The main class activity for the day will focus on some “main event,” a specific stimulus that provokes thought about the issues. Examples of stimuli that will serve this function are audiovisual presentations/films, student presentations, group debates, and so on. In general, the main event serves the purpose of focusing the attention of the students on one event or issue common to them all, and sets the stage for the next part of the process.

3. **Reaction/Response.** First, there is a response by students to the main event and the issues raised therein, with both personal and intellectual reactions encouraged. These reactions allow us to list the specific questions and issues to be discussed in greater depth. Additionally, there is a reaction by me, again both personally and in light of my professional knowledge base in the history of the disciplines.

4. **General Discussion.** The issues will then be discussed in open forum with all students expected to participate. A deliberate effort will be made to understand and, if possible, resolve the issues—particularly as mapped against the student learning outcomes (enumerated above).

5. **Closure.** In concluding each week’s session, we will (as a class) attempt to summarize the main points from the main event, the reactions, and the discussion, to relate summary points to prior class sessions, and to anticipate the relationship of the present summary to future course topics.

VII. Some Thoughts on “Critical Thinking”

One of my mentors, Elie Wiesel, speaks of his life and work within this frame: “My whole life, my whole work, has been devoted to questions. . . not to answers.” (And while I am acknowledging Prof. Wiesel, I should mention that he teaches the only other course on “the rebel” of which I am aware, at Boston University.) An immediate question arises in terms of what we mean by “critical thinking.” For some, the focus is on “critical,” as in “being critical” of any/all ideas. While I agree that thinking critically implies some degree of skepticism, philosopher Simone Weil provides an important balancing principle in this regard. She insists that one first needs to understand a thought or idea before proceeding to judgment. Her point here is that many people criticize authors and/or their work, without ever fully understanding the author or the author’s ideas in the first place. Further, given what we now know about the brain, and the way in which cognitive and emotive pathways are intricately intertwined, there is a real sense in which we should consider “critical feeling” as connected to the task of understanding.
In response, some colleagues at LAVC (Los Angeles Valley College) assembled a list of questions that attempt to provoke “critical thinking,” in a fairly nuanced sense of the term. I have adapted some of that summary as a sort of intellectual toolkit for a well-developed seminar:

A more inclusive definition of critical thinking embraces all thought processes that are “deeper” than memorization and rote recall of factual information. When we think critically, we think deeply; we not only know the facts, but we take such additional steps as:

- progressing beyond “surface” memorization & toward deeper levels of learning
- shifting away from learning as “receiving of information” from teacher or text
- moving toward reflecting on & active transforming of material

To combat a prevalent misconception that critical thinking means being “being critical,” some educators prefer the term “deep thinking” skills. Here are some strategies that we can use to assess whether we are engaging in effective critical thinking when speaking, writing or studying. A trio of sample questions designed to promote that particular form of thinking follows each of the critical thinking skills, and are precisely the kind of questions that all of us, as seminar participants, can use to intentionally move our weekly discussions to “deeper” levels:

1. **“Open-ended” questions intentionally designed to provoke divergent thinking.** “Open-ended” questions call for divergent thinking (i.e., questions that allow for a variety of possible answers) and encourage us to consider issues from multiple perspectives. Using a technique called “guided peer questioning,” seminar participants can begin with a series of generic question stems that serve as cognitive prompts:

   (a) “What are the implications of ___________?”
   (b) “Why is ______________ important?”
   (c) “What is another way to look at _______________?”

2. Questions that ask inquirers to reflect on their own thinking processes and to identify what particular form of critical thinking they are using. One distinguishing characteristic of critical thinkers is this ability to reflect on thought processes during learning and to focus awareness on cognitive strategies (“meta-cognition,” thinking about thinking). Learning to routinely ask ourselves these questions can help us to enhance the depth and quality of our thinking:

   - **Comprehension** (Understanding): to convert information into a form that is personally meaningful, i.e., that makes sense to the individual who is learning it.
     - How would you put _____ into your own words? (Paraphrasing)
     - What would be an example of ______? (Illustrating)
     - How would you translate ______ into visual form? (Concept-Mapping)

   - **Application**: to apply abstract or theoretical principles to concrete, practical situations.
     - How can you make use of ______?
     - How could ______ be put into practice?
     - How would ______ be converted into an action plan?

   - **Analysis**: to break down or dissect information into its component parts in order to detect the relationship among the parts or the relationship between the parts and the whole (e.g. identify the underlying causes or sources of disagreement during a seminar discussion).
- What are the most important/significant ideas or elements of ________?
- What assumptions/biases underlie or are hidden within ________?
- What parts of ________ would be similar to/different than ________?

**Synthesis**: to *build up or connect* separate pieces of information to form a larger, more coherent pattern (e.g., connect related ideas discussed in separate sections or units of a course into a unified pattern, such as a concept map).

- How can this idea be combined with ________, to create a more complete or comprehensive understanding of ________?
- How can these different ideas be grouped together into a more general category?
- How can these separate ________ be reorganized or rearranged to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the “big picture?”

**Evaluation**: to *judge critically* the validity (truth), morality (ethics), or aesthetic (artistic) value of ideas, data, or products by using relevant assessment criteria (standards for judging quality).

- How would you judge the accuracy or validity of ________?
- How would you evaluate the ethical (moral) implications or consequences of ________?
- How would you rate the aesthetic quality (beauty) of ________?

**Deduction**: to draw conclusions about *particular instances* that are logically consistent with or derive from general principles and premises.

- What specific conclusions can be drawn from this general ________?
- If this general ________ were true, then it would logically follow that ________.
- What particular actions or practices would be consistent with this general ________?

**Induction**: to infer (derive or draw out) well-reasoned *generalizations or principles* from individual instances or specific examples (e.g., identify recurrent themes or categories that emerge during a seminar discussion on “the rebel”). One form is the ability to abstract and extrapolate a concept learned in one context and transfer that learning to another context, a cognitive process often referred to as “decontextualization.” This capacity to transfer knowledge, i.e., to apply a concept learned in one context to different contexts than the one in which the concept was originally learned, is often presumed to be a litmus test of whether a person has really (deeply) learned the concept or has simply memorized it in its original form.

- What are the broader implications of ________?
- What patterns or themes emerge from ________?
- What can be extrapolated or extended from this particular ________ that may have more general or universal value?

**Adduction**: to *make a case for* an argument or position by accumulating *supporting evidence* in the form of logical arguments (*rational* thinking) or research evidence (*empirical* reasoning).
- What proof exists for __________?
- What are logical arguments for __________?
- What research evidence supports ____________?

**Refutation:** to make a case against an argument or position by accumulating contradictory evidence in the form of logical arguments (rational thinking) or research findings (empirical reasoning).
- What proof exists that __________ is false?
- What are logical arguments against ____________?
- What research evidence contradicts ____________?

**Balanced Thinking:** to carefully consider arguments/evidence for and against a particular position or viewpoint.
- What are the strengths/advantages and weaknesses/disadvantages of ____________?
- What evidence supports and contradicts ____________?
- What are arguments for and counterarguments against ____________?

**Multiple Perspective-Taking:** to view an issue from a variety of viewpoints, standpoints, or positions in order to gain a more comprehensive and holistic understanding.
- How would people from different ethnic or racial groups view this __________? 
- How would people from different socioeconomic backgrounds be affected by __________?
- How would people who differ in age or gender react to __________?

**Causal Reasoning:** to identify cause-effect relationships between different ideas or actions.
- How would you explain why __________ occurred?
- What is responsible for __________?
- How would __________ affect or influence __________?

**Ethical Reasoning:** to identify what is morally right/wrong or good/bad (graphed along a continuum) about particular ideas, attitudes, or practices.
- What does __________ say about a person’s values?
- What are the moral implications of __________?
- Are the expressed or professed convictions of __________ consistent with actual commitments and observable actions?

**Creative Thinking:** to generate imaginative ideas, unique perspectives, innovative strategies, or novel (alternative) approaches to traditional practices.
- What might be a metaphor or analogy for __________?
- What could be created or invented to __________?
- What might happen if __________?