Philosophy 321
Death

Spring 2026
Lattimore 531, Th 2:00-4:40

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Hours: W 11-1
and by appointment
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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 Čapek, *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. Twice 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. Please pay attention to when your group has reflections due.

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 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 19	120 points
Second tutorial	Mar 26	120 points
Final assignment	Apr 30	140 points
Reaction papers		20 points
Participation		140 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/. 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.

I. The nature of death

Jan 22 Introduction

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (1599) 3.1.56-88

Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967), excerpt from Act Two, 62-64

Montaigne, "To study philosophy is to learn to die" and "That Our Happiness Must Not Be Judged Until After Our Death" (1580), in *Complete Essays*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1943), 56-68 and 54-55.

Defining death

Fred Feldman, chs. 2-4 "Life-Functional Theories of Life," "Vitalist Theories of Life," and "The Enigma of Death," in *Confrontations with the Reaper* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 22-71

Jan 29

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

Lainie Friedman Ross, "Respecting Choice in Definitions of Death," *Hastings Center Report* 48.6 (2018): S53-S55

Rachel Aviv, "The Death Debate," *New Yorker*, 5 February 2018, 30-41

Group A reflection paper due, 7 pm, January 28

Feb 5

<u>The badness of death</u>

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

<u>The asymmetry problem</u>

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 B reflection paper due, 7 pm February 4

Feb 12

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

<u>Harming the dead</u>

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 C reflection paper due, 7 pm February 11

Feb 19 *First tutorials (No regular class meeting)*

Feb 26 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*, trans. Donald Cress (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. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 98-100.

John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), §245 (68-70)

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 D reflection paper due, 7 pm February 25

Mar 5 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

Shelly Kagan, "Immortality," in *Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 234-46

Group A reflection paper due, 7 pm March 4

Mar 12 *Spring Break (No classes)*

Mar 19 Good deaths

Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night"

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
Katie Engelhart, "Modern Medicine," in *The Inevitable* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2021), 21-60
Stephanie Nolen, "Claire Brosseau Wants to Die. Will Canada Let Her?" *New York Times*, 29 December 2025.
(optional) Rachel Aviv, "The Death Treatment," *The New Yorker*, 22 June 2015
(optional) N.R. Kleinfeld, " The Lonely Death of George Bell," *New York Times*, 17 October 2015
(optional) Adam Smith, "Letter to William Strahan, Esq." (on the death of David Hume)
Group B reflection paper due, 7 pm March 18

Mar 26 *Second tutorials (No regular class meeting)*

Apr 2 <u>Suicide and the absurd</u>
Scott Anderson, "The Urge to End it All," *New York Times Magazine*, 6 July 2008
Immanuel Kant, "Suicide" (1780), in *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis: Hackett , 1963), 147-54
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
(optional) Montaigne, "A Custom of the Island of Cea," in *Complete Essays,* 251-62
Group C reflection paper due, 7 pm April 1

Apr 9 <u>Valuing life</u>
Movie: "Never Let Me Go"
Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1-63

Apr 16 <u>Living with death</u>
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

(optional) Dan Moller, "Love and Death," *Journal of Philosophy* 104 (2007): 301-16

Group D reflection paper due, 7 pm April 15

Apr 23 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

(optional) Alexis Elder, "Conversations from Beyond the Grave?: A Neo-Confucian Ethics of Chatbots of the Dead," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 37 (2020): 73-88

Conclusion

L.S. Dugdale, "Finitude," in *The Lost Art of Dying* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020), 25-45

(optional) Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, *Everybody* (New York: Dramatist Play Service, 2018)

Apr 30 *Third tutorial/Final assignment due*