

Philosophy of Death Syllabus

Course Information

Instructor: Anna Brinkerhoff

- Email: anna_brinkerhoff@brown.edu
- Office Hours: TBA

Location: TBA

Time: TBA

Course Description

This course is about death: its nature, its value, and its ethical significance. It will be divided into three units. In the first unit, we will consider questions regarding the nature of death: What is death? More specifically, what is death for creatures like us? Is it possible to survive death? In the second unit, we will discuss questions about the value of death: Is death a bad thing? Can we be harmed by things that happen after we die? Would we be better off if we never died, but went on living forever? Is death worse than prenatal nonexistence? In the third unit, we will consider questions regarding the ethics of death: Is killing worse than letting die? Given the scarcity of medical resources, which deaths should we prevent? How should we approach our own death, and the death of ones we love?

Course Materials

All required readings will be available through the course website located on Canvas.

Time Commitment

Our course will meet 35 times (for a total of 35 hours). Doing the readings and writing up summaries and reflections should take about 2 ½ hours for each class, for a total of 90 hours. For each of your three papers, you should expect to spend 15 hours reading, reviewing notes, outlining, drafting and polishing your work. Each rewrite should take 5 hours. So the total number of hours spent for the course is around 180 hours.

Accessibility and Accommodation

Please inform me early in the term if you have a disability or other conditions that might require accommodations or modification of any of the course procedures. You may speak with me after class or during my office hours. For more information, please contact Student and Employee Accessibility Services at 401-863-9588 or SEAS@brown.edu.

Grade Breakdown

Attendance & Participation	10%
Expert Presentation	10%
Reading Summaries & Reflections	20%
Papers	20% each

Course Requirements

Attendance & Participation: After shopping period, I'll take attendance with a sign-in sheet. For each class meeting, it will be your responsibility to (a) sign in or (b) send me an email in advance of the class explaining why you cannot attend. For each unexcused absence over 3, your attendance grade will be lowered by 10%. This is a discussion-based course and so informed and respectful participation is expected. In addition to in-class contributions, you may earn participation credit through e-mail correspondence with me and office hour discussion.

Expert Presentation: You will each be assigned a reading from the course reading list on which you will become an expert. On the day that your reading is assigned, you are expected to come to class prepared with a 10-15-minute presentation on the reading. The presentation should include a thorough summary of the reading as well as your own reaction to it in order to jump start that day's discussion. You should have an outline handout for the class to pass out.

Reading: I'll assign regular readings, which will generally be around 10-30 pages. You will need to do each assigned reading carefully, preferably more than once. To hold you accountable for doing the readings, I'll expect you to write up a summary and a reflection – comment, question, or criticism – on each day's reading. Summaries should be short (100-200 words) and reflections can be even shorter (20-50 words). Summaries and reflections for a given day's reading must be posted on the relevant discussion board on Canvas *before* the start of class (10am). Late posts will not be accepted. You will be able to see each other's comments and reflections only after you post your own. For each missed post over 3, your reading grade will be lowered by 10%.

Papers: You will write a paper for each of the three units of this course. Papers should be around 2000 words, but no less than 1500 and no more than 2500. For each paper, you will choose any one of the assigned readings of the relevant unit to write on. Around half of each paper should be devoted to clearly, accurately, and charitably presenting the author's argument. The other half of the paper should be devoted to your own original philosophical evaluation of that argument. You will have the opportunity to rewrite each of the first two papers. If you turn in a rewrite for a paper, the recorded grade for that paper will be the average of the grades of your original paper and your rewrite.

Course Schedule

Unit 1: The Nature of Death

What is death?

- Session 1* Pojman, "What Is Death? The Crisis of Criteria"
- Session 2* McMahan, sections I-III (pp. 91-113) of "The Metaphysics of Brain Death"
- Session 3* Feldman, "The Enigma of Death"
- Session 4* Discussion Day

Can we survive our deaths?

- Session 5* Feldman, "Death and the Disintegration of Personality"
- Session 6* van Inwagen, "The Possibility of Resurrection" & an excerpt (pp. 74-80) of Zimmerman, "Bodily Resurrection"
- Session 7* Evans, "Traditional Christian Belief in the Resurrection of the Body" (skip section VI)
- Session 8* Discussion Day
- Session 9* Writing Workshop

Unit 2: The Value of Death

Is death bad?

- Session 10* Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus" & Nagel, "Death"
- Session 11* Brennan, "Feminist Philosophers Turn Their Thoughts Toward Death"
- Session 12* Brinkerhoff, "Death, Deprivation, and the Afterlife"
*First paper due
- Session 13* Discussion Day

Can we be harmed after we die?

- Session 14* Papineau, "Can We Be Harmed After Death?"
- Session 15* Pitcher, "The Misfortunes of the Dead"
- Session 16* Luper, "Posthumous Harm"
- Session 17* Discussion Day

Would we be better off if we just went on living forever?

- Session 18* Ismael, "The Ethical Importance of Death"
- Session 19* Williams, "The Markopoulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality"
- Session 20* Fischer, "Why Immortality Is Not So Bad"
- Session 21* Discussion Day

Is death worse than pre-natal nonexistence?

- Session 22* Fischer and Bruckhamer, "Why Is Death Bad?"
- Session 23* Harman, "Lamenting Non-Existence"
- Session 24* Discussion Day

Unit 3: The Ethics of Death

Is killing worse than letting die?

- Session 25* Rachels, "Active and Passive Euthanasia"
- Session 26* Herchenov, "Misunderstanding the Moral Equivalence of Killing and Letting Die"
- Session 27* Thomson, "Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem"
*Second paper due
- Session 28* Discussion Day

Given that medical resources are scarce, what deaths should we prevent?

- Session 29* Unger, sections 1-8 (pp. 24-41) of chapter 2 of "Living High and Letting Die"
- Session 30* Unger, sections 1-8 (pp. 42-61) of chapter 2 of "Living High and Letting Die"
- Session 31* Persad, et al., "Allocation of Scarce Medical Resources"
- Session 32* Discussion Day

How should we approach our own death, and the death of ones we love?

- Session 33* Kagan, "Living in the Face of Dying"
- Session 34* Moller, "Love and Death"
- Session 35* Marušić, "Do Reasons Expire? An Essay on Grief?"
- Session 36* Discussion Day