

Philosophy 330

Topics in Moral Theory: Death, Well-Being, and Morality

Professor Behrends
Fall 2014

Stevenson 350 A
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:35 – 2:50

So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more. – Epicurus, “Letter to Menoecus”

Course Description and Goals

All of us will die. Most of us find this fact at least sometimes disconcerting, and maybe even terrifying, as Epicurus suggests in the passage above. Certainly I would feel as if a great harm awaited me if I learned that I would die within, say, the next month. But what *exactly* is the nature of the harm that death presents? Epicurus seems to be saying here that, in fact, death *can't* harm us, an idea that seems to fly in the face of common sense thinking about our mortality.

In this course, we will examine the relationship between death and *well-being*, or how well our lives fare for us. We will be concerned with philosophical questions of the following sort:

- Is death bad for the person who dies? If so, in what way is it bad?
- Can the dead be harmed? If my wishes for what happens after my death are not fulfilled, has that made my life go worse for me?
- Prior to my birth, I did not exist. Should I have the same attitudes about my future non-existence as I do about my past non-existence? If not, why not? Is it rational to *fear* my death?
- At *what time* is my death bad for me? And is there a better or worse time to die during one's life?
- Would human lives be better if we were immortal? Could immortality make life *worse*?
- Can life have meaning in the face of our certain deaths?
- What are the moral implications of the relationship between death and well-being?

In order to help us think about these questions, we will examine both historical and contemporary philosophical texts. **The first goal of the course, then, is to enable students to familiarize themselves with key philosophical arguments regarding the relationships among death, well-being, and morality.** The course is not only about learning *content*, however. We will also endeavor to promote the development of certain *skills* that have application beyond the content of this course. **The second goal of the course is to enable students to further develop skills related to critical reading, exegetical and argumentative writing, exegetical and argumentative speaking, and critical reasoning more generally.** As you will see below, all of the assignments required for this course are designed to further one or both of these goals.

This is an advanced course in philosophy, and will be taught as such. This means that I will presuppose a certain facility with philosophical reading, writing, and speaking. Students with no background in philosophy may wish to read ahead at the beginning of the course to determine whether they are comfortable with the kind of material assigned for this course.

Instructor Contact Information and Course Communication Information

Email: jmbehre@ilstu.edu

Office: 339 Stevenson Hall

Office Hours: Wednesdays, 1pm – 3pm, and by appointment

I'm usually quite quick to reply to e-mails. It's very rare that I will take longer than 24 hours to respond to an email, and it's usually much faster than that (except on weekends). Please understand, though, that I cannot *guarantee* very quick responses, so please adjust your expectations accordingly. You are of course welcome to email me with any questions or concerns you have, but you should be aware that I might respond by inviting you to set up a meeting to discuss the issue in person; email is sometimes not well suited to philosophical discussion or instruction.

I know that my office hours will not be convenient for everyone. *Please* feel free to schedule appointments with me at different times if you'd like to come by.

I will communicate announcements about the course using ReggieNet's communication tool; messages will be sent to you both via ReggieNet and email. ***It is imperative that you check your ISU email account.*** In the past year, I have had several students report to me that they do not check their student email accounts for weeks at a time. I don't understand this phenomenon, but I'm including this note here to make explicit my expectation that I will be able to contact you by email, if needed. If you do not have regular access to your email account, please see me so we can discuss some alternative arrangement.

Required Texts

Well-Being and Death. Ben Bradley. Oxford University Press, 2009.

I will also post additional readings to the Modules section of the ReggieNet page. In the reading schedule below, all section numbers (e.g., "1.1 – 1.3" for 9/9) refer to the Bradley book. All other materials will be found on ReggieNet.

Course Requirements

The following requirements will determine your grade for the course:

Reading Memos: 40%

At the beginning of Week 2, I will divide the course into two groups. Group A will be responsible for reading memos on Tuesdays, while Group B will be responsible for reading memos on Thursdays. Each student will complete 10 reading memos. See the Reading and Assignment Schedule below for the exact dates.

These assignments should be at least one page in length, and no longer than two (no more than double-spaced, no less than 1.5-spaced). In your memo, you must do all of the following:

- i. Identify some claim for which the author has argued. This can be any conclusion for which the author argues in the assigned reading for the relevant day. Provide a page citation for the claim in question.

- ii. Briefly explain how the author argues for that conclusion, providing citations to the text when appropriate. If you are comfortable representing arguments in premise-and-conclusion form, you may do so, but you are *not* required to.
- iii. Critically assess *at least one* part of that argument. That is, you should evaluate the argument by either attacking or defending some part of it.
- iv. Identify *at least two* questions that you would like the class to discuss. These might include: questions about some part of the text that you found confusing; questions about whether you've represented the author's argument correctly; questions about whether the class agrees with the assessment you've given of the argument; new questions that the reading has caused you to wonder about, etc. The idea here is to come prepared with *explicitly pre-formulated* potential topics for discussion.

You must submit your Reading Memo to me, via email, no later than the midnight prior to the relevant class meeting. For example, Group A must submit their Reading Memos on Feinberg's "Harm to Others" no later than the midnight prior to our meeting on Tuesday, August 26th (see Reading and Assignment Schedule Below).

I will provide hard copies in class of all of the Reading Memos prepared for the day's meeting. During class I will ask some students to talk through the memo that they have prepared, and then to act as the primary discussion leader as the rest of the class takes up discussion of the argument presented, and of the questions raised in the memo. It is very unlikely that everyone who writes a memo will be able to discuss theirs with the class on any particular day, but you should *always* be prepared to do so. No one will go long stretches of meetings without having their memos selected for discussion.

Reading Memos will be graded both on their content, and on the student's discussion performance in class (when selected, of course). I will provide brief feedback when necessary in order to help you improve your future performance in both areas.

Attendance and Participation: 10%

I move directly to attendance and participation because of its relationship to the Reading Memos. As the description of the memos suggest, our class meetings will be primarily student-driven. It is your work and your interests that will drive discussion. I will moderate, and of course provide clarification and input when helpful. The idea is to run the class in a "seminar style," in which the students themselves dictate which topics and arguments will receive the most attention.

Because of this format, attendance and participation are *absolutely crucial*. The class will simply not work if you do not come prepared to actively engage with the assigned material. To that end, the attendance policy is somewhat strict. You are allowed 2 absences, no questions asked, with no negative effect for this portion of your grade. Absences above that threshold will be excused only for compelling reasons, such as documented illness, etc.

Critical Paper: 20%

The critical paper should be 5 – 7 pages long, and should constitute a critical evaluation of at least one argument that we have encountered in the readings. Students are allowed, and, indeed, *encouraged*, to develop their Critical Papers by expanding on material from one of their Writing Memos. More information about the Critical Paper will be provided later in the term.

Seminar Paper: 30%

The seminar paper should be 10 – 15 pages long, and should constitute a more sustained argumentative paper about one of the central topics that we have discussed during the course. Students are allowed, and, indeed, *encouraged* to develop their Seminar Papers by expanding on material from one of their Writing Memos, the Critical Paper, or both. More information about the Seminar Paper will be provided later in the term.

Grading Scale

Final grades will be calculated as follows:

A 100 – 90%

B 89 – 80%

C 79 – 70%

D 69 – 60%

F <59%

Grades that fall in between these divisions will be rounded up or down at my discretion. There will be no opportunity for extra credit in the course.

Reading and Assignment Schedule

	Tuesday	Thursday
Week 1: NO CLASS MEETINGS <i>See email announcement. Also available on ReggieNet</i>	8/19: NO CLASS <i>See email announcement. Also available on ReggieNet</i>	8/21: NO CLASS <i>See email announcement. Also available on ReggieNet</i>
Week 2: Course introduction, and The Epicurean Challenge	8/26: Epicurus, “Letter to Menoecus” Lucretius, excerpt from <i>De Rerum Natura</i>	8/28: Rosenbaum, “How to be Dead and Not Care” Suits, “Why Death is Not Bad for the One Who Died”
Week 3: Posthumous Harm	9/2: Feinberg, “Harm to Others” Group A Reading Memo	9/4: Portmore, “Desire Fulfillment and Posthumous Harm” Group B Reading Memo
Week 4: Death and Well-Being	9/9: Bradley, 1.1 – 1.3 Group A Reading Memo	9/11: Bradley, 1.4 – 1.5 Group B Reading Memo
Week 5: The Deprivation Account of Death’s Badness	9/16: Bradley, 2.1 – 2.5 Group A Reading Memo	9/18: Belshaw, “Death, Value, and Desire” Group B Reading Memo
Week 6: The Symmetry Problem, and the Rationality of Fearing Death	9/23: Johansson, “Past and Future Non-Existence” Group A Reading Memo	9/25: Draper, “Death and Rational Emotion” Group B Reading Memo
Week 7: When is Death Bad?	9/30: Bradley, 3.1 – 3.3 Group A Reading Memo	10/2: Bradley, 3.4 – 3.5 Group B Reading Memo

<u>Week 8:</u> When is it Worst to Die?	10/7: Bradley, 4.1 – 4.3 Group A Reading Memo	10/9: Bradley, 4.4 – 4.5 Group B Reading Memo *Critical Paper due*
<u>Week 9:</u> Abortion	10/14: Marquis, “Abortion and Death” Group A Reading Memo	10/16: Nichols, “Abortion, Time-Relative Interests, and Futures Like Ours” Group B Reading Memo
<u>Week 10:</u> Can Death be Defeated?	10/21: McMahan, excerpt from <i>The Ethics of Killing</i> Group A Reading Memo	10/23: Bradley, 5.1 – 5.4 and Conclusion Group B Reading Memo
<u>Week 11:</u> Does Bringing Someone <i>Into</i> Existence Harm them?	10/28: Benatar, “Why It Is Better Never to Come Into Existence” Group A Reading Memo	10/30: Bradley, “Asymmetries in Benefiting, Harming and Creating” Group B Reading Memo
<u>Week 12:</u> Immortality and Human Well-Being	11/4: Williams, “The Makropulos Case” Group A Reading Memo	11/6: Fischer, “Immortality” Group B Reading Memo
<u>Week 13:</u> The Meaning of Life	11/11: TBD Group A Reading Memo	11/13: TBD Group B Reading Memo
<u>Week 14:</u> Topic TBD	11/18: TBD	11/20: TBD *Last day to submit optional draft of Seminar Paper*
<u>Week 15:</u> Thanksgiving Vacation!	11/25: No Class!	11/27: No Class!
<u>Week 16:</u> Topic TBD	12/2: TBD	12/4: TBD *Final draft of Seminar Paper due*

Special Needs

Any student needing to arrange a reasonable accommodation for a documented disability should contact Disability Concerns at 350 Fell Hall, 309-438-5853, www.disabilityconcerns.ilstu.edu.

Academic Honesty

Cheating of any kind, including plagiarism, will not be tolerated. A student’s placement of his or her name on any academic exercise shall be regarded as assurance that the work is the student’s own. Students who have questions regarding issues of academic honesty should consult the Code of Student Conduct, B1 (Academic Integrity), which outlines unacceptable behaviors in academic matters. If you are unsure about whether or not something is dishonest, please contact me. If you are found to be in

violation of the university's policies governing academic dishonesty, you will be penalized in accordance with university guidelines. For further information on the university's policies concerning academic dishonesty, see www.deanofstudents.illinoisstate.edu/students/get-help/crr/academic-dishonesty.shtml.

Classroom Etiquette

As in all classroom settings, it is important that we be respectful of each other's time and views. Please remember that, in philosophy, no matter how confident you are that your position is correct, or that another's is incorrect, it is never appropriate to conduct yourself in a way that demeans the views of your classmates. I don't anticipate any problems with this requirement, but I will moderate discussions as necessary to avoid offensive behavior, and I will also address any problems individually with offending parties.

I *do* allow the use of laptops in class, but you should of course use them only for purposes directly relevant to our course. You should abide by this rule for your own sake, but if you need extra motivation, you should know that there are empirical studies that show that when a student uses an electronic device for non-class-related activities, it has the result that *other students are less able to concentrate and retain information*.

I expressly forbid the use of phones in class, except in emergency situations. I will usually provide a verbal warning for first-time offenders. Egregious violators, though, even first-time offenders, may be asked to leave class. Habitual violators will be asked to withdraw from the course, in accordance with University guidelines. If you know in advance that you will need to be reachable by phone during class, please do let me know.

A final special note about etiquette for this course: This class covers a topic that is extremely emotionally charged. It is overwhelmingly likely that every member of this class, myself included, has experienced some painful encounter with death. It is not unreasonable to think that a member of our course currently has a loved one with a terminal disease, or that one of us has come close to dying him or herself, for example. With this in mind, it's especially important that we be mindful of one another. Be on the lookout for comments that might be upsetting, and act accordingly. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't make them, but instead that you should make them conscientiously. In short, let's just agree to look out for each other's emotional well-being as we move forward.

Other Concerns

Life at college can be very challenging. Students sometimes feel overwhelmed, lost, anxious, or depressed. Sometimes they experience relationship difficulties and low self-esteem. I care about your success in this course, and I care even more about your success in life. Please feel free to come to me if you're struggling. I'm happy to listen and to help you find help. Student Counseling Services is staffed by experienced, professional psychologists and counselors, who are attuned to the needs of college students. Their services are free and confidential. Find out more by calling 309-438-3655 or consulting www.counseling.illinoisstate.edu.