**Philosophy of Death and Dying**

PHIL 450Q-01 / Fall 2016 / MW 4-5:30pm / LAC 212

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Office hours: MWF 1-2pm, MW 3-4pm (or by appointment)

“In the long run, we are all dead.” –John Maynard Keynes

**Course Summary**

One thing that is true of all human beings, in all places and all times, is that we must at some point die. Moreover, we are *aware* of the fact that we will die, and we know that our deaths could mean the end of us. For many people, this awareness of our own mortality produces a profound fear and anxiety over death, for death seems to be one of the worst things that could happen to a person. Some question whether our lives can truly have any meaning if we are all doomed to non-existence eventually. Some hold the belief that there is an afterlife and, therefore, that we are immortal in some spiritual sense. Others seek scientific means of increasing how long humans can live in this world. Yet, not everyone accepts that death is necessarily a bad thing. Many believe that death can actually be a good thing. Some argue that an endless life would be unbearable or lack meaning. And sometimes people choose death over life when their lives become too painful to bear.

In this course we will examine a variety of philosophical questions that arise when we start to contemplate our own deaths. Among the questions we will study are the following:

* The Badness of Death – Is it rational to fear death? Is death bad for the person who dies? Is death worse for some individuals than others?
* Immortality and Life-Extension – Would it be a good thing if we could somehow live forever or if we could significantly extend human life through technological means?
* Death and the Meaning of Life – Does death give meaning to life or does it make life less meaningful? How should the fact that we are mortal impact how we live our lives?
* Suicide – Is it ever rational to commit suicide? Is it ever ethical?
* Survival of Death – Is it reasonable to believe that we can survive death in some kind of afterlife? Is it reasonable to think that people have souls? Is there any way that we could survive death if we don’t have souls? What is more important: your own personal survival of death or that the human species collectively continues to exist after your death?
* Harming the Dead – Can people be harmed after they are dead? What moral duties do we have to respect the dead?
* Dying Well – Are there better or worse ways to die? What constitutes a “good death?” What attitudes should a dying person have towards her death? What moral virtues should a dying person possess?

**Course Goals**

1. To enlarge and deepen your understanding of philosophical questions about death and dying and to develop your own perspectives on those questions
2. To enhance your critical thinking skills, including the ability to evaluate arguments for holding certain beliefs and to construct good arguments for your beliefs
3. To enhance your ability to communicate complex ideas and arguments clearly, verbally and through writing

**Grading**

Papers

You will be expected to write three formal philosophy papers in this course. Papers should be approximately 1200-2300 words long (roughly 4-7 pages double-spaced). Your best two papers will each count for 30% of your grade. Your third paper will count for 20% of your grade. In your papers you will be expected to *analyze and evaluate readings* from the course and to *construct an argument* for some philosophical belief you hold on one of the topics covered in the class. I will provide instructions and guidance on how to properly write a philosophy paper.

Reflections

During the semester you will be expected to write at least six 1-2 page informal “reflection papers.” The purpose of the reflection papers is, first, to help you begin to develop your thoughts on a topic we are covering in class and, second, to help generate classroom discussion. I will not be grading you on the quality of your reflections, but I do expect you to take the assignments seriously. Completion of the reflection papers is worth 10% of your grade.

Attendance, Participation, Preparation, and Effort (APPE)

Your attendance, participation, preparation, and effort in this class count for 10% of your grade. To earn an A for this portion of your grade, you must have good attendance, regularly volunteer to participate in class discussions, come to each class period having done the reading assignments, and demonstrate good effort in the class. The following behaviors, among others, will count against your APPE grade: texting in class, using your computer in class for non-class purposes, sleeping in class, and frequently coming to class late or leaving class early. If you are not comfortable participating in classroom discussions, you can also earn participation credit by typing up a short paragraph or two in which you comment on (or raise questions about) the readings and/or the classroom discussion (or by writing additional reflection papers). Written participation should be submitted to me typed on paper no more than one week after we have discussed a particular reading or topic in class.

Grade Breakdown

1. Paper #1 30%
2. Paper #2 30%
3. Paper #3 (your lowest paper grade) 20%
4. Reflection papers 10%
5. APPE 10%

**Classroom Etiquette**

Philosophy, by its nature, involves debate and disagreement on questions that are controversial and sometimes personal. As we examine philosophical questions in this class, we will sometimes disagree with each other. Class time will include discussions in which your beliefs may be questioned, challenged, and debated by other students or the professor. That being said, everyone in the class is expected to follow basic rules of respect for one another. Criticism and disagreement with one another’s opinions should be expressed in a respectful manner. Personal attacks are not acceptable. Additionally, I ask that students raise their hands to speak and try to avoid interrupting one another.

**Plagiarism**

Plagiarism on paper assignments will not be tolerated in this class. Plagiarism consists of passing off another author’s words or ideas as your own without giving the author proper credit. Before your first paper assignment, we will discuss plagiarism in greater detail and the proper way to cite authors. Students who are caught plagiarizing will be punished accordingly. Punishments may include failing the assignment, failing the entire course, and/or being reported to the University. For further information, please consult Marywood’s policy on “Academic Honesty” in the policy manual located at <http://www.marywood.edu/policy/academic-affairs.html>

**Accommodations for Students with Documented Disabilities**

Marywood University complies with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 as amended by the ADA Amendments Act of 2008. Students with disabilities who need special accommodations must submit documentation of the disability to the Office of Disability Services, Liberal Arts Center 223B, in order for reasonable accommodations to be granted. The Office of Disability Services will partner with students to determine the appropriate accommodations and, in cooperation with the instructor, will work to ensure that all students have a fair opportunity to perform in this class. Students are encouraged to notify instructors and the Office of Disability Services as soon as they determine accommodations are necessary; however, documentation will be reviewed at any point in the semester upon receipt. Specific details of the disability will remain confidential between the student and the Office of Disability services unless the student chooses to disclose or there is legitimate academic need for disclosure on a case-by-case basis. For assistance, please contact Diane Webber, Associate Director of Disability Services, at 570.348.6211 x2335 or dtwebber@marywood.edu.

**Texts**

1. Leo Tolstoy, *Confession*
2. Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*
3. Readings available on Google Drive: <https://goo.gl/ysslGe>

**TENTATIVE SCHEDULE**

This schedule of readings and assignments is subject to change based on my discretion and how quickly we work our way through the readings. Any changes in the schedule will be announced in class. Readings listed as “optional” are not required but I may talk in class about some of the ideas in those readings and, depending on which topics you choose to write your papers on, you may want to look at some of those readings.

Week One

8/24

Introduction

Week Two

8/29 – 8/31

*The Badness of Death*

Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus”

Thomas Nagel, “Death”

Optional: Stephen Rosenbaum, “How to Be Dead and Not Care: A Defense of Epicurus”

Week Three

9/5 – 9/7

Monday, September 5th – No class (Labor Day)

*The Badness of Death*

Jens Johansson, “The Time of Death’s Badness”

Week Four

9/12 – 9/14

*The Badness of Death*

James Warren, “The Symmetry Problem”

Christopher Belshaw, “Death, Value, and Desire”

**Discuss first paper assignment**

Week Five

9/19 – 9/21

*Immortality*

Larry Temkin “Is Living Longer Living Better?”

Optional: Corliss Lamont, “Mistaken Attitudes toward Death”

Optional: John Martin Fischer, “Immortality”

Week Six

9/26 – 9/28

*Immortality*

Julian Barnes, “The Dream”

VIDEO: “I Dismember Mama”

**First paper due – Friday, September 30th**

Week Seven

10/3 – 10/5

*Death and Meaning*

Leo Tolstoy, “Confession” pp. 1-49

Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd”

Optional: Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”

Week Eight

10/10 – 10/12

*Suicide*

David Benatar, “Suicide: A Qualified Defense”

Thomas Aquinas, “Whether It Is Lawful to Kill Oneself”

Optional: Immanuel Kant, “Suicide”

Optional: David Hume, “Of Suicide”

Optional: Thomas Hill, “Killing Ourselves”

Week Nine

10/17 – 10/19

FALL BREAK – Monday, October 17th (No class)

*Survival of Death*

Vincent Barry, “The Self and its Relation to Death”

Plato, “Phaedo” (an excerpt)

Rene Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy: Second Meditation”

Week Ten

10/24 – 10/26

*Survival of Death*

Paul Edwards, “An Argument against Survival”

Week Eleven

10/31 – 11/2

*Survival of Death*

Andrew Dell’Olio, “Do Near-Death Experiences Provide a Rational Basis for Belief in Life after Death?”

James Rachels, excerpt from “Do We Survive Death?”

**Second paper due – Friday, November 4th**

Week Twelve

11/7 – 11/9

*Survival of Death*

Stephen Davis, “Traditional Christian Belief in the Resurrection of the Body”

Lars Bergstrom, “Death and Eternal Recurrence”

Week Thirteen

11/14 – 11/16

*The Collective Afterlife*

Samuel Scheffler, “Death and the Afterlife” Lectures I & II pp. 15-81

Scheffler, “Death and the Afterlife” Lecture III pp. 83-110

Week Fourteen

11/21 – 11/23

*The Collective Afterlife*

Susan Wolf, “The Significance of Doomsday” pp. 113-129 (in the Scheffler book)

Harry Frankfurt, “How the Afterlife Matters” pp. 131-141 (in the Scheffler book)

Wednesday, November 23 – No class (Thanksgiving Break)

Week Fifteen

11/28 – 11/30

*Harming the Dead*

George Pitcher, “The Misfortunes of the Dead”

Optional: Steven Luper, “Posthumous Harm”

Week Sixteen

12/5 – 12/7

*A Good Death*

Geoffrey Scarre, “Can There Be a Good Death?”

**Third paper due – Tuesday, December 6th**

Last day of class – Wednesday, December 7th