



Philosophy of Death & Dying
Phil 225 A02 (CRN 23970)
Spring 2026
Course Preview



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



Hybrid Class: Online with face-to-face classes on Fridays



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

Welcome!

We all die. Kick the bucket. Cease to exist. Or do we? Is there an afterlife? Could we be immortal? If not, it makes sense to fear death, right? After all, death is bad, a terrible misfortune. But hold on. Is there really no such thing as a good death? And couldn't life without death become endlessly and mind-numbingly boring?

In this class, we will tackle questions like these and use what we learn to tackle others, for example, questions about the choice to end one's own life and about medical assistance in dying (MAiD).

By the end of this course, students should have developed their skills as critical readers, thinkers, and writers; mastered the use of philosophical terms, such as "deprivationism" and "voluntary active euthanasia"; become familiar with certain philosophical classics; and learned to discuss, with rigour and depth, a number of approaches to fundamental problems in the philosophy of death.



Course Plan

Below is a *preliminary* course plan. Its purpose is to give you some idea of what the course is about and how much work is required, e.g., how much you'll need to read (labelled, "pp."). The *final* course plan may differ in various ways, e.g., may contain a few different readings.

Unit 1: Death and the Afterlife

Week 1: Death Determination

We begin this week with an introduction to the class. Then, to get our feet wet, we take a look at contemporary death determination practices.

To illustrate, suppose you find me, eyes-closed and unresponsive, in a hospital bed. How could you tell whether or not I'm dead? By checking for brain activity? Suppose it has ceased. Is that enough to tell that I'm dead? Do you also need to see if my heart has stopped beating and my lungs have stopped pumping air? Suppose they haven't stopped, and it's because I'm on a mechanical ventilator. What then? Could you simply ask a biologist? Or must you look beyond science? To metaphysics perhaps, or even ethics? What if, by declaring me dead, you make it possible for my organs to be transplanted and so for lives to be saved?

Date	Topic	Reading	pp.
Jan. 5-9	Introduction	Tolstoy - <i>Death of Ivan Ilyich</i> §1	10
	How should death be determined?	President's Commission	7
		Lizza - Why brain death is death	9
Jan. 9	In-class discussion		

Week 2: The Nature of Life and Death

Whether or not we should say death has occurred seems to depend, at least in part, on *the nature of death*. We begin this week by asking what it is: What is it to be dead? Is it to cease to be alive? Irreversibly so? And is it the same for all organisms? Or are we humans different? Are our deaths somehow special?

If death is the end of life, how is an afterlife possible? How, that is, could we possibly be alive after the end of life? To tackle this question, we will begin by asking: 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 for example. 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 altogether?

Date	Topic	Reading	pp.
Jan. 12-16	What is death?	Nair-Collins - Die when entropy	9
	What is it to survive?	Kagan - Personal identity	30
Jan. 16	In-class discussion		

Week 3: Afterlife

Again, could there be life after death? Well, what if we're human animals? Might we survive death by being resurrected? What if, instead, we are immaterial souls? Could we survive death by separating from our bodies? What if we are things with minds? Could we survive death by becoming something like a chatbot? Or might we survive it in some other way? As our legacy perhaps? In the hearts and minds of future generations?

Date	Topic	Reading	pp.
Jan. 19–23	Is an afterlife possible?	Cave - Can we survive our deaths?	9
		Stokes - Survival online (selection)	2
	Review		
Jan. 23	First in-class test		

Unit 2: Badness of Death

Week 4: Deprivationism

When death is bad, why is that? Why is it bad for the one who dies? Here is one answer: It's bad because it deprives us of a longer, better life. Is this answer correct?

One worry with it has to do with experience. Why is stubbing my toe bad for me? Because of a bad experience, a painful one. But then how could death be bad for me? After all, the dead don't have any experiences, much less bad ones. Or so the worry goes.

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	pp.
Jan. 26–30		Tolstoy - <i>Death of Ivan Ilyich</i> §6	4
	Is death <i>bad</i> ?	Epicurus - Letter to Menoeceus	3
	Why is death bad?	Nagel - Death	8
	When is death bad?	Feit - Death is bad for us	8
Jan. 30	In-class discussion		

Week 5: Social Harm, Making Death Less Bad, and Non-Human Animals

This week, we ask three questions about how bad death is.

1. Is death mostly a social harm? That is, is my death primarily bad not for me but for those left behind?
2. After a friend dies, could you make their death less bad? And could you do so by reducing what they are deprived of?

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

Date	Topic	Reading	pp.
Feb. 2–6		Tolstoy - <i>Death of Ivan Ilyich</i> §§7–12	25
	Who is death bad for?	Gruen - Death as social harm	6
	Can we make death less bad?	Egerstrom - Not quite as bad	8
	Is death bad <i>for animals</i> ?	Degrazia - Death sentient nonpersons	9
Feb. 6	In-class discussion		

Week 6: The Symmetry Problem

This week, we ask a strange question: Was your *late birth* a terrible loss? Of course not, you might think. But then how could an early death be bad? After all, wouldn't both a late birth and an early death deprive you of a longer, better life?

Date	Topic	Reading	pp.
Feb. 9–13	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
	Review		
Feb. 13	Second in-class test		

Unit 3: Immortality, Meaning in Life, and Facing Death

Week 7: 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 worthwhile and get tired of life? Or put off what's worth doing, perpetually, because we can always do it later? In short, wouldn't an immortal life eventually become meaningless?

Date	Topic	Reading	pp.
Feb. 16–20	Wouldn't immortality be boring?	Ozaki - Did not wish to die	4
		Williams - Makropulos (selection)	2
		Fischer/M-Y - Immortality boredom	20
		Belgin - Immortality & standing for	7
Feb. 20	In-class discussion		

Week 8: Meaning of Life

Without immortality, is life ultimately meaningless? Well, what is meaning? Does having it depend on what you believe? On your confidence, perhaps, that future

generations will exist? Could thinking about death (in a philosophy class, for example) make your life any more meaningful?

Date	Topic	Reading	pp.
Feb. 23–27	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
Feb. 27	In-class discussion		

Week 9: Facing Death - Fear and Other Emotions

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	pp.
Mar. 2–6	Are any mortal emotions rational?	Unamuno - Tragic sense of life	2
		Cholbi - Rationally Facing Death	9
	How should we face death?	Epictetus - Enchiridion excerpts	4
Mar. 6	In-class discussion		

Week 10: Facing Death - Grief

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

Date	Topic	Reading	pp.
Mar. 9–13	Should we avoid grief?	Seneca - Letter to Lucilius	3
	Is grief good for us?	Cholbi - Why grieve?	7
	Review		
Mar. 13	In-class test		

Unit 4: Choosing Death

Week 11: 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	pp.
Mar. 16–20		Dostoevsky - <i>Demons</i> excerpt	2
	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
Mar. 20	In-class discussion		

Week 12: 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 suffers unbearably? And makes a competent request? And will soon die of an untreatable illness? Are further conditions needed? Or fewer?

Date	Topic	Reading	pp.
Mar. 23–27	Is mercy killing permissible?	Rachels - Active and passive	7
		Callahan - Self-determination amok	4
		Brock - Voluntary active euthanasia	11
Mar. 27	In-class discussion		

Week 13: 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?

Date	Topic	Reading	pp.
Mar. 30–	What is MAiD?	MAiD Overview	6
	Who should be permitted access?	Documentary - Fifth Estate - Too easy to die in Canada?	
		Schüklenk - Assisted Dying	22
	Review		
April 3	UVic closed, no face-to-face class		



Assessment & Grading

The following is meant to give you some idea of how grades will be calculated. (Corresponding content in the course outline may differ in some ways, e.g., in the value of the quizzes.)

Assessment	Percentage of Grade	Due Date(s)
Participation	15%	Weekly
Quizzes (Best 5 of 8 count)	10% (2% each)	On Thursdays before discussion classes
Tests (3)	45% (15% each)	Jan. 23, Feb. 13, Mar. 13
Final Exam	30%	TBA

Participation during either Friday classes or online discussion hours count toward your final grade. A grading scheme will appear on the course outline.

Quizzes check for comprehension of lectures and readings before Friday discussion classes. All quizzes are multiple-choice and are completed online via the course homepage. Only your best five marks on the eight quizzes count toward your final grade.

Tests comprise short-answer questions that ask you to apply relevant concepts. They are non-cumulative; the first test covers material in Unit 1, the second only that in Unit 2, and so on.

The final exam consists of (i) short-answer questions on Unit 4 material and (ii) an essay. You will have an opportunity to submit an essay outline for feedback before the exam.