

PHIL 2465: DEATH AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Autumn 2025
The Ohio State University

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Office Hours	WF 1 - 2pm and by appt.
Class Time	MW 3:55 - 5:15pm
Class Location	McPherson Lab 2015

Description Welcome! I'm very excited to do some philosophy with you all!

There's at least one true thing about everyone reading this: we are all going to die. What are we to make of this fact? The famous philosopher Martin Heidegger called humans "beings-toward-death." In other words, we are the sorts of beings that are actually aware of our imminent demise and we constantly think of our lives, goals, and plans in terms of its eventual end. Or at least we do when we are not ignoring the fact of death.

But what about this fact of death? Is it bad that we will each die? Should we fear death? Or, is it a good thing? Could a meaningful and full life only exist when given the time limits imposed by death? Is fear of death what gives rise to people's evil actions? Is there an afterlife, and if so, what is it like? Heaven? Hell? Reincarnation? Is a good and meaningful life one filled with our own personal happiness? Or is a meaningful life one spent helping others by making the world a better place? What are we to do with the time given to us in order to live a meaningful life in the face of death?

These are the sorts of questions we will read about, write about, and discuss in this class.

General Education Information The Curriculum Committee of the College of Arts & Sciences requests that syllabi of all GE courses list the goals and learning objectives for the relevant category of the GEC.

Legacy GE: Literature. Goals:

1. Students evaluate significant texts in order to develop capacities for aesthetic and historical response and judgment; interpretation and evaluation; and critical listening, reading, seeing, thinking, and writing.

Expected Learning Outcomes: Successful students are able to...

- Students analyze, interpret, and critique significant literary works.
- Through reading, discussing, and writing about literature, students appraise and evaluate the personal and social values of their own and other cultures.

New GE: Health and Well-Being Theme. Goals:

1. Successful students will analyze an important topic or idea at a more advanced and in-depth level than in the Foundations component.
2. Successful students will integrate approaches to the theme by making connections to out-of-classroom experiences with academic knowledge or across disciplines and/or to work they have done in previous classes and that they anticipate doing in future.
3. Students will explore and analyze health and wellbeing through attention to at least two dimensions of wellbeing. (e.g., physical, mental, emotional, career, environmental, spiritual, intellectual, creative, financial, etc.)

Expected Learning Outcomes: Successful students are able to...

- Engage in critical and logical thinking about the topic or idea of the theme.
- Engage in advanced, in-depth, scholarly exploration of the topic or idea of the theme.
- Identify, describe, and synthesize approaches or experiences as they apply to the theme.
- Demonstrate a developing sense of self as a learner through reflection, self-assessment, and creative work, building on prior experiences to respond to new and challenging contexts.
- Explore and analyze health and wellbeing from theoretical, socio-economic, scientific, historical, cultural, technological, policy, and/or personal perspectives.
- Identify, reflect on, or apply strategies for promoting health and wellbeing.

Class Conduct This class will be heavily discussion based. And we will sometimes discuss very sensitive political, moral, and religious topics. So even if we disagree with someone else, we must voice that disagreement in a respectful manner and treat all the members of class with human dignity. If we want to, as a class, we may develop a list of conversational ground rules for our discussions. Do not use cellphones once class starts and please do not email, Internet shop, or social media scroll during class.

Carmen All course content such as announcements, slides, assignments, grades and required readings will be made available on Carmen. You are expected to do the readings *before* the class for which the reading is assigned. Check Carmen regularly. What is assigned on Carmen takes precedence over the assignments/readings detailed on the syllabus.

Please **contact me via email, instead** of via the Carmen messaging.

Materials There is no required textbook for this class. All of the assigned reading material will be available for free on Carmen.

Requirements and Grading Your overall course grade will be assigned based on the following components (with the corresponding percentage of overall grade for the assignment given in parenthesis):

- Participation and attendance (20%).
- Initial reflection paper (5%).
- Short response papers (15%).

- Midterm exam (**25%**).
- Final exam (**25%**).
- Final reflection (**10%**).

Detailed assignment sheets for the reflection papers will be distributed closer to the time of assignment, though some minimal detail for each portion of your grade can be found in the next section of this syllabus. Tentative due dates will be given below. The only opportunity for extra credit in this class will be a small one at the very end of the course.

Descriptions of Major Course Assignments

There will be two **reflection papers**, one at the beginning of the semester and one at the end. Your initial reflection paper will be a very short paper in which you describe your personal philosophical beliefs regarding some of the topics of our class. I expect you to offer some reasoning for the beliefs you hold, but not much reasoning as we will have only just begun our introduction at this point in the semester. You will compare this paper with your final reflection paper at the course's end so that you can see how much you have grown as a philosopher. These will be relatively short, low-stakes assignments.

The **midterm exam** will be a cumulative exam on the various concepts we've learned over the semester. It will consist of multiple question types: multiple choice, true or false, fill in the blank, and short essay. More detail will follow as we approach the midterm. The **final exam** will be the same format.

The short response papers will be available most weeks. You only have to do 3. Full marks on all 3 will get you 15% of your final grade. I will open up a space for your short response papers to be posted in the Carmen module for each week. You will be asked to present an argument for or against one of the main philosophical claims studied that week. These short response papers will be around 350 words each.

Participation and attendance. Please read the assigned reading material *before* class for the day that it was assigned. Everyone is expected to participate in the class in some capacity, whether it be in small group discussion, by asking questions, or by participating in whole-class discussions. A note will be made of participation in lectures, and your participation grade will rise the more one conscientiously participates. A conscientious participant is one who makes respectful contributions to the discussion, not one who tries to dominate it or change the subject. Conscientious participation also requires being familiar with the material before class begins. As for attendance, it will be recorded and kept up with via exit cards. Most class periods, I will distribute index cards where you are to write a question or comment that you had about the material for the day. Make sure to write your full name on them legibly as they will serve as the way I take attendance during lectures. You are allowed up to **four** absences, no questions asked. That is, you can miss four lectures, for any reason whatsoever, with no penalty to you. Starting with the fifth day missed, however, a point will be dropped from your participation and attendance grade for every further day missed. This means, for example, if you miss six lectures, the **maximum** participation and attendance grade you will be able to receive will be an 18 out of 20. Of course this attendance policy is up to negotiation on a one-on-one level if you are suffering from a more severe illness, facing some serious life event during the semester, or are a student-athlete with the University-approved travel documentation. If any of this applies to you or if you have any questions about the attendance policy (or any other grading policy), please just come see me or email me. I'm happy to discuss things with any of you.

Late Assignments Extensions will only be granted in extraordinary circumstances (or, of course, if you have an accommodation from SDLS which involves an extension). That being said, please email me ASAP if you need an extension because of some emergency. Late submissions of assignments will lose 5 points per day. No credit will be given after 5 days.

Instructor Feedback and Response Time For every assignment, I will have grades returned to the students within 15 days of submission. If you need to contact me out of class, please email me at dewitt.197@osu.edu directly. I have technical difficulties getting Carmen messages, so if you message me via Carmen do not expect me to receive your message. I will respond to emails within about 24 hours on weekdays and around 48 hours on weekends.

Grading Scale We will use the OSU Standard Grade Scheme:

- 93-100: A
- 90-92.9: A-
- 87-89.9: B+
- 83-86.9: B
- 80-82.9: B-
- 77-79.9: C+
- 73-76.9: C
- 70-72.9: C-
- 67-69.9: D+
- 60-66.9: D
- Below 60: E

Disability Statement (with Accommodations for Illness) The university strives to maintain a healthy and accessible environment to support student learning in and out of the classroom. If students anticipate or experience academic barriers based on a disability (including mental health and medical conditions, whether chronic or temporary), they should let their instructor know immediately so that they can privately discuss options. Students do not need to disclose specific information about a disability to faculty. To establish reasonable accommodations, students may be asked to register with Student Life Disability Services (see below for campus-specific contact information). After registration, students should make arrangements with their instructors as soon as possible to discuss your accommodations so that accommodations may be implemented in a timely fashion.

If students are ill and need to miss class, including if they are staying home and away from others while experiencing symptoms of viral infection or fever, they should let their instructor know immediately. In cases where illness interacts with an underlying medical condition, please consult with Student Life Disability Services to request reasonable accommodations.

Academic Misconduct Academic integrity is essential to maintaining an environment that fosters excellence in teaching, research, and other educational and scholarly activities. Thus,

The Ohio State University and the Committee on Academic Misconduct (COAM) expect that all students have read and understand the University's Code of Student Conduct, and that all students will complete all academic and scholarly assignments with fairness and honesty. Students must recognize that failure to follow the rules and guidelines established in the University's Code of Student Conduct and this syllabus may constitute Academic Misconduct.

The Ohio State University's Code of Student Conduct (Section 3335-23-04) defines academic misconduct as: Any activity that tends to compromise the academic integrity of the University or subvert the educational process. Examples of academic misconduct include (but are not limited to) plagiarism, collusion (unauthorized collaboration), copying the work of another student, and possession of unauthorized materials during an examination. Ignorance of the University's Code of Student Conduct is never considered an excuse for academic misconduct, so please review the Code of Student Conduct and, specifically, the sections dealing with academic misconduct.

If an instructor suspects that a student has committed academic misconduct in this course, the instructor is obligated by University Rules to report those suspicions to the Committee on Academic Misconduct. If COAM determines that a student violated the University's Code of Student Conduct (i.e., committed academic misconduct), the sanctions for the misconduct could include a failing grade in the course and suspension or dismissal from the University.

If students have questions about the above policy or what constitutes academic misconduct in this course, they should contact the instructor.

Artificial Intelligence and Academic Integrity There has been a significant increase in the popularity and availability of a variety of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, including ChatGPT, Sudowrite, and others. These tools will help shape the future of work, research and technology, but when used in the wrong way, they can stand in conflict with academic integrity at Ohio State.

All students have important obligations under the Code of Student Conduct to complete all academic and scholarly activities with fairness and honesty. Our professional students also have the responsibility to uphold the professional and ethical standards found in their respective academic honor codes. Specifically, students are not to use unauthorized assistance in the laboratory, on field work, in scholarship, or on a course assignment unless such assistance has been authorized specifically by the course instructor. In addition, students are not to submit their work without acknowledging any word-for-word use and/or paraphrasing of writing, ideas or other work that is not your own. These requirements apply to all students undergraduate, graduate, and professional.

To maintain a culture of integrity and respect, these generative AI tools should not be used in the completion of course assignments unless an instructor for a given course specifically authorizes their use. Some instructors may approve of using generative AI tools in the academic setting for specific goals. However, these tools should be used only with the explicit and clear permission of each individual instructor, and then only in the ways allowed by the instructor.

Do not use ChatGPT for any assignments in this class.

Religious Accommodations Ohio State has had a longstanding practice of making reasonable academic accommodations for students' religious beliefs and practices in accordance with applicable law. In 2023, Ohio State updated its practice to align with new state legislation. Under this new provision, students must be in early communication with their instructors regarding any known accommodation requests for religious beliefs and practices, providing notice of specific dates for which they request alternative accommodations within 14 days after the first instructional day of the course. Instructors in turn shall not question the sincerity of a

student's religious or spiritual belief system in reviewing such requests and shall keep requests for accommodations confidential.

With sufficient notice, instructors will provide students with reasonable alternative accommodations with regard to examinations and other academic requirements with respect to students' sincerely held religious beliefs and practices by allowing up to three absences each semester for the student to attend or participate in religious activities. Examples of religious accommodations can include, but are not limited to, rescheduling an exam, altering the time of a student's presentation, allowing make-up assignments to substitute for missed class work, or flexibility in due dates or research responsibilities. If concerns arise about a requested accommodation, instructors are to consult their tenure initiating unit head for assistance.

A student's request for time off shall be provided if the student's sincerely held religious belief or practice severely affects the student's ability to take an exam or meet an academic requirement and the student has notified their instructor, in writing during the first 14 days after the course begins, of the date of each absence. Although students are required to provide notice within the first 14 days after a course begins, instructors are strongly encouraged to work with the student to provide a reasonable accommodation if a request is made outside the notice period. A student may not be penalized for an absence approved under this policy.

If students have questions or disputes related to academic accommodations, they should contact their course instructor, and then their department or college office. For questions or to report discrimination or harassment based on religion, individuals should contact the Civil Rights Compliance Office.

Your Mental Health As a student you may experience a range of issues that can cause barriers to learn, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, feeling down, difficulty concentrating and/or lack of motivation. These mental health concerns or stressful events may lead to diminished academic performance or reduce a student's ability to participate in daily activities. No matter where you are engaged in distance learning, The Ohio State University's Student Life Counseling and Consultation Service (CCS) is here to support you. If you find yourself feeling isolated, anxious or overwhelmed, on-demand resources are available at go.osu.edu/ccsondemand. You can reach an on-call counselor when CCS is closed at 614-292-5766, and 24-hour emergency help is also available through the 24/7 National Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-TALK or at suicidepreventionlifeline.org. The Ohio State Wellness app is also a great resource available at go.osu.edu/wellnessapp.

Intellectual Diversity Ohio State is committed to fostering a culture of open inquiry and intellectual diversity within the classroom. This course will cover a range of information and may include discussions or debates about controversial issues, beliefs, or policies. Any such discussions and debates are intended to support understanding of the approved curriculum and relevant course objectives rather than promote any specific point of view. Students will be assessed on principles applicable to the field of study and the content covered in the course. Preparing students for citizenship includes helping them develop critical thinking skills that will allow them to reach their own conclusions regarding complex or controversial matters.

Grievances and Solving Problems According to University Policies, if you have a problem with this class, you should seek to resolve the grievance concerning a grade or academic practice by speaking first with the instructor or professor. Then, if necessary, take your case to the department chairperson, college dean or associate dean, and to the provost, in that order. Specific procedures are outlined in Faculty Rule 3335-8-23. Grievances against graduate, research, and teaching assistants should be submitted first to the supervising instructor, then to

the chairperson of the assistant's department.

Creating an Environment Free from Harassment, Discrimination, and Sexual Misconduct The Ohio State University is committed to building and maintaining a welcoming community. All Buckeyes have the right to be free from harassment, discrimination, and sexual misconduct. Ohio State does not discriminate on the basis of age, ancestry, color, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity or expression, genetic information, HIV/AIDS status, military status, national origin, pregnancy (childbirth, false pregnancy, termination of pregnancy, or recovery therefrom), race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or protected veteran status, or any other bases under the law, in its activities, academic programs, admission, and employment. Members of the university community also have the right to be free from all forms of sexual misconduct: sexual harassment, sexual assault, relationship violence, stalking, and sexual exploitation.

To report harassment, discrimination, sexual misconduct, or retaliation and/or seek confidential and non-confidential resources and supportive measures, contact the Civil Rights Compliance Office (CRCO):

Online reporting form: <http://civilrights.osu.edu/>

Call 614-247-5838 or TTY 614-688-8605

civilrights@osu.edu

The university is committed to stopping sexual misconduct, preventing its recurrence, eliminating any hostile environment, and remedying its discriminatory effects. All university employees have reporting responsibilities to the Civil Rights Compliance Office to ensure the university can take appropriate action:

All university employees, except those exempted by legal privilege of confidentiality or expressly identified as a confidential reporter, have an obligation to report incidents of sexual assault immediately. The following employees have an obligation to report all other forms of sexual misconduct as soon as practicable but at most within five workdays of becoming aware of such information: 1. Any human resource professional (HRP); 2. Anyone who supervises faculty, staff, students, or volunteers; 3. Chair/director; and 4. Faculty member.

Tentative Course Schedule

The schedule below is tentative. Any unexpected changes to the schedule will be announced on Carmen as the course proceeds.

Week One

August 27th Introduction

■ Read the Syllabus

Week Two

September 3rd Introduction

■ Read "Introduction to Philosophy" and "Logical Toolkit" by Perry, Bratman, and Fischer.

Week Three

September 8th Ancient and Religious Views

■ Read the Katha Upanishad.

September 10th Ancient and Religious Views

■ Read *Apology* by Plato

Week Four

September 15th Ancient and Religious Views

Read selections from *Phaedo* by Plato.

September 17th Ancient and Religious Views

Read “Is Death Bad?” by Kaufman.

Week Five

September 22nd Ancient and Religious Views

Read “The Buddha’s Message” by Gowans.

September 24th Ancient and Religious Views

Read “The Buddha and the Meaning of Life” by Sideritis.

Week Six

September 29th Ancient and Religious Views

Read “My Confession” by Tolstoy.

October 1st Ancient and Religious Views

Read “The Meaning of Life According to Christianity” by Quinn.

Week Seven

October 6th Ancient and Religious Views

Read “Rebellion” by Dostoyevsky

October 8th Midterm

Midterm exam.

Week Eight

Enjoy Autumn Break!

Week Nine

October 20th Modern and Secular Views

Read “The Absurd” by Nagel.

October 22nd Modern and Secular Views

Read selections from “The Myth of Sisyphus” by Camus.

Week Ten

October 27th Modern and Secular Views

Read “Existentialism is a Humanism” by Sartre.

October 29th Modern and Secular Views

Read selections from *The Ethics of Ambiguity* by de Beauvoir.

Week Eleven

November 3rd Modern and Secular Views

Read selections from *The Ethics of Ambiguity* by de Beauvoir.

November 5th Modern and Secular Views

Read selections from *The Fire Next Time* by Baldwin.

Week Twelve

November 10th Modern and Secular Views

Read “On the Meaning of Life” by Schlick.

November 12th Modern and Secular Views

Read selections from *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* by Wolf.

Week Thirteen

November 17th Modern and Secular Views
 Read selections from *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* by Wolf.

November 19th Modern and Secular Views
 Read selections from *Death* by Kagan.

Week Fourteen

November 24th Modern and Secular Views
 Read selections from *Death* by Kagan.

Week Fifteen

December 1st Modern and Secular Views
 Read “The Meaning of Life” by Taylor.

December 3rd Modern and Secular Views
 Read “Living to Some Purpose” by Singer.

Week Sixteen

December 8th Exam Week
 Exam review.

December 10th Exam Week
 Final exam.

Important Assignment Dates (Also Tentative!)

Initial reflection paper September 7th at 11:59pm

Midterm exam October 8th in class

Final exam December 10th in class.

Final reflection December 16th at 11:59pm