

Existentialist Themes Spring 2015

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Office Hours: TR 3-4:30 (or by appt.)

Course: PHIL 20202-01
Room: DeBartolo 331
Time: TR 11:00-12:15

Aims of the Course:

The primary aim of this course is to introduce you to some of the ideas of the philosophical movement known as existentialism. These ideas include the importance of free choice, the lack of meaning (or “absurdity”) of modern life, and the relationship between religious and moral attempts to come to meaning. Existentialism is itself famously difficult to define, and we will ourselves tackle this thorny problem of what makes a writer an “existentialist” throughout the semester. But whatever our answer to this question, one crucial thing the writers we will study in this course all hold in common is the conviction that **philosophical concepts and arguments ought to arise out of our everyday lives**, and address some of the basic problems we deal with in the course of living those lives. Because they thought that, these writers were often drawn to modes of writing that are unlike what you might expect from a “philosopher.” (In fact, many of these writers explicitly denied being philosophers at all!) In particular, rather than abstract speculation on subjects considered lofty and sophisticated, these writers tend to engage in vivid and careful descriptions of scenarios from lives, both real and imagined. Because of this shift, existentialist texts are in a sense more accessible than most philosophy, because there is often less technical argumentation; but they are in their own way more difficult, because grasping the *point* of a fictional story is often not so easy. I hope you will take this to be an interesting challenge rather than a frustration, and will try to help you as much as possible throughout.

The secondary aim of the course is to teach you how to read difficult texts carefully and take pains to write about them in a clear and insightful manner. In this course, I will be expecting you to keep up with a relatively large amount of difficult reading material, and your grade will be determined largely based upon your ability to synthesize that material and respond to it in writing. The result of all this work will hopefully be not only a more developed ability to read and respond to philosophical ideas, but also a greater facility with communicating your ideas in general.

Required Texts (Available in ND bookstore):

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Penguin (trans. Hannay) = “FT”
Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, Vintage (trans. Pevear & Volokhonsky) = “NU”
Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Vintage (trans. Pevear & Volokhonsky) = “BK”
Sartre, *Essays in Existentialism*, Citadel (ed. Wade Baskin) = “EE”
Camus, *The Stranger*, Vintage (tr. Ward)
De Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Citadel (tr. Frechtman) = “EA”

Please get these translations and not others – this class will be focused a great deal on close reading of the texts involved, and we will quite often refer to specific page numbers; you'll likely get lost if you have different editions. For this reason, **e-book versions are strongly discouraged**. Other readings will be provided in PDFs over the course's Sakai site. Please **print these readings out** so that you can mark them up and bring them in to class.

Course Requirements:

- Reading responses (do 5 out of 8): 10%
- Two shorter papers (~3-4 double-spaced pages): 15% each, 30% total
- One longer paper (~6-8 double-spaced pages): 40%
- Participation: 20%

Papers: More information about the papers will be provided as their due dates approach. Paper 1 will be due **Thursday, February 12th**. Paper 2 will be due **Thursday, March 19th**. The final paper will be due **Monday, May 4th** (i.e., the Monday of finals week).

Attendance and Participation: Your participation grade will be determined by a holistic consideration of your contribution to in-class discussions. A significant amount of our time in class will be devoted to discussing your own reactions to the text. Your participation grade will be high if you are a **willing** and **informed** contributor at these times. (I'm confident that we'll be able to create an accepting atmosphere in which you can feel comfortable contributing, but if you are intimidated by the prospect of talking in front of groups, let me know, and we'll meet up in my office sometime or converse through email. That you contribute your own thoughts in some form is crucial.) I won't be taking official attendance in this class, but your attendance in class **will** be crucial to your doing well in the course. First, if you don't keep up with the material you're going to have trouble writing good papers. Second, if you don't show up your participation grade is bound to be lower.

Reading Responses: On eight Thursdays during the semester, I will be accepting what we'll call "reading responses." These responses are to be brief (approximately 1, but no more than 2 double-spaced pages) examinations of the reading for the previous class. They should provide a brief explanation of what you take the main philosophical point of that day's reading to be, and some development or criticism of that point on your own. The idea with these is to get you thinking on your own about the reading, and perhaps to provide you with a jumping off point for your longer papers. These responses must show that you've read and thought about the material, but beyond that they will not be graded for content. **You must submit 5** of these responses, from the 8 opportunities available to you. These papers must be emailed to me by **midnight on the following Friday** for each of these times. **The eight Thursdays that are reading response opportunities are marked with an asterisk ("*") on the schedule below.**

Academic Dishonesty:

I take the issue of academic dishonesty very seriously, and will penalize any form of plagiarism to the maximum extent permitted to me by the University. Keep in mind that, as a Notre Dame undergraduate, you have agreed to hold yourself to the Notre Dame Honor Code (if you need to brush up on what that means, please check out honorcode.nd.edu), and that committing

plagiarism is in general a really dumb decision – if you do it, I WILL catch you, and it WILL (at best) put your passing of the course in serious jeopardy.

If you feel at all tempted to commit any form of academic dishonesty, please come to see me instead. Whatever the difficulty is that you face, I’m sure that together we can come up with a better solution for it than your committing plagiarism.

If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, I strongly suggest that you consult the Philosophy Department’s guidelines, which are admirably clear, and can be found here: <http://philosophy.nd.edu/assets/77703/plagiarism.pdf>. If you still have questions after consulting this document, let me know, and we’ll straighten it out together.

Tentative Schedule

DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
1/13	Introduction	N/A
1/15	The Young Existentialist – background themes and the need for direction in life	From Kierkegaard’s <i>Journals</i> (on Sakai)
1/20	Kierkegaard I: Intros and Knights I	FT, pp. 41-56, start looking through pp. 57-82
1/22*	Kierkegaard II: Knights II	FT, pp. 57-82
1/27	Kierkegaard III: Problema I, the “teleological suspension of the ethical”	FT, pp. 83-95
1/29*	Kierkegaard IV: Problema II, the absolute duty to God	FT, pp. 96-108
2/3	Kierkegaard V: Problema III and summing up	FT, pp. 109-147
2/5	Dostoevsky I: Underground Manifesto	NU, pp. 3-41
2/10	Dostoevsky II: Living the Underground Life	NU, pp. 42-130 (recommended, not required)
2/12*	Dostoevsky III: Brotherly Love	BK, pp. 228-246 (*paper 1 due*)
2/17	Dostoevsky IV: A Poem and a Problem	BK, pp. 246-264
2/19*	Dostoevsky V: The Life of a Monk	BK, pp.287-324
2/24	Transitions I: Nietzsche and the death of God	Selections from <i>The Gay Science</i> and <i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i> (on Sakai)
2/26	Transitions II: Kafka, absurdity and choice	Kafka, “The Judgment” “An Imperial Message,” and “Before the Law” (on Sakai)
3/2	Watch Film: <i>The Sunset Limited</i>	N/A

3/3	Transitions III: Theism vs. Atheism, Life vs. Death	Discussion of film; no new reading
3/5*	Sartre I: Existence Precedes Essence	EE, pp. 31-62
3/7-3/15	SPRING BREAK	N/A
3/17	Sartre II: lecture recap and Sartre's theoretical underpinning - the in-itself and the for-itself	No new reading, reread EE, pp. 31-62; start in on EE, pp. 147-86
3/19*	Sartre III: Patterns of Bad Faith	EE, pp. 147-86 (paper 2 due)
3/24	Sartre IV: Hellish Drama	<i>No Exit</i> (on Sakai)
3/26	Sartre V: Discussion	No new reading - catch up!
3/31	De Beauvoir I: Existentialist Ethics?	EA, pp. 7-34
4/2*	De Beauvoir II: Existentialist Ethics?	EA, pp. 35-73
4/7	De Beauvoir III: Existentialist Feminism	<i>The Second Sex</i> , "Introduction" (on Sakai)
4/9*	De Beauvoir IV: Existentialist Feminism	No new reading
4/14	Camus I: The Problem of Suicide	<i>The Myth of Sisyphus</i> (on Sakai)
4/16	Camus II: Absurd Life, Caligula	<i>Caligula</i> (on Sakai)
4/21	Camus III: Absurd Life, Meursault	<i>The Stranger</i> , pp. 3-59
4/23	Camus IV: Absurd Life, Meursault	<i>The Stranger</i> , pp. 63-123
4/28	Camus and closing discussion	No new reading
5/4	FINAL PAPER DUE	N/A