



University
of Victoria

Philosophy 225 (A02): Death & Dying Fall 2026 (CRN 12748)



Instructor: [Dr. Geordie McComb](#) (he/him)



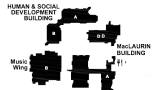
Email: gmccomb@uvic.ca

If 48 hrs pass without a reply, please email me again.



Delivery Mode: Blended

Online asynchronous with face-to-face classes on Wednesdays



Wednesday classes: Time & location

11:30am–12:20pm [MacLaurin Building](#) D288



Drop-in

In-person: Wednesday, 12:30–1:20pm, in [Clearihue](#) C308

Zoom: Monday, 12:00pm–2:00pm



Books you have to buy: None! All readings free on [Brightspace](#)



Tech help: Email helpdesk@uvic.ca or see [IT Service Desk](#)



Welcome!

We all die. Pass away. Kick the bucket. Croak. And so cease to exist. Or do we? Isn't there an afterlife? If not, even then, couldn't we be immortal? If not, how should we face death? Fear? An *awful* feeling, to be sure, but it's the one that makes sense, right? After all, death is bad—a terrible misfortune. But hold on. Is it? How could it be if, once dead, we no longer exist? And, besides, doesn't it save us from a meaningless life, from an eternity of repetitiveness, monotony, and mind-numbing boredom?

In this class, we will tackle questions like these and use what we learn to tackle others, for example, questions about the use of AI chatbots to lessen grief, about the choice to end one's own life, and about who should be permitted access to medical assistance in dying (MAiD).

By the end of this course, students should have developed their skills as critical readers, thinkers, and writers; improved their ability to engage with the relevant academic literature; become familiar with some classic writings in the history of philosophy; mastered the use of technical terms, such as “deprivationism” and “voluntary active euthanasia”; and learned to discuss, with rigour and depth, a number of important problems in the philosophy of death.

Land Acknowledgement

I acknowledge and respect the ɫə́kʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day. I am grateful for the opportunity to teach here, on these beautiful lands. How this opportunity came to be and what it means for these to be their traditional lands are topics that we in the humanities especially should examine in light of historical and ongoing injustice.

How the class works, in short

Typically, at the start of each week, you log in to the [course homepage](#) and find the weekly announcement, readings, and recorded lectures. After studying these materials, you complete an online quiz, post to the discussion board, and attend the in-person Wednesday class. Most in-person classes are for discussion; in the others, and there are two of them, you write a pen-and-paper test. Apart from these two in-class tests, there is an online one. And, at the end of the course, there is a pen-and-paper final exam.

Evaluation

Your grade will be based on the following:

Assessment	Percentage of Grade	Due Date(s)
Weekly Quizzes (online) Best 8 of 11 count	16% (2% each)	Tuesdays at noon (mostly) For dates, see Course Plan
Unit 1 Test (online)	15%	Sept. 25–7
Unit 2 Test (in-person)	15%	Oct. 14
Unit 3 Test (in-person)	15%	Nov. 4
Final Exam (in-person)	35%	TBA
Participation	14%	Weekly

The weekly quizzes, which are multiple-choice, help you check your understanding of class materials and prepare for unit tests. Your best eight of eleven quiz marks count toward your final grade. Complete them online via Brightspace. Most are due Tuesdays (the day before discussion classes) at noon (12:00pm); for specific dates, see the [Course Plan](#). Note that, so long as you submit a quiz before the due date, you can take as long as you like to finish it; you can, for example, begin it one day and finish it the next. Also, you may complete the quizzes in study groups.

The unit tests, which are made up of short- and long-answer questions, ask you to explain and apply relevant concepts. They are non-cumulative; that is, the first test focuses on material in Unit 1, the second that in Unit 2, and the third that in Unit 3. Note that a missed test, absent special consideration, will receive a grade of zero. If you miss a test, be sure to contact me as soon as possible. For more information, see the *missed work* section below.

The final exam includes short- and long-answer questions that focus on Unit 4 material. The exam also includes essay questions. Approximate essay topics will be distributed before the exam.

Participation counts toward your final grade. Contributions can be made each week either *in person*, during Wednesday classes or drop-in hours, or *online*, via weekly Brightspace discussion board posts.

In the interests of quality discussion, the in-class use of laptops, phones, and other electronic devices is discouraged.

Completion requirement: In order to be eligible to pass the course, you must complete the final exam as well as both in-person tests. Failure to complete any one of these required components will result in a grade of “N” for the course.

Course Plan

Below is the course plan, which may be changed from time to time. Any changes will be announced on Brightspace.

It is best to do the readings in the order they are listed. Reading lengths are shown in the far-right column. Purple stars (★★) indicate optional readings.

Unit 1: Death and the Afterlife

Week 1: Introduction to Class

This week, there are no required readings, but there is an optional one: the wonderful first chapter of Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Whether you read the chapter or not, do familiarize yourself with the course outline and start in on the readings for next week.

Date	Topic	Reading or Work Due	pp.
Sept. 9–11		★★★ Tolstoy - <i>Death of Ivan Ilyich</i> §1	10
Sept. 9	Introduction to class		

Week 2: Nature of Death

We begin this week with a look at contemporary death determination practices. Suppose you find me, eyes-closed and unresponsive, in a hospital bed. How could you tell whether or not I'm dead? Check for heartbeat or breathing? Or for brain activity? Just that in my cerebrum? Or what?

Answers to these sorts of questions may depend on *what death is*. Well, what is it? Is it to cease to be alive? Irreversibly so? And is it the same for all organisms? Or are we humans somehow different? Are our deaths somehow special?

Date	Topic	Reading or Work Due	pp.
Sept. 14–18	How should death be determined?	President's Commission	7
		Lizza - Why brain death is death	9
	What is death?	Nair-Collins - Die when entropy	9
Sept. 15		Due: Quiz 1	
Sept. 16		In-class discussion	

Week 3: Afterlife

This week, we ask: If death is the end of life, how could there be anything after it? How is an afterlife so much as possible? To tackle this question, we will back up a bit and ask: How, in general, do we survive from one time to another? The answer seems to depend on what we are. Well, what are we? Human animals? Or parts of our bodies, our brains perhaps? Or are we something else, maybe immaterial souls?

Or are we simply things with minds? Conscious things with beliefs, desires, memories, and so on? Or something else entirely?

That done, we come back to our question: Could there be life after death? Well, what if we are human animals? Might we survive death by being resurrected? Or, instead, what if we are immaterial souls? Could we survive death by separating from our bodies? Or what if we are things with minds? Could we survive death by, say, replacing our cells with silicon and becoming AI chatbots? Or might we survive it in some other way? As our legacies perhaps? In the hearts and minds of future generations?

Date	Topic	Reading or Work Due	pp.
Sept. 21–5	What is it for me to survive?	Kagan - Personal identity	30
	Is an afterlife possible?	Cave - Can we survive our deaths?	9
	A <i>digital</i> afterlife?	Stokes - Survival online (selection)	2
		Campbell et al. - Chatbots (selection)	2
Sept. 22		Due: Quiz 2	
Sept. 23		In-class discussion	
Sept. 25–7	Test 1 (Online)		

Unit 2: Badness of Death

Week 4: Why is death bad for the one who dies?

When death is bad, who is it bad for? If for the one who dies, why is that? Here is one answer: It's bad because it deprives one of a longer, better life. This answer might look right. Is it?

Maybe not. One worry with it has to do with experience. Why is stubbing my toe bad for me? Easy. Because it's a bad experience, a painful one. But then how could death be bad for me? After all, you might think, the dead don't have any experiences, much less bad ones.

Another worry has to do with time. When I stub my toe, it's bad for me at a particular time—namely, afterward, when it hurts. What about death? When is it bad for me? Not afterward, it seems, given that I don't exist after death. But then when? And, if not at any time, how could death be bad for me at all?

Date	Topic	Reading or Work Due	pp.
Sept. 28– Oct. 2		★★★Tolstoy - <i>Death of Ivan Ilyich</i> §6	4
	Is death bad?	Epicurus - Letter to Menoeceus	3
	Why is death bad?	Nagel - Death	8
	Who does it harm?	Gruen - Death as s. harm (selection)	6
	When is it bad?	Feit - Death is bad for us	8
Sept. 29		Due: Quiz 3	
Sept. 30	No Class, University Closed	National Day Truth & Reconciliation	

Week 5: Making Death Less Bad, the Deaths of Non-Human Animals, and the Symmetry Problem

This week, we look at three questions about the badness of death.

First, after a friend dies, could you make their death less bad? And could you do so by reducing what they are deprived of?

Second, is death bad for chimps, dogs, flies, and other non-human animals? If so, are their deaths less bad than our own?

Finally, turning to the Symmetry Problem, we ask: Was your *late birth* a terrible loss? Of course not, you might think. But then how could death be bad? After all, a late birth also deprives you of a longer, better life?

Date	Topic	Reading or Work Due	pp.
Oct. 5–9	Can we make death less bad?	Egerstrom - Not quite as bad	8
	Is death bad <i>for animals</i> ?	Sebo & Schukraft - Don't Farm Bugs	13
	If death is bad, why not a <i>late birth</i> ?	Lucretius - <i>De rerum natura</i> excerpts	1
		WiPhi Symmetry Argument (8 mins)	
		Kaufman - Coming into existence	7
Oct. 6		Due: Quiz 4	

Unit 3: Facing Death

Week 6: Immortality

If there is no afterlife, and death is bad, we should want to live forever. Never die. Become immortal. Right? But hold on. Wouldn't we eventually do everything that is worthwhile and get tired of life? Or put off what's worth doing, perpetually, because we can always do it later? Wouldn't a never-ending life, then, become a meaningless one?

Date	Topic	Reading or Work Due	pp.
Oct. 12–6		★★★ Ozaki - Did not wish to die	4
	Wouldn't immortality be boring?	Williams - Makropulos (selection)	2
		Fischer et al. - Immortality boredom	20
		Pereira et al. - (Un)desirability immort.	11
Oct. 14	Test 2 (In-person)		
Oct. 18		Due: Quiz 5	

Week 7: Meaning in Life

Does death rob life of its meaning? For that matter, what is it for a life to have meaning? Or to have *less* of it? Does it depend, somehow, on what you achieve? Or on the overall shape of your life? Does it depend on what you believe? On your confidence, perhaps, that future generations will exist?

Date	Topic	Reading or Work Due	pp.
Oct. 19–23	What is <i>meaning in life</i> ?	***Behrendt - Death in mind	7
	Does death destroy life's meaning?	Metz - Meaning in spite of death	9
		Altshuler - Future generations	9
Oct. 20		Due: Quiz 6	
Oct. 21	In-class discussion		

Week 8: Facing One's Own Death

How should we face our own deaths? Without terror? And without fear? If so, how? Also, why? Does fearing death not make sense? Is it irrational? What about other emotions, such as anger? Does feeling anger toward death make sense? Or feeling regret that we will miss out on more life? Or gratitude for the life we do get to enjoy?

Date	Topic	Reading or Work Due	pp.
Oct. 26–30	Are any mortal emotions rational?	Unamuno - Tragic sense of life	2
		Cholbi - Rationally Facing Death	9
Oct. 27		Due: Quiz 7	
Oct. 28	In-class discussion		

Week 9: Facing the Deaths of Others

When we face the deaths of those we love, we often grieve. We suffer. But, we might think, grieving is not only good but good for us. How could this be?

Additionally, this week, we'll ask: How should we cope with grief? Specifically, to this end, should we try to use AI chatbots, ones that compellingly mimic a deceased loved one, to continue the relationship?

Date	Topic	Reading or Work Due	pp.
Nov. 2–6	Should we grieve?	Seneca - Letter to Lucilius	3
		Cholbi - Why grieve?	7
		Campbell et al. - Chatbots Rel. Dead	17
Nov. 4	Test 3 (In-person)		
Nov. 6		Due: Quiz 8	

Nov. 9–11	★ Reading Break ★		
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Unit 4: Choosing Death

Week 10: Choosing One's Own Death

Could choosing to end one's own life ever be rational? Or morally permissible? If so, under what conditions? Also, could the choice to die ever be obligatory? Might we, for example, owe it to loved ones not to prolong our lives past a certain point?

Date	Topic	Reading or Work Due	pp.
Nov. 16–20	When can we choose death?	Aquinas - Whether allowed	2
		*** Hume - Of suicide	4
		Benatar - Sometimes defensible	7
		Varelius - An irrational suicide?	7
	Is there ever a duty to die?	Hardwig - Duty to die?	9
Nov. 17		Due: Quiz 9	
Nov. 18	In-class discussion		

Week 11: Euthanasia

Is it ever morally permissible to let someone die? Or to give them a lethal injection? If so, under what conditions? When the patient, who suffers unbearably, makes a competent request? Must the patient also have both a terminal and untreatable illness? Are further conditions needed? Or fewer? And does permitting it lead us down a slippery slope to moral horrors?

Date	Topic	Reading or Work Due	pp.
Nov. 23–7	Is mercy killing permissible?	Rachels - Active and passive	7
		Callahan - Self-determination amok	4
		Brock - Voluntary active euthanasia	11
Nov. 24		Due: Quiz 10	
Nov. 25	In-class discussion		

Week 12: Medical Assistance in Dying

Under what conditions should I be permitted access to medical assistance in dying (MAiD)? Is it when life, in my considered judgement, is not worth living? Or is this condition too permissive?

What if I want access to MAiD because I belong to a vulnerable population and live in an unjust society, one that has failed to provide me with adequate support?

Alternately, what if, in my considered judgement, my future life with late-stage Alzheimer's will not be worth living? Should my advance request for MAiD be respected even if my future self is, by all appearances, living a happy life?

Date	Topic	Reading or Work Due	pp.
Nov. 30– Dec. 4	What is MAiD?	MAiD Overview	6
	Who should be permitted access?	Documentary - Fifth Estate - Too easy to die in Canada?	
	Is MAiD too restrictive?	***Schüklenk - Assisted Dying	22
	Are advance directives wrong?	Margo's Logo	1
		Aas et al. - Deciding Future	5
		Naylor - Advance Directives	25
Dec. 1		Due: Quiz 11	
Dec. 2	In-class discussion		

For important academic dates, click [here](#).

- Last day for a 100% reduction of fees: Sept. 22
- Last day for adding first-term courses: Sept. 25
- Last day for a 50% reduction of tuition fees (100% of tuition fees will be assessed for courses dropped after this date): Oct. 13
- Last day for withdrawing from first-term courses without penalty of failure: Oct. 31
- Examination period for all faculties: Dec. 10–23

Email



Email: gmccomb@uvic.ca

Please include “Phil 225” in the subject line. If 48 hrs pass without a reply, please email me again.

Missed Work

To receive special consideration for missed work—because of illness, a family emergency, cultural obligations, etc.—please contact me as soon as possible.

Make-up assessments for missed work will be considered in cases where an alternate deadline was arranged ahead of time or lateness was caused by an unexpected or unavoidable circumstance, as described in the University’s [policies regarding academic concessions](#). If you are unable to meet a deadline because of conflicting responsibilities or unexpected or unavoidable circumstances, again, please contact me as soon as you are aware of the circumstances or conflict.

Three tips for doing well in this class:

- Read well.** Feel free to skim a reading or, after converting it to audio, to listen to it while doing other things; however, it is often best (also) to read the text slowly and actively, that is, to pay attention solely to the text, to ask yourself why the author is making a given point, to identify arguments, to note down your own questions in the margins, and so on.
- Get help when you need it.** Go to drop-in hours or email me. Sooner is better, and you don’t need to have a clear question.
- Study with your classmates.** To set up a study group on Brightspace, or to find one, see *Start a Study Group* on the course Discussions page under Course Tools. Again, study groups are permitted for completing the quizzes.

How participation will be evaluated:

Participation Type	Points Usually Awarded	Contribution Limits
In-class contributions	2 points	1 per week
Drop-in contributions	1–2 points	1 per week
Brightspace contributions	1 point	1 per week

- Grades will be calculated out of 25. For example, 20 points equals a participation grade of 80%.
- Late discussion contributions—for example, a post about Week 1 content in Week 2—will not count, except in extenuating circumstances.
- You are welcome to contribute more than the above limits, but these contributions won't count for marks.
- To help make up for missed opportunities, students will automatically receive two points.
- Point totals will be posted after the second test. No points will be awarded after the last day of classes (Dec. 7th).
- *Note:* I will try to prioritize students who have made fewer contributions. For example, if a student who has not yet spoken raises a hand, I will try to select that student instead of those who have already made a contribution.
- Tips:
 - Come to class with a few *philosophical* questions (i.e., not ones that are only historical, sociological, etc.). Quality matters: low-effort or off-topic contributions may not count.
 - For a discussion board contribution, you might quote a current reading, explain it, and raise a question. Alternately, you might try to answer another student's question and raise another.
 - Avoid generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Grammarly, etc. I want to hear about your own ideas expressed in a way that you think best.

Academic integrity & professional conduct

ChatGPT and similar technologies are not permitted *during any assessments* in this course. Plagiarism and other forms of cheating will not be tolerated. It is each student's responsibility to know the University's regulations in this regard. The Policy on Academic Integrity is published in the [University Calendar](#). You can also consult the [Libraries' Academic Integrity page](#) or the [Tri-Faculty Standards for Professional Behaviour for Students](#), which draws together a number of existing

UVic policies in one place for ease of reference. 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 Standards.

Can I ever use ChatGPT or similar technologies in this course? Again, you may not use generative AI tools *during any of the assessments* in this course. This includes the quizzes, tests, and final exam. Some uses of generative AI, to be sure, may improve your critical thinking skills or your understanding of various ideas. Others, however, may rob you of an important opportunity to develop both how well you think unaided by AI and how well you understand various important ideas. That is, some uses of AI may undercut some of the very reasons you had for applying to university in the first place.

If you are unsure whether a given use of AI tools is permitted in this course, contact me by email: gmccomb@uvic.ca.

Are there any recommended uses of generative AI in this course? No, but here is an example of a permitted one. It may be of interest to students who wish to develop their skills working with generative AI tools (that is, to develop their “AI fluency”) or to those who simply want to have some fun with AI and philosophical concepts. Here it is:

After completing a reading, briefly converse with an AI chatbot about what you read. Ask a couple questions and raise a few objections to the chatbot’s outputs.

If you do so, be aware that generative AI may produce false or inaccurate statements, even when it is praising the quality of your ideas.

Again, if you are unsure whether a use of generative AI is permissible, contact me by email: gmccomb@uvic.ca.

Percentage Grades

Here is how to understand them:

A-range	Technically superior work, mastery of the subject matter, normally achieved by a minority of students	A+ (90–100%)	A (85–89%)	A- (80–84%)
B-range	Good comprehension and command of relevant skills, full engagement with course requirements and activities	B+ (77–79%)	B (73–77%)	B- (70–72%)
C-range	Adequate comprehension and command of relevant skills	C+ (65–69%)	C (60–64%)	—
D	Minimal comprehension and command of the course materials	D (50–59%)	—	—
N	Did not write examination or complete course requirements by the end of term or session.	N (0–49%)	—	—
F	Earned by work that, after the completion of course requirements, is inadequate and unworthy of course credit towards the degree.	F (0–49%)	—	—

For further details, see the standard UVic grading scheme [here](#) and [here](#). Note that grades are not official until they have been approved by the Chair, Director, or designate.

Intellectual property of materials on the LMS website

All assignments for this course and all materials posted to the LMS website are the intellectual property of the instructor and the University of Victoria. Do not circulate this material or post it to note-sharing sites without the instructor's permission. Posting course materials to note-sharing sites or otherwise circulating course materials without the permission of the instructor violates the Policy on Academic Integrity (link above). Any evidence that you are circulating materials without permission will be referred to the Chair of the Philosophy Department for investigation.

Academic supports

The University has a number of academic support services that may help you, including the [Centre for Academic Communication](#), the [Library's Assignment Help page](#), and the Library's "Ask Us" service (askus@uvic.ca). Information about academic supports can also be found through the [University's Learn Anywhere site](#).

Student Wellness

This course deals with subject matter that may be difficult or disturbing for some students. Please review the content in the course plan (above) and feel free to contact me regarding any concerns you may have about it. Additionally, if you find that you are in need of support services for mental, physical or spiritual health, you can make a same-day or pre-booked appointment with a counsellor, nurse, physician, or spiritual care provider, [here](#).

Academic Accommodations

The University of Victoria is committed to creating a learning experience that is as accessible as possible. If you anticipate or experience any barriers to learning in this course, please feel welcome to discuss your concerns with me. If you believe you will require academic accommodations to address barriers to your education in this course and you have not already registered with the [Centre for Accessible Learning](#), please do so. The Centre for Accessible Learning is the office designated to make arrangements for accommodations. You can find information about academic accommodations through the Centre for Accessible Learning's website.

Other Resources

Student Resources

- i) [UVic Learn Anywhere](#). UVic Learn Anywhere is the primary learning resource for students. It offers many learning workshops and resources to help students with academics and learning strategies.
- ii) [Library resources](#). Information for students wishing to use the UVic library.
- iii) [Indigenous student services](#)
- iv) [Centre for Academic Communication](#)
- v) [Learning Strategies Program](#)
- vi) [Academic Concession Regulations](#)
- vii) [Academic Concessions and Accommodations](#)
- viii) Academic accommodation & access for students with disabilities – [Policy AC1205](#)
- ix) [Student wellness resources](#)
- x) [Ombudsperson](#): A resource to help resolve disputes or complaints.
- xi) [Other student groups and resources](#).

University Statements and Policies

- i) University Calendar – “Information for all students”
- ii) [Creating a respectful, inclusive and productive learning environment](#)
- iii) [Accommodation of Religious Observance](#)
- iv) [Student Conduct and Non-Academic Student Misconduct](#)
- v) [Accessibility](#)
- vi) [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#)
- vii) [Equity and Human Rights](#)
- viii) [Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response](#)
- ix) [Discrimination and Harassment Policy](#)