

# Why We Die: Sociologies of Death

## SOC106

Fall 2014

### Syllabus

**Professor:** Dr. Daniel C. Johnson  
Office: Frost 325A  
Extension: 4407  
E-mail: dan.johnson@gordon.edu  
Office hours: Mon., 12:30 – 2:00 pm;  
Wed., 2:00 – 4:15 pm;  
Thurs., 10:00 am – 12:00 pm;  
and by appointment.

**Class Meetings:** MWF, 9:10 – 10:10 am  
MacDonald 212

**Texts:** Berger, Peter. 1963. *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*. New York: Anchor Books.  
Eire, Carlos. 2009. *A Very Brief History of Eternity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.  
Lightman, Alan. 2000. *The Diagnosis*. New York: Vintage Books.  
Nuland, Sherwin B. 1993. *How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter*. New York: Random House.  
Regis, Ed. 1991. *Great Mambo Chicken and the Transhuman Condition: Science Slightly Over the Edge*. New York: Basic Books.  
Tolstoy, Leo. 2008. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories*. Trans. by Anthony Briggs, David McDuff, and Ronald Wilks. New York: Penguin Books.  
Various selections made available through the class Blackboard site

### Course Description

Death is arguably the only truly universal human experience, yet as an experience it remains maddeningly inaccessible to us. While living with an awareness of death has long been taken to be a defining feature of “the human,” as long as we remain among the living, our encounters with death can only be indirect, mediated, vicarious. We can know full well the pain of having others pass beyond us, but the prospect of our own death is an absurd and confounding notion. It is impossible for us to make any sense of it on our own, and it is just as impossible for us to dismiss it altogether. All of this means that death is necessarily a prime concern of human cultures. Cultures are continually enacting understandings of why we die, and of how we should live in view of death.

This course examines some of the most influential of these understandings—particularly as they find expression in philosophy, theology, social theory, and literature, as well as in more popular cultural forms like music and film. Still more, it draws attention to the ways in which such understandings inform and shape various social practices, institutional arrangements, political and economic structures, and so on. As much as we act as though death is far, far away from us, it is actually an ever-present feature of our world. This course, then, is an exploration into how the question of death insinuates itself in every sphere of social life.

This exploration will draw on observations made from a variety of perspectives and presented using a variety of media formats. The discipline of sociology, however, will provide a primary framework through which we will view, organize, and try to make sense of those observations. Accordingly, the course will begin with a brief orientation to the sociological perspective, and to what that perspective suggests concerning the significance of death as a driving factor in human culture. It will then explore at length five distinctive cultural modes through which humans have responded to question of why we die. These we will organize under the (perhaps rather cryptic) headings of Death Justified, Death Dealt, Death Detailed, Death Denied, and Death Allowed.

## Objectives

As an elective offering under the “Human Person” theme of the Core curriculum, this course’s general goals are the same ones that have been established for every course in this thematic area of the Core. The more specific objectives for this particular course can all be subsumed under those four general goals as follows:

- 1) To help students grasp the enduring significance of fundamental anthropological questions, most notably “What does it mean to be human?”
  - Students will be able to articulate and defend the idea that our awareness of our inevitable death is a fundamental feature of what it means to be human.
  - Students will be able to explain how the prospect of death drives the development of human culture.
- 2) To sensitize students to the existence of varied ways in which to think about the human person.
  - Students will be able to distinguish between dualism and materialist monism, specifically with respect to their consequences for how humans strive to make sense of death.
- 3) To expose students at length to at least two prominent perspectives on humanness.
  - Students will be able to describe the sociological perspective as a specialized way of observing the dialectic that shapes human persons, on the one hand, and the social world, on the other.
  - Students will be able to identify, recount and assess several prominent theological approaches to understanding (and justifying) death.
  - Students will be able to identify, explain, and assess the basic orientations of medical science as it confronts the reality of death.
- 4) To facilitate students’ critical awareness of how certain understandings of humanness have been embedded in various spheres of contemporary life.
  - Students will be able to trace the connections between various cultural modes of responding to the reality of death—namely, Death Justified, Death Dealt, Death Detailed, Death Denied, and Death Allowed—and some of their corresponding institutional manifestations.

Here is how the various course assignments (described below) relate to each of these specific objectives:

Objective	Assessment tool
Students will be able to articulate and defend the idea that our awareness of our inevitable death is a fundamental feature of what it means to be human.	Mid-term exam #1 Mid-term exam #2
Students will understand how the prospect of death drives the development of human culture.	Mid-term exam #1
Students will be able to distinguish between dualism and materialist monism, specifically with respect to their consequences for how humans strive to make sense of death.	Class tickets Oral presentation Mid-term exam #2
Students will be able to describe the sociological perspective as a specialized way of observing the dialectic that shapes human persons, on the one hand, and the social world, on the other.	Mid-term exam #1
Students will be able to identify, recount and assess several prominent theological approaches to understanding (and justifying) death.	Class tickets Oral presentation Mid-term exam #2
Students will be able to identify, explain, and assess the basic orientations of medical science as it confronts the reality of death.	Class tickets Oral presentation Mid-term exam #2
Students will be able to trace the connections between various cultural modes of responding to the reality of death—namely, Death Justified, Death Dealt, Death Detailed, Death Denied, and Death Allowed—and their corresponding institutional manifestations.	Class tickets Oral presentation Mid-term exam #2

## Assignments

Before each class period you will need to prepare a “ticket” that will secure your admission to class. The ticket should consist of two elements: first, a brief statement identifying something that you felt you really understood or connected with from the readings of the day; second, two questions that you still have or that you would like to pose concerning those readings. I will collect your tickets at the beginning of each class and use them to help structure the discussion that follows.

In addition to your general class participation, you will be asked to team up with one other class member to function as “co-cohosts” for one class session over the course of the semester. At a minimum, this will mean making yourselves extra familiar with the day’s discussion materials and giving some thought to how you might facilitate class discussion of their major themes. Prior to your assigned session, you will need to meet with me and hammer out a working plan for the day’s discussion.

The final project for the course will be a six- to ten-minute oral presentation, to be delivered before the entire class toward the end of the semester. If you wish, you may join together with one or two other students in the class to prepare an extended joint presentation. Either way, you will be able to choose a topic for your presentation from a list of several broad options that I will furnish on Monday, October 13. From then, you will be expected to work steadily on your project through the rest of the semester. Indeed, you will be required to deliver a “rough draft” of your presentation during the third week of November. Your rough draft will be video captured and made available to the class via an online forum, through which I and other class members will be able to offer feedback. Your participation in the oral presentation prep forum is mandatory and will be graded as well.

There will be two mid-term examinations. The first is scheduled for Wednesday, October 8, and the second is scheduled for Friday, December 5. As the course outline that follows suggests, the dates for these exams are subject to change. The date for a final examination, by contrast, is fixed for Wednesday, December 17, from 9:00 to 11:00 am, but you will not be taking an exam at that time. Rather, we will use the time to hear the last of the oral presentations that the class has prepared.

## Grading

All major course components will be graded on a 100 point scale, while each day’s class ticket will be assessed on a simple credit/no credit basis. The contribution of each component to the final course grade will be as follows:

- Co-cohosting: 10%
- Class tickets: 15%
- Prep forum participation: 20%
- Oral presentation, final draft: 25%
- Mid-term exam #1: 15%
- Mid-term exam #2: 15%

Letter grades will be assigned according to the standard 90–80–70–60 scale, with “pluses” and “minuses” assigned to the top and bottom 3 percent of each letter grade range.

You may appeal your grade on either of the two examinations. Appeals must be presented **in writing** within one week of the date the graded exam is returned to you.

## Students with Disabilities

Gordon College is committed to assisting students with documented disabilities. (See Academic Catalog Appendix C, for documentation guidelines.) A student with a disability who may need academic accommodations should follow this procedure:

- 1) Meet with a staff person from the Academic Support Center (Jenks 412, x4746) to:
  - a. make sure documentation of your disability is on file in the ASC,
  - b. discuss the accommodations for which you are eligible,
  - c. discuss the procedures for obtaining the accommodations, and
  - d. obtain a Faculty Notification Form.
- 2) Deliver a Faculty Notification Form to each course professor within the first full week of the semester; at that time make an appointment to discuss your needs with each professor.

Failure to register in time with your professor and the ASC may compromise our ability to provide the accommodations. Questions or disputes about accommodations should be immediately referred to the Academic Support Center. See Grievance Procedures available from the ASC.

## Course outline\*

Date	Topics	Texts
8/27	Introduction	
8/29	Sociology, and sociologies	Berger, <i>Invitation to Sociology</i> , Preface, chapters 1 - 2
9/3	Constructions of the self	Berger, chapter 3
9/5	The sociological perspective	Berger, chapters 4 – 5
9/8	The sociological perspective, continued	
9/10	The sociological perspective, continued	Berger, chapter 6
9/12	Three social theoretical orientations	
9/15	Freedom?!	Berger, chapter 7 – 8
9/17	Sociology and the study of culture	
9/19	Death and culture	<i>Battlestar Galactica</i> – Guess What’s Coming to Dinner? (season 4.0, episode 7)
9/22	Death and culture, continued	
9/24	Death and culture, continued	“Called to the Holy Mountain: The Monks of Mount Athos,” <i>National Geographic</i> , 216(6): 134 - 149. “The Hadza,” <i>National Geographic</i> , 216(6): 94 - 119.
9/26	Death Justified	Eire, <i>A Very Brief History of Eternity</i> , chapter 1
9/29		Eire, chapter 2
10/1		Eire, chapters 3 – 4
10/3		
10/6		Eire, chapters 5 - 6
10/8	Mid-term exam #1	
10/10	Death Dealt	Hannah, Sarah. “Azarel (Angel of Death)” (poem). <i>The Southern Review</i> (June 22, 2007): 558-559.
10/13		Tolstoy, “After the Ball”
10/15		Foucault, <i>Discipline and Punish</i> , pp. 47-54.
10/20		Rahimi, Babak. 2010. “The Transhuman Soldier: A Comparative Look at WWI and the Iran-Iraq War.” Koenigsberg, Richard. 2004. “The Soldier as Sacrificial Victim: Awakening from the Nightmare of History.”
10/22		<i>Conspiracy</i>
10/24		

\* This schedule is subject to change at the instructor’s discretion

10/27	Death Detailed	Nuland, <i>How We Die</i> , Introduction, chapters 1 – 2
10/29		Nuland, chapters 5 - 7
10/31		Nuland, chapters 8 - 11
11/3		<i>Wit</i>
11/5		
11/7		Nuland, chapters 3 - 4, 12, Epilogue
11/10	Death Denied	Regis, <i>Great Mambo Chicken and the Transhuman Condition</i> , “The Mania”, chapters 1 - 3
11/12		Regis, chapters 4 – 5
11/14		<i>The Hudsucker Proxy</i>
11/17		
11/19		Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilyich”
11/21	Death Allowed	
11/24		Foucault, <i>The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction</i> , pp. 135-145
12/1		Lightman, <i>The Diagnosis</i> (pp. 1-178)
12/3		Lightman, <i>The Diagnosis</i> (pp. 179-369)
		Szyborska, Wislawa. “On Death, without Exaggeration” (poem). <i>Nobelprize.org</i> .
12/5	Mid-term exam #2	
12/8	Oral presentations	
12/10	Oral presentations, continued	
12/17	Oral presentations, finalized (9:00 – 11:00 am)	