

Philosophy 321  
**Death**

Spring 2023  
Lattimore 531, Th 2:00-4:30

Richard Dees, Ph.D.  
Office: Lattimore 529  
Hours: Th 11:30-1:30  
and by appointment  
[richard.dees@rochester.edu](mailto:richard.dees@rochester.edu)

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 Čapek, *Four Plays* (Methuen)  
Todd May, *Death* (Routledge) [available on Blackboard]  
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.* Three times during the term, you will be expected to write a brief 1-2 page double-spaced reaction paper to the upcoming week's reading, due generally at 7:00 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. Groups will be assigned during the first week of class.

*Paper assignments.* The major assignments in this course will be done using a tutorial system. For the first two papers, 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 death. 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 540 points, apportioned as shown:

First tutorial	Feb 9	120 points
Second tutorial	Mar 16	120 points
Final assignment	Apr 20	140 points
Reaction papers		30 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.

- Jan 12      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  
 Todd May, *Death*, ch 1 (1-43)
- Defining death  
 Fred Feldman, "Life-Functional Theories of Life," ch. 2 in *Confrontations with  
 the Reaper* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 22-38
- Jan 19      Feldman, "Vitalist Theories of Life" and "The Enigma of Death" chs. 3-4 (pp 39-  
 71)  
 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  
*Group C reflection paper due, 7 pm, January 18*

Jan 26

The badness of death

- Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* (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

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)
- Frederik Kaufman, "Pre-Vital and Post-Mortem Non-Existence," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1999): 1-19
- Optional: Stephen Rosenbaum, "The Symmetry Argument: Lucretius Against the Fear of Death," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50 (1989): 353-73  
*Group A reflection paper due, 7 pm January 25*

Feb 2

- Aaron Thieme, "Death and Decline," *Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (2022): 248-57

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.  
*Group B reflection paper due, 7 pm February 1*

Feb 9

*First tutorials (No regular class meeting)*

Feb 16

Souls

- Thomas Aquinas, "Of Man who is Composed of a Spiritual and a Corporeal Substance: and in the First Place, Concerning What Belongs to the Essence of the Soul," *Summa Theologica* I Question 75 (1485)
- Rene Descartes, "Meditation VI: Concerning the Existence of Material Things and the Real Distinction Between Mind and Body" (excerpt) (1642), in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, ), 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. [https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/360/Kant\\_0212\\_EBk\\_v6.0.pdf](https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/360/Kant_0212_EBk_v6.0.pdf)
- 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)

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
- Group B reflection paper due, 7 pm February 15*

Feb 23

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
- May, *Death*, ch 2 (45-78)
- Group C reflection paper due, 7 pm February 22*

Mar 2

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
- Tod Friend, "Jumpers," *The New Yorker*, 5 October 2003,
- Group A reflection paper due, 7 pm March 1*

- Mar 9      *Spring Break (No classes)*
- Mar 16     *Second tutorials (No regular class meeting)*
- Mar 23     Good deaths  
 Drew Gilpin Faust, "Dying: 'To Lay Down My Life,'" in *The Republic of Suffering* (New York: Vintage, 2009), 3-31  
 Kathy Behrent, "Whole Lives and Good Deaths," *Metaphilosophy* 45 (2014): 331-47  
 Dale Dorsey, "A Good Death," *Utilitas* 29 (2017): 153-74  
 Franklin G. Miller, "The Good Death, Virtue, and Physician-Assisted Death: An Examination of the Hospice Way of Death," *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 4 (1995): 92-97
- Valuing life  
 Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1-33  
*Group B reflection paper due, 7 pm March 22*
- Mar 30     Movie: "Never Let Me Go"  
 Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 34-63  
 May, *Death*, ch. 3 (79-114)  
*Group C reflection paper due, 7 pm March 29*
- Apr 6      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.  
*Group A reflection paper due, 7 pm April 5*
- Apr 13     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  
 Caitlin Doughty, "Indonesia: South Sulawesi," in *From Here to Eternity* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), 42-76  
 Optional: Mary Roach, "Life after Death," from *Stiff: The Curious Life of Human Cadavers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 59-84
- Conclusion  
 Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins, *Everybody* (New York: Dramatist Play Service, 2018)
- Apr 20     *Third tutorial/Final assignment due*