PL 103: Life, Death & Meaning
-- A Philosophical Study of the Meaning of Death
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Spring 2012, Juniata College

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Course Description: The course is designed as an introduction to philosophy course through exploring the meaning of death as it figures in human life in terms of contributing the meaningfulness of such a life. Ask yourself this: “if one is not able to die, is he really able to live?” (Paul Tillich) In other words, could you live an authentic life without knowing the meaning of your life? Could you know the meaning and value of your life without understanding the very end of your life journey, i.e., your impending death? If you want to find out what many great philosophers and thinkers think about or want to figure out your own answers to those most fundamental existential issues of your life, come to ponder, think, debate, and argue with us. This course will give you a deeper philosophical understanding of the meaning of death and consequently how to live your life in the face of death, which will ultimately bring you into true being and authentic existence.

Required Texts
4. Your self-made course pack including all the required handouts from the following books (on P drive, Wang’s folder)

Reference List
1) Vincent Barry, Philosophical Thinking about Death and Dying, Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007 (PTDD)
8) Fred Feldman, Confrontations with the Reaper, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992 (CWR)
Learning Objectives: This course has two main objectives: In general, as an alternative Introduction to Philosophy course, this course is designed to provide the beginning philosophy students with the background and conceptual tools necessary for more advanced study in the subject. More precisely, our general objectives are:

1. Introduce the works of some of the greatest philosophers of the Western tradition, initiating a lifelong interaction. Gain some appreciation for the value of what philosophers do and how they do it by seeing how greater clarity and self-knowledge can result from interacting with great thinkers of the past.
2. Become aware of the complexity of philosophical issues, gaining an understanding of how the various components of a worldview are cohere and connected, and of what kind of evidence is relevant to evaluating a worldview.
3. Learn how to examine some of our own unconscious assumptions and biases and how to uncover some deep philosophical presuppositions underlying them through being exposed to the writings of philosophers who challenge the conventional wisdom of our times.
4. Learn analytic skills and a critical way of thinking necessary to conduct philosophical research and other areas of study.
5. Learn to exercise reason and civility in interacting with people with whom we have radical disagreements.
6. Acquire a set of reading, writing, and oral discussion skills that will allow you to engage philosophical texts in an interesting and deep manner, including: (a) the ability to discuss course readings in basic terms; (b) the ability to identify major concepts, positions, and arguments; (c) the ability to demonstrate overall comprehension of course texts; (d) the ability to explain material clearly, accurately, precisely; (e) the ability to draw insightful connections between issues and ideas; (f) the ability to present alternative perspectives fairly and sympathetically; and (g) the ability to evaluate claims critically and to defend rationally a wide range of views.

In particular, the course is a survey of some fundamental philosophical problems of the meaning of death in relation to the meaning and value of life, and the efforts made by significant thinkers to solve them. More precisely, the course will

1. Provide an understanding of the meaning of death in connection with the meaning and value of life and the wide range of philosophical issues surrounding them.
2. Inculcate critical thinking by encouraging personal reflection on issues of life and death and their meaning to each individual.
3. Encourage self-reflection on personal mortality and the cultural and religious understandings of immortality.
4. Encourage you, hopefully, to live a more productive and authentic life by going through the philosophical gate of death (this why I sometimes call it “A Philosophical Death Camp”) based on the following assumptions: (a) the inevitability of death forces everyone to explore its meaning in and for life; (b) life cannot be comprehended fully unless death is grappled with honestly.

Course Requirements:
1. **Attendance, Preparation and Participation** (10 %)
   - A half point (0.5 out of 100) will be deducted from your course grade for each lecture you miss without an official excuse; however, your first absence will be excused by default.
• You are **strictly required** to complete all the reading assignments before each class. Watch: I will check whether you have done so honestly from time to time (by asking for a brief review, posting questions, or giving a pop-quiz about the readings).
• Class participation is an essential component of philosophical training. Active participation will definitely boost your grade, and poor participation will hurt your grade.

2. **Pop Quizzes and group discussions** (15 %)
   • There will be many (how many will depend on how well you finish the readings) pop quizzes (taking a few minutes to finish) to make sure that you finish the reading assignments faithfully and effectively.
   • We will have formal small group discussions from time to time, which will be graded based on group performance.

3. **Ten personal, theoretical, reflective weekly journals** (20 %)
   • About 2-3 typed, double-spaced pages for each journal, which should have an informative title to help you organize your ideas.
   • Ideally, each weekly journal entry should focus on the topics and readings covered in the week. Each entry should be a response to and reflection of text-related themes and ideas. Each journal entry usually contains your insights and discoveries, disagreements and questions, comparisons and inner-reflections, comments on accompanying media excerpts, or responses to the variety of human experience.
   • Only the best eight of total ten journal entries will count (that means it is fine to miss one or two journal entries without hurting your grade badly).

4. **Two short essays** (30 %)
   • Each essay should be about 4-6 double-spaced pages
   • The topics and specific requirements will be announced later.

5. **One final term paper** (25 %)
   • About 8 to 10 double-spaced pages in length (time New Roman font 12, 1 inch margins)
   • Possible topics for you to think about now (more specific information comes later)
     - “Facing Death: a philosophy thinking about my own personal death”
     - “The Meaning of My Death and My Life”
     - “… ” topic of your choice (had better come to talk with me for approval if you are not sure)

**Policies:**
1. **Withdrawal:** you can withdraw from the course at any time before or on the last day of classes, Friday, 12/7/2012, if we both agree that it is in your best interest.
2. **Learning Difference:** the Americans Disabilities Act mandates accessibility in all aspects of the learning environment. If you have an identified disability and are in need of specific accommodations, please notify the Office of Academic Support Services in Founders Hall and discuss your needs with me at the beginning of the semester.
3. **Academic integrity:** “The College considers academic integrity one of the foundation stones of a liberal arts education and asks all students to use good sense and judgment in preparing and submitting material for examination and evaluation. Particularly at mid-semester and semester's end, under work and deadline pressure, students may make false assumptions or uninformed decisions that could lead to a charge of academic dishonesty.” (from the provost office website)
Class Schedule

Week 1 (8/24)
F: Introduction: Why study of death? (a) Thomas Carr, “Why Study Death?” (IDD); (b) Shelly Kagan, “Should You Disregard the Fact of Death?” (D); (c) Vincent Barry, “Philosophical Thinking and Death” (PTDD)

Week 2 (8/27-31)
M: (a) Class discussion on the readings for the first class; (b) Discussion: “if I have only three years to live, then what?”

Section 1. Two Tales of Facing Death
W: Leo Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilyich, introduction, chapters 1-8
    ❖ Journal #1: Write your own obituary (due in Wed’s class)
F: Leo Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilyich, chapters 9-12

Week 3 (9/3-7)
M: Mitch Albom, Tuesdays with Morrie, pp. 1-107
    ❖ Journal #2 on The Death of Ilyich (due in the Monday’s class)
W: Mitch Albom, Tuesdays with Morrie, pp. 108-199
Optional: (a) ABC Nightline TV program, “Morrie: Lessons on Living (with Ted Koppel)”, (9 clips of the interviews on YouTube.com); (b) Movie, “Tuesday with Morrie” (1999, total 11 clips on YouTube.com)

Section 2. The Nature of Death: What is death?
F: (a) Louis Pojman, “What is Death? The Crisis of Criteria” (PAD); (b) Steven Luper, “Death” (POD)

Week 4 (9/10-14)
M: continue
    ❖ Journal #3 on Tuesdays with Morrie (due in the Monday’s class)

Section 3. The Survival of Death: Can you survive your own physical death?
W: Vincent Barry, “Survival Hypotheses” (PTDD)
F: Shelly Kagan, “Dualism versus Physicalism” (D)

Week 5 (9/17-21)
M: Shelly Kagan, “Personal Identity” (D)
    ❖ Journal # 4 on the nature of death (due in the Monday’s class)
W: John Perry, “A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality”, the first night (RR)
F: John Perry, “A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality”, the second night (RR)

Week 6 (9/24-28)
M: John Perry, “A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality”, the third night (RR)

Section 4. The Value of Death
4.1 Is death harmful?
W: (a) Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus” (IR); (b) Fred Feldman, “Epicurus and the Evil of Death” (CWR); (c) Steven Luper, “Epicurus’ Timing Puzzle” (POD)
F: (a) Lucretius, On the Nature of Things (IR); (b) Steven Luper, “Lucretius’s Symmetry Argument” (POD)
    ❖ Short Essay One on sections 2 & 3 due on Friday (9/28)

Week 7 (10/1-5)
M: (a) Shelly Kagan, “The Deprivation Account” (D); (b) Thomas Nagel, “Death” (the deprivation account) (MED)
W: George Pitcher, “The Misfortunes of the Dead” (the desire-frustration account) (MED)

4.2 Is our fear of death rational?
F: Vincent Barry, “Death in the West” (PTDD)

Journal #5 on the badness of death (due in Friday’s class)

Week 8 (10/8-12)

M: Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death, foreword, preface, ch. 1 & 2
W: Jeffrie Murphy, “Rationality and the Fear of Death” (MED)

Section 5. The Meaning of Death from the Existentialist Perspective
F: Sean Ireton, “the metaphysical vs. the ontological perspectives on death” (OSD)

Journal #6 on the fear of death (due in Friday’s class)

Week 9 (10/15-19)

4.1 Soren Kierkegaard on the human predicament and death
MW: (a) Soren Kierkegaard, Sickness unto Death (EBW); (b) Vincent Barry, “Existential Thought and Fear of Death” (PTDD, for Kierkegaard, read pp 55-61 only); (c) Ernest Becker, pp. 25-30; (d) Michael Slote, “Existentialism and the Fear of Dying” (LMD, for Kierkegaard, read pp. 80-86 only)
F: Ernest Becker, the Denial of Death, ch. 5

Journal #7 on Kierkegaard (due in Friday’s class)

Week 10 (10/22-26)

M: fall break!

4.2 Ernest Becker’s existential-psychoanalysis of death: death and heroism
W: Ernest Becker, the Denial of Death, ch. 4
F: Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death, ch. 7 (read pp. 127-131, 142-158), ch. 8

Week 11 (10/29-11/2)

M: Ernest Becker, the Denial of Death, pp. 196-207, ch. 11

Journal #8 on Ernest Becker (due in Monday’s class)

4.3 Friedrich Nietzsche on Free Death
WF: (a) Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Free Death” (TSZ); (b) Sean Ireton, “Nietzsche: the deaths of Empedocles and Zarathustra” (OSD)

Week 12 (11/5-9)

4.4 Martin Heidegger on death and authenticity
MW: (a) Martin Heidegger, “Dasein as being-toward-death” (EBW); (b) Sean Ireton, “Heidegger: The Ontology and Onticity of Death” (OSD)

Journal #9 on Nietzsche (due in Monday’s class)
F: (a) Vincent Barry, “Existential Thought and Fear of Death” (PTDD, for Heidegger, read pp. 61-68 only); (b) Michael Slote, “Existentialism and the Fear of Dying” (LMD, for Heidegger, read pp. 88-95 only)

Week 13 (11/12-16)

M: reserve for catch up

Journal Two on sections 4 & 5 due on Monday (11/12)

Section 6. The Meaning of Life in the Face of Death

6.1 Death doesn’t contribute to the meaning of life
WF: (a) Jean-Paul Sartre, “My Death” (BN); (b) Walter Kaufmann, “Sartre on Death” (MD); (c) Michael Slote, “Existentialism and the Fear of Dying” (LMD, for Sartre, read section V only)

Week 14 (11/19-23)

M: Robert Solomon, “death fetishism, morbid solipsism” (DP)
WF: Thanks-Giving Break!
Week 15 (11/26-30)

6.2 Is immortality desirable?
M: Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality” (MED)
W: John Fischer, “Why Immortality Is Not So Bad” (LDM)

6.3 Death makes life meaningful
F: Robert Nozick, “Philosophy and the meaning of Life” (LDM)
❖ Journal #10 on the (un)desirability of immortality (due in Fridays’ class)

Week 16 (12/3-7)
M: Jeff Malpas, “Death and the Unity of Life” (DP)
W: Shelly Kagan, “How to Live in the Face of Death?” (D)
F: final reflection

❖ Final term paper due on Monday, 12/10