

34-521: Political Philosophy
Death, Life-time and the Temporal Conditions of Human Freedom

There is no experience more central to mortal human life than the passage of time. The finitude of lifetime entails the finitude of the range of activities which it is possible for us to realize on earth. “we come out of the dark, and we go into the dark again, and in between lies the experience of our lives.” (Thomas Mann) If we assume that the quality of life in general is determined by the quality of the experiences and activities we actually have and realize, and that all experience and activity takes time and depends upon the structure of time, then it follows that a good life has definite temporal conditions. It will be the aim of the seminar to explore these conditions in their general existential and particular socio-economic and political manifestations. These explorations will be undertaken in light of a general thesis—to be tested through our discussions-- that a good life is a free life, and that a free life, for a mortal human being, requires an experience of time itself as free.

The seminar will begin with important literary explorations of the experience of time in relation to death. We begin with literature because it seems impossible to disengage philosophical reflection on time from our own emotional relationship to our personal finitude, and the literary form explores more profoundly than most philosophy the emotional ranges (terror, violent rejection of inevitability, ultimate acceptance) our own death must stir in us.

Exploration of emotional depth is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of understanding the temporal conditions of human freedom. We also need conceptual clarity, and this clarity can only be provided by philosophical reflection on the emotional substance explored in the first part of the course. We will thus move, in the second part, to examine the general existential problems raised by finitude and death, and in particular their (perhaps) being necessary conditions of the meaning and value of the particular experiences and actions of our lives.

While such existential reflections are necessary, they too must be supplemented by more concrete forms of socio-economic and political analysis. The experience of time is not shaped only by our own dispositions towards its passing, but also by the institutions within which our lives are actually led. The experience of time varies between societies. Nowhere is this variation more pronounced than in the difference between the experience of time under capitalism and the experience of time under pre- and non-capitalist societies. Since, for better or worse, we live in a capitalist society, the third section of the course will examine the structure of life-time under capitalism and how this affects the temporal conditions of human freedom.

In the final section of the class we will attempt to draw some conclusions regarding the nature of these temporal conditions by re-examining the content in light of John McMurtry’s principle of life-coherence, and my own explorations of the implications of this principle for an understanding of the complete material (natural, social, and temporal) conditions of human freedom.

Seminar Schedule

Meeting One: Introduction and Overview

Part One: Literary Explorations

Meeting Two: Thomas Mann, "Excursus on Time" (from *The Magic Mountain*). Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Raising of Lazarus,"
A.E. Houseman, "To an Athlete Dying Young," Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Illitch*.

Part Two: Existential Reflections

Meeting Three: Martin Heidegger, "Being Towards Death," "The Temporality of Everydayness" (from *Being and Time*).

Meeting Four: Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Meeting Five: Bernard Williams, "The Boredom of Immortality," Ronald Aronson, "Living Without God."

Part Three: Socio-Economic and Political Structures

Meeting Six: Karl Marx, selections from *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, Volume 1.

Meeting Seven: Georg Lukacs, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," (from *History and Class Consciousness*).

Meeting Eight: Harry Braverman, selections from *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism*.

Meeting Nine: Moishe Postone, selections from *Time, Labour, and Social Domination*.

Part Four: Conclusions and Remaining Problems

Meeting Ten: John McMurtry, *What is Good? What is Bad: the Value of All Values Across Times, Places, and Theories*.

Meeting Eleven: Meeting Twelve: Jeff Noonan, "Free Time as a Condition of a Free Human Life."

Meeting Twelve: Collective Discussion of Conclusions and Remaining Problems
Structure of the Meetings

The class will meet twelve times over six weeks (Tuesdays and Thursdays, from 10-12:50). The first part of each class will be devoted to student seminars (@ 2hrs). Each participant will be responsible for leading the class through an analysis of that day's readings. The second part of each class (@50 minutes) will be devoted to a collective discussion of the wider implications of the readings. All students will be expected to actively participate (which includes actively listening when others are speaking) in these discussions.

Assignments:

- 1) Seminar: 25% (criteria to be distributed at the first meeting)
- 2) Written Version of the seminar: 25% (criteria to be distributed at the first meeting)

- 3) Participation in Collective Discussion: 10%
- 4) Major Paper: 40% (Topic to be developed in consultation with the instructor, outline due at the beginning of the Fourth Week, final version due three weeks from the end of class, September 7th). The paper should be between 15 and 20 pages, and must incorporate at least 5 secondary sources.