

Philosophy 321  
**Death**

Spring 2021  
Harkness 210, Th 2:00-4:30

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Office: Lattimore 529  
Hours: Th 11:30-1:30  
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Death poses a number of philosophical puzzles: What does it mean to die? Am I harmed when I die? I don't experience my death or being dead, so why would it be bad for me? Is it appropriate, then, to fear my death? Is it wrong to kill myself? Can I be harmed *after* I die? If dying is bad, would it be better if I never died, if I lived forever? Does the fact of that we will die change the way we should live? Does death shape the meaning of our lives?

**Required Texts:**

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Vintage)  
Karel Capek, *Four Plays* (Methuen)  
Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife* (Oxford)  
Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton)  
Readings on Blackboard

**Course Requirements:**

*Class participation* is worth a significant portion of your grade. The class is based on student discussions, not on lectures. You are expected to come to class, and you are expected to come to class prepared to discuss the readings – if only to ask relevant questions about them. Most of your class participation grade is based on regular, substantive participation in class discussions.

*Reflection papers.* Almost every week, you will be expected to write a brief one-page reaction paper to the upcoming week's reading, due generally at 9:00 p.m. on the Wednesday before class. Please email them to me. These papers should respond to some specific arguments or position in the readings by explaining why you agree or disagree with it. Each is worth 10 points.

*Paper assignments.* The major assignments in this course will be done using a tutorial system. I will give you a series of questions about particular texts, and I will ask you to respond to them in a paper of 6-8 pages. You and another student will meet with me in my office during the time set aside for that purpose. Together, the three of us will discuss each of your papers. While attending a tutorial is required, you will be graded only on what is in your paper. I will explain the tutorial method in more detail later.

For your final assignment, you will have a choice: you may either write a third tutorial of 7-10 pages on a topic I will give you, or you may write a 7-10 page paper on a topic of your own

choosing. This latter option will give you the opportunity to explore an issue of particular interest to you at greater length. Note that the paper must be a *philosophy* paper: it should explain and evaluate a line of argument that concerns neuroscience or neurological practice. I will be happy, however, to help you develop your topic. In any case, if you choose to write a paper, you *must* consult me.

In addition, students are encouraged to form study groups to discuss the issues raised in the course. If you have a group and you would like me to meet with it, please contact me, and I will be happy to attend.

The course grade is divided into 610 points, apportioned as shown:

First tutorial	Mar 11	120 points
Second tutorial	Apr 8	120 points
Final assignment	May 6	140 points
Reaction papers		100 points
Participation		130 points

Academic honesty: The Honor Pledge will be required on the papers for the course. I expect the work on these assignments to be your own; all quotations and *ideas from others* that are used in your work must be properly cited. The reflections papers are more informal, so I do not expect rigorous citations or the Pledge, but I do expect the work to be your own. This is an ethics course, and I take a particularly dim view of violations of academic honesty. Please consult the College's policy at [www.rochester.edu/College/honesty/](http://www.rochester.edu/College/honesty/). If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

### Schedule of Readings

This schedule is tentative (especially for topics later in the course). However, any changes will be announced on Blackboard, and an up-to-date copy of the syllabus can always be found on Blackboard. All readings, except those in the required books for the class, are on Blackboard.

- Feb 4      Introduction  
 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (1599) 3.1.56-88  
 Montaigne, "To study philosophy is to learn to die" (1580), in *Complete Essays*,  
 trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1943), 56-68
- Defining death  
 Fred Feldman, "Vitalist Theories of Life" and "The Enigma of Death" chs. 3-4  
 in *Confrontations with the Reaper* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,  
 1992), 39-71
- Feb 11      Ad Hoc Harvard Committee on Brain Death, "A Definition of Irreversible  
 Coma," *JAMA* 205 (1968): 337-40

James Bernat, "A Defense of the Whole Brain Concept of Death," *Hastings Center Report* 28.2 (1998): 14-24  
 Jeff McMahan, "Brain Death, Cortical Death, and Persistent Vegetative State," in *A Companion to Bioethics*, ed. Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 250-60  
 Don Marquis, "Are DCD Donors Dead?," *Hastings Center Report* 40.3 (2010), 24-31  
 Rachel Aviv, "The Death Debate," *New Yorker*, 5 February 2018, 30-41  
*Reflection paper due, 7 pm, February 10*

Feb 18      The badness of death  
 Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus* (c. 300 BCE)  
 Thomas Nagel, "Death," *Noûs* 4 (1970): 73-80  
 Harry S. Silverstein, "The Evil of Death," *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980): 401-24  
 Ben Bradley, "When Is Death Bad for the One Who Dies?," *Noûs* 38 (2004): 1-28  
*Reflection paper due, 7 pm, February 17*

Feb 25      The asymmetry problem  
 Lucretius, *The Nature of Things* (c 50 BCE), trans. Frank Copley (New York: WW. Norton, 1977), Book III, lines 971-77 (more generally, 830-1094)  
 Derek Parfit, "Different Attitudes to Time" (excerpts) from *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), §64-67 (pp 165-77)  
 Stephen Rosenbaum, "The Symmetry Argument: Lucretius Against the Fear of Death," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50 (1989): 353-73  
 Frederik Kaufman, "Pre-Vital and Post-Mortem Non-Existence," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1999): 1-19  
*Reflection paper due, 7 pm, February 24*

Mar 4      Harming the dead  
 George Pitcher, "The Misfortunes of the Dead," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1984): 183-88  
 Dorothy Grover, "Posthumous Harm," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 39 (1989): 334-53  
 James Stacey Taylor, "The Myth of Posthumous Harm," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (2005): 311-22  
 (Optional) Richard Dees, "Primum Non Nocere Mortuis: Bioethics and the Lives of the Dead," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 44 (2019): 732-55  
*Reflection paper due, 7 pm, March 3*

Mar 11      *First tutorials (No regular class meeting)*

Mar 18

Souls

Rene Descartes, "Meditation VI: Concerning the Existence of Material Things and the Real Distinction Between Mind and Body" (1642), in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 51-59

Immanuel Kant, "The Immortality of the Soul as a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason" (1785) in *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. T.K. Abbott (1888), 150-51

David Hume, "Of the Immortality of the Soul" (1755), in *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985), 590-98

Jeff McMahan, "The Soul," from *The Ethics of Killing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), I.2 (7-24)

*Reflection paper due, 7 pm, , March 17*

Mar 25

The undead

Manuel Vargas, "Dead Serious: Evil and the Ontology of the Undead," in *The Undead and Philosophy*, ed. Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad (Chicago: Open Court, 2006), 39-52

Richard Greene, "The Badness of Undeath," in *The Undead and Philosophy*, 3-14

Immortality

Karel Capek, "The Makropulos Case," in *Four Plays*, 165-260

Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 82-100

Connie Rosati, "The Makropulos Case Revisited," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Death*, ed. Ben Bradley, Fred Feldman, and Jens Johansson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 355-90

*Reflection paper due, 7 pm, March 24*

Apr 1

Suicide

Immanuel Kant, "Suicide" (1780), in *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1963), 148-54

David Hume, "Of Suicide" (1755), in *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*, 577-89

Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1955), 1-31, 51-65, 119-23.

Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 716-27

*Reflection paper due, 7 pm, April 7*

Apr 8

*Second tutorials (No regular class meeting)*

Apr 15

Valuing life

Movie: "Never Let Me Go"

Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1-63

*Reflection paper due, 7 pm, April 14*

Apr 22

Living with death

P.D. James, *The Children of Men* (New York: Vintage, 1992), ch. 1 (pp. 1-12).  
Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15-110.

*Reflection paper due, 7 pm, April 21*

Apr 29

Dead bodies

*Tour of Mt. Hope Cemetery*

Thomas Laquer, "Places of the Dead in Modernity," in *The Age of Cultural Revolutions: Britain and France, 1750-1820*, edited by Colin Jones and Dror Wahrman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 17-32

Mary Roach, "Life after Death," from *Stiff: The Curious Life of Human Cadavers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 59-84

Conclusion

Montaigne, "That Our Happiness Must Not Be Judged Until After Our Death" (1580), in *Complete Essays*, 54-55

*Reflection paper due, 7 pm, April 28*

May 6

*Third tutorial/Final assignment due*