

Death and the Meaning of Life

Philosophy 180 - Summer 2021 Syllabus

Basic course information

Instructor: Justin Mooney
Email: jmooney@umass.edu
Office: South College E410
Office hours: by appointment

Course dates: Jul 6 – Aug 13, Summer 2021
Days: N/A (online course)
Time: N/A (online course)
Room: N/A (online course)

Course description and objectives

Is death bad? If it is, what makes it bad? What happens after death? Is there a heaven or a hell? Are we reborn? And what implications do the answers to these questions have for the meaning of life? This class will focus on questions like these. We will explore what philosophers from diverse traditions, both religious and secular, have had to say about them, and we will learn how to critically evaluate their arguments and views.

Assignments

Discussion posts: Each week there will be three readings to complete. You will be asked to participate in online discussions about the readings in a discussion thread on our course Blackboard page. Minimally, you are required to post one written reaction to each reading. These posts should be short: aim for about one paragraph. Some of them may be replies to other students' posts.

Argument Evaluations: Throughout the course I will post pre-recorded lectures on Blackboard in which I will present philosophical arguments based on the readings. You will be required to write a total of four "argument evaluations," each of which is a two-page critical evaluation of one of the philosophical arguments I present in the pre-recorded lectures. More instructions about these argument evaluations will be provided as the course proceeds.

Closing Reflection: Your final assignment in this class will be to write a 5 page "closing reflection" about what makes a life meaningful. In this reflection, you will engage with some of the philosophical arguments we have considered and explain how your view on what makes a life meaningful has (or has not) changed from what it was before this class. More instructions about this reflection will be provided as the due date approaches.

Grades

Your final grade in this class breaks down as follows. The discussion posts will be worth 20% of the final grade; the four argument evaluations will be worth 60% of your final grade (15% each); and the closing reflection will be worth 20% of your final grade.

This class will use a standard grading scale:

A	93-100%	C	73-76%
A-	90-92%	C-	70-72%
B+	87-89%	D+	67-69%
B	83-86%	D	65-66%
B-	80-82	F	0-65%
C+	77-79%		

Policies

Attendance: This is an online course, so there is no traditional attendance component. However, you are expected to keep up with the course readings and the pre-recorded lectures. Readings should be completed by noon on the day that they are listed on the course schedule. Lectures will be posted at noon on those same days, and should be viewed within 48 hours from the time they are posted.

Extensions: Extensions may be granted in special circumstances. Otherwise, assignments will be deducted by 1/3 letter grade for each day they are late (e.g. a B+ paper drops to a B paper if it is one day late; it drops to a B- if it is two days late; etc.). Assignments more than one week late will not be accepted.

Class Discussion: This course will include an online discussion component where students will post in discussion forums on the course Moodle site. Students are expected to be respectful and kind in these discussions.

Academic Honesty: As always, academic honesty is expected. The University policies regarding academic honesty will be followed in this class. For more information, see: <https://www.umass.edu/honesty/>

Accessibility: I intend this class to be accessible to all students. Students who need or would benefit from relevant accommodations should talk to me and also register with disability services. For more information, see: <https://www.umass.edu/disability/>

List of Readings

All of the required readings for this course will be provided on the course Moodle page. Those readings are listed below.

- Benatar, David (1997). "Why it is Better Never to Come into Existence." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34(3): 345-355.
- Betty, Stafford (2010). "Dvaita, Advaita, and Viśiṣṭādvaita: Contrasting Views of Mokṣa." *Asian Philosophy* 20(2): 215-224.
- Bortolotti, Lisa (2010). "Agency, Life Extension, and the Meaning of Life." *The Monist* 93(1): 38-56.
- Blessing, Kimberly (2013). "Atheism and the Meaningfulness of Life." In *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (S. Bullivant and M. Ruse, eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. 104-
- Blumenfeld, David (2009). "Living Life Over Again." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 79(2): 357-386.
- Bradley, Ben (2008). "The Worst Time to Die." *Ethics* 118(2): 291-314.
- Burley, Mikel (2012). "Atheism and the Gift of Death." *Religious Studies* 48(4): 533-546.
- Cyr, Taylor (2016). "A Puzzle About Death: Can Death be Bad for the Paradise-Bound?" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 80(2): 145-162.
- Fraser, Chris (2013). "Xunzi Versus Zhuangzi: Two Approaches to Death in Classical Chinese Thought." *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 8(3): 410-427.
- Jackson, Liz (2021). "Pascal's Wager: A Pragmatic Argument for Belief in God." *1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology*. Available online at: <<https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2021/01/04/pascals-wager-a-pragmatic-argument-for-belief-in-god/>>.
- Levenbook, Barbara (1984). "Harming Someone After His Death." *Ethics* 94(3): 407-419.
- Lewis, David (2007). "Divine Evil." In *Philosophers Without Gods* (Louise Antony, ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. 231-242.
- Pelser, Adam (2017). "Heavenly Sadness: On the Value of Negative Emotions in Paradise." In *Paradise Understood* (T. R. Byerly and E. Silverman, eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- "Simplicity in Funerals III" in the *Mozi*. Available online at The Chinese Text Project: <<https://ctext.org/mozi/simplicity-in-funerals-iii>>.
- Sederits, Mark (2007). *Buddhism As Philosophy*. England: Ashgate Publishing.
- Stoeber, Michael (1990). "Personal Identity and Rebirth." *Religious Studies* 26(4): 493-500.
- Timmerman, Travis (2021). "Dissolving Death's Time-of-Harm Problem." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming).
- Wolf, Susan (2016). "Meaningfulness: A Third Dimension of The Good Life." *Foundations of Science* 21(2): 253-269.

Class Schedule

*This schedule is subject to change.

Week 1: What is a Good Life?

- July 6 Lecture 1 (intro)
Discussion post 1 (“introduce yourself”) due at noon.
- July 7 Wolf, “Meaningfulness: A Third Dimension of the Good Life.”
Discussion post 2 due at noon.
- July 8 Bloomenfeld, “Living Life Over Again.”
Discussion post 3 due at noon.
- July 9 Benatar, “Why it is Better Never to Come into Existence.”
Discussion post 4 due at noon.

Week 2: Is Death Bad?

- July 12 Bortolotti, “Agency, Life Extension, and the Meaning of Life.”
Discussion post 5 due at noon.
- July 14 Timmerman, “Dissolving Death’s Time-of-Harm Problem.”
Discussion post 6 due at noon.
- July 16 Bradley, “The Worst Time to Die” (up to p. 301).
Discussion post 7 due at noon.
- July 17 Argument Evaluation 1 due at 11:59pm.

Week 3: Life and Death Without God

- July 19 Blessing, “Atheism and the Meaningfulness of Life.”
Discussion post 8 due at noon.
- July 21 Burley, “Atheism and the Gift of Death.”
Discussion post 9 due at noon.
- July 23 Jackson, “Pascal’s Wager.”
Discussion post 10 due at noon.
- July 24 Argument evaluation 2 due at 11:59pm.

Week 4: Heaven and Hell

- July 26 Lewis, "Divine Evil."
Discussion post 11 due at noon.
- July 28 Pelser, "Heavenly Sadness."
Discussion post 12 due at noon.
- July 30 Cyr, "A Puzzle about Death."
Discussion post 13 due at noon.
- July 31 Argument evaluation 3 due at 11:59pm.

Week 5: Rebirth and Liberation

- August 2 Stoeber, "Personal Identity and Rebirth."
Discussion post 14 due at noon.
- August 4 Sederits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, pp. 18-27.
Discussion post 15 due at noon.
- August 6 Betty, "Dvaita, Advaita, and Viśiṣṭādvaita."
Discussion post 16 due at noon.
- August 7 Argument evaluation 4 due at 11:59pm.

Week 6: Honoring the Dead

- August 9 Fraser, "Xunzi Versus Zhuangzi."
Discussion post 17 due at noon.
- August 11 The *Mozi*, "Simplicity in Funerals III."
Discussion post 18 due at noon.
- August 13 Levenbook, "Harming Someone After His Death."
Discussion post 19 due at noon.
- August 14 Closing reflection due at 11:59pm.

There is no final exam in this class.