

LS 812: Science & Human Values – ‘The Meaning of Life’

Fall 2019 | Dr. Michael Kenny

Course Outline:

This seminar will explore the significance of the concept of ‘life’ – broadly defined in a biological sense. The readings draw on classical sources, scientific works, and speculative fiction. Topics will include the following:

- the emergence of life; the boundary between the living and non-living
- evolution and intelligent design
- taking control of evolution: eugenics & human enhancement
- artificial life, artificial intelligence, and the Turing problem

A disquieting ‘Promethian’ theme runs throughout – the quest for *mastery* of life, whether as an organic process, political program, or capitalist commodity. Ethical and religious issues abound, and will provide more than ample scope for discussion. Participants will be asked to comment on selected readings, and in the end produce an approximately 15pp paper exploring one or another of these issues in greater detail. [a week-by-week syllabus will be provided in due course]

Readings

Aeschylus – Prometheus Bound and other plays

(Penguin Classics: 978-0140441123)

Mary Wollstencraft Shelley – Frankenstein

(Dover Publications: 978-0486282114)

H.G. Wells – The Island of Doctor Moreau

(Dover: 978-0486282114)

Karel Capek – RUR (Rossum’s Universal Robots)

(Dover: 978-0486419268)

William Paley - Natural Theology

(Oxford U.P.: 978-0199535750)

Charles Darwin - The Origin of Species (selected sections)

(Signet: 978-0451529060)

H.G. Wells - Men like Gods

(Dover Thrift: 978-048680836-9)

Aldous Huxley - Brave New World (introduction by Margaret Atwood)

(Vintage Canada: 978-0307356543)

Alan Turing - 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence'

(Mind, v.59, 1950: pp. 433-460)

Phillip K. Dick - Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?

(Del Rey: 978-034504473)

Diane Paul - Controlling Human Heredity, 1865 to the Present.

(Humanities Press: 978-1573923439)

Jamie Metzl - Hacking Darwin: Genetic Engineering and the Future of Humanity.

(sourcebooks: 978-1492670094)

Margaret Atwood - Oryx and Crake

(Vintage Canada: 978-0307398482)