

PH 100: Intro to Philosophy: Life & Death

Time: T/Th 10am-11:30am

Location: TBD

Instructor: Lewis Wang

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Office Hours: On Zoom by appointment

Course Description

This course focuses on two of the most fundamental and inalienable conditions of human existence, namely life and death. It aims to explore two central questions: what is the meaning of life, and how should we approach death? How we answer these two questions has a profound impact on how we live our life, how we interact with others, and what kind of project we commit our life to. For this reason, life and death have been two of the most ancient and enduring topics that are discussed by philosophers across the globe. There is hardly a better way to introduce one to philosophy than to get one to think about questions related to life and death.

In this course, we will explore and examine answers to our two central questions by thinkers across a number of philosophical traditions. These include Buddhist thoughts as presented by contemporary Buddhist scholars, the 19th Century European philosophers Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Existentialist philosophers Heidegger, Camus and de Beauvoir, Classical Chinese philosophers Zhuangzi and Mengzi, and famous contemporary analytic philosophers such as Thomas Nagel, Bernard Williams, and Shelly Kagan. By exposing students to a range of diverse perspectives on life and death, this course aims to engage students with these different views, to invite them to reflect on their own life, and ultimately to get students mentally and intellectually more prepared for some of the inevitable decisions and situations in their life.

Learning Objectives

The primary goal of this course is to get students to seriously engage with various questions on the topics of life and death as well as the existing answers to those questions, and ultimately to get students to form their own answers to those questions that they can apply to their own life. In addition, this course will be reading and writing intensive, with the aim of cultivating in students the following abilities:

- The ability to read and understand complex and abstract texts from both historical and contemporary times.
- The ability to clearly and concisely summarize the main question, claim and argument of a piece of writing, both verbally and in writing.

- The ability to analyze and evaluate an argument, including its logical structure and the strength of its premises.
- The ability to connect wisdom of the past to our life and the current world.
- The ability to keep an open mind to foreign, antiquated, unfamiliar or seemingly strange thoughts and conceptual frameworks.

Required Texts

All readings will be made available on **Blackboard** in pdf format.

Course Assignments and Grading

Participation and Attendance (15%)

Participation in class is a central and essential part of this course. There are multiple ways in which one can participate in this course: answer my questions, ask questions, participate in group discussions, and talk to me in office hours, etc. At the end of the semester, students are required to complete a participation self-assessment form, on which you will be asked to reflect on your own attendance and participation performance in the course and give yourself a participation grade. If I think your self-assessment is fair, your self-assessed grade will be your participation grade. If I think you have under- or over-evaluated your performance, I will contact you and make amendment to your self-assessed grade.

Attendance is part of participation and is not separately graded in this course. You cannot participate in class unless you attend the class, after all. There are good reasons and bad reasons to miss classes, but what counts as a good or a bad reason will differ depending on each person's situation. Thus, **I will not take attendance in this course**. Instead, I ask each one of you to **keep track of your own attendance**, especially **how many classes you have missed without what you think is a justifiable reason**. Your standard for what is and is not a good reason to miss a class should be reasonable, and you will be asked to explain your standard in your participation self-assessment form. Bottomline: being sick or having a family emergency is always a good reason to miss a class, and played computer games for too long that you forgot there is class is almost always a bad reason.

Reading Reflections & In-class Reflections (10% each)

Before each week's class, you are required to complete a **reading reflection** about one of the readings from the upcoming week. There is no hard requirement on the length, content or format of the reading reflection, so long as I can see that you have put in the effort to engage with the reading. It can include any thoughts, comments, or reactions you have of that reading, and the writing need not be polished or formal at all. My only requirement is that you include **at least two questions** you find interesting or confusing

about the reading you are discussing. This assignment is meant to help you with your reading process. It is meant to help you gather your thoughts and questions as you read. **It will be graded based on effort rather than quality.** As long as I can sense that you have read and thought about the readings seriously, that is good enough.

The last 5-10 minutes of each class will be dedicated to an in-class reflection exercise. You will be asked to reflect on what you have just learned and discussed in that class and write **one or two paragraphs** on what you find most interesting from that class and what you are still unclear about or want to know more about. You can also add any thought, comment, or question you have regarding that class. Finally, you need to come up with **one potential paper topic** based on what we have covered in that class. **This assignment will also be graded based on effort rather than quality.**

Both kinds of reflections should be submitted on **Blackboard's Discussion Board.**

Papers (2 x 20% = 40%)

There will be two papers in this course, one in the first half of the semester and one in the second. Each paper should be 900-1200 words long, double spaced, Times New Roman, 12 pt font. You will be asked to determine your own paper topics, which you need to clear by me ahead of time. You can select a topic from those you have come up with in your in-class reflections or come up with a new one. My only requirement for paper topics is that the first paper should be on a topic that we covered in the first half of the semester and the second paper should be on a topic we covered in the second half. **If you really have trouble finding a paper topic, please feel free to ask me for some ideas.**

For both papers, you will have the opportunity to revise and resubmit. The process runs as follows:

- For your initial submission, I will give you substantive comments and a grade.
- If you would like a second chance to improve your grade, you can submit a revised version of your essay plus a brief explanation of the changes you have made. I will give you a new grade that takes into account both the quality of the revised version and your effort in making the revision, especially how seriously you have treated my comments and how well you have incorporated them in your revision.
- **Revision is due a week after I returned the paper to you.**
- The final grade of a paper = 25% initial version grade + 75% revised version grade (or, if you choose not to resubmit, 100% initial version grade).

Group Final Project (25%)

For the final project, I want you to get into a group of 2 to 3 people of your choice, and bring what we have discussed in class back into your life. There is no limit to the topic of your group's project, as long as it has something to do with the topic of life and death.

What is crucial is that the topic of your group's project is something everyone in your group finds interesting and important. There is no limit to the format of the project. Instead, I want you to be creative. The project may be a small story, a play, or the synopsis of a possible movie or TV series. It may be a podcast, a vlog, a song, or a Vox-style video. It may be an interview, a stand-up comedy, or even a business proposal. It may be a short film, a mini-documentary, a painting, or a sculpture. It may be a TED talk, an Op-ed, or if you can't come up with anything else, a philosophy paper. The point is that I want you to express what you want to express in the way you want to express it. There is no length or size requirement to your project, either, unless your group decides to write a philosophy paper (in which case it needs to be 2500-3000 words).

Each group needs to do a presentation of its project, in which its members explain the project's motivation, main point, argument (if any), and how it is composed. The **last class** of this course will be dedicated to the presentation of your projects.

Grade Breakdown

Participation – 15%

Reading Reflections & In-Class Reflections – 10% + 10% = 20%

Papers x 2 – 20% x 2 = 40%

Final Project – 25%

Grading Scale

94 - 100 = A

90 - 93.99 = A-

87 - 89.99 = B+

84 - 86.99 = B

80 - 83.99 = B-

77 - 79.99 = C+

74 - 76.99 = C

70 - 73.99 = C-

60 - 69.99 = D

Below 60 = F

Course Policies

Deadline and Extension Policy

All papers must be submitted using the course Blackboard page in **.docx** or **.pdf** format. Please do not submit a Google Doc link or a .pages file; I cannot open them, and they will not be graded. Papers are due at 11:59 pm on the date indicated.

I do not require a reason or any documentation for a small extension of **up to 24 hours** if you inform me via email before the deadline. If you need to a longer extension, or you need an extension after the deadline, then you do need to send me an email with your reason for it. Late submissions without contacting me or beyond the extension I granted will have 5 points taken off for each day they are late. **Timely communication is key.**

Electronics Policy

You are welcome to use laptops or tablets for the purpose taking notes or accessing course materials. Please do not do things unrelated to the class with your electronic devices. Remember: not paying attention in class will ultimately affect your own performance and grades. **No use of phone is allowed during class time, unless it is needed to accommodate a special condition of you.** If you think you might need to use phone in class, please come talk to me.

To save the planet, in this course I will minimize printing and try to conduct most business electronically. That means that you'll need to bring an electronic device that you can type on – either a laptop or a tablet – to every class in order to access the handouts, PowerPoints, and readings posted online and to do the in-class reflections. If you do not anticipate having access to a laptop or tablet during this course, please let me know and I will prepare printed copies of course materials for you.

Academic Integrity

Students are responsible for adhering to the CAS Academic Conduct Code:

<https://www.bu.edu/academics/policies/academic-conduct-code/>.

All instances of cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic misconduct will be addressed in accordance with this policy. Penalties for academic misconduct can range from failing an assignment or course to suspension or expulsion from the university.

Be especially attentive to the requirements regarding plagiarism. Please note that copying, restating, or paraphrasing the views of others (including online sources) without citing them counts as plagiarism. Ignorance of this policy is not an acceptable excuse; if you have any questions about what counts as plagiarism, please contact me.

Accommodation Due to Disabilities

Students with documented disabilities, including learning disabilities, may be entitled to accommodations intended to ensure that they have integrated and equal access to the academic, social, cultural, and recreational programs the university offers. If you believe you should receive accommodations, please contact the Office of Disability & Access Services at 617-353-3658 or access@bu.edu to discuss your situation. If you already have a letter of accommodation, please share it with me as soon as possible. **If you have**

difficulty getting a letter but think you have some needs that require accommodation, please come to talk to me. I am happy to provide accommodation even without a letter.

Course Schedule (may be changed with due notice)

9/3: Syllabus & Introduction; Suffering and the Life of the Buddha

- Required Readings:
 1. SYLLABUS
 2. C. W. Huntington, "The Life and Death of the Buddha", in his *What I Don't Know about Death*

Unit 1: Meaning of Life

9/5: The Four Noble Truths: What if Life is Suffering?

- Required Readings:
 1. Amber Carpenter, *Indian Buddhist Philosophy*, Ch.1
- Optional Readings:
 1. Jay Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics*, Ch.6 & Ch.7

9/10: Two Buddhist Ideals: Arhats and Bodhisattvas

- Required Readings:
 1. Amber Carpenter, *Indian Buddhist Philosophy*, p.60-5 in Ch.3
 2. Jay Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics*, p.109-117 in Ch.8 (skim the rest of the chapter)
- Optional Readings:
 1. Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (2nd edition), Ch.7

9/12: No Free Will, No Meaning of Life? Part I: No-Self

- Required Readings:
 1. Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (2nd edition), Ch.2.1-2.3
 2. Jay Garfield, *Buddhist Ethics*, Ch.4
- Optional Readings:
 1. Martin T. Adam, "No self, no free will, no problem: Implications of the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta for a perennial philosophical issue"

9/17: No Free Will, No Meaning of Life? Part II: Karma

- Required Readings:
 1. Amber Carpenter, *Indian Buddhist Philosophy*, Ch.5
- Optional Readings:
 1. Derek Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life*, Ch.8

9/19: Does Emptiness Imply Global Meaning Nihilism?

- Required Readings:

1. Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (2nd edition), Ch.8.1
2. Jonathan Gold, "The Coherence of Buddhism: Relativism, Ethics, and Psychology"
- Optional Readings:
 1. Guy Newland, "How Does Merely Conventional Karma Works?"

9/24: Schopenhauer's Pessimism I

- Required Readings:
 1. Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Sufferings of the World"

9/26: Schopenhauer's Pessimism II

- Required Readings:
 1. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (§56-58, §68-71).

10/1: Nietzsche, Meaning of Life, and Illusion

- Required Readings:
 1. Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes, "Nietzsche's Illusion"

10/3: Nietzsche on Affirming Life

- Required Readings:
 1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Preface (pp.32-8); Books I, sections 1-4 (pp.73-9), 13 (pp.86-8); Book III, section 125 (pp.181-2).
 2. Beatrice Han-Pile, "Nietzsche and the Affirmation of Life"
- Optional Readings:
 1. Amber Carpenter, *Indian Buddhist Philosophy*, p.48-53 in Ch.3 (on what she calls the "Nietzschean Objection")

10/8: Faith and Despair I

- Required Readings:
 1. Leo Tolstoy, *Confession* (focus on Sections V – IX; you may skim the rest).

10/10: Faith and Despair II

- Required Readings:
 1. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* (excerpts)

10/15: No Class (Substitute Monday Schedule)

10/17: Absurdity, Ambiguity, and Freedom I

- Required Readings:
 1. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Ch.1 & Ch.4 ("An Absurd Reasoning" and "The Myth of Sisyphus")

10/22: Absurdity and Freedom II

- Required Readings:
 1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Part I (“Ambiguity and Freedom”) and Part III.5 (“Ambiguity” in “The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity”)

10/24: Is Meaning of Life Subjective or Objective?

- Required Readings:
 1. Richard Taylor, “The Meaning of Life”
 2. Susan Wolf, “The Meaning of Lives”

Paper I Topic due 10/ 25 at 11:59pm

Unit 2: Attitude towards Death

10/29: What is Death?

- Required Readings:
 1. Shelly Kagan, *Death*, Ch.8.
 2. Fred Feldman, “The Enigma of Death”

10/31: Is Death Bad? Part I

- Required Readings:
 1. Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus” and “Principal Doctrines”

Paper I due 11 / 3 at 11:59pm

11/5: Is Death Bad? Part II

- Required Readings:
 1. Thomas Nagel, “Death”

11/7: Is Death Bad? Part III

- Required Readings:
 1. Excerpts from the *Analects*, *Mengzi* and *Xunzi* (pdf on Blackboard)
 2. *Zhuangzi* (excerpts, pdf on Blackboard)

11/12: Immortality I

- Required Readings:
 1. Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case”

11/14: Immortality II

- Required Readings:
 1. John Martin Fisher, “Why Immortality Is Not So Bad” (Appendix is optional)

11/19: Fear of Death

- Required Readings:
 1. Shelly Kagan, *Death*, Ch.14

11/21: Being Towards Death

- Required Readings:
 1. Mark Wrathall, *How to Read Heidegger*, Ch.6
- Optional:
 1. Paul Edwards, "Heidegger and Death as 'Possibility'"
 2. Stephen Mulhall, "Human Mortality: Heidegger on How to Portray the Impossible Possibility of Death"

11/26: Facing Death

- Required Readings:
 1. Leo Tolstoy, "The Death of Ivan Ilyich"
 2. Huntington, "Letting go", in his *What I Don't Know about Death*

11/28: Thanksgiving break, no class

12/3: Euthanasia

- Required Readings:
 1. James Rachels, "Active and Passive Euthanasia"
 2. Bonnie Steinbock, "The Intentional Termination of Life"

12/5: Suicide

- Required Readings:
 1. Richard B. Brandt, "The Morality and Rationality of Suicide"
 2. Michael Cholbi, "The Rationality of Suicide and the Meaningfulness of Life"

Paper II Topic due 12/6 at 11:59pm

12/10: Final Project Presentation

- Required Readings: None!

Paper II due 12/16 at 11:59pm