

Philosophy of Death and Dying (PHIL10192): Semester 2 (2022-23)

Instructor: Professor Michael Cholbi **E-mail:** mcholbi@ed.ac.uk

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Seminar schedule: Fridays 9:00-10:50, 40 George Sq., LG08

Office hours: Tuesdays, 2:30-3:45 (40 George Square, 13.13)

Course description

Death is one of the few universals of human life and thus raises philosophical questions important to all reflective individuals. As a number of commentators have remarked, while all creatures die, humans are almost certainly unique in knowing this fact and in having to live in light of that knowledge. This course investigates fundamental philosophical questions raised by human mortality, with special attention to the metaphysical nature of death, death's significance for human well-being, and ethical quandaries related to mortality. We will investigate how the conditions for death should be medically determined, the possibility and desirability of immortality, rival views of death's welfare value, how we should respond to the deaths of others, and what attitudes we should adopt toward death and mortality, including fear. Students will have the opportunity to decide our course content for weeks 9 and 10.

Learning outcomes

This course will provide students many opportunities to practice the fundamental skills of philosophical inquiry, including the extraction, expression, and evaluation of arguments articulated in philosophical texts; the crafting of compelling and convincing philosophical prose; and the development of their own informed point of view on philosophical issues. In addition, by the conclusion of the course, students should be able to

1. outline influential positions and arguments concerning metaphysical and ethical issues raised by death and dying;
2. critically assess these positions and arguments, drawing their own reasoned conclusions about their defensibility;
3. relate disputes in the philosophy of death and dying to larger questions within various subdisciplines of philosophy (ethics, metaphysics, philosophy of science, philosophy of religion, etc.);
4. better articulate their own views regarding the significance of death and dying for their own lives and for humanity in general; and
5. participate more meaningfully in larger societal conversations concerning controversies related to death and dying.

Assessment

- Midterm Essay, 35% of course mark (1,500 words): due via Learn, Thursday March 2, 12 pm. Guidance to be distributed by Feb 7.
- Final essay, 60% of course mark (3,000 words): due via Learn, Thursday April 20, by 12 pm. Guidance to be distributed by March 29.
- Reflective course experience essay 5% (1,000 words): due via Learn Monday April 24, by 12 pm. Guidance to be distributed by April 1

Coursework dissertations

I welcome the opportunity to work with you on a coursework dissertation. You are required to notify the Philosophy Teaching Office of your intent to complete a coursework dissertation in this seminar by Monday February 27, 12 pm. Coursework dissertations are due Thursday April 20 by 12 pm. Please note that coursework dissertations are not available to visiting students

PPLS Skills Centre

PPLS has a Skills Centre that provides assistance to philosophy students with their academic work, including their written assessments. You are encouraged to make appointments with Centre staff to assist you. Y4 students can make up to two appointments per month with Skills Centre staff. More information here: <https://skillscentre.ppls.ed.ac.uk/>

Course readings and schedule

Course readings can be accessed via the Library Resource List on the course Learn page.

A number of our course readings are from the following anthology:

- Cholbi and Timmerman, *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Routledge, 2021)

This is available via the library resource list as the ‘Primary text’. Readings from this anthology are indicated by CT, followed by the page numbers. All other readings are available via the resource list.

As you likely know by now, reading philosophy can often be challenging. Here are some resources students report they’ve found useful in improving their reading experience (but feel free to contact me for more guidance about reading):

- <https://www.blogs.ppls.ed.ac.uk/2017/02/28/read-philosophy-step-step-guide-confused-students/>
- <https://philosophy.arizona.edu/sites/philosophy.arizona.edu/files/Rosati%2C%20How%20to%20Read%20a%20Philosophical%20Article%20or%20Book.pdf>
- <http://melissajacquart.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/How-to-Read-Philosophy-Handout.pdf>

The readings below are divided into **core** and **secondary**. The core readings lay out the main issues associated with the particular topic and articulate main positions. The secondary readings are often more difficult, operating at later points in the philosophical dialectic.

I expect each of you to make at least one good faith effort to read the *core* readings for each week. Move on to the secondary readings only if (a) you have good reason to think you’ve comprehended the core readings satisfactorily, and/or (b) you’d like to understand the topic more deeply, and/or (c) you’d be interested in writing on the topic for a course essay or dissertation.

1 20 Jan
Declaring death

Core readings (= 36 pp.)	Secondary readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Introduction” (CT xv-xvi)• “Part I: When Do We Die?” (CT 1-2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gilmore, “What It Is to Die” (CT 28-37)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aviv, “What Does it Mean to Die?” • President’s Commission, “Defining Death” (CT 3-9) • Lizza, “Defining Death in a Technological World: Why Brain Death is Death” (CT 10-18) • Nair-Collins, “We Die When Entropy Overwhelms Homeostasis “(CT 19-27) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Davis, “Defining Death” in Davis, ed., <i>Ethics at the End of Life</i> • McMahan, “The Metaphysics of Brain Death”
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2 27 Jan

The possibility of immortality I: ‘Staying alive’ and resurrection

Core readings (= 24 pp.)	Secondary readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Part II: Can We Survive Our Death?” (CT 1-2) • Unamuno, <i>Tragic Sense of Life</i>, excerpt (CT 41-46) • Kagan, <i>Death</i>, pp. 6-10 • de Grey, “A Thousand Years Young” • Cave, “Can We Survive Our Deaths?” (CT 46-49) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tennyson, “Tithonus” • David and Rose Hershenov, “The Possibility of An Afterlife” (CT 56-63) • Kagan, <i>Death</i>, pp. 118-27 • Olson, “An Argument for Animalism” • Mandelbaum, “Everything and More: The Prospects of Whole Brain Emulation”

3 3 Feb

The possibility of immortality II: Souls and legacies

Core readings (= 67 pp.)	Secondary readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cave, “Can We Survive Our Deaths?” (CT 50-55) • Kagan, <i>Death</i>, pp. 13-18, 24-56, 115-118 • Scheffler, <i>Death and the Afterlife</i>, pp. 15-36 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kagan, <i>Death</i>, pp. 57-68 • Altshuler, “The Significance of Future Generations” (CT 191-99) • <i>Children of Men</i> (2006 feature film, dir. A. Cuarón) • Al-kindī, <i>On the Device for Dispelling Sorrows</i>, esp. pp. 132-35

4 10 Feb

Epicureanism about death’s value

Core readings (= 31 pp.)	Secondary readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Part III: Can Death Be Good or Bad for Us?” (CT 65-66) • Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus” (CT 67-69) • Taylor, “Why Death is Not Bad for the One Who Dies” (CT 78-84) • Luper, “Annihilation” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mitsis, “When Death Is There, We Are Not: Epicurus on Pleasure and Death” • Cyr, “How Does Death Harm the Deceased?” (through p. 37) • Fischer, “Mortal Harm” • McMahan, “Death and the Value of Life” • Willaschek, “Death and Existential Value: In Defense of Epicurus”

5 17 Feb (NOTE: flexible learning week – swap for 24 Feb)

Deprivationism about death's value

Core readings (= 21 pp.)	Secondary readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nagel, "Death" • Kagan, <i>Death</i>, pp. 206-212 • Egerstrom, "Making Death Not Quite as Bad for the One Who Dies" (CT 93-100) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belshaw, "Victims" • Hawley, "Persistence and Time" • Kamm, "The Badness of Death and What to Do About It (If Anything)," through p. 18 • Yourgrau, "The Dead" • Beglin, "Fearing Death as Fearing the Loss of One's Life: Lessons from Alzheimer's Disease" • McMahan, "Death" (<i>Ethics of Killing</i>, ch. 2) – <u>for the ambitious!</u>

6 24 Feb (NOTE: flexible learning week – swap for Mar 3)

Two puzzles about death's badness: The Timing Problem and the Lucretian Asymmetry

Core readings (= 28 pp.)	Secondary readings
<p>On the Timing Problem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feit, "Death is Bad for Us When We're Dead" (CT 85-92) <p>On the Lucretian Asymmetry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Part IV: Can Lucretius' Asymmetry Problem Be Solved?" (CT 101-102) • Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i> (excerpts) (CT 103) • Kagan, <i>Death</i>, pp. 224-233 • Timmerman, "If You Want to Die Later, Why Don't You Want to Be Born Earlier?" (CT 104-111) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Johansson, "Two Arguments for Epicureanism" (CT 70-77) • Kaufman, "Coming Into and Going Out of Existence" (CT 112-118) • Cyr, "How Does Death Harm the Deceased?," pp. 37-45

<Mar 3 – No seminar meeting>

7 10 Mar

The desirability of immortality

Core readings (= 39 pp.)	Secondary readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Part V: Would Immortality Be Good for Us?" (CT 119-20) • <i>Either</i> Epic of Gilgamesh (excerpt) <i>or</i> Ozaki, "The Story of the Man Who Did Not Wish to Die" (CT) • Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" (focus on pp. 90-95, skim remainder) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gorman, "Taking Stock of the Risks of Life Without Death" (CT 137-143) • Rosati, "The Makropulos Case Revisited: Reflections on Immortality and Agency" • Bortolotti and Nagasawa, "Immortality Without Boredom" • Overall, "From Here to Eternity"

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mitchell-Yellin, “How to Live a Never-ending Novela” (CT 131-136) • Olson, “Death and Immortality” • Beglin, “Immortality, Boredom, and Standing for Something” (CT 144-151) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cholbi, “Immortality and the Exhaustibility of Value” • Hagglund, <i>This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free</i> • Buben, “Do Immortals Need an Eject Button? Sartre and the Importance of Always Having an Exit”
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8 17 Mar

Addressing the deaths of others

Core readings (= 19 pp.)	Secondary readings*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Part VII: How Should We React to the Deaths of Others?” (CT 179-80) • Seneca, Letter to Lucillus (“On Grief for Lost Friends”) (CT 181-183) • Cholbi, “Why Grieve?” (CT 184-90) • Stokes, “Death and Survival Online” (CT 200-207) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moller, “Love and Death” • Scheffler, “Aging as a Normative Phenomenon” • Ratcliffe and Byrne, “Grief, Self, and Narrative” • Olberding, “The Consummation of Sorrow: An Analysis of Confucius’ Grief for Yan Hui” • Lewis, <i>A Grief Observed</i> • Krueger & Osler, “Communing with the Dead: Chatbots, Grief, and Continuing Bonds”

*Additional sources on philosophy and grief can be found at

<https://www.griefyork.com/bibliography.html>

The topics for weeks 9 and 10 will be determined by student interest. Three possibilities:

- (i) Investigation of a heretofore uninvestigated death and dying topic. Possible topics include
 - the ethics of suicide, suicide prevention, or assisted dying
 - the ‘duty to die’
 - memory and memorialization of the dead
 - duties to/interests of the dead
 - death and life’s meaning
 - human extinction
- (ii) Reading a recent book in the philosophy of death and dying (some possibilities: Ratcliffe, *Grief Worlds*; Buben, *Existentialism and the Desirability of Immortality*; Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and the Ethical Life*; Herring, *The Right to Be Protected from Committing Suicide*)
- (iii) Considering previous course topics in greater depth.

9 24 Mar

To be determined

Core readings	Secondary readings
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10 31 Mar

To be determined

Core readings	Secondary readings
•	•

11 7 April

How shall we feel about death and mortality?; Course recap and reflection

Core readings (= 37 pp.)	Secondary readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Part VI: What is the Best Attitude to Take Toward Our Mortality?” (CT 153-55) • Four Noble Truths/“Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion” (excerpts) (CT 174-75) • Nietzsche, “Voluntary Death” (CT 176-77) • Kagan, <i>Death</i>, pp. 282-303 • May, “Death, Mortality, and Meaning” (CT 157-61) • Gorer, “The Pornography of Death” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tolstoy, <i>The Death of Ivan Ilyich</i> • Epictetus, <i>Enchiridion</i> excerpts (CT 170-73) • Bradley, “Fitting Attitudes Toward Death” (CT 162-69) • Solomon et al, <i>The Worm at the Core</i> (excerpt) • Kagan, <i>Death</i>, pp. 186-96 • Emanuel, “Why I Want to Die at 75” • Glasgow, <i>The Solace: Finding Value in Death Through Gratitude for Life</i> (“Third Path”) • Monso, “How to Tell If Animals Can Understand Death” • Hardwig, “Is There a Duty to Die?” • Carel, “Creatures of a Day: Contingency, Mortality, and Human Limits” (Heideggerian) • Blanchfield, “Death Drive Nation” • Freud, “On Transience” • Summers, “What I’ve Learned from Having Cancer is Nothing”