

**CAS RN 106**  
**DEATH AND IMMORTALITY**

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TT 11-12:30  
Tsai Auditorium

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“Oh Wow. Oh Wow. Oh Wow”—reported last words of Apple CEO Steve Jobs

**Description:** Death is an inescapable fact of life, and all religious and philosophical traditions attempt to come to grips with it. This course examines death in light of the many ways humans have attempted to accept, overcome, deny, defeat, or transcend it. How did death originate? Are there good and bad ways to die? To grieve? How should we dispose of a corpse? Do we have a soul (or souls) and does it (or they) reincarnate? Is there an afterlife? Is immortality possible? Desirable? What techniques might help us achieve it? Religious traditions have attempted to answer these questions for millennia, and we will study how. Topics such as cremation, damnation, salvation, near-death experiences, mourning, grief, suicide, burial, and reincarnation will be explored in light of a variety of religious and philosophical traditions, both East and West.

**Objectives:** You will be expected to learn how humans have dealt with mortality and hoped for immortality in different times and places. You will also analyze and criticize those approaches—to explore and modify your own ideas and values about death and dying. Along the way, you will acquire basic literacy in some of the world’s religions. Finally, you will be challenged to come to grips with your own mortality.

**Requirements:**

1. Attendance and Participation (7.5%). This course is run as a conversation. Please come to each lecture and section meeting having done the reading and prepared to discuss it. Students with more than 2 absences should expect poor class participation grades. Active participation is rewarded.
2. Weekly reading responses (7.5%), due at 10 pm on the day before your discussion section meets (via email to your TA). Short personal reflections (one paragraph is fine) on one of the readings/films for the week—your comments, criticisms, questions. The goal here is NOT to summarize the readings/films but to interact with and respond to them.
3. Two Quizzes (10% each=20% total). Demonstrate basic religious literacy by defining key terms and stating the religious tradition(s) in which they are used. Terms will be listed on Blackboard. Dates are **Mar 5 and Apr 16**.
4. First Writing Assignment: Funeral or Memorial Service Essay. Choose either Option 1 or Option 2. (10%). **Due Mar 19 at the beginning of class.**
  - a. *Option 1.* Design a one-to-four-page bulletin for your funeral or memorial service. Include your name and the place and date of the service. Include also an order of service (beginning to end) that lists precisely what is going to happen (including whether there is a body or cremated remains and what, if anything, is done with either). Possibilities: music, prayers, meditation, eulogy or eulogies, homily, readings from scripture or literature, specific ritual acts (carrying a coffin in or out, scattering ashes, etc.) Next, analyze (500 words) your service. What beliefs, if any, about life, death, and the afterlife does the service articulate? Which of the five models does it most closely track, and how? By which religious tradition or traditions is it most closely informed? And how, if at all, does it diverge from it/them?

- b. *Option 2*. Attend a funeral or memorial service. Analyze (750 words) the service. What beliefs, if any, about life, death, and the afterlife did the service articulate? Which of the five models did it most closely track, and how? By which religious tradition or traditions was it most closely informed? And how, if at all, did it diverge from it/them? Be sure to include the bulletin handed out at the service along with your work. If there is no bulletin, include on a separate sheet basic information about the service, including place, date, and an order of service listing precisely what happened from beginning to end.
6. Second Writing Assignment (25%): Choose one of the following two essays (**due April 30 at the beginning of class**). Each is a 1200-word thesis-style research essay and must include appropriate footnotes or endnotes. Each must use at least two books as sources. Neither can use encyclopedias or internet sources as its central sources. All sources should be properly referenced in notes or a bibliography. Because it is a thesis-style essay, it must develop and sustain an argument, marshalling appropriate evidence along the way.
- (1) Martyrdom Essay. Write about one particular martyr. Be sure to discuss in your essay (a) the life of this martyr; (b) the community (or communities) that turned him/her into a martyr after his/her death; and (c) the beliefs/values/practices for which he/she died. This person can be a more "traditional" martyr such as Perpetua or Felicitas of the early Christian church or a contemporary martyr such as Cassie Bernal (of Columbine) or Mohamed Atta (of 9/11). It can also be a political martyr such as Abraham Lincoln or the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., or a "pop martyr" such as Kurt Cobain, Tupac Shakur, or Janis Joplin.
- (2) Body Essay. Write about how people inside one particular religious/philosophical tradition treat the body, both in life and at death. Focus, for example, on Sunni Muslims or Theravada Buddhists? What restrictions do they put on what the body can eat, what it can do sexually, etc.? Do they discipline the body (asceticism) or pleasure it (hedonism)? Or both? How do they dress it? Mark it? What do they do to the body at key rites of passage, including upon death? Does this body dance? Or is dancing prohibited? Does it pray? If so, how and how often? In this essay you cannot answer all these questions. Focus on a few that will help you develop a coherent essay. NOTE: This essay is not about *theories* of the body or *doctrines* concerning it. It is about what particular religious people *actually do* with and to their bodies in life and at death.
7. Final examination (30%). Cumulative essay-style exam (possible questions to be posted in advance on Blackboard). Date, time, and place to be determined by Registrar.

#### Required Reading (available at Barnes & Noble)

Gawande, *Being Mortal* (Metropolitan, 2014)

*Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative* (Mason translation; Mariner books, 2013: **use this translation only**)

Green, *The Fault in Our Stars* (Penguin USA, 2014)

Obayashi, *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions* (ABC Clio, 1992)

Plato, *Phaedo* (Oxford, 2009)

Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories* (Penguin USA, 2012)

#### Grading for Papers

Papers will be graded in light of organization, spelling and grammar, argument, evidence, and style:

A: Superb. Paper is clearly (even elegantly) written and clearly organized, contains no grammatical or spelling errors, presents a clear and convincing thesis, supported by relevant evidence. Moreover, this thesis contains original insights and provocations not present in B+ or A- papers.

A-: Excellent. Paper is clearly written and organized, contains no more than one or two grammatical or spelling errors, presents a clear and convincing thesis, supported by relevant evidence.

B+: Very good. Paper is well written and tolerably well organized, contains no more than a few grammatical or spelling errors, presents a clear and convincing, though fairly predictable thesis, supported by reliable evidence. Organization may be somewhat unclear

B: Very good. Paper is adequately written and may be somewhat haphazardly organized, contains no more than a few grammatical or spelling errors, presents a clear, though perhaps fairly predictable thesis supported by some evidence.

B-: Good. Paper is not particularly well written and may be somewhat haphazardly organized, contains a handful or more of grammatical or spelling errors, presents a thesis that is either unclear or unconvincing or both supported by some evidence.

C+ and below: Subpar. Paper is difficult to read and to follow, contains various grammatical or spelling errors, presents no clear thesis.

### **Late Papers/Makeup Exams Policy**

Exams will not be rescheduled. Papers are due at the beginning of class on due date. Papers *may* be handed in late, but will be marked down half a grade for each day or portion of a day they are late. (No excuses necessary.) Exceptions only for illness with doctor's note or death/sickness in the family.

### **Plagiarism**

In keeping with Boston University's policies, plagiarism will be penalized severely. Don't do it. Please know that I refer cases of suspected academic misconduct to the Dean's Office, and follow BU's academic conduct code: <http://www.bu.edu/cas/academic-conduct-codes-undergraduate-and-grs/>

### **Electronic Devices in the Classroom**

Cellphones are not to be used in the classroom. Laptops and tablets may be used, but only for the purpose of taking notes. Why these restrictions? This course is run as a conversation, and conversations are best when everyone involved is fully engaged. Forays into Facebook or onto your cellphone are distracting to those around you, and to the professor. I know this policy will be disappointing to many and annoying to some, but there is now a considerable body of scientific research demonstrating that multitasking is a misnomer; when we think we are multitasking we are actually toggling back and forth from one task to another, and in the process we become less productive at each. A recent Stanford study showed that those who multitask more remember less. Another study showed that the IQ's of people who fielded emails and phone calls dropped by 10 points—more than double the drop attributed to smoking pot. See, e.g., See Adam Gorlick, "Media Multitaskers Pay Mental Price, Stanford Study Shows," *Stanford News*, August 24, 2009, <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2009/august24/multitask-research-study-082409.html>; and Peter Bregman, "How (and Why) to Stop Multitasking," *HBR Blog Network*, May 20, 2010, <http://blogs.hbr.org/2010/05/how-and-why-to-stop-multitaski/>.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Jan 20 Introduction

Jan 22 Five Models of Death and Immortality  
The Materialist, Spiritualist, Docetic, Psychosomatic, and Impermanence Models  
**Reading:** Becker, "The Terror of Death" (pp. 11-24), <http://public.zoob.eml.cc/becker1-2.pdf>

Jan 27 *Being Mortal*  
**Reading:** Gawande, *Being Mortal* (2014) (entire book)

## **THE MATERIALIST MODEL**

Jan 29 Modern Western Materialism  
Am I my body? Is there a soul? Is God an illusion? Is religion evil?  
**Reading:** Bertrand Russell, "What I Believe" (1925) (Blackboard); Christopher Hitchens,

“Religion Poisons Everything,” <http://www.slate.com/id/2165033/entry/2165035/>

- Feb 3 Near-Death Experiences  
What are the features of NDEs? Do they prove materialism wrong? Can we explain them away?  
**Reading:** “Unusual Experiences Near Death and Related Phenomena,” in Kelly & Kelly, *Irreducible Mind*, pp. 367-421 (Blackboard)

### THE SPIRITUALIST MODEL

- Feb 5 Shamanism and American Spiritualism  
Are the Dead Deadly? Can We Communicate with Them?  
**Reading:** Obayashi, Chapter 2
- Feb 10 Materialism and Shamanism in Ancient Mesopotamia: *Gilgamesh*  
**Reading:** *Gilgamesh* (entire)
- Feb 12 Materialism and Shamanism in Ancient Mesopotamia: *Gilgamesh* (cont.)  
**Reading:** *Gilgamesh* (entire)

### THE DOCETIC MODEL

- Feb 17 \*\* no Tuesday classes this week (Monday schedule instead on 2/17) \*\*
- \*Feb 19 The Indian Way of Death  
**Reading:** Obayashi, Chapter 10  
**Film:** “Ganges, River to Heaven”
- Feb 24: Indian Way of Death: Karma, Samsara, Reincarnation, Moksha  
**Reading:** selection from the Katha-Upanishad (Blackboard)
- Feb 26: The Greek Way of Death and the Immortality of the Soul  
**Reading:** Plato, *Phaedo* (entire but focus on 1-67)
- Mar 3 Ancient and Modern Cremation  
**Reading:** Prothero, “Introduction,” in his *Purified by Fire*, pp. 1-12 (Blackboard).
- Mar 5 **Terms Quiz #1 (Materialist, Spiritualist, and Docetic Models)**

\*\* March 7- March 15: SPRING BREAK \*\*

### THE PSYCHOSOMATIC MODEL

- Mar 17 Martyrdom, Resurrection, and the Good Death in Israelite Religion and Early Judaism  
(Guest Lecture by Prof. Jonathan Klawans)  
**Reading:** Obayashi, Chapter 7
- \*Mar 19 Did Harry Potter Die? (Was he raised from the dead?)  
**Film** (in class): *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows—Part 2*.  
**Assignment:** Funeral service bulletin and essay due at the beginning of class

Mar 24 Catholic and Protestant Christianity (7 Sacraments or 2?)  
**Reading:** Caroline Walker Bynum, "Material Continuity, Personal Survival and the Resurrection of the Body," on *Blackboard*; Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, "The Order for the Burial of the Dead" <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1928/Burial.htm>  
(You can skip the Psalms and you do not need to read "At the Burial of a Child.")

Mar 26 **\*\* PLEASE NOTE: CLASS MEETS TODAY (ONLY) IN THE GSU AUDITORIUM, NOT THE TSAI PERFORMANCE CENTER AS USUAL \*\***  
Islam 101  
**Reading:** Obayashi, Chapter 9; Al-Ghazali, "Alchemy of Happiness,"  
<http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/tah/tah08.htm>

Mar 31 Martyrdom in Islam  
**Reading:** David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (2007), 1-11, 135-164; 172-73 (Blackboard)

### THE IMPERMANENCE MODEL

Apr 2 The Doctrine of No-Self (Theravada Buddhism)  
Are Self and Soul Illusions? Is Death?  
**Reading:** Obayashi, Chapter 11

Apr 7 Bodhisattvas and the Pure Land (Mahayana Buddhism)  
**Reading:** Becker, "The Afterlife in Pure Land Buddhism," in his *Breaking the Circle*, 46-62.

\*Apr 9 Film: "Groundhog Day" (1993)  
"He's having the worst day of his life . . . over . . . and over . . . and over again."

Apr 14 The Tibetan Book of the Dead (Tibetan Buddhism)  
Reading: Obayashi, Chapter 12

Apr 16 **Terms Quiz #2 (Psychosomatic and Impermanence Models)**

### HOW TO DIE? HOW TO GRIEVE?

Apr 21 *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*  
**Reading:** Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (entire short story)

Apr 23 The "Good Death": Socrates, Buddha, Jesus  
**Reading:** Plato, *Phaedo* (67-79); Gospel of Mark (14:12-15:39), <http://www.biblegateway.com>;  
"Death and Final Instructions of the Buddha,"  
<http://www.as.miami.edu/phi/bio/Buddha/death.htm>.

Apr 28: Teenage Death  
**Reading:** Green, *The Fault in Our Stars* (entire)

Apr 30 The "Good Death": A Conversation with Author Ann Neumann  
**Reading:** Neumann, "How the Other Half Dies," *Guernica*,  
<https://www.guernicamag.com/daily/ann-neumann-how-the-other-half-dies/>  
**Assignment:** Third paper due at beginning of class