

Philosophy and Death (PHI 3695)

Fall 2024

21603

Section 3610

Meeting time and place:

Tuesday, period 7 (1:55 pm – 2:45 pm) in MAT 0114

Thursday, Period 7 and 8 (1:55 – 3:50 pm) in MAT 0114

Instructor: Duncan Purves

Email: dpurves@ufl.edu

Office hours: Thursdays 11:30 am – 1:00 pm in Griffin-Floyd Hall, rm. 332

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us...since as long as we exist death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist (Epicurus).

Bertrand Russell once said that the point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as to seem not worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it. In the elegant passage above, Epicurus does exactly this. By starting from the plausible claims that our death does not happen *during* our lives, and that we cease to exist when we die, Epicurus ends with the unbelievable conclusion that death is something we should not care about. Upon reflection, the reasoning is hard to resist. After all, if death is not bad for us before it happens or after it happens, when *could* it be bad?

This is just one of the puzzling questions we will confront in this class on philosophy and death. Others include:

- What exactly is death? Under what conditions do individuals die?
- What would it take to survive death? Is survival after death possible?
- If death *is* bad for the person who dies, should we prefer to be immortal? What would be good (or bad) about immortality?
- What is wrong with killing?
- When, if ever, is it morally okay to kill a human being? Why is it worse to kill a human being than an animal, and what general lesson can that teach us about the badness of killing?

- We will also consider some controversies about killing, including abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty, and killing in war.

REQUIRED READING

Samantha Brennan and Robert J. Stainton, eds., *Philosophy and Death* (Broadview Press, 2010).

Other readings can be found as PDF files on the course website: instructure.ufl.edu

COURSE OBJECTIVES

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 moral philosophy when writing original essays.

GRADING POLICIES

The following grade scale will be used to assign final letter grades for the course. See UF grading policies for assigning grade points at: <https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/academic-regulations/grades-grading-policies/>

| Grade Scale | Grade Value |
|--------------|-------------|
| 100-92.5=A | A=4.0 |
| 92.5-89.5=A- | A-=3.67 |
| 89.5-85.5=B+ | B+=3.33 |
| 85.5-81.5=B | B=3.00 |
| 81.5-78.5=B- | B-=2.67 |
| 78.5-75.5=C+ | C+=2.33 |
| 75.5-71.5=C | C=2.00 |
| 71.5-68.5=C- | C-=1.67 |
| 68.5-65.5=D+ | D+=1.33 |
| 65.5-61.5=D | D=1.00 |
| 61.5-59.5=D- | D-=0.67 |

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| 59.5-0=E |
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| E=0.00 |
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Grades that fall exactly on the threshold are awarded the higher grade.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Death Case Study (100 points) Due **11/12**. You will complete one group case study assignment. I will provide a detailed prompt concerning an issue related to death or killing. After reading the prompt details, as a group, you will complete several questions about the case study. More details to come.

Short Papers (200 points X 2 papers) Due **9/23, 10/18 and 11/29**. You are required to write **two** short reply papers of ~700 words for two of the three units we cover. For each short paper, I will provide a topic for you to write about, and I will provide a structure for you to follow. Each paper will be worth 200 pts of your grade. If you want, you can write three short papers, one for each unit of the course. Only the best two will count towards your final grade. More details to come.

Long Paper (350 points) Due **12/8**. You will write a long essay of ~2000 words on one of the topics we have discussed in class. I will provide topics for you, but you may write about a topic that is not listed in the assignment, if you first get my approval. Details to come.

For advice about writing a successful philosophy paper see Chris Heathwood's very helpful webpage on:

<http://spot.colorado.edu/~heathwoo/philosophypaperFAQ.html>

Weekly Critical Discussion Questions (150 pts) A good philosophy course requires good discussion. Good discussion requires showing up to class having thought carefully about the concepts and arguments presented in the readings. To promote this, the remaining 10% of the course grade will be determined by your submitting a critical discussion question to the Canvas before **every Friday's** class. To receive full credit, you must also attend class to be able raise that discussion question in the classroom.

Note: A 10% deduction from your final grade may also occur for transgressions such as disruptive behavior, falling asleep, sending text messages, or surfing the internet.

COURSE WEBSITE AND TECHNICAL ISSUES

This course is supplemented by online content in the e-Learning environment known as "Canvas." Readings, an electronic copy of the syllabus, and assignment submission portals can be found on the course website. To login to the e-Learning site for this course, go to <https://lss.at.ufl.edu/>, click the **e-Learning in Canvas** button, and on the next page enter your Gatorlink username and password. You can then access the course e-Learning environment by selecting PHI 3681 from the **Courses** pull-down menu at the top of the page.

If you encounter any difficulties logging in or accessing any of the course content, contact the UF Computing Help Desk at (352) 392-4537 or <http://helpdesk.ufl.edu>. Do not contact the course instructor regarding computer issues (I am unlikely to be of any help!).

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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 Conduct Code specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. [Click here to read the Conduct Code](#). If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructor or TAs in this class.

AI Use Policy

This policy covers any generative AI tool, such as ChatGtP, Elicit, etc. This includes text and artwork/graphics/video/audio. **1.** Students are not permitted AI tools UNLESS under direct instruction from the instructor to do so. Please contact your instructor if you are unsure or have questions BEFORE using AI for any assignment. **2.** If AI is permitted to be used, students must indicate what part of the assignment was written by AI and what was written by the student. **3.** The first assignment in the course is to sign the AI contract stating that you understand and agree to these policies. Violations of this contract will be understood as violations of the pledge described in the above section titled “Academic Honesty.”

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, <https://disability.ufl.edu/get-started/>). 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.

Classroom Conduct

Students and faculty each have responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Those who fail to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with differences of race, culture, religion, politics, sexual orientation, gender, gender variance, and nationalities. Class rosters are provided to the instructor with the student’s legal name. I will gladly honor your request to address you by an alternate name or gender pronoun. Please advise me of this preference early in the semester so that I may make appropriate changes to my records.

Late work, Illness, Religious Holidays, and Twelve Day Rule

Requirements for class attendance, religious holidays, 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>.

**If you think you have an acceptable reason to be excused for late work, you must contact the [Dean of Students Office](#) to receive an excuse letter. This prevents me from having to make difficult discriminations between excuses, and it provides you with something you can use for all of your missed classes.

Course evaluation process

Students are expected to provide professional and respectful feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing course evaluations online via GatorEvals. Guidance on how to give feedback in a professional and respectful manner is available at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/students/>. Students will be notified when the evaluation period opens, and can complete evaluations through the email they receive from GatorEvals, in their Canvas course menu under GatorEvals, or via <https://ufl.bluera.com/ufl/>. Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/public-results/>.

Email

The best way to reach me or your TAs is by email (see page 1 of the syllabus). Although we typically check email numerous times per day, you shouldn't expect us to reply to an email before the next business day. Please plan ahead if you have questions before major assignments are due. We are happy to answer whatever questions you have over email, so long as they are the kinds of questions that can be answered in just a couple of sentences. We prefer that you ask more involved questions—especially conceptual questions about the lectures or readings—during office hours. **I will occasionally email the class list with important information, like changes in the reading, discussion questions, or modifications for assignments. Therefore, please check your email regularly.*

Campus Resources:

Health and wellness

U Matter, We Care: If you or someone you know is in distress, please contact umatter@ufl.edu, 352-392-1575, or visit U Matter, We Care website to refer or report a concern and a team member will reach out to the student in distress.

Counseling and Wellness Center: Visit the [Counseling and Wellness Center](#) website or call 352-392-1575 for information on crisis services as well as non-crisis services.

Student Health Care Center: Call 352-392-1161 for 24/7 information to help you find the care you need, or visit the [Student Health Care Center](#) website.

University Police Department: Visit [UF Police Department website](#) or call 352-392-1111 (or 9-1-1 for emergencies).

UF Health Shands Emergency Room / Trauma Center: For immediate medical care call 352-733-0111 or go to the emergency room at 1515 SW Archer Road, Gainesville, FL 32608; Visit the UF Health Emergency Room and Trauma Center website.

GatorWell Health Promotion Services: For prevention services focused on optimal wellbeing, including Wellness Coaching for Academic Success, visit the [GatorWell website](#) or call 352-273-4450.

Academic Resources

E-learning technical support: Contact the UF Computing Help Desk at 352-392-4357 or via e-mail at helpdesk@ufl.edu.

Career Connections Center: Reitz Union Suite 1300, 352-392-1601. Career assistance and counseling services.

[Library Support](#): Various ways to receive assistance with respect to using the libraries or finding resources.

[Teaching Center](#): Broward Hall, 352-392-2010 or to make an appointment 352- 392-6420. General study skills and tutoring.

[Writing Studio](#): 2215 Turlington Hall, 352-846-1138. Help brainstorming, formatting, and writing papers.

[Student Complaints On-Campus](#): Visit the Student Honor Code and Student Conduct Code webpage for more information.

COURSE SCHEDULE AND DUE DATES

(This schedule is subject to change)

| <i>Date</i> | <i>Topic</i> | <i>Reading</i> |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| Week 1 | | |
| <i>Thurs., 8/22</i> | Introductions/Syllabus | No reading |
| <i>UNIT 1: Metaphysics of Death and Survival</i> | | |
| Week 2 | | |
| <i>Tues., 8/27</i> | Immortality (con) | Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case", 207-223 |
| <i>Thurs., 8/29</i> | Immortality (pro) | John Martin Fischer, "Why Immortality is Not So Bad", 224-238 |
| Week 3 | | |
| <i>Tues., 9/3</i> | Personal identity and surviving death | John Perry, Excerpts from <i>A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality</i> , 65-76 |
| <i>Thurs., 9/5</i> | The afterlife | Terence Penelhum, "Life After Death", PDF, posted on Canvas, under Files |
| Week 4 | | |
| <i>Tues., 9/10</i> | Better never to exist? | Benatar, "Why It is Better Never to Come into Existence" (PDF) |
| <i>Thurs., 9/12</i> | What is death? | Louis Pojman, "What is Death? The Crisis of the Criteria", 99-108 Optional: Rachel Aviv, " What Does it Mean to Die? " <i>The New Yorker</i> |
| Week 5 | | |
| <i>Tues., 9/17</i> | What is death? | Jeff McMahan, "The Metaphysics of Brain Death", 109-140 |
| <i>Thurs., 9/19</i> | What is death? | Jeff McMahan, "The Metaphysics of Brain Death", 109-140 (Cont'd) |

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| | | “Scientists have restored circulation to severed pig brains in a step that blurs the definition of death” (MIT Tech Review) Optional: Rachel Aviv, “What Does it Mean to Die?” <i>The New Yorker</i> Fred Feldman, “The Enigma of Death”, 143-158 |
| Week 6 Tues., 9/24 | What is death? | |
| UNIT 2: The Badness of Death | | |
| Thurs., 9/26 | Tentative Class Cancelled | |
| Week 7 Tues., 10/1 | Skepticism about the badness of death | Epicurus, “Letter to Menoecus” & “The Principle Doctrines”, 163-171; Lucretius, Excerpts from Book Three of <i>On the Nature of Things</i> , 172-176 |
| | Unit 1 Short Paper Due | |
| Thurs., 10/3 | Explaining the badness of death | Thomas Nagel, “Death”, 177-184 |
| Week 8 Tues., 10/8 | Explaining the badness of death | Harry S. Silverstein, “The Evil of Death”, 185-206 |
| Thurs., 10/10 | Feminism and death | Samantha Brennan, “Feminist Philosophers Turn Their Thoughts to Death”, 239-246 |
| UNIT 3: The Ethics of Killing and Letting Die | | |
| Week 9 Tues., 10/15 | The wrongness of killing | Jonathan Glover, “The Sanctity of Life”, 345-359 |
| Thurs., 10/17 | Class Cancelled | |
| Week 10 Tues., 10/22 | The wrongness of killing | Jeff McMahan, “The Wrongness of Killing |

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| | | and the Badness of Death”, 362-379 |
| Thurs., 10/24 | The wrongness of killing | Matthew Hanser, “The Wrongness of Killing and the Badness of Death” (PDF) |
| Week 11 | | |
| Tues., 10/29 | Against abortion | Don Marquis, “Why Abortion is Immoral”, 266-284 |
| Thurs., 10/31 | In defense of abortion Unit 2 short paper due | Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “You Can’t Lose What You Ain’t Never Had”, 285-296 |
| Week 12 | | |
| Tues., 11/5 | In defense of abortion | Judith Jarvis Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion”, 249-264 |
| Thurs., 11/7 | In defense of euthanasia | James Rachels, “Active and Passive Euthanasia”, 297-302 |
| Week 13 | | |
| Tues., 11/12 | Against euthanasia | Bonnie Steinbock, “The Intentional Termination of Life”, 303-311 |
| Thurs., 11/14 | In-class euthanasia case study | Canadian Woman Lives on as a Silent Partner Awaiting Birth, NYT |
| Week 14 | | |
| Tues., 11/19 | Killing in war | Robert Fullenwider, “War and Innocence” (PDF) |
| Thurs., 11/21 | Killing in war | Lawrence Alexander, “Self-defense and the Killing of Noncombatants” (PDF) |
| | | Jeff McMahan (2004). “The Ethics of Killing in War,” <i>Ethics</i> 114: 693 – 733 |
| Week 15 | Thanksgiving Holiday | No class |
| Tues., 11/24 | | |
| Thurs., 11/26 | Thanksgiving Holiday | No class |

Week 16
Tues., 12/3

Killing Case Study Due
In-class discussion case study
answers

Bring your case study
answers!