

PHIL 225

Death and Dying



Instructor: Dr. Chris Goto-Jones (he/him) (chrisgotojones@uvic.ca) (please call me Chris!)

Office Hours: Monday 12-13:00 and Thursday 13.00-14.00 (online by appointment)

(book via Calendly: <https://calendly.com/chrisgotojones/office-hours>)

Class Information: COR B143, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday 11.30-12.20

Course Website: Through Brightspace. <http://bright.uvic.ca>

Teaching Assistant: Salah Mekhalati (salahreyes@gmail.com)

Readings available through the course website – all available electronically when on campus network.
Links to academic support and other services available in this syllabus and through course site.

Course Description

Rosencrantz: *Do you ever think of yourself as actually dead, lying in a box with the lid on it? Nor do I really. Silly to be depressed by it. I mean, one thinks of it like being alive in a box. One keeps forgetting to take into account that one is dead. Which should make all the difference. Shouldn't it? I mean, you'd never know you were in a box would you? It would be just like you were asleep in a box. Not that I'd like to sleep in a box, mind you. Not without any air. You'd wake up dead for a start and then where would you be? In a box. That's the bit I don't like, frankly. That's why I don't think of it. Because you'd be helpless wouldn't you? Stuffed in a box like that. I mean, you'd be in there forever. Even taking into account the fact that you're dead. It isn't a pleasant thought. Especially if you're dead, really. Ask yourself: if I asked you straight off I'm going to stuff you in this box now – would you rather to be alive or dead?*

Naturally you'd prefer to be alive. Life in a box is better than no life at all. I expect. You'd have a chance at least. You could lie there thinking, well, at least I'm not dead. In a minute, somebody's going to bang on the lid and tell me to come out. (knocks) "Hey you! What's your name? Come out of there!" (Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, 1966/1990)

Death has long been considered one of the most important (and sometimes the only vital) question for philosophy. For some, death is single most powerful fact of life, and yet also, in various ways, it remains a mystery. What is death? How does it relate to life? Is it worse? Maybe it's better? Is there any sense in which we can say death is harmful to us, even though we won't be there when we're dead? Perhaps most importantly for this course, what is it like to live knowing that you'll die? What is it like to die? What is it like to cause death? Does knowledge of death make our lives richer, better, and more meaningful? And, if so, why in modern society so adverse to talking about or even admitting death? Modern societies tend to hide death away from our view, as though we can then forget it ever happens. Does this forgetfulness or denial make life better or worse? Is the modern reduction of death to an objective, technical description of biological processes really just another way to distract us from the significance of death for our lives?

Course Objectives

The course aims to give students an understanding of the central questions, concepts and arguments in various philosophical traditions about death

Students who successfully complete the course will have a good understanding of:

- debates around whether death is a harm;
- the ways in which knowledge of death affect values and meaning in life;
- the ways in death has been understood in different philosophical and cultural traditions;
- how the process of dying might be experienced;
- the meaning and nature of grief;
- how death is understood by other-than-human animals.

Students who successfully complete the course will be able to:

- critically analyse and personally reflect upon primary sources in translation, paying attention to issues of origination;
- critically analyse and personally reflect upon recent literature in the analytic, continental, and Asian philosophical traditions;
- formulate and defend well-reasoned positions (that are authentically your own) on the questions covered in the course in writing and in-class discussions.

Course materials

I have tried to avoid structuring this course around an expensive textbook. Instead, we will be making use of resources that are available electronically in the library. Having said that, there are two books that will be used repeatedly – both are available as ebooks through the library:

- Malpas & Solomon (eds), *Death and Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1998
- Cholbi & Timmerman (eds), *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying*. London: Routledge, 2021

Additional materials will be provided through Brightspace.

Course Logistics

This course will be in-person. Attendance is highly recommended; interaction and discussion are vital to learning (and teaching!). If you are sick or have other good reason to miss the class (life happens!), please let me know in advance of the class (or as soon as possible thereafter), and this may count as an excused absence.

Academic Integrity

Everything you will be evaluated on in this course will be fully open book and untimed. All answers to assignments have to be your own written work. This means that you are not allowed to provide answers for someone else, or vice versa or even versa vice. If you are ever unsure about what constitutes a violation of academic integrity, more information is provided on the University Calendar:

<http://web.uvic.ca/calendar/undergrad/info/regulations/academic-integrity.html>

Professionalism is expected from all students enrolled in courses in the Faculty of Humanities. As part of professionalism, students, faculty and staff are expected to be familiar with University policies, including the [Tri-Faculty's Standards for Professional Behaviour](#).

Communication and Office Hours

Email is my preferred method of communication, as opposed to Brightspace messages or forum posts. If you ask me a question over email, you can expect a reply within about 1 working day. If you don't hear back from me within that time frame, feel free to try again in case your message went astray, or in case I'm just snowed under (it happens). Please be aware that if you email on Friday night, the first working day will be ... Monday.

When you do address me (over email or otherwise), please do so as Chris, because that's my name. If you feel more comfortable with titles, then please use either Professor (Prof.) Goto-Jones or Dr. Goto-Jones. No 'sir' or 'mr,' for various reasons, thanks! If you are ever nervous about sending me an email, or asking a question, feel free to include a funny anecdote, cartoon, or a picture of your pet with your request. This will not affect whether or not I will be able to help you with your request, but it will be much more fun for us all.

Finally, my pronouns are he/him. If you think I am unlikely to know the name you would prefer to be called, or the pronouns I ought to use for you, please don't hesitate to make me aware. It's helpful if you add your pronouns to your email footer.

My default platform for office hours will be Zoom, Mondays and Thursdays 12:30-13:20 am (TBC), but if that does not work for you, please feel free to email me in advance to suggest an alternative time and/or platform. Office hours will require pre-booking via Calendly (link to follow). If you don't make an appointment, you are welcome to sit in the Zoom waiting room until I become free, but please keep in mind

that all the slots might already be booked. It's much better to make an appointment. All relevant links will be posted on Brightspace.

Evaluation

You are expected to maintain high standards of respect and academic integrity throughout this course. Discussion is essential to learning in this course, and it relies upon an atmosphere of trust. Everyone present should feel safe to express their views, which also means that everyone present is responsible for ensuring that they exercise academic freedom (rather than merely freedom of speech), treating each other respectfully and supportively.

• Continuous Assessment/Participation: 10%

In this course, your participation will be evidenced by attending and participating in classes. Each time you come to class and participate you will receive 1 point, up to a maximum of 30 by the end of the semester (ie. 10 weeks of classes). Since there are 13 weeks, you have some leeway!

• Reflective assignments: 50%

Because a goal of this course is to reflect upon and understand how our ideas about death and dying impact our lives, 2 of the assignments will be 'reflective.' Each will be worth 25% of your final grade. A 'reflective assignment' encourages you to explore your own responses to the material covered in these sections and how (if at all) this material may have altered your outlook. They are less formal than a regular academic essay, but no less important. For each reflection, you will receive a choice of 3 prompts; you will respond to 1 with about 750 words. Your work will be assessed on both your understanding of the material covered (you must represent it accurately) as well as your ability to relate that to your existing views on the topics concerned.

• Final analytic assignment: 40%

The final assignment will be open-book format. You will receive a list of potential topics in week 12. From that list, you will select one question, which you will address in sophisticated, academic manner. You should expect that the final assignment will be more conventionally 'academic' than the reflection assignments. I will expect approx. 1,500-2,000 words. The questions will encompass topics from the whole course; your answers will benefit from making use of knowledge and context from the course overall.

Your work will be assessed on: its relevance to the themes and materials of the course; its accurate use of sources; its coherence, sophistication and persuasiveness; the convincingness and effectiveness of your argument and writing.

Grades

Per [UVic grading rubric](#), grades will be given as percentile marks. I am encouraged to remind you that UVic does not endorse grading a curve, but nevertheless the rubric states that grades over 80 (ie. A-, A, A+) are 'normally achieved by a minority of students.'

Late work and extensions

I am happy to allow each of you 4 days of extra time for your assignments. That is 4 days in total for the semester. You can use these days however is helpful for you: all for one assignment, some for each, or whatever. This period of grace is granted without any need for explanation or justification. These are days are not divisible into hours. Should you need further extensions, you will need to apply for them formally. Work that is submitted beyond these limits will be penalized 5% per day until submission. In the instance that work is submitted too late to be graded, it will not be marked.

Course Schedule (provisional)

1. Why study death? (Jan 7, 8, 10)

For many philosophers, across various periods and cultures, the nature of death has been seen as perhaps the most important question for us to understand. In most cases, the significance of death has been quite normative, about how our understanding of death actually matters to our lives (ie. 'understanding' death requires us to be alive!). In some cases the question of death has been more metaphysical, about what death might actually be and how we might recognise it when we see it. In this week, we'll flash through a quick, high level survey of some of these philosophical tendencies.

Readings:

No required readings ... best to prepare your readings for next week 😊

2. What happens when we die? (Jan 14, 15, 17)

There are various ways to talk about what happens when we die. For example, famously, the magician and escapologist, Houdini, said that he'd come back and tell us what it was like after he died. As far as we know, he didn't succeed. So maybe waiting until after death isn't the way to go.

One way to talk about what happens when we die is experientially: that is, what is it like to go through the process of dying? We have many accounts of so-called 'near-death experiences' (NDEs), recalled by people (including some philosophers) who got to the point of death but then somehow returned to life. Some philosophical systems (such as Tibetan Buddhism) have rather elaborate maps of the stages of death.

Another way to talk about what happens when we die is 'objectively.' That is, by watching the death of others we can work out what the material conditions of death actually are: is it enough for the respiratory and circulatory systems to stop, or does the brain also have to stop functioning etc? These questions push us back into an equally difficult question: what happens when we're alive?

Reading:

Tem Horwitz, 'My Death,' in Malpas & Solomon (eds), *Death and Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1998, pp.5-14.

And:

Cody Gilmore, 'What it is to Die,' in Cholbi & Timmerman (eds), *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying*. London: Routledge, 2021, pp.28-37.

3. Is death actually nothing to worry about? (Jan 21, 22, 24)

One of the most influential (and highly debated) arguments about death is that it's really not got anything to with us, because we won't be there anymore to worry about it. So, if anything, death is only significant to us to the extent that other people die. Any anxiety we might feel about our own death is just a mistake that we should be able to fix by thinking about it better. We can just ... accept it in a disinterested and calm way. Philosophy can rescue us from our fear of death!!

Reading:

Epicurus, 'Letter to Menoeceus,' in Cholbi & Timmerman (eds), *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying*. London: Routledge, 2021, pp.67-69.

Lucretius, 'On the Nature of Things,' in Cholbi & Timmerman (eds), Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying. London: Routledge, 2021, p.103.

And:

Ivan Soll, 'On the purported insignificance of death,' in Malpas & Solomon (eds), Death and Philosophy. London: Routledge, 1998, pp.20-34.

Optional:

Thomas Nagel, 'Death.' *Noûs*, 4:1 (Feb 1970), pp.73-80

4. Should we rage against death anyway? (Jan 28, 29, 31)

For some people, the idea that it is irrational to fear death doesn't mean that we either won't (or shouldn't) fear death! Perhaps fear is not the kind of thing that responds to rationality? Or perhaps rationality isn't the best way to understand death? Whatever the case, many philosophers have suggested that even if we need not fear death, that's no reason not to rage and fight against it for as long as possible!

Reading:

Reinhard Steiner, 'Against Death,' in Malpas & Solomon (eds), Death and Philosophy. London: Routledge, 1998, pp.15-19.

Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 'Fearing Death.' *Philosophy*, 58:224 (1983), pp.175-188.

Optional:

Dominic Wilkinson, 'Grief and the Inconsolation of Philosophy.' *Philosophy*, 93:3 (2023), pp.273-296.

FIRST REFLECTIVE ASSIGNMENT ISSUED 31 Jan, DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION 7 Feb

5. Does authentic life rely on us facing death? (Feb 4, 5, 7)

While many existentialist thinkers of the twentieth century were preoccupied with the significance of death and its relationship with being (indeed, some seemed to suggest that death is an essential condition for the possibility of being at all), perhaps the philosopher most associated with a 'philosophy of death' in modern times is Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger, clearly facing death is the only way to live an authentic life. For Heidegger and some of the existentialists, the possibility of death is also the possibility of meaning.

Reading:

Todd May, 'Death, Mortality, and Meaning,' in Cholbi & Timmerman (eds), Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying. London: Routledge, 2021, pp.157-161

Julian Young, 'Death and Authenticity,' in Malpas & Solomon (eds), Death and Philosophy. London: Routledge, 1998, pp.101-107.

Optional:

Adam Buben, 'Heidegger's Reception of Kierkegaard: The Existential Philosophy of Death.' *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 21:5 (2013), pp. 967-988.

6. Are life and death actually just unremarkable? (Feb 11, 12, 14)

Of course, as we've seen already in various ways, not all philosophy about death participates in the basic framings offered by the ancient Greeks. Over the next few weeks we'll look explicitly at how two Asian

philosophical traditions have dealt with death. One of the crucial differences will be the tendency towards non-dualism in these traditions, which asserts the unity of opposites. So, first, in this week, we'll dip into the classical Daoist philosophy of death and examine the relationship between life and death as a kind of 'transformation of things.' What happens when, in your dreams, you are a butterfly?

Reading:

Roger Ames, 'Death as transformation in classical Daoism,' in Malpas & Solomon (eds), *Death and Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1998, pp.51-63.

Plus:

selections from Burton Watson (trans), *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

Optional:

David Chai, 'On Pillowing One's Skull: Zhuangzi and Heidegger on Death.' *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, 11:3 (September 2016), pp. 483-500.

7. READING WEEK (Feb 18, 19, 21)

8. Are life and death basically the same? (Feb 25, 26, 28)

Buddhism has often been described as a philosophy of death, not only because it is usually associated with funeral rites in many Asian societies, but also because Buddhist philosophy seems to suggest that what we experience as 'life' is actually a kind of delusion from which we must liberate ourselves. If life is a delusion, what is life? And how might that relate to death? In a famous Zen phrase, we have to die first before we can truly live! As we'll see, the answers to these questions are simple neither in theory nor in practice. One possible answer is this: life and death are the same thing.

Reading:

Ikkyū Sōjun (Blyth & Waddell trans) 'Ikkyū's Skeletons.' *The Eastern Buddhist*, 9:1 (May 1973), pp. 111-125. Other sources tbc depending on interests ... perhaps Hagakure and the 'craze for death.'

SECOND REFLECTIVE ASSIGNMENT ISSUED 28 Feb, DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION 7 MARCH

9. Do we need to die to be know the truth? (Mar 4, 5, 7 – heads up: there's a possibility this content will be asynchronous)

One of the most famous texts about death in the world is the so-called Tibetan Book of the Dead (spoiler, this is not the book's real title!). On the face of it, it is a Buddhist text that explains the process of dying and then the kinds of things we should do after that, in the 'bardo,' in order to ensure our liberation from the endless cycle of life and death. However, this text is also a classic statement of the psychology of living and dying moment-by-moment in life. After all, even though it's a book about dying, it is directed towards the living.

Reading:

Robert Wicks, 'Death and enlightenment.' in Malpas & Solomon (eds), *Death and Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1998, pp.64-74.

Plus,

Selections from the Tibetan Book of the Dead

(Robert Thurman (trans), The Tibetan book of the dead, as popularly known in the West : known in Tibet as The great book of natural liberation through understanding in the between. New Delhi: HarperColins, 1998.)

10. What do animals understand about death? (Mar 11, 12, 14)

Given the focus on this course on how death impacts our experience of life, we have focussed largely on the question of human death. In this week we'll turn towards the significance of death for other-than-human animals. Do these animals have an understanding of death and, if so, how does that understanding affect their lives? How is that understanding different from our own? This is the emerging field of comparative thanatology.

Readings:

Susana Monsó, 'Death is common, so is understanding it: the concept of death in other species.' *Syntheses*, 199 (2021), pp.2251–2275.

Optional:

Susana Monsó, 'How to tell if animals can understand death.' *Erkenntnis*, 87 (2022), pp.117–136.

You might also enjoy selections from Monsó's recent book, *Playing Possum: How Animals Understand Death*. Princeton University Press, 2024.

11. What happens when others die? (March 18, 19, 21)

Until now, we've largely been concerned with the question of our own death. In this week, we turn towards the significance of the death of others (who and whatsoever those 'others' may be). One interesting question here might be: if death is nothing to the person who dies, why does it feel so bad to everyone around them? Hence, here we will consider the importance and significance of grief. In keeping with our focus on personal experience, we'll look in particular at how grief actually feels and what that might teach us about life and death.

Reading:

Michael Cholbi, 'Why Grieve?' in Cholbi & Timmerman (eds), *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying*. London: Routledge, 2021, pp.184-190

Matthew Ratcliffe, 'Towards a phenomenology of grief: insights from Merleau-Ponty.' *European Journal of Philosophy*, 28 (2020), pp.657-659.

Optional:

Catherine Fullarton, 'Grief, Phantoms, and Re-membering Loss.' *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 34:3 (2020), pp.284-296.

Dominic Wilkinson, 'Grief and the Inconsolation of Philosophy.' *Philosophy*, 93:3 (2023), pp.273-296.

FINAL ASSIGNMENT ISSUED 21 March, DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION 11 APRIL

12. What happens when we kill? (March 25, 26, 28)

Throughout this course, we've really been considering death as something that 'happens,' either to us or to someone else. In this week, we'll take a step to the side and ask what happens (to us) when we cause death. This could be the result of a deliberate act like suicide, murder, war, or even genocide, but it could also be the result of an accident: has a bird ever flown into your window and broken its neck? have you ever run

over a squirrel? have you ever run a red-light and crashed into a cyclist? It might be impossible to live without causing the death of others, and so we need to understand what that means for being human. As in previous weeks, the emphasis here will be experiential and phenomenological – what is it like to cause death?

Reading:

To be determined (based on how the previous sessions have been going ... so, for instance, would something about Jainism (and the endeavour to live without ever causing a death) be interesting, or perhaps something about warrior traditions (and the virtue of causing the death of 'enemies')?)

13. LAST WEEK – review, catch-up, and requests (Apr 1, 2, 4)

DEADLINE FOR FINAL COMPLETION OF COURSE 11 APRIL

Other Resources:

Student Resources

- a. [UVic Learn Anywhere](#). UVic Learn Anywhere is the primary learning resource for students that offers many learning workshops and resources to help students with academics and learning strategies.
- b. [Library resources](#). Information for students wishing to use the UVic library.
- c. [Student wellness resources](#)
- d. [Ombudsperson](#) A resource to help resolve disputes or complaints.
- e. Indigenous student services ([ISS](#))
- f. Centre for Academic Communication ([CAC](#))
- g. Math & Stats Assistance Centre ([MSAC](#))
- h. Learning Strategies Program ([LSP](#))
- i. [Other student groups and resources](#)
- j. [Academic Concession Regulations](#)
- k. [Academic Concession and Accommodation](#)
- l. Academic accommodation & access for students with disabilities – [Policy AC1205](#)

University statements and policies

- a. University Calendar- Section "[Information for all students](#)"
- b. [Creating a respectful, inclusive and productive learning environment](#)
- c. [Accommodation of Religious Observance](#)
- d. [Student Conduct](#)
- e. [Non-academic Student Misconduct](#)
- f. [Accessibility](#)
- g. [Diversity / EDI](#)
- h. [Equity statement](#)
- i. [Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response](#)
- j. Discrimination and Harassment [Policy](#)