

**THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO**  
**DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY**  
**Philosophy 2073F: Philosophy and Death**  
**Previously Philosophy 111A/B, Philosophy 153**

Summer Term 2011  
Tuesdays & Thursdays, 6:00-9:00  
Kresge Building, Room K-103

Instructor: Nicholas McGinnis  
Stevenson Hall, Room 2150 (Office Hours: TBA)  
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**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

The struggle with the inevitability of death is universal: from Epicurus to Marcus Aurelius, from Michel de Montaigne to Goethe, from Freud to Simone de Beauvoir we find an abiding concern with death and dying. The French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard, upon being diagnosed with the cancer that killed him, wrote jestingly that “death orders matters well, since the very fact of your absence makes the world distinctly less worthy of being lived in.”<sup>1</sup> More seriously, the samurai Yamamoto Tsunemoto suggested, in his *Hagakure*, that “meditation on inevitable death should be performed daily.”<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, ever the pessimist, argued that life and death aren’t in opposition, but that “the living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type,” emphasizing the continuity between the living and non-living: we are material, hence we are mortal.<sup>3</sup>

While this course takes up personal death as an entry-point, our concern with mortality isn’t solely existential. What *is* death? Can it be identified with cessation of bodily function or brain activity? Is there an afterlife? Is death to be feared? Moral questions arise in connection with mortality: deep and troubling questions about suicide, killing, euthanasia, capital punishment and abortion. We will discuss various ethical frameworks in relation to these topics and students will be expected to defend their own positions in response to the readings. The objective of the course is, first, to introduce students to key issues in the philosophy of death; and second to enable them to write clear and cogently argued papers on the topics considered.

**TEXTS**

Samantha Brennan and Robert J. Stainton (eds.), *Philosophy and Death: Introductory Readings*, Broadview Press, 2009, ISBN: 9781551119021. Available at the UWO Bookstore.

**REQUIREMENTS**

<u>Assignment</u>	<u>Worth</u>	<u>Due Date</u>
3 Short reading responses	5% each (15% total)	(Students choose from the readings)
1 Paper outline	10%	Tuesday June 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2010
1 Final Paper	35%	Tuesday June 10 <sup>th</sup> , 2010
1 Final Exam	35%	Tuesday June 10 <sup>th</sup> , 2010
Class participation:	5%	n/a

Short reading responses should be ~400 words detailing the main argument of a reading and an original question, problem, supporting argument or objection about it.

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<sup>1</sup> *Cool Memories V*, 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Hagakure*, chapter 11.

<sup>3</sup> *The Gay Science*, §109.

The final paper must be between 1,250-1,500 words and present a clear position and argument on a topic (a list of suggested topics will be provided).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the purpose of the outline is to help with the *structure* of the essay, which should never be written off the top of one's head! The outline should be about a page long, indicating what topic will be considered, what position will be taken, and what arguments offered. More will be said in class on what will be expected in the essay and the outline.

A course reading schedule will be made available on WebCT in time for the first class.

Please note that a printed copy of the assignments must be submitted on the due date; students will also be required to submit work to Turnitin.com. A penalty of 5% points per day will be levied against late assignments.

### **AUDIT**

Students wishing to audit the course should consult with the instructor prior to or during the first week of classes.

The **Department of Philosophy Policies** which govern the conduct, standards, and expectations for student participation in Philosophy courses is available in the Undergraduate section of the Department of Philosophy website at <http://www.uwo.ca/philosophy/undergraduate/policies.html>. It is your responsibility to understand the policies set out by the Senate and the Department of Philosophy, and thus ignorance of these policies cannot be used as grounds of appeal.

### **COURSE READING SCHEDULE**

May 10<sup>th</sup>. Introduction: What is death? Why philosophy and death? Also: death, cosmology and thermodynamics.

May 12<sup>th</sup>. *Existentialism and Death*, Paul Edwards.

May 17<sup>th</sup>: Excerpts from the *Phaedo*, Plato; excerpts from *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*, John Perry.

May 19<sup>th</sup>: *Traditional Christian Belief in the Resurrection of the Body*, Stephen T. Davis; *What is Death? The Crisis of Criteria*, Louis Pojman.

May 24<sup>th</sup>: *The Metaphysics of Brain Death*, Jeff McMahan; *The Enigma of Death*, Fred Feldman.

May 26<sup>th</sup>: *Letter to Menoeceus & The Principal Doctrines*, Epicurus; excerpts from *The Nature of Things*, Lucretius; *Death*, Thomas Nagel; *The Evil of Death*, Harry Silverstein.

May 31<sup>st</sup>: *The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality*, Bernard Williams; *Why Immortality is Not So Bad*, John Martin Fischer.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, if the question is the morality of suicide, the essay should first clearly state whether suicide is permissible or not (the 'thesis statement') and explain why or why not (the 'argument'). Consider a possible rebuttal to your position and explain why it is wrong (the counter-argument). Conclude by recapitulating your position and perhaps suggesting other applications of your argument (the conclusion'). Structure is *freedom*, everybody. Really!

June 2<sup>nd</sup>: *Feminist Philosophers Turn Their Thoughts to Death*, Samantha Brennan; *Why Abortion is Immoral*, Don Marquis; *You Can't Lose What you Ain't Never Had: A Reply to Marquis on Abortion*, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong.

June 7<sup>th</sup>: *Active and Passive Euthanasia*, James Rachels; *The Intentional Termination of Life*, Bonnie Steinbock. *The Morality and Rationality of Suicide*, Richard Brandt; *Assisted Suicide: The Philosopher's Brief*, John Rawls, Judith J. Thomson, Robert Nozick, T.M. Scanlon, Thomas Nagel. **PAPER OUTLINE DUE**

June 14<sup>th</sup>: *The Sanctity of Life*, Jonathan Glover; *The Wrongness of Killing and the Badness of Death*, Jeff McMahan; *The Badness of Death, the Wrongness of Killing, and the Moral Importance of Autonomy*, Samantha Brennan.

June 16<sup>th</sup>: **FINAL EXAMINATION; FINAL PAPER DUE**