

# Philosophy of Death and Dying

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Meeting Time: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday 2:00-4:05pm, Allen 318

This course will explore philosophical questions about death and dying, such as what attitudes we should have toward the prospect of nonexistence, the moral psychology and ethics of dying, and the permissibility of suicide. To this end, we will first consider metaphysical questions about the nature of death and dying and how we should operationalize these concepts in medicine. Next we will examine the psychological attitudes we have toward death and dying, and whether these attitudes are rational responses to our mortality. Finally, we will consider a range of ethical questions at the end of life, including virtues in the face of dying, whether suicide is permissible, and how to “die well” when the end comes.

*Readings:* We will read from *Death: Philosophical Soundings* (Herbert Fingarette, ISBN: 978-0812693300) and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (Leo Tolstoy, ISBN: 978-0307951335). All other readings will be made available to you via Sakai.

*Office Hours:* After class or by appointment.

*Meetings:* Students will be expected to have carefully read the assigned readings **prior** to class time. As a seminar course, discussion is vital for successful learning and students will be expected to participate. I may also call on students to answer specific questions.

## Assessment

*Response papers (25% of grade, one per week):* Each week, students must submit a two-page response to one of the readings. These will be due each Thursday, by 11:59pm, and will be submitted through the Assignments tab in Sakai, in Word doc format. The first paragraph (~half a page) should summarize the *main* argument from the text, including the conclusion as well as the premises used to arrive there. The remainder of the paper is evaluative and should defend or criticize at least one argument from the text, as well as briefly consider and respond to a possible counterargument. This can be the main argument or a secondary one.

*Final Paper (50% of grade):* There will be a final paper due 6/21 by 11:59pm via the Assignments tab in Sakai, in Word doc format. This should be 8-15 pgs double spaced, with Times New Roman 12-point font with 1-inch margins on the sides. In your paper you should (1) explain and (2) defend or criticize a significant argument from one of the

**\*Note: This syllabus may be revised in the course of the semester.\***

texts that we have read. Longer is not necessarily better, but instead strength of explanation and argumentative clarity will be the main points of evaluation.

*Participation (25% of grade):* Students must participate in classroom discussions but need not participate each day. Grading will not be based on the number of times a student speaks but instead on general willingness to be involved in the conversations that take place. Attendance is required as a part of your participation grade. I may call on individual students to answer questions about the readings. Students should be on time and prepared with the readings for that day.

## **Policies**

*Late work policy:* Requests for an extension must be made with at least one day's notice before the due date and will be granted at instructor discretion. Late work will be accepted up to 2 days after the due date, with a half letter grade penalty.

*Electronics policy:* Students should bring all assigned readings to class for discussion in print format. Use of electronic devices is not permitted, unless (1) you require an accommodation for which you provide documentation, or (2) you make a request to me in person where you argue the case for an electronics allowance in your individual case.

*Accommodations:* Any student with a disability or special learning requirement impacting their participation in the course should discuss this with me in the first week of class so that reasonable accommodations can be made.

## **Schedule**

### **Section One: The Problems of Death and Dying**

Wed 5/11: Robert Nozick "Dying"

Thur 5/12: Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus" + Thomas Nagel, "Death"

Mon 5/16: Shelly Kagan, *Death*, Ch. 11 "Immortality" (234-246)

Tue 5/17: Lewis and Greer, "Current Controversies in Brain Death Determination" + Butcher, "Commission Will Revise the Uniform Determination of Death Act What That Means for Defining Brain Death"

[https://journals.lww.com/neurotodayonline/Fulltext/2021/10210/Commission\\_Will\\_Revise\\_the\\_Uniform\\_Determination.10.aspx](https://journals.lww.com/neurotodayonline/Fulltext/2021/10210/Commission_Will_Revise_the_Uniform_Determination.10.aspx)

Thur 5/19: Film: *Being Mortal*; discussion

## **Section Two: What Attitudes Ought We Have Toward Death?**

Mon 5/23: Herbert Fingarette, *Death: Philosophical Soundings* pgs.5-54

Tue 5/24: Herbert Fingarette, *Death: Philosophical Soundings* pgs.55-89

Thur 5/26: Shelly Kagan, *Death* (Ch.14 “Living in the Face of Death”), pgs.288-317

Mon 5/30: No class (Memorial Day)

Tue 5/31: Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (all)

Thur 6/2: Seneca, “On Grief for Lost Friends”

[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Moral\\_letters\\_to\\_Lucilius/Letter\\_63](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Moral_letters_to_Lucilius/Letter_63) + John Danaher, “The Goodness of Grief: Is it Integral to the Well-Lived Life?”

<https://philosophicaldisquisitions.blogspot.com/2018/04/the-goodness-of-grief-is-it-integral-to.html>

## **Section Three: The Ethics of Hastening Death**

Mon 6/6: John Donnelly, *Suicide: Right or Wrong?* (Introduction, pgs. 7-14, 26bottom-end.); “A Death of One’s Own” (Solomon)

Tue 6/7: “Comas: Quinlan and Cruzan” (Pence)

Thur 6/9: James Rachels “Active and Passive Euthanasia” + Chris Hill “The Note”

## **Section Four: How to Die Well**

Mon 6/13: Daniel Callahan, *The Troubled Dream of Life* (Ch.6 “Pursuing a Peaceful Death”)

Tue 6/14: Jacques Choron, *Modern Man and Mortality* (Ch.9 “Methods for Alleviating the Fear of Death”)

Thur 6/16: Lydia Dugdale, *The Lost Art of Dying* (Ch.9, “Life”)

**Tue 6/21: Final Paper due by 11:59pm**