

Death and Dying

Phil 4371

This is a revised syllabus to reflect the cancelled week of classes after Hurricane Harvey.
It replaces the original syllabus. Revisions are in red.

Instructor: Dr. Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin

Time: MWF 9:00-9:50am

Location: CHSS 242A

Office hours: W 11:00am-1:00pm, and by appointment

Office: CHSS 356

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Course description

Is death bad? Should we want to live forever? What makes for a meaningful life? What do near-death experiences show us about the nature of consciousness? These are the central questions we will be grappling with in this course. We will engage in philosophical reflection on death and its connection to a meaningful life. In the process, we will consider some central issues in ethics, metaphysics and philosophy of mind. We will also reflect on the significance of current research in psychology, technology and the medical sciences. Our goal is to apply our critical thinking skills to this set of issues and sharpen them in the process. Maybe we will gain some personal insight along the way.

Course objectives

1. Develop and improve our ability to analyze and critically evaluate arguments in support of philosophically significant positions related to life and death.
2. Develop and improve our skills of oral and written expression.

Texts

All readings are *posted on the Course Blackboard Site* and available for download.

Please make sure to bring a copy of the reading with you to class.

Policies

Class time is for discussion of the course material. Some of the topics covered in the course may be sensitive and some of the positions controversial. Our discussion of these issues will reflect an awareness of the diversity of viewpoints that merit serious and respectful consideration by all.

Please keep all cell phones in your bags or pockets. Anyone using a phone during class will be asked to put it away. Laptops or tablets may be used for note taking and reference to reading assignments only. Repeated misuse of phones, computers or other mobile devices in class will result in the student being asked to leave class—an unexcused absence.

Class attendance is essential and required. Absences may be excused with proper documentation, and each student may be absent 3 times without excuse before it negatively affects her/his in-class participation grade. There will be a **sign-in sheet** available at the front of the classroom each meeting. You need to sign the sheet in class on that day in order to be marked present for a class meeting.

I will not accept late assignments. To repeat: *No late assignments will be accepted in this course.* Once again: **You cannot receive credit for late work.** If you plan on missing class on a day an assignment is due, please turn it in early. *I will always accept assignments prior to the due date, provided we have already begun covering the relevant material in class.* If you plan on being sick around the time an assignment is due, complete it and turn it in early. If you plan on going on vacation around the time an assignment is due, complete it and turn it in early. If you plan on visiting your family around the time an assignment is due, complete it and turn it in early. If you plan on sleeping in on a day an assignment is due, complete it and turn it in early. If you plan on caring for a sick friend on a day an assignment is due, complete it and turn it in early. ... You get the idea. **NO LATE ASSIGNMENTS WILL BE ACCEPTED.**

Plagiarism in any form will *not be permitted* and will result in a *zero for the plagiarized assignment.*

For further information about university policies regarding academic dishonesty, absences for religious holidays, disability accommodations and visitors, please see: <http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus/>. This course will follow all applicable university policy on these matters.

Assignments

The **reading** for the course is *mandatory* and should be completed by the beginning of class on the assigned day. The reading assignments for each day of class are listed on the schedule, below.

There are *4 written assignments* due for the course (due dates on the schedule, below). The following are short descriptions of the assignments. You will receive more detailed rubrics, including a grading rubric, as well.

1. *Short reflection:* Write 1-2 pages reflecting on the question whether your death is bad for you. Make sure to provide reasons in support of your opinion.

2. *First essay*: Write 3-4 pages on the question whether immortality is desirable. Make sure to provide reasons in support of your opinion and to cite any and all sources for considerations you include in your essay. Make sure also to consider at least *one objection* and *respond* to it.
3. *Second essay*: Write 3-4 pages on what makes for a meaningful life. Make sure to provide reasons in support of your opinion and to cite any and all sources for considerations you include in your essay. Make sure also to consider at least *one objection* and *respond* to it.
4. *Final essay*: Write 4-5 pages on the significance of near-death experiences. Make sure to provide reasons in support of your opinion and to cite any and all sources for considerations you include in your essay. Make sure also to consider at least *one objection* and *respond* to it.

This course satisfies the requirements for being listed as “writing enhanced” by providing you with the opportunity to write as a means to thinking critically about the material and to receive regular feedback on your writing. We will hold an in-class writing workshop for each of the assigned essays, which will allow you to incorporate my and your classmates’ feedback when completing these writing assignments. Evaluation of your written work will account for 90% of your final grade.

Grades

Course grades are based on the following percentages.

10% in-class participation
10% short reflection
25% first essay
25% second essay
30% final essay

Final letter grades for the course will be based on the following percentages:

A	90% - 100%
B	80% - 89.99%
C	70% - 79.99%
D	60% - 69.99%
F	59.99% or below

Schedule

Wed., Aug. 23: Course introduction

Unit 1: Death and Badness

Fri., Aug. 25: Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” (Chs. 1-4)

~~Mon., Aug. 28: Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” (Chs. 5-12)~~

~~Wed., Aug. 30: “Epicurus and Lucretius”~~

~~Fri., Sept. 1: Nagel, “Death”~~

Mon., Sept. 4: **No class (Labor Day Holiday)**

Wed., Sept. 6: Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” (Chs. 5-12)

Fri., Sept. 8: “Epicurus and Lucretius”
12th Class Day

Mon., Sept. 11: Nagel, “Death”

Wed., Sept. 13: Rosenbaum, “How to Be Dead and Not Care: A Defense of Epicurus”

Unit 2: Immortality

Fri., Sept. 15: “Epic of Gilgamesh,” Tablets IX, X, XI
(<http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/>)

Short reflection due
12th Class Day

Mon., Sept. 18: Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality”

Wed., Sept. 20: Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality”

Fri., Sept. 22: No new reading

Mon., Sept. 25: Borges, “The Immortal”

Wed., Sept. 27: Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, “Immortality and Boredom”

Fri., Sept. 29: Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, “Immortality and Boredom”

Mon., Oct. 2: Egan, “Learning to Be Me”

Wed., Oct. 4: de Grey, “Demystifying Aging”

Fri., Oct. 6: Bostrom and Roache, “Ethical Issues in Human Enhancement” (pp. 1-7) and Kaneps, “The Ultimate Life Hack”

Mon., Oct. 9: Emanuel, “Why I Hope to Die at 75”
(<http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/09/why-i-hope-to-die-at-75/379329/>)

Wed., Oct. 11: In-class film: “Laura Keller-NB”

Fri., Oct. 13: Borges, “Funes the Memorious”

Mon., Oct. 16: In-class film: “Plastic Bag”

Wed., Oct. 18: First Essay Workshop

Unit 3: Meaning in Life

Fri., Oct. 20: Wolf, “The Meanings of Lives”

Mon., Oct. 23: Wolf, “The Meanings of Lives”

First Essay Due

Wed., Oct. 25: Scheffler, “Death and the Afterlife”

Fri., Oct. 27: Scheffler, “Death and the Afterlife”

Mon., Oct. 30: “Replies to Scheffler”

Wed., Nov. 1: Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski, “Symbolic Immortality”

Fri., Nov. 3: Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski, “Symbolic Immortality”

Mon., Nov. 6: Second Essay workshop

Unit 4: Near-Death Experiences

Wed., Nov. 8: Plato, “The Myth of Er”

Second Essay Due

Fri., Nov. 10: Alexander, “Proof of Heaven: A Doctor’s Experience with the Afterlife”
(<http://www.newsweek.com/proof-heaven-doctors-experience-afterlife-65327>) and
Dittrich, “The Prophet” (<http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/interviews/a23248/the-prophet/>)

Mon., Nov. 13: Williams, “People Have Near-Death Experiences While Brain Dead”
(<http://www.near-death.com/experiences/evidence01.html>.)

Wed., Nov. 15: van Lommel, et al., “Near-death experience in survivors of cardiac arrest:
a prospective study in the Netherlands”

Fri., Nov. 17: van Lommel, “Non-Local Consciousness”

Mon., Nov. 20: van Lommel, “Non-Local Consciousness”

Wed., Nov. 22 – Fri., Nov. 24: **No Class (Thanksgiving Break)**

Mon., Nov. 27: Mitchell-Yellin and Fischer, “The Near-Death Experience Argument Against Physicalism: A Critique”

Wed., Nov. 29: Mitchell-Yellin and Fischer, “The Near-Death Experience Argument Against Physicalism: A Critique”

Fri., Dec. 1: Final Essay Workshop

Final Essay Due: Wed., Dec. 6 (by 9:30am)