

GESM I20: The Gifts of Ilúvatar: Death and Immortality

This is a draft syllabus for registration purposes only. All elements of the syllabus are subject to change prior to the start of the spring 2022 semester.

Who: You and 17 other USC freshmen, along with Professor Mark Schroeder (he/him or they/them)

When: Tuesdays and Thursdays 8:30-9:50am

Classroom: TBD

Student Contact Hours: Monday 10:00-12:00

Course Introduction

You are *Peredhel*, the lovechild of one of the world's greatest historical romances, between human and elf. Raised at the intersection of these two great cultures, you are now coming of age and must choose between the two great gifts of Ilúvatar to each of your parents' peoples: the human gift of mortality, or the elven gift of immortality. The Valar have set a deadline of May 1, 2022 for your choice. In the meantime, you have the opportunity to review, with your siblings who have been set a similar choice, the greatest wisdom of the ages about the benefits and burdens of immortality.

In this class we will ask what death, time, and the open future mean for happiness, risk, social progress, conflict, and human relationships, among other topics. At the end of the semester, you will turn in a master paper that presents and justifies your choice to live a mortal or immortal life and presents a plan for how you will best take advantage of the virtues of your answer and avoid its pitfalls. Throughout the semester, you will have the opportunity to be challenged by philosophical reflection on this topic as well as by seventeen other students who are trying to make the same choice for themselves.

Learning Objectives

In this class you will develop and Demonstrate Understanding of important ideas from throughout the history of philosophy, and gain an understanding of what motivates these ideas. This learning objective addresses objectives 1-3 from the GE-B category:

- Reflect on what it means to be human through close study of human experience throughout time and across diverse cultures;
- Cultivate a critical appreciation for various forms of human expression, including literature, language, philosophy, and the arts, as well as develop an understanding of the contexts from which these forms emerge;
- Engage with lasting ideas and values that have animated humanity throughout the centuries for a more purposeful, more ethical, and intellectually richer life;

You will learn to write clear prose in which you can Exposit Clearly difficult ideas to an audience of readers who do not yet understand them. This learning objective addresses part of objective 4 from the GE-B category:

- Learn to read and interpret actively and analytically, to think critically and creatively, and to write and speak persuasively;

You will develop Critical Distance from these ideas and decide for yourself which you will take on board and why. This learning objective addresses objective 5 from the GE-B category:

- Learn to evaluate ideas from multiple perspectives and to formulate informed opinions on complex issues of critical importance in today's global world;

You will learn to Respond to Feedback, developing your own ideas in response to critical challenges. This learning objective addresses objective 6 from the GE-B category:

- Learn to collaborate effectively through traditional and new ways of disseminating knowledge.

And you will learn to argue for your ideas, trying to Succeed By Your Own Terms at the argumentative challenges that you have set for yourself in your writing. This learning objective addresses the second half of objective 4 from the GE-B category.

Required Texts

There are no required texts for this course. All readings and course materials will be [distributed electronically](#). It is *strongly recommended* that you print out the readings, if you have access to a printer, as there is good evidence that people engage better with reading print materials, and it will make it easier for you to refer to readings in class discussion without flipping between windows on your laptop or apps on your tablet.

Required Work

Reading

Every week there will be assigned required reading for the week. You are expected to do this reading before the beginning of the week and come to class with specific questions about it to discuss in class. Some weeks different students will be assigned to do different readings, so that we can learn from each other in class. You are not responsible to do readings that are assigned to other students. Weekly reading contributes toward the Demonstrate Understanding learning objective for this course.

Weekly Writing

Each week (with exceptions to be explained below) you will complete a short writing assignment following the TIOR format that is explained later in this syllabus. Your writing assignment is due to be submitted through Blackboard and is due by midnight Monday night each week. You are required to complete the TIOR in weeks 2 and 3, and beyond that there is a threshold that you must meet for each grading condition. Weekly writing contributes toward developing all five of the learning objectives for this course.

Participation

You are required to actively participate in class discussions. This does not mean that you have to speak up in class. Your participation contribution can come from some combination of asking probing questions in class, leading class discussion, contributing to ongoing discussion on the course Slack, and participation in Student Contact Hours. Being wrong in interesting and important ways counts just as much toward participation as being right, as does asking a question that other people learn from, even if you do not know the answer. I will occasionally award a scholar point for a particularly strong contribution, and scholar points can contribute toward your final course grade (see below). Participation contributes toward the Exposit Clearly, Critical Distance, and Respond to Feedback learning objectives for the course.

Midterm Essay

Before the end of week seven you will submit a Midterm Essay addressing one of the two challenges that we will have covered so far in class. Your Essay will explain this challenge in the most forceful way that you can and take a stand on whether this challenge is successful. This Essay will in turn become a rough draft of part of your Final Essay for the semester. Your Midterm Essay will be evaluated with respect to the criteria of four of the five learning objectives for the course, excepting Respond to Feedback. You will have an opportunity to resubmit your Midterm Essay after receiving written feedback, in order to improve your grade.

Final Essay

At the end of the semester, you will submit a Final Essay addressing the question of whether you will choose the gift of mortality, or the gift of immortality, and explaining why, addressing what you take to be the chief challenges for your answer as well as outlining what you see to be its greatest advantages. Your Final Essay will be evaluated with respect to whether it meets competence standards for each of the five learning objectives for the course. You will have the opportunity to submit a draft of your Final Essay early and, if you do, to submit a second time in response to feedback, in order to improve your grade.

Presentations

You will have the opportunity to present your progress on your final paper to the class in week 15 for discussion and peer feedback. Giving a presentation is required to be eligible for an A grade in the class but is not required full-stop, and can improve your non-A grade as described below. The presentation contributes toward the *Exposit Clearly* and *Respond to Feedback* learning objectives for the class.

Weekly Writing

Each week you will complete the reading to be discussed during the *ensuing* week by Monday at midnight, and submit your writing assignment by midnight following the instructions on Blackboard. Every writing assignment will consist in a short argumentative paper, following the TIOR format. TIOR stands for ‘They say... I say... One might object... But I Reply...’.

So your papers will always include these four moves, in this order: first you will say what someone else says (usually the author of one of our readings for the week), then you will say what you say in response, then you will consider how your target might object to what you say, and finally you will say how you can defend yourself from that objection. You may only use one sentence per move, and you may not cheat by using sentences that are so long that they become difficult to read – the point of the exercise is to focus on what is important for your argument.

You may write in response to anything from the week’s reading. So your topic is entirely up to you each week. The semester is 15 weeks but there is no reading and no assignment due before week 1 or week 15, and there will be no TIORs in week 8, because of the Midterm Essay. So there are only 12 opportunities for weekly writing assignments. Each TIOR will receive a grade of ‘satisfactory’, ‘unsatisfactory’, or ‘exceptional’. ‘Satisfactory’ assignments count as one point toward the criteria for higher course grades as described below, and ‘exceptional’ assignments count as two points. Scores of ‘exceptional’ will be rare.

Grading

Your grade for this class will be determined by competence-based criteria. That means that instead of adding up or averaging points from different components of your course grade, you will instead be asked to show different levels of competence for different levels of course grade, and that you will be allowed the opportunity to demonstrate your competence in different ways.

This puts you in a position to always know where you stand and what you need to do, and means that if you seek to get an A in the class, everything that you do up through the Final Essay remains important.

In general, A-range grades correspond to demonstrating competence in higher-level skills associated with the learning objectives for the course. The criteria for each grade are as follows:

C-range: To receive a C-range grade – that is, a passing grade in this course – you must be present and engaged for at least 21 classes out of our 28 class meetings, complete six TIOR weekly writing assignments with a grade of satisfactory or excellent, turn in a Midterm Essay that satisfies the competence condition for Demonstrate Understanding, and turn in a Final Essay that satisfies the competence conditions for Demonstrate Understanding, Respond to Feedback, and Critical Distance.

B-range: To receive a B-range grade – that is, a B-, B, or B+ – you must satisfy all of the criteria for a C-range grade plus, *in addition*, receive at least 8 points in total for weekly TIOR writing assignments, turn in a Midterm Essay that satisfies the competence condition for Exposit Clearly, and turn in a Final Essay that satisfies the competence condition for Exposit Clearly.

A-range: To receive an A-range grade in this class – that is, either an A or an A-, you must satisfy all of the criteria for a B-range grade plus, *in addition*, satisfy at least three of the following five criteria: receive a total of at least 10 points for weekly TIOR writing assignments, turn in a Midterm Essay that satisfies the competence condition for Critical Distance, turn in a Final Essay that satisfies the competence condition for Succeed By Your Own Terms, present your work-in-progress on your Final Essay in the final week of class, and collect at least five ‘scholar’ citations for helpful contributions in class discussions, online discussions, or office hours.

+’s and –’s If you have satisfied the criteria for a C-range grade but not the criteria for a B-range grade, then your grade will be determined by how many of the criteria you have met for a B-range grade and how many of the criteria you have met for an A-range grade. If you satisfy two of the B-range criteria *and* at least one of the A-range criteria, you will receive a C+. If you satisfy two of the B-range criteria *or* one of the A-range criteria but not both, you will receive a C. Otherwise you will receive a C-.

If you have satisfied the criteria for a B-range grade but not the criteria for an A-range grade, then your grade will be determined by how many of the criteria you have met for an A-range grade. If you meet two criteria for an A-range grade, then you will receive a B+. If you meet one criterion for an A-range grade, you will receive a B. Otherwise you will receive a B-.

If you have satisfied the criteria for an A-range grade, then you can receive an A by satisfying at least four of the A-range criteria.

Schedule of Topics and Course Calendar

The schedule of topics for each week of the course, including links to the readings available online and reminders of all writing and assignment deadlines, is available through the course calendar on the [course webpage](#), behind the password (as always) ‘gifts’.

Sample Selected Readings for Course Approval

Unit 1: The Challenge of Immortality

- Class 1.1 Introduction (no reading, in-class discussion of Tolkien)
- Class 1.2 B. Williams: 'The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality'
- Class 2.1 Karel Čapek: 'The Makropulos Affair' (original play)
- Class 2.2 Connie Rosati: 'The Makropulos Case Revisited'
- Class 3.1 Leoš Janáček: 'The Makropulos Affair' (opera)
- Class 3.2 Michael Cholbi: 'Immortality and the Exhaustibility of Value'
- Class 4.1 Lisa Bortolotti and Yujin Nagasawa: 'Immortality Without Boredom'
- Class 4.2 Aaron Smuts: 'Immortality and Significance'

Unit 2: Is Death Bad? Is the Soul Immortal?

- Class 5.1 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, book 3
- Class 5.2 Ben Bradley, 'How Bad is Death?'
- Class 6.1 Plato, *Phaedo*
- Class 6.2 No new reading (or maybe selection from *The Questions of King Milinda*)
- Class 7.1 Al-Ghazali, 'Incoherence of the Philosophers', discussions 18-20
- Class 7.2 Ibn Rushd, 'The Incoherence of the Incoherence', selection TBD
- Class 8.1 Moses Mendelssohn, *Phaedron*
- Class 8.2 No new reading

Unit 3: Stages of Life

CHILDHOOD

- Class 9.1 Tamar Schapiro, 'What Is a Child?'
- Class 9.2 Mark Schroeder, 'Treating Like a Child'

Marriage

- Class 10.1 Dan Moller, 'An Argument Against Marriage'
- Class 10.2 TBD

The Mid-Life Crisis

- Class 11.1 Kieran Setiya, *The Mid-Life Crisis*, selections TBD
- Class 11.2 Kieran Setiya, *The Mid-Life Crisis*, selections TBD, *Groundhog Day*

Unit 4: Society

- Class 12.1 TBD
- Class 12.2 TBD
- Class 13.1 TBD
- Class 13.2 TBD

Unit 5: Existential Choice

- Class 14.1 Sartre, selection from *Existentialism as a Humanism*
- Class 14.2 Judith Jarvis Thomson, selection from *Goodness and Advice*
- Class 15.1 Presentations
- Class 15.2 Presentations

Other possible readings

- Regina Rini, 'The Last Mortals'
- Steven Cave, *The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives Civilization*
- Martha Nussbaum, 'Mortal Immortals: Lucretius on Death and the Voice of Nature'

Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Immortal'
Hesiod, something TBD?
Rawls, selection from *Political Liberalism*

Statement on Academic Conduct

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” <https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Late Work and Incompletes

All work is expected to be completed and turned in on time. Incomplete work is work not completed due to documented illness or some other emergency occurring after the 12th week of the semester. Arrangements for an IN and its removal should be initiated by the student and agreed to by the instructor prior to the end of the fall 2016 semester.

Academic Accommodations

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. DSP is located in GFS 120 and is open 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is 213-740-0776.

Reporting Sexual Misconduct and for those experiencing stress around issues of gender or protected class (including sexual assault): If you become aware of incident of sexual misconduct please connect with one of the following departments immediately:

Relationship & Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>

Office of Equity, Equal Opportunity and Title IX – (213) 821-8298

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://eeotix.usc.edu/>

Department of Public Safety - 213-740-6000 or Emergencies 213-740-4321

Student Resources and Support

College can be a stressful time, and challenges to one’s mental health can interfere with optimal academic performance. Seeking help and support is smart and effective. These resources can help students manage personal concerns that threaten their emotional or academic well-being.

For those experiencing psychological distress:

Counseling and Mental Health Services (CMH) - (213) 740-9355– 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Bias Assessment Response and Support

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. <https://ooc.usc.edu/how-to-use-help-hotline/>

Additional support services:

Campus Support & Intervention – (213) 740-0411

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. <https://campussupport.usc.edu>

Asian Pacific American Student Services (APASS) – (213) 740-4999

<http://apass.usc.edu/>

Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs (CBCSA) – (213) 740-8257

http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/black_cultural_center/

First Generation Plus Success Center (FG+SC)

<https://firstgenplussc.usc.edu/>

LA CASA – (213) 740-1480

<https://lacasa.usc.edu/>

LGBT Resource Center – (213) 740-7619

<https://lgbtrc.usc.edu/about/>