

## **Philosophy of Death and Dying (PHIL10192): Semester 1 (2024-25)**

**Instructor/organizer:** Professor Michael Cholbi    **E-mail:** [mcholbi@ed.ac.uk](mailto:mcholbi@ed.ac.uk)

**Office:** 40 George Sq, 13.13

### **Semester 1 office hours:**

- In person: Mondays, 11:15-12:15
- Online (via Zoom: login information available on Learn): Tuesdays 15:00-16:00

**Course secretary:** Catriona Keay ([ppls.phil@ed.ac.uk](mailto:ppls.phil@ed.ac.uk))

**Seminar timetable:** Mondays 9:00-10:50, 21 Buccleuch Place, room 1.01

### **Course description**

Death is one of the few universals of human life and thus raises philosophical questions important to all reflective individuals. 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 the content of our final seminar meeting.

### **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**

- First midterm essay, 35% of course mark (1,500 words): due via Learn, Thursday October 10, 12 pm. Guidance to be distributed by September 26.
- Second midterm essay, 35% of course mark (1,500 words): due via Learn, Thursday November 14, 12 pm. Guidance to be distributed by October 22.
- Final revised essay, 25% of course mark (2,500 words), due via Learn Thursday December 5, by 12 pm. Guidance to be distributed by November 21.
- Reflective course experience essay 5% (1,000 words): due via Learn Thursday December 5, by 12 pm. Guidance to be distributed by November 21.

### *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 14 October, 12 pm.
- An **introductory supervision meeting** for all students interested in pursuing a coursework dissertation will be held 25 Sept, 10:30-12:00, Appleton Tower, G.05.
- Coursework dissertations are due Thursday 12 December, 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 Sept 16  
Declaring death

Core readings (= 41 pp.)	Secondary readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Introduction” (CT xv-xvi)</li> <li>• “Part I: When Do We Die?” (CT 1-2)</li> <li>• Aviv, “What Does it Mean to Die?”</li> <li>• DeGrazia, “The Definition of Death,” <i>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i>, through §2.3</li> <li>• Lizza, “Defining Death in a Technological World: Why Brain Death is Death” (CT 10-18)</li> <li>• Nair-Collins, “We Die When Entropy Overwhelms Homeostasis “(CT 19-27 )</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Davis, “Defining Death” in Davis, ed., <i>Ethics at the End of Life</i></li> <li>• Gilmore, “What It Is to Die” (CT 28-37)</li> <li>• Johnson, <i>Philosophical, Medical, and Legal Controversies about Brain Death</i></li> <li>• McMahan, “The Metaphysics of Brain Death”</li> <li>• President’s Commission on Bioethics, “Defining Death” (CT 3-9)</li> <li>• Williams, “Death and Consensus Liberalism”</li> </ul>

2 Sept 23  
Immortality and its possibility I: Wanting to survive and surviving as bodies

Core readings (= 24 pp.)	Secondary readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Part II: Can We Survive Our Death?” (CT 1-2)</li> <li>• Unamuno, <i>Tragic Sense of Life</i>, excerpt (CT 41-46)</li> <li>• Cave, “Can We Survive Our Deaths?” (CT 47-49)</li> <li>• Kagan, <i>Death</i>, pp. 6-10, 118-131</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• David &amp; Rose Hershenov, “The Possibility of An Afterlife” (CT 56-63)</li> <li>• Olson, “An Argument for Animalism”</li> </ul>

3 Sept 30  
Immortality and its possibility II: Surviving as souls and symbolic immortality through legacy

Core readings (= 67 pp.)	Secondary readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cave, “Can We Survive Our Deaths?” (CT 50-53)</li> <li>• Kagan, <i>Death</i>, 13-18, 115-118</li> <li>• Scheffler, <i>Death and the Afterlife</i>, pp. 15-36</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Altshuler, “The Significance of Future Generations” (CT 191-99)</li> <li>• Cuaron, <i>Children of Men</i> (2006 feature film)</li> <li>• Kagan, <i>Death</i>, pp. 24-68</li> <li>• Metz, “Reasons of Meaning to Abhor the End of the Human Race”</li> <li>• Plato, <i>Phaedo</i></li> <li>• Timmerman, “Doomsday Needn’t Be So Bad”</li> </ul>

4 Oct 7  
Death’s value: Epicureanism

Core readings (= 31 pp.)	Secondary readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Part III: Can Death Be Good or Bad for Us?” (CT 65-66)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cyr, “How Does Death Harm the Deceased?”</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus” (CT 67-69)</li> <li>• Taylor, “Why Death is Not Bad for the One Who Dies” (CT 78-84)</li> <li>• Luper, “Annihilation”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Johansson, “Two Arguments for Epicureanism” (CT 70-77)</li> <li>• Mitsis, “When Death Is There, We Are Not: Epicurus on Pleasure and Death”</li> <li>• Willaschek, “Death and Existential Value: In Defense of Epicurus”</li> </ul>
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5 Oct 14

Death’s value: deprivationism and the categorical desire view

Core readings (= 31 pp.)	Secondary readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nagel, “Death”</li> <li>• Kagan, <i>Death</i>, pp. 206-212</li> <li>• Egerstrom, “Making Death Not Quite as Bad for the One Who Dies” (CT 93-100)</li> <li>• Belshaw, “Victims”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beglin, “Fearing Death as Fearing the Loss of One’s Life: Lessons from Alzheimer’s Disease”</li> <li>• Cholbi, “Capital Punishment”</li> <li>• McMahan, “Death and the Value of Life”</li> <li>• McMahan, “Death” (<i>Ethics of Killing</i>, ch. 2) – <u>for the ambitious!</u></li> <li>• Kamm, “The Badness of Death and What to Do About It (If Anything),” through p. 18</li> </ul>

6 Oct 21

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

Core readings (= 42 pp.)	Secondary readings
<p>On the Timing Problem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feit, “Death is Bad for Us When We’re Dead” (CT 85-92)</li> <li>• Scarre, “The Vulnerability of the Dead”</li> </ul> <p>On the Lucretian Asymmetry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Part IV: Can Lucretius’ Asymmetry Problem Be Solved?” (CT 101-102)</li> <li>• Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i> (excerpts) (CT 103)</li> <li>• Kagan, <i>Death</i>, pp. 224-233</li> <li>• Timmerman, “If You Want to Die Later, Why Don’t You Want to Be Born Earlier?” (CT 104-111)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cyr, “How Does Death Harm the Deceased?”, pp. 37-45</li> <li>• Johansson, “When Do We Incur Mortal Harm?”</li> <li>• Kaufman, “Coming Into and Going Out of Existence” (CT 112-118)</li> </ul>

7 Oct 28

The desirability of immortality

Core readings (= 39 pp.)	Secondary readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Part V: Would Immortality Be Good for Us?” (CT 119-20)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beglin, “Immortality, Boredom, and Standing for Something” (CT 144-151)</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Either</i> Epic of Gilgamesh (excerpt) <i>or</i> Ozaki, “The Story of the Man Who Did Not Wish to Die” (CT)</li> <li>• Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality” (focus on pp. 90-95, skim remainder)</li> <li>• Olson, “Death and Immortality”</li> <li>• Mitchell-Yellin, “How to Live a Never-ending Novela” (CT 131-136)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buben, “Do Immortals Need an Eject Button? Sartre and the Importance of Always Having an Exit”</li> <li>• Cave and Fischer, <i>Should You Choose to Live Forever?</i></li> <li>• Cholbi, “Immortality and the Exhaustibility of Value”</li> <li>• Elpidorou, “Boredom, Human Psychology, and Immortality”</li> <li>• Gorman, “Taking Stock of the Risks of Life Without Death” (CT 137-143)</li> <li>• Hagglund, <i>This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free</i></li> <li>• Rosati, “The Makropulos Case Revisited: Reflections on Immortality and Agency”</li> </ul>
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8 Nov 4

Addressing the deaths of others

Core readings (= 38 pp.)	Secondary readings*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Part VII: How Should We React to the Deaths of Others?” (CT 179-80)</li> <li>• Seneca, Letter to Lucillus (“On Grief for Lost Friends”) (CT 181-183)</li> <li>• Cholbi, “Why Grieve?” (CT 184-90)</li> <li>• Atkins, “Empathy for the Dead”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cholbi, “Empathy and Psychopaths’ Inability to Grieve”</li> <li>• Lewis, <i>A Grief Observed</i>, especially ch. 1</li> <li>• Moller, “Love and Death”</li> <li>• Olberding, “The Consummation of Sorrow: An Analysis of Confucius’ Grief for Yan Hui”</li> <li>• Ratcliffe and Byrne, “Grief, Self, and Narrative”</li> <li>• Scheffler, “Aging as a Normative Phenomenon”</li> </ul>

\*Additional sources on philosophy of grief can be found at

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

9 Nov 11

Ohman’s *The Afterlife of Data*, part I

Core readings (= 86 very short pp.)	Secondary readings*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ohman, <i>The Afterlife of Data</i>, pp. 1-86</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elder, “Conversation from Beyond the Grave? A Neo-Confucian Ethics of Chatbots of the Dead”</li> <li>• Krueger &amp; Osler, “Communing with the Dead: Chatbots, Grief, and Continuing Bonds”</li> <li>• Stokes, “Death and Survival Online”</li> <li>• Troyer, <i>Technologies of the Human Corpse</i></li> </ul>

10 Nov 18 (**ONLINE LEARNING WEEK – logistics to be provided**)

Ohman's *The Afterlife of Data*, part II

Core readings (= 74 very short pp.)	Secondary readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ohman, <i>The Afterlife of Data</i>, pp. 87-161</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ruin, <i>Being with the Dead: Burial, Ancestral Politics, and the Roots of Historical Consciousness</i></li></ul>

11 Nov 25

(a) Course recap and reflection

(b) Student choice of topic. Some possibilities:

- Suicide and/or assisted dying
- Death and meaning in life
- Fear and other attitudes toward death

Core readings	Secondary readings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “Part VI: What is the Best Attitude to Take Toward Our Mortality?” (CT 153-55)</li><li>• Four Noble Truths/“Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion” (excerpts) (CT 174-75)</li><li>• Nietzsche, “Voluntary Death” (CT 176-77)</li><li>• Gorer, “The Pornography of Death”</li></ul> <i>Others based on student choice of topic</i>	<i>Based on student choice of topic</i>