I. “The Question” (Ch. 1)

A. The Question and Science (1-7)

1. In what sense are we formed of the stuff as the cosmos (“We are formed of stardust”) and yet alienated from it? (2-4)

2. In what way is science prepared to deal with questions regarding why the universe is the way it is rather than merely deal with questions as to how the universe is the way it is? But why does Cottingham believe this still falls short of helping us to deal with our questions concerning the meaning of life? (4-7)

B. How does the inability of science to address the question of the meaning of life entail that an answer to that question may lie outside space and time and, as such, lie outside the limits of human knowledge? How might this lead us to religious discourse as a way of coming to terms with what we cannot know? (7-9)

C. Meaning without God (11-31)

1. Willing Meaning - Nietzsche (11-18)

   a. What does Nietzsche propose as the source of meaning in life? What is the significance of Nietzsche’s myth of the eternal recurrence? (11-15)

   b. Why does Cottingham reject Nietzsche’s position claiming that “meaning and worth cannot lie in raw will alone”? (16-18)

2. From the Meaning of life to its various meanings (18-23)

   a. How does Cottingham’s story of the retired golfer illustrate how one might find various meanings to one’s life in diverse life activities? (18-19)

   b. What sorts of things need to be assumed in judging our retired golfer’s life as meaningful and, most importantly, how does this imply that “talk of meaning in life is inescapably evaluative talk”? How does Cottingham go on to argue that “value is typically not grounded in arbitrary preference but in objectively assessable
features of the world”? (19-21)

c. How does evaluating someone’s life as meaningful entail, as Cottingham argues, a sense of the seriousness and achievement orientedness of the activities in question and the self-awareness of the agent undertaking them? (21-23)

3. Meaning and Morality (23-31)

a. How does the “dedicated Nazi torturer” and the selfish, but highly creative artist (Gauguin) raise problems for the conception of meaning sketched so far and suggest that being moral may be an important aspect of a living a meaningful life as well? (23-26)

b. How does Cottingham appeal to our human nature (“the lives of a very special kind of animal with interlinked imperatives” - 26) and, in particular, to our emotional and rational make-up to argue that the lives of the “dedicated Nazi torturer” and Gauguin cannot be judged meaningful? (26-31)

II. “The Barrier to Meaning” (Ch. 2)

A. The Broadly Naturalistic Challenge to Meaning (32-39)

1. In what way does the naturalistic vision of the world question our relation to the world, giving rise to a sense of our alienation from the cosmos? (32-35)

2. How does Cottingham trace the source of the above sense of alienation to scientific naturalism’s vision of the physical universe as an “inexorable machine”? (36-37)

3. How, according to Cottingham, does Leibniz suggest a way in which we can regard the universe mechanistically and operating according to “providential purposes”? (37-39)

B. The Specifically Darwinian Challenge to Meaning (39-58)

1. Cottingham mentions on p. 41 Augustine’s fourth century essay, *On Genesis*, as providing a way of understanding creation that was consistent with Darwinian and, more generally, scientific accounts of our origins. We’ll speak a bit more about this Augustinian account in class.
2. How does Cottingham suggest that “talk of divine creation” need not be thought of as “an anthropomorphic alternative to the scientific explanations we now have of how the planet Earth and its inhabitants got here”? How does this involve thinking of religious language as “a way of interpreting the significance” of the universe? (44-47)

3. How does Cottingham argue that the Darwinian insight that “man owes his origins to a purely accidental chain of blind natural forces” is consistent with the religious conviction that the universe is a “purposive system”? (47-49)

   a. What does Tennyson’s image of nature, “red in tooth and claw,” refer to with respect to Darwinism and how does it raise problems for a religious understanding of the world? (49-51)
   b. How does Cottingham attempt to address the problem of animal suffering with an “ecological response” (51-52)
   c. How does Cottingham attempt to address the problem of human suffering with his reflections on the nature of the material world? Why does he claim “We might wish (though very few actually do) that there had been no material world at all; but what we cannot coherently wish is that God had created a material world not subject to change, decay and suffering”? (54-57)
   d. How do these reflections end up with Darwinism providing support for a religious vision of life? (57)

5. Why does Cottingham conclude this chapter by noting that “from the fact that something can be true, it does not follow that it is actually true”? (58-63)

III. “Meaning, Vulnerability and Hope”(Ch. 3)

A. The Frailty of Goodness (64-79)

1. Why does Cottingham believe that our “moral insights ought to be able to stand alone . . . (that) there have to be reasons that make things good, and these reasons cannot boil down to the mere fact of their being divinely commanded”? (65)
2. Why does Cottingham believe that we need to feel that our projects have some chance of success in order to find meaning in them? (66-67)

3. What does Cottingham mean when he speaks of the “frailty of goodness”? (68-69)

4. How does Cottingham urge against the acceptance of the idea that there is an “irreducible element of luck” in our pursuit of a meaningful life by arguing that it is “psychologically indigestible and ethically repugnant”? (69-70)

5. How does Cottingham reject the ideal of a meaningful life suggested by the examples of the “valiant surfer” and Sisyphus? (70-71)

6. How, according to Cottingham, does religious faith bring with it a sense of hope that is not a naive belief “that things always work out for the best” even in an afterlife, but “an emotional allegiance to the idea of the power of goodness”? How is this sense of hope grounded in an awareness of our vulnerability and finitude, “allowing the possibility of a meaningful life despite our inherent human weakness and mortality”? (73-79)

B. Religious Faith as Practice and Belief (79-99)

1. What are “the goals of spirituality” as Cottingham understands them? (79-86)

2. How does Cottingham argue that it is spiritual practice (as a form of inner transformation) not doctrine (or belief) that is most central to religion? (86-91)

3. As Cottingham admits, though, religious practices presuppose some beliefs. How does Cottingham defend the rationality of affirming a set of religious beliefs which cannot be known to be true? (91-99)

IV. Ronald Aronson’s “Gratitude”

A. Why does Aronson say the sense of gratitude he was feeling on his hike “didn’t fit any familiar category, evading (his) usual lenses and language of perception”? (43-44)

B. How does Aronson address the possibility he raises with Camus that, in a godless universe, the universe is without meaning - absurd? (44-49)
C. What is Aronson getting at when he suggests, with Solomon, that “our sense of gratitude needs to be educated,” in particular, by an informed awareness of our “vulnerability and dependence”? (49-56)

D. How does Aronson propose to extend our sense of gratitude from our dependence on natural processes to our fellow human beings? (56-61)

E. How does an awareness of human inequality complicate our sense of gratitude with feelings of anger and guilt? (61-64)