

Philosophy of Death and Dying

Ben Sarbey

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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 500-750 word response to one of the readings. These will be due each Friday, by 11:59pm, and will be submitted through the Assignments tab in Sakai, in Word doc format. The first paragraph 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 7-15 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. The explanation of the argument from the reading should be only ~1pg and the remainder of the paper should be evaluative. Students should also consider and respond to at least one possible counterargument to their position. Longer is not necessarily better, but instead strength of explanation and argumentative clarity will be the main points of evaluation. No outside research is required. The grading rubric I use is roughly 20% clarity of writing, 40% submitting all required elements of the essay, 40% quality of the arguments provided.

Attendance/Participation (25% of grade): Students must participate in the course, either in class or remotely. Attendance is required for students taking the course in-person. For students taking the class remotely, this requirement may be met by a mix of the following methods: 1) attending and participating as a part of some in-person class meetings; 2) posting comments on the forum section of the Sakai site; 3) meeting or emailing with me to speak about the issues we cover; 4) forwarding me emails or presenting some other form of proof of discussions between students outside of class.

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: Discussion is vital to the success of this course. For this reason, students may only use electronic devices in class to view digital copies of the readings. No other uses will be allowed, unless 1) a request for an accommodation is made, for which documentation should be provided, or 2) an individual student makes a convincing argument for an exception for a particular type of device usage in their 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: Nozick "Dying"

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

Mon 5/16: Danaher, "Longer Lives and the Alleged Tedium of Immortality" + Kagan, *Death*, Ch. 11 "Immortality" (234-246)

Tue 5/17: Film: *Being Mortal*; discussion

Thur 5/19: 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”

Section Two: What Attitudes Ought We Have Toward Death?

Mon 5/23: Fingarette, *Death: Philosophical Soundings* (5-54)

Tue 5/24: Fingarette, *Death: Philosophical Soundings* (55-89)

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

Mon 5/30: No class (Memorial Day)

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

Thur 6/2: Seneca, “On Grief for Lost Friends” + Danaher, “The Goodness of Grief: Is it Integral to the Well-Lived Life?” + Danaher, “The Badness of Grief: A Moderate Defence of the Stoic View”

Section Three: The Ethics of Hastening Death

Mon 6/6: Donnelly, *Suicide: Right or Wrong?* (7-14, 26bottom-end) + Brandt, “The Morality and Rationality of Suicide”

Tue 6/7: Pence, “Comas: Quinlan and Cruzan” + Rachels, “Active and Passive Euthanasia”

Thur 6/9: Hill, “The Note” + Riley and Sarbey, “The Unexamined Benefits of the Expansive Legalization of Medical Assistance-in-Dying”

Section Four: How to Die Well

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

Tue 6/14: Choron, *Modern Man and Mortality* (Ch.8-9 “Reactions When Contemplating Mortality”, “Methods for Alleviating the Fear of Death”)

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

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