

Philosophy 180: *Death and the Meaning of Life*

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4 credits

Lectures: Tuesday and Thursday, 4:00pm-4:50pm, Thompson 102.

Discussion sections: various times on Friday, in various locations.

Gen Ed Info: Satisfies DG (Global Diversity) and SB (Social and Behavioral Sciences) Gen Ed requirements.

Professor Markosian's Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday 2:30-3:30pm, and by appointment. South College E421.

Teaching Assistants:

- Youngchan Lee (youngchanlee@umass.edu). Office hours: Wednesday 1:00-3:00pm, and by appointment. South College E318.
- Kory Matteoli (bmatteoli@umass.edu). Office hours: Monday and Wednesday 3:00-4:00pm, and by appointment. South College E320.
- He Yuan (heyuan@umass.edu). Office hours: Wednesday 9:00-11:00am, and by appointment. South College E314.

Course Overview

PHIL 180 involves a careful consideration of many of life's biggest questions. The course is designed to provoke comparison between different possible answers to each of these questions, to promote critical acuity through the formulation and evaluation of arguments for and against the various theses considered, and to encourage verbal expression through the writing of clear and persuasive essays. This is not a course in which students are taught the right answers to the big questions about life and death but,

rather, a course in which students are taught how to think carefully about those questions so as to develop their own answers (and be able to defend them).

PHIL 180 is also an introduction to a distinctive way of thinking – a way of thinking that focuses on carefully presenting and evaluating arguments. No background is assumed or required.

The course will cover a range of topics related to death and the meaning of life. We will focus especially on the following questions:

- What exactly are life and death? What is dying?
- How should we think about death if we are Materialists (that is, if we do not believe we have immaterial souls)?
- How should we think about death if we do think that we have immaterial souls?
- How can your death be bad for you, given that before you die it hasn't happened and after you die you no longer exist?
- Would immortality be a good thing?
- What sort of afterlife is it reasonable to hope for?
- If grief is the appropriate attitude after the death of a loved one, is it rational to feel diminishing grief as time goes by?
- Is there something that can make lives like ours meaningful? If so, what is it?
- Does the fact that we will all die make our lives meaningless?
- What about the fact that the universe will one day evolve to be cold and lifeless? If the end of the story is already written, why does it matter what the details are along the way?
- What is the meaning of life?
- Why are we here? Is there some reason or purpose for our existence?
- Is there a goal that all of us should be aiming for?
- Didn't we learn from the tragic events of the 20th Century that there is no God and our existence is pointless?
- Some say we are here to love one another. But the world is full of injustice. Could it be that anger is a more appropriate attitude than love?
- Some have argued that given how difficult, painful, and ultimately futile our lives are, each one of us would have been better off not existing. How should we respond to this?
- Can there be good and bad, or right and wrong, in a Godless universe?

The aim of the course will be to educate students about some of the main issues, positions, and arguments concerning these questions, so that the students may arrive at their own considered opinions on these matters.

Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing this course, you will be able to:

- Read complicated texts, extract the arguments contained in those texts, and come up with the best objections to those arguments.
- Identify your own beliefs about death and the meaning of life, and formulate them in a clear and straightforward way.
- Develop your own arguments in support of your beliefs.
- Understand the best arguments against your views, and come up with good objections to those arguments.
- Write clear, concise, and persuasive essays.

Course Requirements

- ❖ **Three Short Papers.** The specific paper assignments and deadlines are spelled out below. There are four paper assignments, and you can choose to write either three or four papers, but only your three best paper grades will count. Each of your three paper grades will be worth 25% of your final grade.
- ❖ **Weekly Quizzes.** There will be a quiz every week in your discussion section. (That's 13 quizzes.) The quizzes will be designed to test whether you have paid careful attention in the lectures and done the readings in a responsible way. They are also meant to ensure that you attend your discussion section every week. If you know in advance that you will miss a given discussion section, you may choose to write a Quiz Paper for that day. A Quiz Paper is a two-page paper (double-spaced, with one-inch margins) in which you (i) summarize the most interesting thesis or argument from that week's reading and (ii) discuss an objection to that thesis or argument. Your Quiz Paper must be emailed to your TA in the form of a PDF **before** your discussion section on the relevant day. There will be no other way to make up for missed quizzes, and there will be no exemptions granted for missed quizzes. But your three lowest quiz grades will be automatically dropped, so that only your 10 best quiz grades will count toward your final grade. Your cumulative quiz grade will be worth 25% of your final grade.

Note: Your entire course grade will be determined by your short paper grades and your quiz grades. There will be no way to earn extra credit or otherwise improve your grade

from whatever is the average of your three best short paper grades and your overall quiz grade.

Academic Honesty

Since the integrity of the academic enterprise of any institution of higher education requires honesty in scholarship and research, academic honesty is required of all students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Academic dishonesty is prohibited in all programs of the University. Academic dishonesty includes but is not limited to: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating dishonesty. Appropriate sanctions may be imposed on any student who has committed an act of academic dishonesty. Instructors should take reasonable steps to address academic misconduct. Any person who has reason to believe that a student has committed academic dishonesty should bring such information to the attention of the appropriate course instructor as soon as possible. Instances of academic dishonesty not related to a specific course should be brought to the attention of the appropriate department Head or Chair. Since students are expected to be familiar with this policy and the commonly accepted standards of academic integrity, ignorance of such standards is not normally sufficient evidence of lack of intent. Please see the webpage below for more information.

http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/

Accommodations

The University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to providing an equal educational opportunity for all students. If you have a documented physical, psychological, or learning disability on file with Disability Services (DS), you may be eligible for reasonable academic accommodations to help you succeed in this course. If you have a documented disability that requires an accommodation, please notify me within the first two weeks of the semester so that we may make appropriate arrangements. For further information, please visit the UMass Disability Services website.

<https://www.umass.edu/disability/>

Title IX

In accordance with Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 that prohibits gender-based discrimination in educational settings that receive federal funds, the University of

Massachusetts Amherst is committed to providing a safe learning environment for all students, free from all forms of discrimination, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and retaliation. This includes interactions in person or online through digital platforms and social media. Title IX also protects against discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion, or related conditions, including recovery. There are resources here on campus to support you. A summary of the available Title IX resources (confidential and non-confidential) can be found at the following link.

<https://www.umass.edu/titleix/resources>

You do not need to make a formal report to access these resources. If you need immediate support, you are not alone. Free and confidential support is available 24 hours a day / 7 days a week / 365 days a year at the SASA Hotline: (413) 545-0800.

Laptops, Tablets, and Cellphones

Empirical research shows that nearly everyone is better off not using any electronic device in a lecture class – including laptops, tablets, and cellphones. The studies show that students learn much better when they focus on the professor, and take notes on paper. Studies also show conclusively that others around a student who is using a laptop or device are negatively affected by the presence of a screen nearby. **For these reasons, this is a no-device class. The use of laptops, tablets, cellphones, and other electronic devices is not permitted, either in lectures or discussion sections.** (But please note that the lectures are all recorded and available to students in the class through Canvas. Also, notes taken by a TA will be available to students who qualify for such an accommodation.)

Required Readings

- “On Arguments.” (Handout available on Canvas.)
- “Formulating and Explaining Views and Presenting, Explaining, and Evaluating Arguments.” (Handout available on Canvas.)
- Benatar, David, “Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* **34** (1997), pp. 345-355. (Available on Canvas.)
- Bradford, Gwen, “Achievement and Meaning in Life,” in Iddo Landau (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life* (Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 58-73. (Available on Canvas.)

- Chan, Rebecca, “Enduring Emotions and the (Im)Possibility of Forgiveness,” *Disputatio* (forthcoming).
- Cherry, Myisha, “Love, Anger, and Racial Injustice,” in Adrienne M. Martin (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook on Love in Philosophy* (Routledge, 2019), pp. 157-168. (Available on Canvas.)
- Feldman, Fred, *Confrontations with the Reaper*, (Oxford University Press, 1992). (This is one of two texts you will have to buy for this class.)
- Wielenberg, Erik J., “Atheism and Meaning in Life,” in Iddo Landau (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life* (Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 216-228. (Available on Canvas.)
- Wolf, Susan, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, (Princeton University Press, 2010). (This is one of two texts you will have to buy for this class.)

About Short Papers

Details about the individual short paper assignments can be found below.

Each short paper is due at 5pm on the relevant day. (See the schedule below for specific due dates.) ***You must submit your paper through Canvas.*** Any paper turned in after the deadline will be considered late. Late papers will be penalized 5 points (out of 100) per day. Late papers can be turned in until one week past the deadline, but will not be accepted after that. (Note: Extensions are possible. If you would like to request an extension on a paper, for any reason, you should email your TA ***before*** the deadline for that paper.)

The papers you will be writing for this course are not research papers, in the traditional sense. We do not want you to report on what others have said about our topics. Nor do we particularly want you to seek out ideas from other sources. (In fact, we would prefer that you not do this.) We want you to do the assigned readings, attend the lectures, participate in the discussions, review the slide shows, think hard about the topics, discuss them with others in our class, and then write your papers. The purpose of writing these papers is to learn how to develop and defend your own ideas, not someone else’s ideas. (If you do end up incorporating an idea from someone else into your paper, that is fine, but you must properly cite your source. If you do not, you will be in violation of UMass’s academic honesty policy, which we will apply very strictly. Please talk to your TA if you have any questions about this.)

All students are encouraged to take advantage of the resources offered by UMass's [Writing Center](#) and [Student Success](#) program. But by far the best way to get help on your papers is by meeting with your TA during office hours.

Short Paper Assignments

- ❖ **First short paper assignment:** Choose one of the topics from our first unit (What is life? What is death? What is dying? What will happen to us after we die?), and write a 1000-1350-word paper (that's about 3-4 pages) in which you (i) introduce the topic; (ii) formulate and explain your favorite view about that topic; (iii) present, explain, and evaluate your favorite argument for that view; and (iv) present, explain, and evaluate what you take to be the best argument against that view. (1000-1350 words is the ideal length. If your paper is shorter than 1000 words, it is probably not detailed or substantive enough. If it is longer than 1350 words, it probably either contains too much material or else needs to be edited for concision. Your paper should have normal fonts and margins.) ***You must submit your paper through the course website on Canvas.***

- ❖ **Second short paper assignment:** Choose one of the topics from our second unit (Epicurus's puzzle about the evil of death, one of the other puzzles about the evil of death, the question of whether immortality would be a good thing, or The Paradox of Grief), and write a 1000-1350-word paper (that's about 3-4 pages) in which you (i) introduce the topic; (ii) formulate and explain your favorite view about that topic; (iii) present, explain, and evaluate your favorite argument for that view; and (iv) present, explain, and evaluate what you take to be the best argument against that view. (1000-1350 words is the ideal length. If your paper is shorter than 1000 words, it is probably not detailed or substantive enough. If it is longer than 1350 words, it probably either contains too much material or else needs to be edited for concision. Your paper should have normal fonts and margins.) ***You must submit your paper through the course website on Canvas.***

- ❖ **Third short paper assignment:** Write a 1000-1350-word paper (that's about 3-4 pages) on the question of what makes a life meaningful in which you (i) introduce the topic; (ii) formulate and explain your favorite view about that topic; (iii) present, explain, and evaluate your favorite argument for that view; and (iv) present, explain, and evaluate what you take to be the best argument against that view. (1000-1350 words is the ideal length. If your paper is shorter than 1000 words, it is probably not detailed or substantive enough. If it is longer than 1350 words, it probably either contains too much material or else needs to be edited for

concision. Your paper should have normal fonts and margins.) *You must submit your paper through the course website on Canvas.*

- ❖ **Fourth short paper assignment:** Choose one of the topics from our fourth unit (Why are we here? Should love always be the main goal for people like us, or is it sometimes more appropriate to feel anger? Would it be better never to exist? Can there be value in a Godless universe?), and write a 1000-1350-word paper (that's about 3-4 pages) in which you (i) introduce the topic; (ii) formulate and explain your favorite view about that topic; (iii) present, explain, and evaluate your favorite argument for that view; and (iv) present, explain, and evaluate what you take to be the best argument against that view. (1000-1350 words is the ideal length. If your paper is shorter than 1000 words, it is probably not detailed or substantive enough. If it is longer than 1350 words, it probably either contains too much material or else needs to be edited for concision. Your paper should have normal fonts and margins.) *You must submit your paper through the course website on Canvas.*

Grade Scale

93-100	A
90-92.99	A-
87-89.99	B+
83-86.99	B
80-82.99	B-
77-79.99	C+
73-76.99	C
70-72.99	C-
67-69.99	D+
63-66.99	D
60-62.99	D-
0-59.99	F

Schedule

Date	Topic/Assignment	Reading
Jan 30	Course intro	Handout: <i>On Arguments</i>
31	Discussion: Validity and soundness	
Feb 4	What is life?	Feldman, Chapter 2

	6	What is death?	Feldman, Chapter 4
	7	Discussion: Life and death	
	11	What is dying?	Feldman, Chapter 5
	13	What happens to us after we die?	Feldman, Chapter 6
	14	Discussion: What happens after we die?	
	18	Epicurus's puzzle and Feldman's solution	Feldman, Chapter 8
	20	<i>No class</i> (Monday schedule)	
	21	Discussion: Epicurus's puzzle	
	23	<i>First short paper due at 5pm</i>	
	25	Other puzzles about the evil of death	Feldman, Chapter 9
	27	Immortality	
	28	Discussion: Other puzzles; immortality	
Mar	4	The Paradox of Grief	Chan, Sections 0-3
	6	Blame and forgiveness	Chan, Sections 4-5
	7	Discussion: Grief, blame, and forgiveness	
	11	What makes a life meaningful?	Wolf, pp. 1-13
	13	What makes a life meaningful?	Wolf, pp. 13-25
	14	Discussion: What makes a life meaningful?	
	16	<i>Second short paper due at 5pm</i>	
	18	<i>Spring Break</i>	
	20	<i>Spring Break</i>	
	21	<i>Spring Break</i>	
	25	What makes a life meaningful?	Wolf, pp. 25-33
	27	What makes a life meaningful?	Wolf, pp. 34-40
	28	Discussion: What makes a life meaningful?	
Apr	1	What makes a life meaningful?	Wolf, pp. 40-48
	3	What makes a life meaningful?	Wolf, pp. 48-63
	4	Discussion: What makes a life meaningful?	
	8	Achievement	Bradford, pp. 58-66
	10	Achievement	Bradford, pp. 66-73
	11	Discussion: Bradford on achievement	
	13	<i>Third short paper due at 5pm</i>	
	15	Why are we here?	
	17	<i>No class</i> (Pacific APA)	
	18	<i>No discussion section</i> (Monday schedule)	
	22	Love and anger	Cherry
	24	Is it better never to exist?	Benatar, Sections I-III

	25	Discussion: Love and anger	
	29	Is it better never to exist?	Benatar, Sections IV-VI
May	1	Can there be value in a Godless universe?	Wielenberg, pp. 216-220
	2	Discussion: Is it better never to exist?	
	6	Can there be value in a Godless universe?	Wielenberg, pp. 220-226
	8	Course wrap-up	
	9	Discussion: Value in a Godless universe; course evaluations	
	11	<i>Fourth short paper due at 5pm</i>	