

## *Sigmund Freud Debates C. S. Lewis: God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life*

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### Theme

Arguably the most influential individual in the history of psychology, Freud's concepts such as ego, repression, resistance, and Freudian slips have become part of our vernacular, and the sexual revolution he helped spawn, a pervasive feature of modern life. Freud's atheism, like his focus on sexuality, is well known. One might think his life would have little commonality with that of C. S. Lewis, the Oxford professor who wrote not only the *Chronicles of Narnia* but also some of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most widely read books arguing for belief. However, Sigmund Schlomo Freud and Clive Staples Lewis shared much more than distinctive given names. Delving into their biographies, one sees that they faced many of the same struggles. Both experienced losses in their childhood: Freud lost his beloved nanny, Lewis, his mother when he was 9. Later in life, Freud battled cancer of the mouth and Lewis agonized through the illness and death of his wife, Joy. Through such challenges, Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis developed their perspectives on some of life's deepest questions.

While Freud and Lewis shared a number of similar life experiences, the positions they developed represent polar opposites. This class will focus on Freud and Lewis' thoughts about sexuality and love, pain and suffering, and, most importantly, ultimate questions of human significance, such as the meaning of life and the existence of God. We will also be examining their biographies, trying to discern the commentary their own lives offer on the viability and utility of their views. Although they never met, juxtaposing their writings and life stories permit their diametrically opposed positions to stand out in bold relief for evaluation like two debaters on a stage. Participants in this seminar will enter into this debate, and in the process we will refine our own answers to some of life's ultimate questions.

### Class Requirements

#### Readings

Three books are required for the course:

- Armand Nicholi. *The Question of God: C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life*. New York: The Free Press, 2002.  
 (Some copies of this text will be available for students to purchase or borrow; in addition, electronic copies of individual chapters will be available on Moodle.)
- Sigmund Freud. *The Future of an Illusion*. New York: Vintage Books, 1939. (Segments will be available on the Moodle site for the course.)
- C. S. Lewis. *A Grief Observed*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.  
 (Segments will be available on the Moodle site for the course.)

Additional required readings will also be available online or distributed by email.

#### Videos

This course is modeled after an undergraduate course taught at Harvard University by Dr. Nicholi, which became so popular that the PBS (Public Broadcasting System) television network in the U.S. did a 4-hour series on the course complete with dramatic presentations of Freud and Lewis. In each of the first nine weeks of the course you will be asked to view one or two short video segments from this series. The set of videos used in this course are available on a private YouTube site (set up by Eric

Kruger, PhD): <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRev11PsisXSrofGWUG8qkHsIHuhz6lU6>  
Although these videos are no longer available on the PBS website, transcripts of the videos and other materials from the PBS series are available at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/why/index.html> .

### Study Questions and In-class and Online Discussions

A total of ten weeks of the semester will be devoted to covering the Nicholi text and viewing the movie “Shadowlands.” During this time, the class will be conducted as a “hybrid” combination of discussions during our regularly scheduled class time via Zoom during half the weeks and asynchronous online discussions in the remaining weeks. In both formats, we hope to simulate the rich discussions that characterize a small seminar. It has been my experience that such seminar discussions can be conducted at a much higher level if students have completed all readings prior to the discussion and have spent some time reflecting and writing about aspects of the readings before participating in a group discussion. Thus, we will spend a week on each of 9 major topics corresponding to Chapters 1 through 9 of the Nicholi book. By Tuesday night each week, students will be expected not only to have read the assigned readings for that Module but to submit written answers to three Study Questions (selected from a list of 10 or more).

In half the weeks (specifically, on weeks 2, 4, 6 [in-class Debate], 9, and 11), our class sessions on Wednesdays will generally consist of brief presentations by the faculty and discussion by the seminar participants of the study questions and other aspects of the assigned material for that week. In the remaining weeks (specifically, weeks 3, 5, 7 [Training week], 8 and 10), you will be expected to post an answer to a Discussion question in an online Discussion Forum and reply to posts by others in the class. Although a response (which Moodle somewhat confusingly refers to as a “new discussion topic”) to the Discussion question and replies to others’ posts will not be due until the following day after the Study Questions are due, you will be allowed to answer the Discussion question as soon as you have submitted your answers to the Study Questions.

Study Questions for the first Module are included here as well as on the webpage for that module, but Study Questions for subsequent units will be indicated only on the pages you link to through the webpages for each module.

### Zoom Class Meetings

After the first in-person class on Sept. 14 where only the American instructor will be joining the class virtually, the remaining scheduled classes (on weeks 2, 4, 6, 9, 11, 12 and 13) will take place via Zoom to allow students to interact “live” with the instructors, student assistants, and each other. The instructors will be joining these class meetings virtually via Zoom. Students will be expected to join individually on Zoom with both video and audio connections on their own device enabled unless they make arrangements with a student assistant or one other student to share a computer connection.

### Term Paper

By the 6<sup>th</sup> week of the semester (i.e., by Saturday, Oct 22), students will be asked to submit a statement outlining a topic for a term paper relevant to the course. Possible topics include: (1) an analysis of the views of Lewis or Freud as revealed in one of their major works other than those assigned in the course, e.g. Lewis’ views on education in *The Abolition of Man* or Freud’s views of the origin of guilt in *Totem and Taboo* (Note that several major works by Freud and Lewis are now available in the Károli Institute of Psychology library); (2) choosing a contemporary issue such as whether marriage is becoming obsolete and applying Freud or Lewis’ perspective to that question; (3) trace the outworking of Freud’s or Lewis’ legacy in contemporary society, e.g. the contribution of Freud to changing attitudes regarding sex, or the continuing appeal of Lewis’ writings such as recent popular attention received by *The Chronicles of Narnia*. An annotated bibliography of sources is to be submitted by the 8<sup>th</sup> week of our class (i.e., Saturday, Nov. 12, the first week after returning from the fall break and training week). The term paper is to be completed by the 11<sup>th</sup> week of our class (i.e., Saturday, Dec. 3).

### Oral Presentation

Two class sessions late in the semester (in December) will be devoted to live student presentations of the results of their term paper research. Although it is not required that you use Powerpoint, most students find that utilizing visual images as well as text on Powerpoint slides is a convenient way to present considerable information in a short amount of time. Because of the number of

students potentially enrolled in the class it is anticipated you will have no more than 10-12 minutes available for your presentation in order to accommodate all students in two 90-minute sessions planned for Dec. 7 and Dec. 14. These classes also will be conducted via Zoom.

### Evaluation

Evaluation for all students will be determined by the completeness and quality of the responses to the Study Questions and the extent of active participation in the in-person classes and online discussions, as well as the quality of the final term paper and the final oral presentation. Students have the option of not completing one of the 9 Modules.

The breakdown of available points that may be earned during the semester, and the cutoffs for the final grades for students are shown below:

Grading:		Breakdown of points	Points
		<u>Component</u>	<u>Points</u>
		Study Questions (9 sets [if no module omitted] x 30 points each set)	270
		Personal Intro.; Paper Topic; Bibliography; Epilogue Response (4 x 10)	40
		Participation in class and online discussions (10 x 10 points each)	100
		Debate	40
		Term Paper	100
		Presentation	<u>100</u>
		<i>Total</i>	650

Cutoffs for grades:

<u>Grade</u>	<u>% Cutoff</u>	<u>Points</u>
5	90%	585
4	80%	520
3	70%	455
2	60%	390
1	<60%	<390

### **Course Schedule**

#### **Introduction & Module 1 Prologue: Why Freud & Lewis?; The Lives of Freud & Lewis (Sept. 14-21)**

##### Assigned reading for first class (Sept. 14):

Effort will be made to distribute a brief reading in advance of the first class, but because some students may register late, there is no mandatory reading for the first class. But the class session will be devoted to introductory remarks somewhat along the lines addressed in the Prologue to Armand Nicholi's *The Question of God*, (see pp. 1-9). This initial meeting on Sept. 14 will be the only time the class will be meeting in person rather than via Zoom.

##### Questions relevant to in-person class on Sept. 14 to illustrate the kinds of Study Questions for which written answers will be required in the modules starting Tuesday, Sept. 20:

1. How do our worldviews influence our lives? (see Nicholi, *The Question of God*, p. 7)
2. Why study Sigmund Freud and C. S. Lewis?
3. Are the worldviews of Freud and Lewis mutually exclusive (see Nicholi, *The Question*, p. 8)? Is the choice between these worldviews one that people make today, and, if so, is that choice important?

Written Personal Introduction: Instead of writing answers to the Study Question above, you are asked to write a brief self-introduction and comment on your motivation for taking this class (due Sat., Sept. 17).

##### Assigned readings (to be completed by Tuesday, Sept. 20):

Armand Nicholi. *The Question of God*, Prologue and Ch. 1: The Lives of Sigmund Freud and C. S. Lewis, pp. 1-35.

Sigmund Freud. *The Future of an Illusion*, first part of book (i.e., Freud bio by Peter Gay; and *Future*, Ch. 1-3) (available on the Moodle website for the course).

C.S. Lewis. *The Problem of Pain*, Ch. 1: Introductory (available on website for course).

Videos (you can read transcripts of the videos on the PBS website:  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/program/complete.html>

But to view the videos you should follow the link on the Module 1 Home Page to the following private YouTube site <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRevl1PsisXSrofGWUG8qkHsIHuhz6lU6>. )

Prior to answering the study questions, view the following video segments from the PBS miniseries on The Question of God (length of segment in minutes and seconds is indicated after the title; a hyperlink to these segments is provided on the Moodle webpage for Module 1):

Freud –“Golden Child” 7:29

Lewis –“Surprised by Joy” 9:18

Study Questions (written answers due Sept. 20):

*Study Questions for Module 1: The Protagonists (Answer 3 of the following 10 questions. Questions in red on the website and bold in the hard copy of this syllabus must be answered. You must answer at least one question from each of the two sections below. That is, in addition to answering a question from Nicholi reading and PBS segments, you must answer one of the questions based on either The Future of an Illusion (either question 7 or 8) or on The Problem of Pain (either question 9 or 10). Because you have some choice about which questions to answer it is important that you copy the question and then provide an answer of at least 5-10 typewritten lines for each of the three questions you select.*

### **Section 1: Nicholi reading and PBS segments**

1. In Freud’s own analysis, he observed feelings in himself like those of the “Oedipal complex” that he made famous. How might this psychological dynamic of conflict with his father have influenced Freud with regard to a spiritual worldview? (See especially Nicholi, pp. 15-17,23-25.)

2. **Based on the readings for this week and other information provided (e.g. Timelines, sections of the PBS website on the lives of Freud and Lewis), make a list of the similarities and differences between the biographies of Sigmund Freud and C. S. Lewis. Your response should include references to experiences, relationships, personality, and beliefs.**

3. Freud’s reflection on his early childhood is that it was marked by what he later concluded was the “universal event” of an Oedipus complex (see Nicholi, p. 24-25). (Freud’s early childhood is portrayed in the video segment “Golden Child”.) Do you, in contrast, think that some of the unique or at least distinctive features of Freud’s early childhood influenced him in ways that were peculiar to his particular situation? If so, what were some of these distinctive features of his early childhood, and in what way do you think he was influenced by them?

4. Lewis describes “Joy” as “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction” (*Surprised by Joy*, p. 17) and says, as quoted by Nicholi (p. 27) that it must be “sharply distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure”. (His first experience of this sort of desire is portrayed in the video segment “Surprised by Joy”.) Do you think such periodic, extraordinarily intense feelings of longing for something or someone are universal, or something experienced only by a select few individuals? Have you had such an experience?

5. What do you make of Freud’s ambivalence about belief when he was studying under Brentano (see Nicholi, pp. 18-19)? (In answering this question you may find it helpful to preview the video segment “The Revelation of Science” which will be part of the required viewing for Module 2.)

6. Do you think there were positive effects as well as negative effects for Lewis of his early educational experiences, first in various boarding schools and then being tutored by William T. Kirkpatrick? (In answering this question you may find it helpful to preview the video segment “School Days” which will be part of the required viewing for Module 2.) If so, in what way might Lewis have been affected by these experiences and what, if any, benefits might he have eventually reaped from his early education?

### **Section 2: *The Future of an Illusion* and *The Problem of Pain***

7. In the first chapter of *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud gives his characterization of the masses (e.g., pp. 8-9 in Norton ed.). How would you describe his view of humanity? Do you think it is accurate?

8. In the second chapter of *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud asserts that most people obey cultural prohibitions “only under the pressure of external coercion”? Do you agree that most people would go against prohibitions against lies, fraud, etc. “so long as they can remain unpunished for it”?

9. On most points concerning religion, such as the origin and nature of morality, Freud and Lewis sharply disagree. But there is considerable agreement on the common human experience of “the uncanny” (about which Freud once wrote a lengthy essay, citing examples as Lewis does from a wide variety of literature). In Lewis’ discussion of the uncanny (see pp. 5-10 of *The Problem of Pain*), it is suggested that the term “uncanny” might be applied to experiences of either “ghostly dread or numinous awe” (p. 9). Do you agree that this is a widespread human experience? Have you personally had an experience that might be described as uncanny or numinous?

10. Most of the Introductory chapter of *The Problem of Pain* (pp. 5-13) is devoted to Lewis’ analysis of the origin of “all developed religion”. He sees three elements as key: the pervasive sense of the Numinous (i.e., the supernatural or mysterious), the universal experience of morality (e.g., feelings of “I ought” or “I ought not” toward certain proposed actions), and the identification of the Numinous power as being the authority behind the moral law. He alludes briefly to Freud’s analysis of the origin of religion (pp. 10-11) as deriving from the sense of guilt created in a “prehistoric parricide” (i.e., when primal father was killed and cannibalized by his sons, as conjectured by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*). Freud suggests that religion arose from the need for protection and the desire for compensation for the sufferings imposed by civilization (see *Future*, Ch. 3). Which analysis of the origin of religion, Freud’s or Lewis’, do you regard as more plausible?

Live Zoom class, Wednesday, Sept. 21:

We will have a second class meeting (which you should attend via Zoom) on Wednesday, Sept. 21, to discuss the assigned readings for Module 1, review answers to the first set of Study Questions, and clarify any procedural questions about the online course.

**Module 2** Is There an Intelligence Beyond the Universe? (Sept. 21 – Sept. 28; Note that readings and answers to Study Questions for this module are to be completed by Tues., Sept. 27)

From the Greeks through the next two millennia of intellectual history in the West, the dominant view of human nature included reference to a transcendent realm.

Assigned readings:

Armand Nicholi. *The Question of God*, Ch. 2: Is There an Intelligence Beyond the Universe?, pp. 36-56.  
Sigmund Freud. *The Future of an Illusion*, Ch. 4-10. (distributed by email)

C. S. Lewis. Excerpts from *Miracles*--listed as “Nature and Supernature” (available on Moodle webpages for Module 2), pp. 211-228.

Video segments:

View segments on private YouTube website pertaining to Freud—“Revelation of Science” and Lewis—“School Days”.

Study questions for Module 2: Intelligence (Answers due Sept. 27) are on webpages for course. In lieu of an in-person class on Sept. 28, students are to post a Response to the Discussion question and a reply to another student’s post by Wednesday night, Sept. 28.

Extra credit quiz: Students may earn up to 12 points of extra credit by completing a brief quiz in Module 2 on the two different meanings of “because” discussed in the reading by C. S. Lewis.

**Module 3** Conscience: Is There a Universal Moral Law? (Sept. 28 –Oct. 5; Note that readings and answers to Study Questions for this module are to be completed by Tues., Oct. 4)

Assigned readings:

Armand Nicholi. *The Question of God*, Ch. 3: Conscience: Is There a Universal Moral Law?, pp. 57-75.  
C. S. Lewis. “Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe”, pp. 3-32 (see Module 3 files)

Video segment:

View segment on the private YouTube website about Lewis—“Defender of the Faith”. Transcript is at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/program/complete.html>

Study questions for Module 3: Conscience (Answers due Oct. 4) are on webpages for course.

Live Zoom class, Wednesday, Oct. 5: We will have a third class meeting (which you should attend via Zoom) on Wednesday, Oct. 5, to discuss the assigned readings for Module 3.

**Module 4** The Great Transition: Which Road to Reality? (Oct. 5 – Oct. 12; Note that readings and answers to Study Questions for this module are to be completed by Tues., Oct. 11)

Assigned readings:

Armand Nicholi. *The Question of God*, Ch. 4: The Great Transition: Which Road to Reality?, pp. 76-94.  
Sigmund Freud. “The Question of a *Weltanschauung*”, pp. 158-182.

Video segments:

View segments on private YouTube website about Freud—“Interpreter of Dreams” and Lewis—“Leap in the Dark”. Transcripts are at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/program/complete.html>

Study questions for Module 4: Transition (Answers due Oct. 11) are on webpages for course. In lieu of an in-person class on Oct. 12, students are to post a Response to the Discussion question on Module 4: Transition and a reply to another student’s post by Wednesday night, Oct. 12.

**Module 5** Happiness (Oct. 12 – Oct. 19; Note that readings and answers to Study Questions for this module are to be completed by Tues., Oct. 18)

Assigned readings:

Armand Nicholi. *The Question of God*, Ch. 5: Happiness: What is the Source of Our Greatest Enjoyment in Life?, pp. 97-125.  
Sigmund Freud. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Ch. 2 & 3.

Video segments:

View segments on private YouTube website about Freud—“Human Mythology” and Lewis—“From Spirits to God”. Transcripts are at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/program/complete.html>

Study questions for Module 5: Happiness (Answers due Oct. 18) are on webpages for course.

**Debate:** *The class will meet at 6:15 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 19, via Zoom to debate Freud and Lewis’ views regarding desires, morality, rationality, and happiness.*

**Additional written assignment:** Students are to turn in a brief paragraph describing the topic of their term paper and the major subtopics they will be addressing in their paper (*due Saturday, Oct. 22*).

**Autumn Break and Training Week (Oct. 24-Nov. 4)**

*In order to finish the class before Christmas, it will be necessary to have students complete Module 6 some time during the time allotted Autumn break and Training week, Oct. 24-Nov. 4. Your term paper topic statement is to be on the Saturday before the Autumn break starts so that you can have the option of using some of the time on break to begin work on your term paper. Study Questions and Discussion Posts for Module 6 will be due in the second week of the two-week break.*

**Module 6** Sex: Is the Pursuit of Pleasure Our Only Purpose? (Oct. 19 – Nov. 2; Note that readings and answers to Study Questions for this module are to be completed by Tues., Nov. 1)

Assigned readings:

Nicholi. *Question of God*, Ch. 6: Sex: Is the Pursuit of Pleasure Our Only Purpose?, pp. 126-159.

Video segment:

View segment on private YouTube website about Freud—“Libido”. Transcript is at:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/program/complete.html>

Study questions for Module 6: Sex (Answers due Nov. 1) and Discussion question (In lieu of an in-class discussion, for this Module, a response to the Discussion question on Moodle and a reply to another student are due by Nov. 2) are on webpages for course.

**Module 7** Love: Is All Love Sublimated Sex? (Nov. 2 – Nov. 9; Note that readings and answers to Study Questions for this module are to be completed by Tues., Nov. 8)

Assigned reading :

Armand Nicholi. *The Question of God*, Ch. 7: Love: Is All Love Sublimated Sex?, pp. 160-186.

Lewis—*The Four Loves*, excerpt on “Charity”.

Video segment:

View segment on private YouTube website about Lewis—“The Four Loves”. Transcript is at:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/program/complete.html>

Study questions for Module 7: Love (Answers due Nov. 8) are on webpages for course. In lieu of an in-person class on Nov. 9, students are to post a Response to the Discussion question and a reply to another student’s post by Wednesday night, Nov. 9.

Additional written assignment:

Students are to turn in an annotated bibliography of sources consulted for their term paper research (*Due Saturday, Nov. 12*).

**Module 8** Pain: How Can We Resolve the Problem of Suffering? (Nov. 9 – Nov. 16; Note that readings and answers to Study Questions for this module are to be completed by Tues., Nov. 15)

Assigned readings:

Armand Nicholi. *The Question of God*, Ch. 8: Pain: How Can We Resolve the Problem of Suffering?, pp. 187-215.

C. S. Lewis. *A Grief Observed*. Up through Chapter 2. (available via email)

C. S. Lewis. *The Problem of Pain*, Ch. 2 & 3. (available on website for course)

Video segment:

View segment on private YouTube website about Freud—“Civilization and Its Discontents”. Transcript is at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/program/complete.html>

Shadowlands movie: In conjunction with reading A Grief Observed in Modules 8 and 9, students are asked to view “Shadowlands,” a movie starring Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger that portrays Lewis’ relationship with Joy Davidman. The movie is available online on a private YouTube site at [Shadowlands](#). Ten points of extra credit may be earned after viewing the movie by completing a brief response to a question about the movie by November 29.

Study questions for Module 8: Pain (Answers due Nov. 15) are on webpages for course.

Live Zoom class, Wednesday, Oct. 5: We will have a regular class meeting (which you should attend via Zoom) on Wednesday, Nov. 16, to discuss the assigned readings for Module 8.

**Module 9** Death: Is Death Our Only Destiny? (Nov. 16 – Nov. 23; *Note that readings and answers to Study Questions for this module are to be completed by Tues., Nov. 22*)

Assigned readings:

Armand Nicholi. *The Question of God*, Ch. 9: Death: Is Death Our Only Destiny?, pp. 216-239.

C. S. Lewis. *A Grief Observed*. Chapters 3-4. (available via email)

Sigmund Freud. “Letters” regarding death. (available on website for course)

C. S. Lewis. “Hope”. (available on website for course)

Video segments:

View segments on private YouTube website about Freud—“The Promised Land” and Lewis—“A Grief Observed”. Transcripts are at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/program/complete.html>

Study questions for Module 9: Death (Answers due Nov. 22) are on webpages for course. In lieu of an in-person class on Nov. 23, students are to post a Response to the Discussion question and a reply to another student’s post by Wednesday night, Nov. 23.

**“Last Things” unit** (Nov. 23 – Dec. 14)

The last three weeks of the semester will be devoted to a variety of different tasks including viewing a movie on Lewis’ relationship with Joy Davidman (if you have not done so previously), completing your term paper, making your Powerpoint presentations in one of three final in-person class sessions, and reading the Epilogue of Nicholi’s book. However, to allow time for completion of your term paper, there will be no assigned reading until after your term paper is submitted.

**Week 11**

Discussion of course topics and the movie “Shadowlands”

We will have a class session, which you should attend via Zoom, devoted to discussion of topics covered in the second half of the course and the movie “Shadowlands” (131 minutes) on Wednesday, Nov. 30.

As mentioned above under Module 8, extra credit may be earned by submitting a response to the question available in Module 8 about the movie.

Term paper due. All students are to submit their completed term papers by Saturday, Dec. 3.

**Weeks 12-13 Student Presentations** (Dec. 7, 14)

Students will be asked to make available a brief summary of their term papers (e.g. an Abstract and key references) for distribution during the class in which they make their oral presentation on the topic of their research. One half of the class will make a presentation on their term paper on Wednesday, Dec. 7, the other half will do so on Dec. 14.

Final assignment. Read the Epilogue of the Nicholi text (Armand Nicholi. *The Question of God*, Epilogue, pp. 240-244) and submit an answer to the Study Question online by Dec. 13.

Course Evaluations Written evaluations are to be completed by Dec. 15, the date of our final class.