

## **Death and Dying**

Phil 4371

*Instructor:* Dr. Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin

*Time:* MWF 9:00-9:50am

*Location:* CHSS 220

*Office hours:* Wed 2:00-4:00pm, 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. This course is part of the EWCAT program. This means we will be reading original texts and incorporating Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) discussions into the course schedule.

### *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. The exception to this rule is for PLTL discussion days. You may have at most one excused absence for these days. There will be a **sign-in sheet** available at each meeting, which I will pass around. You need to sign the sheet in class on that day in order to be marked present for a class meeting.

Late assignments will be *docked by 1/3 letter grade* for every day they are late. **I am unable to accept late final essays.** If you think that you might be sick, have car trouble, have a family obligation, have a wedding to attend, or for any other reason be unable to turn in your assignment on time, then you need to turn in your assignment early. **I will always accept early assignments.**

Academic integrity is a serious matter and will be taken seriously in this course. I am committed to helping you learn how to do your own quality work, and I am happy to answer any and all questions regarding issues including, but not limited to, citation norms, research best practices and plagiarism. *Plagiarism in any form will not be permitted and will result in a zero for the plagiarized assignment.* Especially egregious cases may be forwarded to the Dean of Students for possible university sanctions.

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.

### *Peer-Led Team Learning*

There will be six PLTL sessions throughout the term. These are a central part of the EWCAT experience and are central to this course. *They are not to be missed.* PLTL sessions are special discussion sections between you and your peers, supervised and evaluated by students who have taken this class before. The aim is to provide you with the opportunity to engage in discussion of the course material with your peers and in the absence of the instructor. In preparation for these sessions, you will receive a list of discussion questions. The peer leaders will evaluate you on your participation in the discussion, your preparedness and your contribution level. (There are many ways of contributing to a lively discussion and demonstrating preparedness to do so.) They will report back to the instructor so that these evaluations may be incorporated into your participation grade for the course. Indeed, these evaluations will largely determine your participation grade for the course. (The rest of that grade, as mentioned above, will be impacted by attendance.) The guiding idea behind the PLTL sessions is that they are a

space for you to explore the course themes in detail amongst yourselves and to take greater ownership of your learning experience in the course.

### *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 3 *written assignments* due for the course (due dates on the schedule, below). The following are the essay prompts. You will receive a more detailed grading rubric closer to the due date for the first assignment, and we will hold in-class essay workshops for each assignment. In addition, I am always happy to discuss your essays with you during office hours, or by appointment.

1. *First essay*: Write 3-4 pages on the question whether Ivan Ilyich's death is bad *for him*. 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.
2. *Second essay*: Write 3-4 pages on 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. *Final essay*: Write 4-5 pages on the significance of near-death experiences for debates about physicalism. 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 80% of your final grade.

### *Grades*

Course assignments are worth the following percentages.

- 20% in-class participation
- 25% first essay
- 25% second essay
- 30% final essay

Letter grades will be determined according to the following percentages.

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

### *Schedule*

Wed., Jan. 17: Course introduction

#### **Unit 1: Death and Badness**

Fri., Jan. 19: Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” (Chs. 1-4)

Mon., Jan. 22: Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” (Chs. 5-12)

Wed., Jan. 24: “Epicurus and Lucretius”

Fri., Jan. 26: *Peer-Led Team Learning Session 1*

Mon., Jan. 29: Nagel, “Death”

Wed., Jan. 31: Nagel, “Death”

(Thurs., Feb. 1: 12<sup>th</sup> class day; last day for drop with 100% refund and no “Q” grade)

Fri., Feb. 2: Olberding, [“Is the death of an elder worse than the death of a young person?”](#)

Mon., Feb. 5: Rosenbaum, “How to Be Dead and Not Care: A Defense of Epicurus”

Wed., Feb. 7: Review of Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilyich”

Fri., Feb. 9: *Peer-Led Team Learning Session 2*

Mon., Feb. 12: First Essay Workshop

#### **Unit 2: Immortality**

Wed., Feb. 14: “Epic of Gilgamesh,” Tablets IX, X, XI

(<http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/>)

**First Essay Due (by beginning of class)**

Fri., Feb. 16: Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality”

Mon., Feb. 19: Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality”

Wed., Feb. 21: Borges, “The Immortal”

Fri., Feb. 23: *Peer-Led Team Learning Session 3*

Mon., Feb. 26: Velleman, “Dying”

Wed., Feb. 28: Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, “Immortality and Boredom”

Fri., Mar. 2: Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, “Immortality and Boredom”

Mon., Mar. 5: Egan, “Learning to Be Me”

Wed., Mar. 7: de Grey, “Demystifying Aging”

Fri., Mar. 9: *Peer-Led Team Learning Session 4*

Mon., Mar. 12: **No class**

Wed., Mar. 14: **No class**

Fri., Mar. 16: **No class**

Mon., Mar. 19: In-class film: “Laura Keller-NB”

Wed., Mar. 21: Bostrom and Roache, “Ethical Issues in Human Enhancement” (pp. 1-7)

Fri., Mar. 23: Emanuel, “Why I Hope to Die at 75”  
(<http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/09/why-i-hope-to-die-at-75/379329/>)

Mon., Mar. 26: Wolf, “The Meanings of Lives”

Wed., Mar. 28: **No class**

Fri., Mar. 30: *Peer-Led Team Learning Session 5*

Mon., Apr. 2: Wolf, “The Meanings of Lives”

Wed., Apr. 4: In-class film: “Plastic Bag”

Fri., Apr. 6: Second Essay Workshop  
(Last day to “Q” drop)

### **Unit 3: Near-Death Experiences**

Mon., Apr. 9: Alexander, "Proof of Heaven: A Doctor's Experience with the Afterlife"  
(<http://www.newsweek.com/proof-heaven-doctors-experience-afterlife-65327>)

**Second Essay Due (by beginning of class)**

Wed., Apr. 11: Dittrich, "The Prophet"

(<http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/interviews/a23248/the-prophet/>)

Fri., Apr. 13:

Mon., Apr. 16: Williams, "People Have Near-Death Experiences While Brain Dead"

(<http://www.near-death.com/experiences/evidence01.html>.)

Wed., Apr. 18: van Lommel, et al., "Near-death experience in survivors of cardiac arrest: a prospective study in the Netherlands"

Fri., Apr. 20: *Peer-Led Team Learning Session 6*

Mon., Apr. 23: van Lommel, "Non-Local Consciousness"

Wed., Apr. 25: van Lommel, "Non-Local Consciousness"

Fri., Apr. 27: Mitchell-Yellin and Fischer, "The Near-Death Experience Argument Against Physicalism: A Critique"

Mon., Apr. 29: Mitchell-Yellin and Fischer, "The Near-Death Experience Argument Against Physicalism: A Critique"

Wed., May 2: Final Essay Workshop

Fri., May 4: **Final Essay Due (by end of class meeting time)**