

PHIL336-001
Twentieth-Century Continental Thought: Existentialism
Spring 2016
MW 3.00pm - 4.15pm
Robinson A105

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Office Hours: MW 1.30pm - 2.30pm

1. Course Outline

Two facts about human beings are certain: we are born, and we will die. How should we go about making sense of what unfolds in between? How can we give meaning to existence? Is human existence ultimately meaningless and absurd? Can the possibility of meaning emerge out of that very realization? What kind of freedom do we have to choose or create the meaning of our lives? To what extent is our existence given meaning by how others see us? What responsibility do we bear for the meaning of our own lives, as well as for the lives of others?

On this course we will approach these questions via key writings by Soren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon, and Martin Buber. We will also use literary extracts by writers such as Kate Chopin and Richard Wright to explore existentialist themes and questions, and ask why art and literature are particularly appropriate forms through which to explore these questions.

Key themes of the course will include freedom, responsibility, faith, the absurd, ethics, embodiment, gender, and race.

2. Learning Outcomes

On successful completion of the course students will have acquired:

- An understanding of philosophical existentialism through direct engagement with key texts and figures in the field;
- An understanding of existentialist thinking as it is found in key texts by Kierkegaard, Buber, Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir and Fanon;
- An ability to explain and critically engage with some of the most important ideas, texts and arguments in the work of key existentialist thinkers;
- An appreciation of the relevance of existentialist thinking to both their own lives and to key social and political issues, including those connected to gender, race, and colonialism;
- An appreciation of the value of literature as a site for the exploration of philosophical ideas;
- An improved ability to undertake textual analysis and produce informed interpretation and critical argument;
- An improved ability to produce philosophical writing at a high level, in keeping with the Philosophy program's standards for good writing:*

<http://philosophy.gmu.edu/undergraduate/writing-standards>

3. Key Texts

The key reading for each week is listed in the course schedule below (see section five). You will need to have your own copy of the main texts we will be discussing. **Please note that it is essential to use the specific editions and translations listed below.**

It is also strongly recommended that you obtain these books in print (not electronic) form, as we will be doing a lot of close textual work in class and for written assignments. **If you decide to purchase electronic versions of these texts, please make sure that the version you are using is the correct edition and translation (as listed below) and that it shares the same pagination as the printed version.** This is essential for referencing, both in class and in written assignments.

Books for purchase (in the order in which we will be using them):

1. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, translated by Alastair Hannay, Penguin Classics 1986. ISBN: 9780140444490 (**NB you MUST use this Penguin edition and the Hannay translation!**)
2. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, translated by Justin O'Brien, Penguin Classics, 2013. ISBN: 9780141182001
3. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, translated by Bernard Frechtman, Citadel (Kensington Publishing), 2000. ISBN: 9780806501604
4. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, rev'd edition, 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0802143006

Texts to be provided as pdfs on BB:

Descartes, *Meditations* 1 and 2 (extract)

Nietzsche, 'The Death of God' (extract from *The Gay Science*)

Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*

Sartre, on 'The Look' and 'Bad Faith' (extracts from *Being and Nothingness*)

Buber, *I and Thou* (extract)

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (extracts)

Richard Wright, *Native Son* (extracts)

Suggested Background Reading:

Aho, Kevin, *Existentialism: An Introduction* (Polity Press, 2014)

Barrett, William, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (Anchor Books / DoubleDay 1990). [A classic - and probably still the best overall account of existential philosophy]

Crowell, Steven, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Flynn, Thomas, *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

Wartenberg, Thomas E., *Existentialism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oneworld: 2008)

4. Course Requirements

4.1 Assignments

Attendance and Participation: 10%

Assessed Worksheets x 3: 15%

Response Papers x 2: 10%

Essays x 2: 65%

a) Attendance and Participation (10%)

Regular attendance and active participation is expected. **10% of your final grade will be determined by your participation in scheduled class sessions.** Class activities will vary from week to week and may include small group discussions, informal writings, blackboard discussions, Q&A sessions involving the whole class, etc. Participation will also include peer review work on your longer papers, and a short (10 minute) presentation in which students will work in pairs to introduce a key text and set up the discussion for a particular class.

This is an all or nothing grade - if you participate in the relevant activities in a meaningful way, you get full marks. If you are absent or don't complete a set activity without informing me of any mitigating circumstances, you won't get the participation mark for that activity/class.

There are no marks for showing up - though regular attendance will benefit your overall performance on the course. **You will however lose marks for not showing up** - every absence after the first two will lead to a half grade reduction in your participation grade, unless you inform me, in writing (email is best), of mitigating reasons for your absence.

This course will be run primarily as a seminar – I will give lectures to provide context and frameworks for reading and thinking, but much of our work will be done collaboratively through discussion, based on close readings of the texts and in-depth, critical discussion. *How well this works depends on how much time and thought everyone gives to the relevant texts before each session - I will expect everyone to have read the texts at least once before class and to be able to participate actively in discussion, with questions and comments.*

b) Assessed Worksheets (3 x 5% = 15%) There will be assessed worksheets on Kierkegaard, Sartre and de Beauvoir. These will be distributed in advance of the relevant class and will form the basis of our discussions during one or more sessions. You will be able to revise your answers after class, before submitting them on BB.

c) Response Papers (2 x 5%) You will write two short response papers (2-3 pages), one in response to Camus and one in response to Fanon. The aim of these papers will be to relate the insights of Camus and Fanon to a social or political event or situation, a film or literary text, a recent news item, or an event in your own life. Specific instructions will be distributed a week before the assignment is due.

d) Two Papers (30% and 35% = 65%)

You will write one paper of 6-8 pages based mainly on the first part of the course (Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre) and one paper of 8-10 pages based mainly on the second half (de Beauvoir, Fanon, Buber). The first paper must engage with at least two of the three thinkers examined before Spring Break; the second paper must engage with at least two of the thinkers examined after Spring Break. The second paper may also relate back in some way to one or more of the thinkers examined in the first part of the course. Specific instructions will be distributed c.3 weeks before the submission deadline. Drafts for both papers will be subject to peer review (participation in peer review will contribute to your attendance and participation grade).

4.2 Submission of Written Work

All graded written work should be uploaded on Blackboard (a link will be provided for each assignment). With the exception of the worksheets, you must also bring a **paper copy** to the next scheduled class (or submit to my mail box in the Philosophy Department Office, Robinson B465).

In general, deadlines are non-negotiable. Extensions can be given where there is a good reason for submitting the work late. **Wherever possible, extensions should be arranged with me in advance (by email is fine).** Extensions cannot be given beyond the last day of the exam period.

I will take the **date of submission** from when the assignment is uploaded on BB, NOT from when a paper copy is submitted. If there is a problem with BB that means you cannot upload the paper on time, please email me it instead and let me know about the problem.

Lateness penalties: unless you arrange an extension with me, or there is a general BB problem that affects all students, graded work will normally lose a half grade for each day it is late. This includes weekends (Saturday and Sunday count as two days). This is to ensure fairness in the grading of the course (i.e. everyone has the same amount of time for the same assignment).

4.3 Technology in the Classroom

Mobile phones should be switched off and put away, unless you have an emergency situation that you need to monitor.

Laptops / tablets are permitted if that is the way you normally take notes, but **only** for that purpose. Other electronic devices should be put away. If using a laptop for notes, please turn off your internet connection and above all, during class time, please do not check email or other social media. As a class, we are in 'flight mode' (lines of thought can be lines of flight too - see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, for the concept of 'lines of flight').

Electronic media can be an invaluable help with further research, e.g. for finding and accessing secondary sources. Please feel free to make copious use of them outside of class time! But the time for sustained thought and discussion is (increasingly) rare - I would like us to make the most of our 2 hours and 30 minutes each week. This is a discussion and text based course: during class time I would like us to engage with each other, the ideas and the texts, and (so far as is possible) nothing else.

5. Course & Assignment Schedule

NB What follows is a schedule of assignments and a *provisional* schedule of key readings – depending on how discussions unfold, we may progress through the material more slowly, and/or switch readings around. Any significant changes will be posted on the Blackboard site for this course and signalled via email (using your GMU email address). Please check both regularly.

Week 1

Wednesday January 20th

Introduction to the course

Week 2

Monday January 25th

The philosophical context of existentialism: from the birth of the self to the death of god.

Reading: Descartes, *Meditations* 1 & 2 (pdf on BB)

Nietzsche, 'The Death of God' (extract on BB)

PART ONE: EXISTENTIALISM, ABSURDITY AND FREEDOM

Wednesday January 27th

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling 1: The Story of Abraham*

Reading: Preface, Attunement, Speech in Praise of Abraham

Kierkegaard worksheet distributed

Week 3

Reading: Problemata: Preamble from the Heart

Monday February 1st

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling 2*

Wednesday February 3rd

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling 3*

Week 4

Monday February 8th

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling 4*

Reading: Problema 1

Kierkegaard Worksheet due on BB by 6pm on Tuesday Feb 9th

Wednesday February 10th

Camus: Life, Death and the Absurd

Reading: Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp.1-26

Week 5

Monday February 15th

Camus: Philosophical Responses to Absurdity

Reading: *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 27-30, 35-39, 49-63.

Wednesday February 17th

Camus: Literary Responses to Absurdity

Reading: *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 90-101; 109-119.

Week 6

Reading: Sartre: *Existentialism is a Humanism* (on BB)

Monday February 22nd

Sartre: *Existentialism is a Humanism* 1

Camus Response Paper due on BB by 3pm on Monday Feb 22nd

Wednesday February 24th:

Sartre: *Existentialism is a Humanism* 2

Sartre Worksheet distributed

Week 7:

Reading: Sartre, extracts on 'The Look' and 'Bad Faith' (on BB)

Monday February 29th

Sartre: The Look

Wednesday March 2nd

Sartre: Bad Faith

Sartre Worksheet due on BB by 6pm on Friday March 4th

Week 8 SPRING BREAK**Week 9****Monday March 14th**

Peer Review on first paper

PART TWO: EXISTENTIALISM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE OTHER**Wednesday March 16th**

Simone de Beauvoir: Woman and Existentialism

Reading: Introduction to *The Second Sex* (on BB)

First Paper due 6pm Friday March 18th

Week 10**Monday March 21st**

Applying de Beauvoir: Kate Chopin's 'Awakening' (extract on BB)

de Beauvoir Worksheet distributed

Wednesday March 23rd

de Beauvoir: Ethics of Ambiguity 1

Reading: de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Part I: Ambiguity and Freedom

Week 11:

Reading: de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Part II: Personal Freedom and Others

Monday March 28th

de Beauvoir: Ethics of Ambiguity 2

Wednesday March 30th

de Beauvoir: Ethics of Ambiguity 3

Week 12:

Monday April 4th

de Beauvoir: Ethics of Ambiguity 4

Reading: de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Part III Section 5: Ambiguity

de Beauvoir Worksheet due on BB by 6pm on Tuesday April 5th

Wednesday April 6th

Fanon 1: Existentialism and Colonialism

Reading: Introduction and Chapter One, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Week 13

Reading: Chapter 5, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Monday April 11th

Fanon 2: Being an Object: The Epidermal Racial Schema

Wednesday April 13th

Fanon 3: Robbed Chances: Negritude and Sartre

Week 14

Monday April 18th

Fanon 4: Recognition, Liberation and Human Worth

Reading: ch.7, section B, & ch.8 ('By Way of Conclusion'), *Black Skin, White Masks*

Wednesday April 20th

Buber: I and it, I and Thou

Reading: chapter one, *I and Thou* (on BB)

Response Paper on Fanon due on BB by 6pm on Friday April 22nd

Week 15

Monday April 25th

Buber: an Ethics of Relation and Difference

Reading: chapter one, *I and Thou* (on BB)

Wednesday April 27th Peer review on second paper

Week 16

Monday May 2nd: last day classes (snow day / make up day)

Final Paper due: 6pm Monday May 2nd.

6. Commitment to Diversity

The Philosophy Department seeks to create a learning environment that fosters respect for people across differences. We welcome and value individuals and their differences, including gender expression and identity, race, economic status, sex, sexuality, ethnicity, national origin, first language, religion, age and ability. We encourage all members of the learning environment to engage with the material personally, but to also be open to exploring and learning from experiences different than their own.

Each course offers an opportunity for us to develop this commitment together, not just as an attitude but a mode of critical practice that can involve, amongst other things:

- being willing to listen to other perspectives and to hear criticism of one's own views;
- expressing criticisms and differences of opinion in ways that are not personal or hurtful and that leave space for other voices (and the possibility that one is wrong!);
- not rushing to judgment: being willing to evaluate different positions while being unsure where one stands;
- having good reasons for one's views, but being willing to be unsettled and change one's mind;
- basing critical comments or questions on as good an understanding of another person (or text or theory) as one can manage;
- *and* being willing to accept that at any particular time, there will always be things one cannot see or understand (we all have blindspots).

An important aspect of the commitment to diversity is that it does not mean not being critical. Respecting others' views means taking them seriously, i.e., treating them as worthy of critical interrogation and evaluation themselves, *and* as having critical and transformative potential in relation to one's own existing views and commitments.

7. Academic Integrity and the Honor Code

As members of the academic community, you are expected to be attentive to issues of academic integrity, particularly as they relate to the acknowledgement of sources and appropriate citation and reference practices. If you have questions about referencing practices, please do not hesitate to ask me, and/or to consult the resources housed on the Writing Center webpage: <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/>

This course is conducted in accordance with the GMU Honor Code as set out on the University website: "Student members of the George Mason University community pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal, or lie in matters related to academic work." <http://academicintegrity.gmu.edu/honorcode/>

You are expected to be familiar with and to abide by this code; any violation will be reported to the Honor Committee for adjudication.

8. Student Support & Further Resources

Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS): (703) 993-2380; <http://caps.gmu.edu/>

Office of Disability Services: If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me within the first 2 weeks of the semester and contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) to ensure you receive the required support: 703-993-2472. All academic accommodations must be arranged through ODS: <http://ods.gmu.edu/>

University Libraries: <http://library.gmu.edu/>

Writing Center: <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/>