

Philosophy 180: *Death and the Meaning of Life*

Ned Markosian
Department of Philosophy
University of Massachusetts Amherst
markosian@umass.edu
Spring 2026
4 credits

Lectures: Monday and Wednesday, 1:25-2:15, Integrative Learning Center S240.

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: Monday and Wednesday 2:30-3:30pm, and by appointment. South College E421.

Teaching Assistants:

- Kam-Ho Chan (kamhochan@umass.edu). Office hours: Monday and Wednesday 12:00-1:00pm, and by appointment. South College E306.
- Kory Matteoli (bmatteoli@umass.edu). Office hours: Monday and Wednesday 12:00-1:00pm, and by appointment. South College E320.

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.

In this course we will consider a range of questions related to death and the meaning of life, including the following:

- What exactly are you – a physical body, an immaterial soul, or something else?
- What exactly are life and death? What is dying?
- What will happen to you after you die?
- Is it possible that you will be reincarnated?
- How can your death be bad for you, if (as many people believe) you will not exist after dying?
- Would immortality be a good thing or a bad thing?
- When a loved one has died, does it make sense to continue to grieve forever, since the reason for grieving never changes?
- Does it ever make sense – is it even possible – to rationally forgive someone for a seriously bad thing they have done?
- Is there something that can make our lives meaningful? If so, what is it?
- Might it be that the African tradition of Communitarianism provides the best answer to the question of what makes our lives meaningful?
- Why are we here? Is there some reason or purpose for our existence?
- Could it be that the Buddhist doctrine of suffering and enlightenment offers the best account of the meaning of life?
- 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? Are the two compatible?
- 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?
- Is there any way that our lives could be meaningful if we live 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

- ❖ **Class attendance** (15% of final grade)
- ❖ **Weekly Quizzes in Discussion Section** (20% of final grade)
- ❖ **Midterm Exam** (30% of final grade)
- ❖ **Final Exam** (35% of final grade)

Note: Your entire course grade will be determined by (i) attendance in lectures, (ii) weekly quizzes in discussion sections, (iii) your midterm exam, and (iv) your final exam. There will be no way to earn extra credit or otherwise improve your grade in the class.

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 Cell Phones

Empirical research shows that nearly everyone is better off not using any electronic device in a lecture class – including laptops, tablets, and cell phones. The studies show that students learn much better when they focus on the professor and their classmates, 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, cell phones, 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. This will make it possible for a student to take notes on a device while viewing a recording of a lecture. Also, lecture notes taken by a TA will be available to students who qualify for such an accommodation.)

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.)
- Carpenter, Amber D., “The Buddha’s Suffering,” in Carpenter, *Indian Buddhist Philosophy* (Routledge, 2014), pp. 1-19. (Available on Canvas.)
- Chan, Rebecca, “Enduring Emotions and the (Im)Possibility of Forgiveness,” *Disputatio* (forthcoming). (Available on Canvas.)
- 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.)
- Gyekye, Kwame, “[African Ethics](#),” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

- Markosian, Ned, "Meaning in Life and the Nature of Time," in Iddo Landau (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life* (Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 189-202. (Available on Canvas.)
- 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 Attendance

Attendance will be taken in the lectures beginning the second week of classes (Feb. 9th), which means that it will be taken on 24 days. Each student will be allowed four unexcused absences, and zero excused absences.

About Weekly Quizzes

There will be a quiz every week but one in your discussion section. (That's 11 quizzes. On the one day when there is not a quiz in your discussion section there will be a midterm exam.) 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 particular discussion section, and you get pre-approval from your TA, you may choose to write a Quiz Paper for that day. (Note: This option is available only one time for each student. Other missed quizzes after that will have to count among your three lowest quiz grades.) A Quiz Paper is a two-page paper (double-spaced, with one-inch margins) in which you (i) summarize the most important 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 eight best quiz grades will count toward your final grade.

About Exams

The midterm and final exams will be in-class, closed-book exams. For each one there will be a set of essay questions posted in advance, and on the day of the exam, I will choose

one of those questions for you to answer. You will have 45 minutes to write your answer in a bluebook.

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	Reading
Feb 2	Course intro	Handout: <i>On Arguments</i>
4	What are we?	
6	Discussion: What are we?	
9	What is life?	Feldman, Chapter 2
11	What is death?	Feldman, Chapter 4
13	Discussion: Life and death	
16	No class (Presidents' Day)	
18	What is dying?	Feldman, Chapter 5
19	(Monday schedule) What happens to us after we die?	Feldman, Chapter 6
20	Discussion: What happens after we die?	
23	Reincarnation	
25	Epicurus's puzzle and Feldman's solution	Feldman, Chapter 8
27	Discussion: Reincarnation and Epicurus's puzzle	
Mar 2	Other puzzles about the evil of death	Feldman, Chapter 9
4	Immortality	
6	Discussion: Immortality	

	9 The Paradox of Grief 11 Blame and forgiveness 13 Discussion: <i>Midterm exam</i>	Chan, Sections 0-3 Chan, Sections 4-5
	16 <i>Spring Break</i> 18 <i>Spring Break</i> 20 <i>Spring Break</i>	
	23 What makes a life meaningful? 25 What makes a life meaningful? 27 Discussion: What makes a life meaningful?	Wolf, pp. 1-18 Wolf, pp. 18-33
Apr	30 What makes a life meaningful? 1 What makes a life meaningful? 3 Discussion: What makes a life meaningful?	Wolf, pp. 34-48 Wolf, pp. 48-63
	6 Achievement 8 Communitarianism 10 Discussion: Achievement and Communitarianism	Bradford Gyekye, Sections 7-8
	13 Meaning in life and the nature of time 15 Why are we here? 17 Discussion: Why are we here?	Markosian (optional)
	20 <i>No class</i> (Patriot's Day) 22 A Buddhist account of why we are here 24 (Monday schedule) Love and anger and injustice	Carpenter Cherry
	27 Is it better never to exist? 29 Nonexistence 1 Discussion: Is it better never to exist?	Benatar, Sections I-III Benatar, Sections IV-VI
May	4 Can there be value in a Godless universe? 6 Can there be value in a Godless universe? 8 Discussion: Value in a Godless universe	Wielenberg, Sections 1-2 Wielenberg, Sections 3-5
	TBD <i>Final Exam</i>	