

Philosophy of Death Syllabus

Course Information

Instructor: Anna Brinkerhoff

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

Location: Corliss Brackett, Room 106

Time: MWF, 10:00 – 10:50

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? What attitude should we have toward 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

Regular Attendance	10%
Participation	10%
Reading Summaries and Reflections	20%
Papers	20% each

Course Requirements

Regular Attendance: 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%.

Participation: This is a discussion-based course and informed and respectful participation is expected.

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.

Due Dates: October 5 (nature of death paper) – November 12 (value of death paper) – December 15 (ethics of death paper)

Course Schedule

Unit 1: The Nature of Death

What is death?

- 09/07 Pojman, "What Is Death? The Crisis of Criteria" & (optional but recommended) Coffman, "Finding, Clarifying and Evaluating Arguments"
- 09/10 McMahan, sections I-III (pp. 91-113) of "The Metaphysics of Brain Death"
- 09/12 Feldman, "The Enigma of Death"
- 09/14 No Class (Anna is at a conference)
- 09/15 Discussion Day

Can we survive our deaths?

- 09/19 Feldman, "Death and the Disintegration of Personality"
- 09/21 van Inwagen, "The Possibility of Resurrection" & an exert (pp. 74-80) of Zimmerman, "Bodily Resurrection"
- 09/24 Evans, "Traditional Christian Belief in the Resurrection of the Body" (skip section VI)
- 09/26 Discussion Day
- 09/28 Writing Workshop

Unit 2: The Value of Death

Is death bad?

- 10/01 Epicurus, "Letter to Menoecus" & Nagel, "Death"
- 10/03 Brennan, "Feminist Philosophers Turn Their Thoughts Toward Death"
- 10/05 Silverstein, "The Evil of Death"
*First paper due
- 10/08 No Class (Indigenous Peoples' Day)
- 10/10 Discussion Day

Can we be harmed after we die?

- 10/12 Scheffler, Lecture I (pp. 131-157) of "Death and the Afterlife"
- 10/15 Pitcher, "The Misfortunes of the Dead"
- 10/17 Luper, "Posthumous Harm"
- 10/19 Discussion Day

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

- 10/22 Ismael, "The Ethical Importance of Death"
- 10/24 Williams, "The Markopoulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality"
- 10/26 Fischer, "Why Immortality Is Not So Bad"
- 10/29 Discussion Day

Is death worse than pre-natal nonexistence?

- 10/31 Fischer and Brueckhamer, "Why Is Death Bad?"
- 11/2 Harman, "Lamenting Non-Existence"
- 11/5 No Class (Anna is out of town)

Unit 3: The Ethics of Death

Is killing worse than letting die?

- 11/7 Rachels, "Active and Passive Euthanasia"
- 11/9 Herchenov, "Misunderstanding the Moral Equivalence of Killing and Letting Die"
- 11/12 Thomson, "Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem"
*Second paper due
- 11/14 Discussion Day

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

- 11/16 Unger, sections 1-8 (pp. 24-41) of chapter 2 of "Living High and Letting Die"
- 11/19 Unger, sections 1-8 (pp. 42-61) of chapter 2 of "Living High and Letting Die"
- 11/21 No Class (Thanksgiving)
- 11/23 No Class (Thanksgiving)
- 11/26 Taurek, "Do the Numbers Count?"
- 11/28 Discussion Day

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

- 11/30 Kagan, "Living in the Face of Dying"
- 12/3 Lewis, chapter 1 of "A Grief Observed" & Moller, "Love and Death"
- 12/5 Kobbler, "Remembering and Loving in Relationships Involving Dying, Death, and Grief"
- 12/7 Discussion Day