

Life and Death

Summer 2009



Description

This course will examine life and death from three philosophical perspectives:

- **Metaphysics:** What is the nature of life and death? What does it take to be alive, and what does it take to die? Is it possible to have an afterlife? If I destroy your body and then create an exact replica, am I keeping you alive or replacing you with someone else? Does it matter?
- **Ethics:** What is the value of life and death? Do we have moral duties to animals and plants? What about embryos and corpses, and past and future generations? Is life a gift, and is death a harm? Is there a moral difference between killing and letting die?
- **Existentialism:** What is the meaning of life and death? Does life have a purpose? Is life worth living? How should we think and feel about our own death? If you could live forever, or repeat this life an infinite number of times, would you want to?

General Information

- Time: M/T/W/R 1:30–3:05
- Place: 5 Washington Place, #201
- Instructor: Jeff Sebo
- Email: jeffsebo@gmail.com
- Office: 5 Washington Place, #607
- Office hours: T 11:00–12:00 or by appointment
- Course website: jeffsebo.net/teaching/

Readings

The required books for this course are:

- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*
- Fred Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper*
- Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*
- John Perry, *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*

All readings not from one of the required books will be posted on blackboard.

Grading

Your grades will be determined as follows:

- **Papers (60%)**: There will be three paper assignments. Paper 1 (15%) will cover metaphysics, Paper 2 (20%) will cover existentialism, and Paper 3 (25%) will cover ethics.
- **Quizzes (30%)**: Each lecture will begin with a short quiz covering that day's reading and the previous day's lecture. These quizzes are designed to be easy if you do the reading and come to class.
- **Attendance and Participation (10%)**: I want this to be a discussion-based class, so I encourage you to talk as much as you like.
- **Extra Credit**: In exchange for a 1/3 letter bump in your final grade, you can give a 15 minute presentation about a particular culture's or religion's views on life and death. You can choose any culture or religion that you like, but I think it would be great if you challenged yourself by picking one other than your own.

Policies

- **Laptops/Cell Phones**: Laptops are allowed, but only for taking notes. Cell phones must be on silent.
- **Special Accommodations**: If you need special accommodations, please let me know so that I can assist you.
- **Academic Integrity**: Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. See the NYU College of Arts and Science policy on Academic Integrity for more information.
- **Late Papers/Extensions/Incompletes**: Since part of the purpose of the quizzes is to reward regular attendance, I will not give make-up quizzes except in very exceptional circumstances. Late papers will be accepted, but will lose 1/3 letter grade for each day late. Extensions and incompletes will be granted only in exceptional circumstances. If you would like to request either, please do it well before the due date.

Schedule

Week 1: The Nature of Life

- 5/18 - Introduction
- 5/19 - Fred Feldman, "Life-Functional Theories of Life"
- 5/20 - Fred Feldman, "Vitalist Theories of Life"
- 5/21 - Fred Feldman, "The Enigma of Death"

Week 2: The Nature of Death

- 5/25 - Holiday: Memorial Day
- 5/26 - John Perry, "First Night"
- 5/27 - John Perry, "Second Night"
- 5/28 - John Perry, "Third Night," Phillip K. Dick, "Impostor"
- **5/30 - Paper 1 due**

Week 3: The Value of Life

- 6/1 - Peter Singer, "All Animals Are Equal"
- 6/2 - Mary Ann Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion"
- 6/3 - James Rachels, "Active and Passive Euthanasia"
- 6/4 - Derek Parfit, "The Non-Identity Problem"

Week 4: The Value of Death

- 6/8 - Thomas Nagel, "Death"
- 6/9 - Judith Jarvis Thomson, "Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem"
- 6/10 - Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"
- 6/11 - Movie: *Six Feet Under*, "Pilot"
- **6/13 - Paper 2 due**

Week 5: The Meaning of Life

- 6/15 - Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*
- 6/16 - Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus"
- 6/17 - Simone de Beauvoir, "Ambiguity and Freedom"
- 6/18 - Simone de Beauvoir, "The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity"

Week 6: The Meaning of Death

- 6/22 - Martin Heidegger, "Being Towards Death"
- 6/23 - Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Greatest Weight"
- 6/24 - Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality"
- 6/25 - David Velleman, "So It Goes"
- **6/27 - Paper 3 due**