

# PHI 3695 PHILOSOPHY AND DEATH

Fall 2023

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**Office:** Griffin-Floyd 320

**Office Hours:** Monday 12:00–1:30pm, Wednesday 12:00–1:30pm, and by appointment.

## Course Overview

### Course Description

Death is simultaneously familiar and foreign to us; it is something we all know occurs, but—at the same time—it is something we hardly understand. In addition to this pair of attitudes, death is something we seem to care and think about quite a lot: we *fear* death, we try to *understand* death, and we *wonder* whether death is the end. Given our complicated stance towards it, death is ripe for philosophizing, and in this course, we are dedicated to acknowledging, clarifying, and addressing the puzzling family of questions concerning death. In particular, we will confront the following questions concerning philosophy and death:

- What *exactly* is death? How do we know when something dies?
- What would it mean to survive after death?
- Is there an afterlife?
- Should we *worry* about death?
- Is death *bad*? If so, in what way? If not, why is it not?
- Is it better to have been born or to have never been born?
- Why is *killing* wrong?
- When, if ever, if it morally *okay* to kill a living thing? Is it worse to kill a human than a non-human animal?

### Learning Objectives

The specific learning objectives of this course may be described in terms of the three categories of content, communication and critical thinking as follows.

- *Content.* Students will become familiar with some of the major questions, positions, and arguments with respect to some important philosophical topics concerning death, such as: the knowledge/meta-physics of death, how death relates to the value of life, whether existence is better than non-existence, and the morality of killing. (Assessed by all aspects of the course.)
- *Communication.* Students will become practiced in presenting clearly and effectively ideas that are controversial and often liable to misunderstanding. Assessed by all aspects of the course, but especially the graded writing assignments. (Assessed by participation and discussion.)
- *Critical Thinking.* Students will gain skills in reasoning clearly, writing out arguments, anticipating objections, and investigating difficult questions in a conscientious fashion. (Assessed by the graded writing assignments.)

### Course Goals/Objectives

This course is designed to introduce students to the central philosophical questions and arguments concerning death as represented by a selection of historical and/or contemporary readings. Students will learn how

to thing clearly and critically about these questions and arguments, represent them clearly and fairly, and evaluate them for cogency. Students will also learn to develop their own arguments and views regarding the philosophical questions studied in the course in a compelling fashion. In these ways the course aims to develop students' own reasoning and communication skills in ways that will be useful in any further study of philosophy they undertake and beyond the bounds of philosophy itself.

Students in this course should:

- Develop an understanding of the key questions about death and its significance both for the value of one's life and for the ethics of prolonging or ending life
- Become familiar with the questions regarding possible survival of death, the arguments for and against thinking of one's own death as a harm to oneself, and what sorts of considerations are relevant in thinking about the moral significance of causing death
- Discern the structure of arguments, to represent them fairly and clearly and to evaluate them for cogency
- Read and discuss complex philosophical texts from classical and contemporary works
- Speak and write clearly and persuasively about abstract and conceptually elusive matters. Apply fundamental concepts and terminology in philosophy when writing original essays

## Course Requirements and Grading

### Required Texts

There are **two** required texts for this course; all other materials are made available as PDF files via Canvas. The two required texts are:

- Samantha Brennan and Robert J. Stainton, eds., *Philosophy and Death* (Broadview Press, 2010).
- David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 2006).

### Expectations

As a student in this class, you are of course expected to read the assigned papers, attend lectures, participate in class discussion, complete assignments and participate in group discussions. In addition, however, you are also expected to:

- be familiar with all policies and requirements as set out in the Complete Course Syllabus
- be aware of all deadlines throughout the semester
- stay informed by keeping up with all announcements made on the Canvas site
- maintain academic integrity in all of your work—or risk failing the entire course
- be respectful of your classmates, even when engaged in lively critical dialogue with them
- inform the instructor promptly of any emergencies or problems that will affect your ability to do what is needed in the course ask questions and seek help when you need it

If you do these things and make a serious effort, you should be able to do well in the course, especially if you are willing to seek help when you need it. It is important to understand, though, that a grade is meant to record how well you have in fact demonstrated the skills and knowledge the class is supposed to instill; it is not in itself a reward for effort.

## Class Routine

While class sessions are a mixture of lecture and discussion, this course will mostly be discussion based, and—generally—half of Thursdays are reserved exclusively for discussion reflecting on the week. In my experience students learn best when these two things are not separated but mixed together. You are encouraged to ask questions or make comments at any point. If I think it best to leave the question or comment until a later point, I will ask you to wait, but usually I am happy to address your thoughts immediately. I will normally come to class with an outline of topics and/or activities for us that day, though I might depart from it considerably depending on how things go. I might make sparing use of PowerPoint.

## Philosophy and Respectful Dialogue

Philosophy is a highly critical enterprise; we are in the business of evaluating the merits of different arguments and claims. As a result, philosophical discussion can seem intimidating or even mean-spirited at times, at least when the participants let their enthusiasm bypass their usual sense of diplomacy. In no way do I want to discourage enthusiasm, but I want to stress that the critical points made in philosophy can all be directed at ideas and arguments, not people. Your aim should be to assess whether a given claim is plausible, whether certain arguments are cogent, and so on. Even if you decide a particular argument is a very bad one, you need not go on to think ill of the person who made the argument. The fact is that philosophy is difficult. In class discussion you should recognize that your fellow students are struggling with the ideas just as you are, and while you should feel free to criticize their ideas, you should also welcome their criticism of your own ideas. So: you should be vigorous and engaged in class discussion, but keep your critical remarks relevant and polite. And remember that you can help as well as criticize: you may note that an argument has a problematic premise, point this out, and then suggest a better one to replace it! Philosophy is not a matter of combat between people; we are all engaged in a cooperative effort to achieve understanding, and while that may mean letting the ideas fight among themselves, so to speak, it does not require that we fight with each other.

## Grade Determination

The course grade is determined by the following factors with the indicated percentages:

Kind of assignment	# assigned	% of course grade
Attendance, participation, & discussion	# of class meetings	15%
Short paper	3	45%
Final paper	1	35%
Unannounced quizzes	t.b.d.	5%

As you can see from the above, the grades for the short papers and the final paper matter most in determining your overall course grade. Do not take these lightly; many students are surprised at how difficult it can be to write well about a philosophical issue.

Additionally, I will break down the grading for the three short papers required in this course as follows. Your best paper will be worth 20% of your final grade, the worst will be worth 10%, as follows (ranked from best to worst):

- 1:     **20%**
- 2:     **15%**
- 3:     **10%**

Because your papers are the primary means of determining your grade, this grading system ensures that you aren't unfairly punished for your worst-graded paper and that you are appropriately rewarded for your best work.

### Quizzes

In order to ensure that you are actively working through the material, there will be frequent assignments (your papers) and occasional, unannounced quizzes. These are not meant to serve as any sort of punishment or excess challenge; they merely serve to check how well you understand the material independent of your papers. Quizzes will always concern the specific reading assigned for the day.

### Grade scale

The grade scale is different from what you are surely used to seeing. Instead of using a scale where an A starts at 92% or 94% or the like, the grading scale in this class is based on the 4-point scale for letter grade values, where an A is worth 4 points, an A- is 3.67 points, and so on. Since Canvas uses percentages for grades, the 4-point scale is translated into percentages to get the following scale.

Grade Scale	Grade Value	Grade Scale	Grade Value	Grade Scale	Grade Value
100–91.75% = A	A = 4.0	66.74–58.25% = B-	B- = 2.67	33.24–25% = D+	D+ = 1.33
91.74–83.25% = A-	A- = 3.67	58.24–50% = C+	C+ = 2.33	24.9–16.75% = D	D = 1.00
83.24–75% = B+	B+ = 3.33	49.9–41.75% = C	C = 2.00	16.74–8.25% = D-	D- = 0.67
74.9–66.75% = B	B = 3.00	41.74–33.25% = C-	C- = 1.67	8.24–0 = E	E = 0.00

(For information on how UF assigns grade points, visit: <https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/academicregulations/grades-grading-policies/>.)

Don't let yourself be confused by this scale! If you see that you earned, say, a 68% on an assignment, don't immediately think that this means you earned a poor grade; a 68% counts as a B. The grades are not curved; they are just determined using this not very familiar scale. For information on how UF assigns grade points, visit: [this page](#).

In evaluating particular assignments, we generally use the following way of assigning points:

Excellent	Good	Adequate	Minimal	Unacceptable
4	3	2	1	0

An assignment might be assessed using several factors, where each factor is evaluated using this system. All of the graded work in this class is assessed using the percentage-to-letters scale given above.

In accordance with UF policy, a grade of C- for the course is not a qualifying grade for major, minor, General Education or College Basic Distribution requirements. Further information on UF's grading policy can be found [here](#).

## Policies and resources

### Academic honesty

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states

We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: "On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment."

The Honor Code in full can be found at [sccr.dso.ufl.edu/students/student-conduct-code/](https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/students/student-conduct-code/). It specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. Furthermore, you are obligated to report any condition that facilitates academic misconduct to appropriate personnel. If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructor or teaching assistants in this class.

In any academic writing you are obliged to inform the reader of the sources of ideas expressed in your work. Failure to do so is plagiarism. **WE HAVE A ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICY FOR ACADEMIC DISHONESTY. CLEAR EVIDENCE OF ACADEMIC DISHONESTY MEANS AN AUTOMATIC FAILING GRADE FOR THE ENTIRE COURSE.** This includes not just plagiarism but any conduct constituting academic dishonesty as defined in the honor code, including prohibited collaboration, prohibited use of resources, and so on. Any act of academic dishonesty is reported to the Dean's Office. The Dean's Office prevents students from dropping courses in cases of academic dishonesty. **If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism or other academic dishonesty it is your responsibility to get answers. Do not be afraid to ask if you are unsure.**

We are serious about this. If you cheat in any way and are caught, you will fail the course. Cheating is an insult to the professor, any teaching assistants, and your fellow students. It will not be tolerated.

### Outside sources

There are many resources out there about philosophy, including on the internet. We cannot stop you from looking at those sources, but we want to strongly discourage you from looking at them. Doing so will probably hurt you more than it can help you. Here's why.

- The variety of material out there is of very inconsistent quality. While there are many sites with good, informed discussion by people who know what they're talking about, there are many other sites about which that cannot be said.
- Even if the site you are reading has high quality material on it, there is a good chance it will be more bewildering than enlightening. Without any help in approaching the material, you could end up much more confused than before.

- If you find yourself browsing through the results of a Google search on the philosophical topics under discussion in this class, you may find yourself tempted to make use of ideas you get from what you found without citing them properly. If you do that, however, that will constitute plagiarism, and you then run the risk of getting an automatic failing grade for the course as stressed above. If you refrain from such browsing, you avoid that temptation and risk.
- Even if you are entirely conscientious and cite everything you use that you find from these outside sources, you might be tempted to do something else that, while honest, is definitely not to your advantage. This is the temptation to lean on the ideas of the outside sources without trying to think through the issues on your own. More precisely, you may be tempted to fill up the paper by explaining someone else's argument, then someone else's objection to it, and then someone else's reply to it, and end with nothing by way of your own contribution. If you write such an essay clearly and show that you understand the issues, it may get a passing grade, but it won't get a good grade. We hope for you to come out of this class with some real skills in both thinking for yourself and being critically rigorous. If you merely assemble other people's ideas, you are not developing those skills.

In light of these reasons, we strongly recommend that you refrain from surfing the net looking for outside help on philosophical issues. If you do look at any outside sources, you must provide appropriate citation, of course. We are not picky about the method of citation, but if you refer to anything that isn't a reading made available here on this Canvas site, you must (1) refer to that source wherever in your own essay you make use of it and (2) include in a 'works cited' list information on the author(s), title, publisher, and date of publication. If it is an online source you must provide the URL. For more information on how cite properly, see the resources for basic writing assistance.

### **Drafts of written work**

While you are working on your papers, you may wonder if I am willing to review your rough drafts. The answer is that I will not look at such drafts in *full*, but I am willing to discuss the drafts with you. You can come to office hours with your own draft and/or notes in hand and talk through with me, what you hope to say, how you hope to defend it, and so on. From experience, this seems the most fruitful way to help you in the process of writing your papers, in contrast to reviewing rough drafts.

### **Basic writing assistance**

Students will also find a number of resources for improving their writing at the university's Writing Studio page ([which you can find here](#)), including a link to an electronic version of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* (<http://www.bartleby.com/141/>), the recommended style manual for this course.

Another very useful resource is Purdue University's Online Writing Lab, also known as the 'OWL.' It is especially good for getting detailed information on how to cite sources properly. You can find it [here](#).

### **Make-up policy**

Requirements for class attendance and make-up exams, assignments, and other work in this course are consistent with university policies that can be found at: <https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>.

### **Disability accommodations**

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center 352-392-8565, [www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/](http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/)) by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructor when requesting

accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester.

## UF Evaluations Process

Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing online evaluations at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu>. Evaluations are typically open during the last two or three weeks of the semester, but students will be given specific times when they are open. Summary results of these assessments are available to students at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu/results/>

## Support services

You should be aware that UF provides counseling and other kinds of help for students in distress. You can call the on-campus Counseling and Wellness Center at **352-392-1575** and see their website at <https://counseling.ufl.edu>.

The “U Matter, We Care” program provides resources for everyone in the UF community. See the website at [umatter.ufl.edu/](http://umatter.ufl.edu/). Students can contact [umatter@ufl.edu](mailto:umatter@ufl.edu) seven days a week for assistance for students in distress. There is also a phone number for this program: **352-294-CARE**.

## Announcements and archive

When you log in to Canvas, you should see any and all announcements from your online class sites. If there is a new announcement you have not read, make sure you read it! That may seem obvious, but we want to emphasize doing this so that you keep on top of the course. Announcements might include information that you really don’t want to miss out on. For instance, if we hear that a particular assignment is causing confusion among students, we may post an announcement clarifying that assignment. They may also include links to additional materials designed to help you do better in this class. So be sure to pay attention to those announcements.

Instead of having announcements linger on the “announcements” page for the entire term, after a few days or so announcements will be removed. Some announcements will include things that you will want to be able to go back to later, however, such as links to samples of good student work that we provide to you during the term or documents that provide additional comments on the material to improve everyone’s understanding. A separate discussion board called “Links Archive” is maintained where that material is stored for the entire term so you can return to it at any point later in the course.

## Accessing in-text comments on written work

Here’s what you should do to see the “in-text” (or “inline”) feedback on those assignments:

1. Click on the Assignments tab located on the left of the Canvas website
2. Select the Short Writing Assignment or Argumentative Essay you would like to view.
3. You will see a screen with a link “Submission Details” on the right. Click on that.
4. On the next screen you will see a link (upper right corner) that says “View Feedback.” Click on that.
5. You will then have a preview of the graded work with our in-text comments. You can look at it there or download it, using the link on the upper left corner. We recommend downloading it and opening it separately; it should be much easier to read that way. The download will be a PDF file with the comments. (Make sure you are able to view comments in your PDF reader.)

For additional help on seeing the in-text comments can be found here: <https://community.canvaslms.com/docs/DOC-10542-4212352349>.



## Weekly Schedule

Week	Topic	Readings & Assignments
Week 1	Introduction	<b>Readings:</b> None <b>Assignments:</b> None
Week 2	Epistemological & Meta-physical Questions about <i>Death</i>	<b>Tues., 08/29:</b> Paul Edwards, “Existentialism and Death: a Survey of Some Confusions and Absurdities” (3–37) <b>Thurs., 08/31:</b> Plato, <i>Phaedo</i> Excerpts (39–64)
Week 3	Epistemological & Meta-physical Question about <i>Death</i>	<b>Tues., 09/05:</b> John Perry, Excerpts from <i>A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality</i> (65–76) <b>Thurs., 09/07:</b> “Traditional Christian Belief in the Resurrection of the Body” (77–98)
Week 4	Defining <i>Death</i>	<b>Tues., 09/12:</b> Louis Pojman, “What is Death? The Crisis of Criteria” (99–108) <b>Thurs., 09/14:</b> Jeff McMahan, “The Metaphysics of Brain Death” (109–142)
Week 5	Defining <i>Death</i>	<b>Tues., 09/19:</b> Fred Feldman, “The Enigma of Death” (143–159) <b>Thurs., 09/21:</b> (i) Rachel Aviv, “What Does it Mean to Die?” (Canvas); (ii) Antonio Regalado, “Scientists have Restores Circulation to Severed Pig Brains” (Canvas) <b>*Sun., 09/24: Paper 1 Due</b>
Week 6	<i>Death</i> & Value	<b>Tues., 09/26:</b> (i) Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus” and “The Principal Doctrines” (163–171); (ii) Titus Lucretius Carus, Excerpts from Book Three of <i>On the Nature of Things</i> (172–176) <b>Thurs., 09/28:</b> (i) Thomas Nagel, “Death” (177–184); (ii) Harry S. Silverstein, “The Evil of Death” (185–206)
Week 7	<i>Death</i> & Value	<b>Tues., 10/03:</b> (i) Harry S. Silverstein (cont.); (ii) Samantha Brennan, “Feminist Philosophers Turn Their Thoughts to Death” (239–246) <b>Thurs., 10/05:</b> Samuel Scheffler, “Lecture One” from <i>Death and the Afterlife</i> (Canvas)



Week 8	<i>Death &amp; Value</i>	<p><b>Tues., 10/10:</b> Samuel Scheffler, “Lecture Two” from <i>Death and the Afterlife</i> (Canvas)</p> <p><b>Thurs., 10/12:</b> (i) “Lecture Two” (cont.); (ii) Susan Wolf “The Significance of Doomsday” from <i>Death and the Afterlife</i> (Canvas)</p>
Week 9	<i>Death &amp; Value</i>	<p><b>Tues., 10/17:</b> Harry Frankfurt, “How the Afterlife Matters” from <i>Death and the Afterlife</i> (Canvas)</p> <p><b>Thurs., 10/19:</b> Summing up Scheffler (No reading)</p> <p><b>*Sun., 10/22: Paper 2 Due</b></p>
Week 10	<i>Death, Birth, &amp; Immortality</i>	<p><b>Tues., 10/24:</b> Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality” (207–223)</p> <p><b>Thurs., 10/26:</b> John Martin Fischer, “Why Immortality is Not So Bad” (224–238)</p>
Week 11	<i>Death, Birth, &amp; Immortality</i>	<p><b>Tues., 10/31:</b> David Benatar, Chapter 1 of <i>Better Never to Have Been</i> (1–17)</p> <p><b>Thurs., 11/02:</b> David Benatar, Chapter 2 of <i>Better Never to Have Been</i> (18–59)</p>
Week 12	<i>Death, Birth, &amp; Immortality</i>	<p><b>Tues., 11/07:</b> David Benatar, Chapter 2 (cont.)</p> <p><b>Thurs., 11/09:</b> David Benatar, Chapter 3 of <i>Better Never to Have Been</i> (60–92)</p>
Week 13	<i>Death, Birth, &amp; Immortality</i>	<p><b>Tues., 11/14:</b> David Benatar, Chapter 3 (cont.)</p> <p><b>Thurs., 11/16:</b> David Benatar, Chapter 4 of <i>Better Never to Have Been</i> (93–131)</p> <p><b>*Sun., 11/19: Paper 3 Due</b></p>

Week 14	<i>Death &amp; Killing</i>	<b>Tues., 11/21:</b> TBD Buddhist reading
Week 15	<i>Death &amp; Killing</i>	<b>Tues., 11/28:</b> TBD Buddhist reading (cont.)  <b>Thurs., 11/30:</b> Jonathan Glover, “The Sanctity of Life” (345–361)
Week 16	<i>Death &amp; Killing</i>	<b>Tues., 12/05:</b> Samantha Brennan, “The Badness of Death” (380–379)  <b>Thurs., 12/07:</b> Summing up (No reading)  <b>*Sat., 12/16: Final Paper Due</b>