



PHIL 3912: death and the meaning of life

W 10:10-12, 716 Philosophy Hall

Instructor: Jenann Ismael, 706 Philosophy Hall

It is difficult to think about the fact that you will die. It is confusing theoretically and it is confusing emotionally. We will be spending the course trying to think our way through the confusions. On the theoretical side, thinking about the fact that you will die raises a cluster of philosophical questions. What are you? Are you necessarily the sort of thing that ceases to exist when your biological life ends? What is it that connects you to your childish self and makes some person in the future you? And does the fact that you die diminish the value of your life? If it means the end of your existence, does it make life absurd, or meaningless, or only more precious? We will address these questions as well as whether death should be feared, whether death is bad, and whether immortality would be desirable.

Being confronted with the fact of your death can also help focus questions about how you should live. It presses you to think about what makes life worth living? What makes a life meaningful? When you look at examples of other people's lives (and daily these days, we see on the news and hear from others about people who have died and how they lived) do you have a clear sense of what sort of life do you want to have lived, what sort of projects seem important, what sort of person do you want to have been? Are there objective answers to what makes a life meaningful, or is this a personal choice? If meaningfulness involves some kind of overarching project (e.g., achieving something, leaving something behind, participating in something larger than ourselves) is meaningfulness worth pursuing, or should we instead throw off the tyranny of purposes and just *live*?

These are the things we will be talking about over the course of the semester. It is perhaps a special time to be thinking about them and we will try to do justice to the moment.

Required texts

1. Shelly Kagan, *Death* (Yale U Press)
2. E.D. Klemke and Steven Cahn (eds.), *The Meaning of Life* (4th Edition) get the right edition.)
3. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Illyich*

This will be a discussion intensive class for philosophy majors that will address central topics in philosophy but have broad leeway for exploring topics of interest to the class. There will be no lectures. Attendance and participation is required (though different ways of participating will be available).