

Agata Bielik-Robson

SEMINAR: *Choose Life!* Towards a Philosophy of Survival

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HOURS	AUTUMN Semester All Years 30
FREQUENCY	3 x 45 every two weeks

THE COURSE CORRESPONDS TO TOPICS: Contemporary philosophy, history of ideas, social thought, political thought, psychoanalytic theory.

ASSESSMENT:

- The course is available to all students (General course open to all students)
- The course to be conducted in English
- Credit requirements: active participation in classes
- Time of classes: Alternate Tuesdays, 17-20, both *in situ* and hybrid
- Begins: 17:00
- Duration: 17:00-20:00 (4 x 45 minutes) every two weeks (for a total of 30 hours)
- Commencement date: 22 October 2024

COURSE AIMS AND CONTENT:

Philosophy of survival is not the same as the philosophy of life. Although this seminar will take into account various philosophical conceptions of life – from Giordano Bruno, through Friedrich Nietzsche, German *Lebensphilosophie*, and Sigmund Freud to Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben – it will focus on the notion of survival which, often regarded as a simple biological process of self-preservation, was not dignified enough to be regaled with a separate idea. The seminar aims to address this lack: the lack of the symbolic representation of survival as the “lowest form of life,” seemingly unworthy of philosophical reflection. There have been important exception to this rule of the symbolic exclusion of survival: Michel de Montaigne, Baruch Spinoza, and Jacques Derrida, and the seminar will look closely at their respective theorisations of the process of living-on (Montaigne’s “marrano” interpretation of the Biblical imperative of “choose life!”; Spinoza’s elevation of survival to the conceptual level of *conatus*; Derrida’s famous last words: “Always choose life and affirm survival”). But the main framework of the seminar will be delivered by psychoanalytic theory, mostly via the confrontation between Jacques Lacan and Jean Laplanche: while the former negates survival in his construal of the “barred subject,” the latter grounds the whole edifice of the symbolic structure on the “persuasion into life,” that is, a way in which a child is initiated into a will to survive through symbolic means. The goal of the seminar will be to reformulate the traditional no-concept of survival as a form of life that, from the very

beginning, needs to be chosen, affirmed, and symbolically represented as the fundamental value which then leads to a new conceptualisation of the symbolic sphere as essentially “biophilic” (Derrida).

KNOWLEDGE TO BE ACQUIRED:

Participants are expected to acquire: (1) a basic orientation in the philosophical theories of life and survival; (2) a knowledge of arguments used in the polemics between various philosophical and psychoanalytic schools referring to the concept of the survival.

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES:

Knowledge:

- Improved knowledge on the place and role of the humanities, the social, exact and natural sciences in early and contemporary culture;
- Comprehensive understanding of the terminology of the humanities and social sciences and knows how to use it;
- Knowing in depth the relationships among different humanities disciplines studying works of art in culture and the sociological context of cultural activity;
- Knowing and understanding the main methods of analysing and interpreting products of culture in conjunction with tradition;
- Having good organized knowledge on the main trends in philosophical and social thought in a historical and contemporary perspective.

Skills:

- Selecting and interpreting information from different textual, iconographic and electronic sources;
- Analysing artistic, philosophical and sociological texts using the appropriate research tools, and presenting the results of such work;
- Basic research skills enabling the formulation of research problems from the humanities, philosophy, literature, and arts;
- Basic skills in using interdisciplinary research methods and tools to analyse phenomena of contemporary culture;
- The capacity to take part in conferences, symposia and discussions on literary, artistic and philosophical topics.

Social Competence:

- Understanding the dynamics of scientific, cultural and social development and keeping up with new research methods and paradigms;
- Understanding the principles of tolerance and cultural differences;
- Understanding the importance of Europe’s cultural diversity and heritage;
- Participating actively in cultural and social life taking advantage of all forms offered by media, the arts and science

TIME & VENUE:

IFiS PAN (Staszic Palace) – Tuesdays fortnightly: 17.00 – 20.00. Mostly *in situ*, occasionally hybrid

The Syllabus

1. **Introduction to the Course.** The preliminary lecture outlining the problem of survival in modern humanities in historical, as well as philosophico-theological perspective. 22.10.2024
2. ***U'baharta ba-hayim! Choose Life!*** Readings: Deuteronomy and Erich Gutkind, *Choose Life* (fragments). Seminar devoted to the theological context of the imperative to choose life and its reverberations in modern thought. 5.11.2024
3. **Contempt for Survival: Philosophical Tradition of Sublimation.** Readings: Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (fragment on Odysseus) and Slavoj Žižek, "Introduction: Robespierre, or the 'Divine Violence' of Terror," in *Maximilien Robespierre, Virtue and Terror*. Seminar devoted to the denigration of survival as constitutive for the foundation of Western philosophy. 12.11.2024
4. **The Marrano Crisis: Montaigne and Spinoza.** Readings: Michel de Montaigne, *Essays* (fragments) and Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (fragments). Seminar devoted to the concept of survival as emerging from the Marrano experience of forced conversion, documented by Montaigne and Spinoza. 26.11.2024
5. **The Right to Death: Hegel, Kojève, Lacan 1.** Readings: G.W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Master and Slave Dialectics) and Alexandre Kojève, "The Idea of Death in Hegel's Philosophy." Seminar devoted to the exposition of the thanatic sublimation in the post-Kojévian French thought. 10.12.2024
6. **The Right to Death: Hegel, Kojève, Lacan 2.** Readings: Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (fragments). Seminar continuing the seminar 5, devoted to the Kojévian elements in Lacan's thought. 17.12.2024
7. **Derrida and the Right to Life.** Readings: Jacques Derrida, *The Death Penalty* (fragments on Montaigne and Blanchot) and *Learn to Live Finally*. Seminar devoted to Derrida's polemic with the philosophical "right to death" as exemplified by Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Lacan. 7.01.2025
8. **Persuasion into Life: Laplanche's Psychoanalysis of Survival 1.** Readings: Jean Laplanche, *Between Dream and Psychic Pain* (fragments). Seminar devoted to the psychoanalytic context of the imperative "choose life!" 21.01.2025
9. **Persuasion into Life: Laplanche's Psychoanalysis of Survival 2.** Readings: Jean Laplanche, *Sublimation* (fragments). Seminar continuing the seminar 7, devoted to the concept of "another sublimation," based not on the "imitation of death," but on the continuous "effort of survival." 4.02.2025
10. **"We Were Wanted on Earth": Arendt's Natalism.** Readings: Hannah Arendt, *The Concept of Love in Augustine* (fragments). Seminar devoted to the idea of natalism as a

vitalistic anti-philosophy of birth, counteracting the Heideggerian (or simply philosophical)
focus on death and the idea of *melete thanatou*. 18.02.2024