... and a Time to Die:

A Study in Philosophical and Theological (bio)Ethics

ETH500 SPRING 2016
Vancouver School of Theology
19 January – 7 April (W 2 – 5pm)

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*Media vita in morte sumus;* In the midst of life we are in death;
*Quem quaerimus adjutorem* Of whom may we seek for succour,
*Nisi te, Domine* But of thee, O Lord,
*qui pro peccatis nostris* who for our sins art
*iuste irasceris?* justly displeased?
*Sancte deus,* Yet, O Lord God most holy,
*sancte fortis,* O Lord most mighty,
*sancte et misericors salvator:* O holy and most merciful Saviour:
*Amarae morti ne tradas nos.* Deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death.

—Latin antiphon of the 12th Century

For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die

—Ecclesiastes 3:1-2

**Purpose:**

When we confront death and dying in our own lives and in the lives of others, several questions about the good and the right are raised. Such questions compel further enquiry as to whether a particular death was “good” or whether it was tragic, terrifying, or peaceful. To accomplish this, the course will examine the phenomenon of death and dying from a variety of perspectives, including both philosophical and theological treatments. Yet the principal concern is to be able to navigate the ethical challenges introduced by death and dying in our modern pluralistic society, where there is no single thing called ‘death’, but its meaning and our response to it are often governed by particular narratives. Therefore, the purpose of this course is to prepare students to analyse and address the ethical issues that arise when facing death and the limits of human existence. Student will be introduced to a variety of ethical perspectives and theories, which might assist them to think critically and constructively about death and dying, with a particular focus on such issues that arise from the modern science and practice of medicine. Yet the intent is to cultivate astute clergy, clinical caregivers, lay-persons, and professionals who are responsive to the needs, contexts, and insights of parishioners and members of the larger moral community who will be confronted by the panoply of questions that arise at the end of life. That is to say, we will have opportunity to engage in careful dialogue that emphasizes the complex issues that surround many deaths in our modern world and helps to cultivate thoughtful responses.
**Competence Objectives:**

The graduate of this course will be enabled:

1. To explain the similarities and differences between the ethical theories used to navigate ethical discourse and decision-making.

2. To apply both philosophical and theological analysis in response to contemporary issues raised by life and death issues confronted in society.

3. To demonstrate competence in responding to moral issues that are most likely to arise when confronted by death and dying, sickness and disability, and medical interventions to assuage mortality.

4. To recognize and to reflect upon distinctive insights arising from particular social locations (i.e., ethnic, gender, and class locations; specific recognition of the insights of persons with disabling conditions).

5. To develop thoughtful and engaged responses to issues of death and dying at a congregational and/or an institutional level, while enabling others to not only think but also to examine carefully the many questions such issues raise.

6. To describe how responses to moral problems might shape congregational/institutional life and how particular responses to bioethical concerns regarding the meaning of life and death impact the greater society.

**Course Texts and Readings**

**Required:**


**With either**


**Or**


**Additional readings and resources not included in these texts will be posted online (Moodle) or held on reserve in the library. The principal discussions each week will focus on these readings and selections. See outline below for details.**
Course Evaluation:
The following will serve as the principal tools for evaluating your progress in the course and your demonstration of competence noted above:

1. Op Ed/Homily/Blog (500 words)
   • Responding to and engaging with the first week readings (among others you might engage), you will prepare a brief written outcome, i.e., a homily, an opinion editorial, or a scholarly blog post. You will be expected to explore, in brief, the cultural and religious meanings of and/or the moral response to death and dying in our modern Western context as introduced in the preliminary readings of the course. The outcome you choose should demonstrate comprehension of the readings and culminate in the articulation of various questions, comments, and/or concerns the articles raise—not only questions that are of interest/importance to you but also those which others might not have considered or that might arise from within particular social locations. Consider this exercise as an opportunity to raise questions, rather than to offer answers. The outcome should be written in a way that might encourage conversation and challenge the reader towards thinking more deeply about those issues raised by our readings. The outcome should be approx. 500 words. Please note, as each of these would be delivered via some public medium, your work will also be posted on our course site ‘blog’ for your peers to read.
   DUE: Week 2—27 January 2016

2. Book Review of Verhey OR Bishop (600 words)
   • An analytic or critical review of a book is not primarily a summary; rather, it comments on and evaluates the work in the light of specific issues and theoretical concerns in a course (or field of study). It is your task to engage one of two books pertaining to our course and the content therein: Jeffrey Bishop’s *The Anticipatory Corpse* or Allan Verhey’s *The Christian Art of Dying*.
   • Your book review should demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of the book, while focusing upon the principal argument(s) being developed. A critical summary of the material should not be more than one page. Beyond the summary, it should be your aim to focus upon one or two elements or arguments in the book that you might wish to highlight. It is important to demonstrate not only critical acumen but also intellectual empathy. Be sure to critically engage the author but aim towards a fair representation of the work being reviewed.
   • Further directions will be given in the syllabus.
   • A sample book review will be disseminated in class as a model to follow. We will review the features of this model in class.
   DUE: Final Day of Term—22 April 2016

3. Group Case Presentation and Facilitated Discussion
   • During weeks 5 through 10, we will be taking up various topics for consideration. These will introduce particular ethical challenges and relevant case studies will be discussed. Using an approved ‘model’ for ethical analysis, each student group will assess one of the case studies, providing a provisional analysis where a decision must be made and supported. You will be expected to present and discuss the case with your peers, while
leading us all towards a decision for human action. The goal of this presentation and facilitated group discussion is to help us not only to understand the topic better but also to understand how and why one might make a particular decision for human action over another—accordingly, the idea that ethics is an event of conversation might be modeled while a diversity of thoughts may be expressed and carefully considered.

- During the 30-minute block, it is expected that each student group will provide 10 to 15 minutes of prepared content (i.e., a formal 10-minute presentation might consist of approx. 1000 – 1250 words), including critical engagement with the case, probing questions for peers, and a constructive summary to conclude the discussion. The remaining 15-20 minutes will provide limited space and time for whole-class discussion where distinctive insights will be heard and constructive conversation might be cultivated. One assigned reading for the class to consider must support the presentation and discussion. Readings must be distributed to the class two weeks prior to the scheduled discussion.

- For those students who are completing this course online, a virtual space will be provided for your virtual group to upload the respective reading and corresponding ‘presentation’—i.e., a manuscript, a video presentation, etc. This space will also be where fellow students (i.e., other groups) will (1) engage with your work, (2) respond to questions posed, and (3) raise other questions. The aim will be to foster a virtual conversation, where the online group(s) might be able to interact with face-to-face students, and vice versa.

DUE: As scheduled—24 February through 23 March 2016


- You may address any issue within the limits of our course theme (ethics in death and dying), but your research needs to reflect thoughtful and probing engagement with both philosophical and theological ethical resources. This should be a research-oriented paper containing sufficient references and citations not only to carry forward but also to ground the argument you are making. In order to execute a thoughtful research paper (and presentation), it will be necessary to constrain your topic within a narrow range as the paper length will not allow for an expansive thesis.

- The aim of this paper is to demonstrate a thoughtful and engaged response to an issue raised in class. Accordingly, the research paper should deal with an aspect of moral theory or method or with a particular moral issue raised in class for which you labour to elaborate on an ethical-theological perspective/argument—it may be that a question you raised in the principal assignment is one you wish to pursue more deeply here. That said, topics must be submitted in writing for approval in advance by the instructor no later than 24 February 2016—in addition to the question for which you seek approval, please include a preliminary bibliography of no less than five sources.

- The paper you develop may present an argument or articulate a position regarding a selected issue. The paper may be written with a persuasive tone or with an objective to clarify the issue(s) in order to clear the space for future and fruitful ethical discourse and decision-making. The paper may be written so as to explore the implications of the issue raised by your thesis for institutional and societal life. In the end, the paper should set out a clear and concise thesis, while working to attend to the wonder and analysis the thesis provokes, with the judicious use of primary (and selective use of secondary) sources.
• Satisfactory completion of a 2000 word research paper is required along with an oral presentation of the paper before your peers that will stimulate (bio)ethical reflection (further presentation details to follow). The presentation component will take place at the end of the course, to be scheduled on either 30 March or 6 April 2016.
• For those students who are completing this course online, a virtual space will be created where your peers will be able to view and respond to your paper. A virtual conversation will be encouraged and enabled in the online environment so that all students may benefit from and learn to cultivate engaging and thoughtful dialogue around the issues raised.
DUE: Week 11—30 March 2016

Course Policies and Expectations

Attendance and Participation

• Learning is not a spectator sport. Fundamentally, the responsibility to learn is yours. Accordingly, for learning to happen in any course, you must take an active role in the process so that you might nurture the competencies established and evaluated.
• The class policy, then, will be as follows: It is the responsibility of the student to read all required materials, to study notes carefully, and to participate regularly in course lectures, group discussions, and other learning activities.
• Attendance is specified by VST requirements, which requires at least 80% attendance for this course. This means attending class on time with no more than 2 allowable absences for any reason.
• If you have a documented disability that might interfere with your success in this course, I encourage you to discuss it with me after class and/or solicit the appropriate services provided by the school. See your Student Handbook or talk to the Dean.
• Please Note: The students in this course all bring a good deal of experience and represent diverse worldviews. Thoughtful discussion will be encouraged and regular individual contributions to discussion expected—in this way, each of us should reap the full benefits of each other’s experience. However, you must be aware that there are standards of academic discourse. In general, discussion contributions should be substantive in that you explain the reasons or provide support for your position. Assertions without explanation of your reasons are mere opinions. Additionally, agreement or disagreement with others in the class can be spirited. We all benefit from knowing when we have made a strong case for our position. Similarly, we all benefit from thoughtful critiques that show the weaknesses in our arguments, present criticisms that are constructive, or suggest an alternate perspective for our consideration. This is how we learn. Such exchanges should focus on reasons and assumptions that support or fail to support the argument in question. They should never be attacks directed at the person or qualities of the person, e.g., their professional background, worldview, age, or experience. Exchanges should be respectful. Simply “blowing off steam”, “insulting” a peer, or otherwise “cheering or jeering” for another is not academic discourse. The instructor reserves the right to halt discussions that are offensive or not worthy of an academic forum.
Late Papers and/or Assignments

- Submission of assignments on time is a part of academic, professional, and pastoral competence and a part of every course at VST. All assignments in courses are due on the dates specified in the syllabus for each course.
- Failure to submit an assignment on time will be noted in the narrative evaluation of an assignment, and may affect your final grade for the course. Two late assignments without legitimate excuse will result in a reduction of one letter grade for the course.
- Please note: For this course, failure to upload group readings two weeks prior to the case presentation will also result in a full letter deduction for each member of the group.

For Further Reading on Death and Dying

Phillipe Ariès, Western Attitudes toward Death (1974)
Ernst Becker, The Denial of Death (1973)
Robert Cardinal Bellarmine, The Art of Dying Well (1847)
Robin Cook, Coma (1977)
John Cheever, The Death of Justine (1960)
Annie Dillard, For the Time Being (1999)
Margaret Edson, Wit (1999)
William Falkner, As I Lay Dying (1929)
Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Birthmark (1843)
Kazuo Ishiguro, Never Let Me Go (2005)
Eberhard Jüngel, Death, the Riddle and the Mystery (1975)
David Kelsey, Eccentric Existence (2009)
Søren Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death (1849)
C.S. Lewis, A Greif Observed (1961)
Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (1981)
Gabriel Marcel, Un Homme de Dieu [A Man of God] (1957)
Jessica Mitford, The American Way of Death (1963)
Friedrich Nietzsche, Ecce Homo (1908)
Edgar Allan Poe, The Premature Burial (1844)
Karl Rahner, On the Theology of Death (1961)
Gillian Rose, Love Works (2011)
Fleming Rutledge, The Undoing of Death (2005)
Felix Salten, Bambi (1923)
Mary Shelley, Frankenstein (1818)
Margaret Sommerville, Death Talk: The Case Against Euthanasia and PAS (2001)
William Stringfellow, An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land (1974)
John Thiel, God, Evil, and Innocent Suffering (2002)
Miriam Toews, All My Puny Sorrow (2014)
An End of Life Bioethics Bibliography


Becker, Carl B. "Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia." Philosophy East and West 40 (1990): 543-556.


