

PHIL 111: Existentialism and European Philosophy

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and by appointment

MWF, 10:00-10:50am, Bowden Hall 118

Course Description

Existentialists argue that we define ourselves as we exist. There is no pre-given essence to who we are. Even if our calling were written in the stars, it would still be up to us to take it up. We are radically free to paint the sketch of our lives: to make of it our own work of art.

In this course, we will investigate the ethical consequences of this view. Can we define ourselves with and through others? Can we form a moral community if we are each radically free to pick our own values? We will review answers to these questions from key existentialist thinkers. Beginning with the pre-history of existentialism with Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Fyodor Dostoevsky, we will move to Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Louis Lavelle.

At the end of this course, students will acquire a deeper understanding of two interrelated themes: first, how existentialism challenges our ordinary conception of what it means to be a person; and second, how it challenges our ordinary conception of our relations with other people. Questions of 'self' and 'others' are here intertwined.

Course Objectives

Students will:

1. understand how existentialism both inherits and challenges the traditional, Cartesian conception of the subject;
2. understand how existentialism places intersubjective relations at the very core of our subjective constitution; that is, they will understand how others serve both as an obstacle and as an indispensable means to our self-creation;
3. be able to explain complex philosophical concepts in their own words;
4. be able to develop critiques of, and objections to, those concepts;
5. be able to apply their understanding of existentialist ideas to literary texts; and conversely, to appreciate the philosophical import of certain literary texts.

N.B.: No background or previous training in philosophy is required. This class is open to all levels.

Recommended Text

Gordon Marino (ed.), *Basic Writings of Existentialism*. New York: Modern Library, 2004. ISBN: 978-0375759895.

All texts will also be uploaded as PDFs onto Canvas.

Assignments

20% Attendance and Participation

I will take attendance each day at the start of class. You are allowed two unexcused absences; each additional unexcused absence will lead to a grade reduction of half a letter grade (5%). However, these absences may be excused by obtaining the appropriate documentation from the Dean of Students Office. Please let me know at the beginning of the semester if there are special circumstances that we need to address. Arriving ten minutes late to class more than once will also constitute an absence. If there is a particular reason why you cannot arrive on time, let me know!

I will grade participation based on contribution to the class and active listening. This means that participation does not simply entail speaking up in class, but also listening to others, paying attention to the lectures, and contributing to discussions with relevant questions and comments.

30% Ten Reading Responses

By midnight every Wednesday, you are required to submit via Canvas a short reflection of approximately 200 words. You may choose to critique, expand on, compare or otherwise react to the week's texts. These entries provide an opportunity for students to check in with themselves and the professor as they encounter the themes and authors of the course. They can also serve as a space for students to develop ideas over the course of the semester that could then become the foundation for final papers.

These responses will be graded on a scale of 1 to 3 based on the quality of the writing (grammar and overall clarity) and the level of engagement with the week's texts. I will evaluate this engagement according to three criteria: *depth*, *accuracy*, and *originality*. A response should not stay at the surface but discuss something central to the text; it should present the text's ideas accurately; and if it criticizes an idea from the text, it should do so with originality—albeit without losing sight of accuracy and depth.

Notice that, on five different Wednesdays, reading responses will not be due. This is either because of a break (such as Thanksgiving) or because of another assignment due that same week. Since we have fifteen weeks in the term, we are left with a total of ten weeks when responses are due.

20% Two Exegetical Papers

By midnight on Sep. 23rd and Oct. 28th, an exegetical paper of 800-1000 words will be due. These papers are narrow in scope and meant for close reading of primary texts. A list of prompts will be distributed in advance.

30% Final Paper

By the end of the exam period (Dec. 17th, 5pm), a final paper of 1700-2500 words will be due. A list of possible prompts will be made available, but you are encouraged to develop your own theme in consultation with me.

Policies and Resources

Readings: come to class prepared. You should have read the assigned text for each week at least once before you come to class. As you read, mark passages that you find particularly difficult to understand and write down questions you want to ask during class. Every student should have a copy of the text in class.

Email: please use your Emory email account when corresponding with me. Feel free to reach out with questions; I am typically able to respond within 48 hours.

Submission of Assignments: every assignment must be submitted online in the designated section of Canvas. A late assignment will result in the reduction of half a letter grade (5%) for each day that it is late. However, I am happy to give short extensions if you reach out to me *prior* to the due date—just let me know!

Electronics: laptops or other devices are allowed only for note-taking purposes. However, with the use of laptops there is a temptation to also use the internet. I am willing to allow laptops only if participation is not compromised; if these devices seem to be causing distraction, they will no longer be allowed in class.

Plagiarism: students cannot copy the ideas or words of another person without appropriate citation and credit. I will refer any act of plagiarism to the relevant university office. A completely or partially plagiarized assignment will lead the student not only to fail that assignment but also the whole course. If you are unsure whether you need to cite something, send me an email, and/or simply cite, even if it might not have been necessary. Always err on the side of caution.

Accommodations: please do not hesitate to contact me if you need any kind of accommodation. You may also need to reach out to Access, Disability Services, and Resources (ADSR) at adsrstudent@emory.edu to get the proper document.

Writing Center: this is an invaluable resource for polishing your papers and for improving your writing in general. Tutors are available to support students as they work on papers, reading responses, and other projects. Several tutors can attend to the needs of English Language Learners and have received additional training to do so. To schedule an appointment, access writingcenter.emory.edu.

Class Schedule

The Discovery of Existence

- 8/24-26 Introduction: The Problem of an Existentialist Ethics
*no reading response
- 8/29-9/2 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meds. I and II (PDF)
*reading response due midnight on Wednesday, 8/31
- 9/5-9 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (BW, pp. 341-367)
*no class on Monday—Labor Day
*reading response due midnight on Wednesday, 9/7

The Pre-History of Existentialism

- 9/12-16 Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Problema I (BW, pp. 7-23)
*reading response due midnight on Wednesday, 9/14
- 9/19-23 Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Problema II (BW, pp. 24-39)
*no reading response
*first paper due midnight on Friday, 9/23
- 9/26-30 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, First Essay (BW, pp. 111-144)
*reading response due midnight on Wednesday, 9/28
- 10/3-7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay (BW, pp. 145-192)
*reading response due midnight on Wednesday, 10/5
- 10/10-14 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I (BW, pp. 193-230)
*no class on Monday—Fall Break
*reading response due midnight on Wednesday, 10/12

French Existentialism

- 10/17-21 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Bad Faith (BW, pp. 369-390)
*reading response due midnight on Wednesday, 10/19
- 10/24-28 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, The Look (BW, pp. 391-409)
*no reading response
*second paper due midnight on Friday, 10/28
- 10/31-11/4 Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit* (PDF)
*reading response due midnight on Wednesday, 11/2
- 11/7-11 Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Part I (link)
*reading response due midnight on Wednesday, 11/9

- 11/14-18 Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Part II (link)
*reading response due midnight on Wednesday, 11/16
- 11/21-25 Thanksgiving Break
- 11/28-12/2 Louis Lavelle, *The Dilemma of Narcissus*, Chapters 1 and 2 (PDF)
*no reading response
- 12/5 Final Class, Review
*final paper due at the end of exam period—12/17, 5pm