Existentialism – The Human Search for Meaning

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Fall 2015

This course will be concerned with the questions of human freedom, personal identity and responsibility, and the search for meaningful ways of living in the face of the traumatic shock of social and cultural upheaval in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Europe at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th became a crucible in which the values morals and beliefs of a tradition reaching back more than 3,000 were tested in the conflagration of two World Wars. Existentialism was the cultural movement which emerged from that crucible, and which in turn set the direction for the cultural forces that are shaping the world we live in today under the name of “Postmodernism.” Our investigation of this cultural upheaval will be guided by the philosophical testimony of two major Existentialist philosophers – Nietzsche and Sartre, in conversation with other philosophers who have written in the existentialist spirit: Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Camus, de Beauvoir, Heidegger and Simone Weil.

The goal of the course, however is not limited to historical understanding; it invites personal engagement with the question of freedom through personal reflection on the uniquely contemporary significance of a series of tensions that characterize human existence at the beginning of the 21st Century: The individuality of experience/the universality of reason; the objectivity of truth/the subjectivity of meaning; the limitations of human finitude/the desire for transcendence; personal fulfillment/social and moral responsibility; autonomy/relationship.

Nietzsche and Sartre experienced these issues in the historical situations of the end the 19th and the first half of the 20th century; we experience them in the changed context of a new millennium. Our task is to make the question of human freedom our own, guided by whatever we can learn from the existentialist philosophers. This task requires that we reflect on our own experience of the problematic tensions that the existentialists emphasized and that made existentialism the important episode it was in the history of western culture. The benefit of such a reflection on our parts will not be primarily knowledge about that episode; rather, it will be understanding what the question of human freedom means for us as persons in the time that is uniquely our own.

*** SEE SCHEDULE FOR FIRST READING ASSIGNMENT***
Learning Goals:

• Develop a clear understanding of the nature of interdisciplinary inquiry by actively working with diverse perspectives on fundamental questions of human existence and culture and learning to recognize the appropriate requirements, contributions and limitations of disciplinary knowledge and methods to such inquiry. This goal is supported by lecture content and supplementary readings which touch substantially on the subject matter of disciplines such as history, philosophy, religion, psychology, political theory, physics and biology, literature and the plastic arts.

• Practice advanced skills of textual interpretation through the modeling in class lectures of a hermeneutical style of engagement with primary texts of major intellectual figures. Hermeneutic interpretation is modeled on the experience of engagement in dialogue with other persons regarding fundamental questions of human meaning and values. In such dialogical context reading becomes an experience with is both participatory a matter of personal responsibility.

• Skills of structured argumentation will be practiced in the writing assignments throughout the course, as well as in the contributions required of each student to class discussion.

• Develop advanced skills of academic research and organization\delivery of material in professional academic form. Students in this course who have entered the MALS program in Fall 2013 or who entered the program earlier but have opted to complete their degrees under the provisions that went into effect then must either have completed the MALS Research and Academic Writing Workshop or complete it while taking this course. (see below)This goal is supported by the written work requirements of the course, which must implement the guidelines for research and writing presented in the workshop as well as by the requirement for an oral presentation of 15 to 20 min. by each student. In addition there will be a session conducted by a research librarian within the context of one of the class sessions on basic techniques of research and bibliography development.

FOUNDATION COURSE WORKSHOP

Foundation Course Library Boot Camp

Finally, for MALS students as part of their requirement to complete 2 Foundation courses in the first several semesters of their program, they must additionally attend one of the Writing Boot
Camps during that same time, the earlier in degree program the better. The Fall Boot Camp for MALS students is scheduled Saturday, Sept. 26, 10 AM - 3 PM, Lauinger Library, and is conducted by Dr. Kathryn Temple. The Boot Camp is designed to foster one's research and writing skills and the methodological skills that are part of a graduate degree education. If you have not already satisfied this requirement you are strongly encouraged to sign up for it by emailing Anne Ridder, riddera@georgetown.edu. Remember you must complete the Boot camp in order to graduate. Both MALS and DLS students may participate in more than one Boot Camp as they pursue their degrees. The DLS Writing Boot Camp is Nov. 7. Registration is open for it as well.

1. **Required texts:**
   - Nietzsche - *The Genealogy of Morals*, Hackett
   - S. Weil - *Two Moral Essays* (handout)
   - Dostoevsky - *The Grand Inquisitor*, Hackett
   - Barrett – *Irrational Man*, Anchor Books
   - Becker, E., *The Denial of Death*

In addition to the texts for the course, all students should acquire and make use of: Turabian, Kate L., *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. 7th edition, University of Chicago Press. ISBN: 978-0-226-82337-9 ($17.00)

2. **Assignments:**
   - Three reflection papers (1800-2000 words) (60%)
   - Final paper (3000 words) (40%)
   - Class Contribution (10%)

Each of the three reflection papers should be focused on the thought of one the authors from the syllabus and accomplish two things: 1) articulate clearly and concisely one aspect of the author’s thought that you find especially important; 2) explain your own personal conviction with regard to that same issue and why the similarity or difference between the two is significant in your view.

The reflection may be turned in when you are ready (doublespaced, hardcopy, include word count) but all students must submit at least one reflection paper no later than Oct. 7; a second no later than Nov. 11, and the third by the last class meeting, Dec. 9. Each student may exercise the option to rewrite one (only) of the first two papers based on the instructor’s critique. Rewriting a paper may result in a higher grade, but not necessarily.

3. **Consultation:**

All students are strongly encouraged to meet with the instructor outside of class hours during the semester to discuss their participation in the course.
4. **Attendance and Participation:**

Class attendance is presumed. More than two absences for any reason other than serious health problems or bereavement will result in a penalty of one half letter-grade; more than three such absences will disqualify the student from completing the course. The benefit of the course to the individual student will depend largely on intelligent classroom participation. This in turn presumes careful reading of the assigned texts before they are discussed in class. Class contribution (10%) includes both active participation in class and participation in the final class discussion activity.

5. **Tentative Schedule:**

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic and Assignments</th>
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<tr>
<td>September 3</td>
<td>Introduction; ***N.B.: Read Barrett, Irrational Man, Parts I &amp;II, before first class.</td>
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<td>September 10</td>
<td>Dostoevsky, read <em>The Grand Inquisitor</em>, including Editor’s introduction.</td>
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<td>September 17</td>
<td>No class</td>
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<td>September 24</td>
<td>Nietzsche – read Blackboard selections, pp. 98 - 143</td>
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<td>October 1</td>
<td>Nietzsche; read <em>The Genealogy of Morals</em>, Essays I and II</td>
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<td>October 8</td>
<td>Sartre; read Blackboard selections: first, pp.310 - 335; then 246-66</td>
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<td>October 15</td>
<td>No class</td>
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<td>October 22</td>
<td>Sartre, read Blackboard selections: pp. 266 - 309;</td>
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<td>October 29</td>
<td>de Beauvoir, read Blackboard selections, pp.343-356.</td>
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<td>November 5</td>
<td>Camus, <em>The Plague</em>.</td>
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<td>November 12</td>
<td>Becker, <em>The Denial of Death</em>;</td>
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<td>November 19</td>
<td>Heidegger, read Blackboard selections: “What is Metaphysics”;</td>
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<td>November 25</td>
<td>Thanksgiving</td>
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<td>December 2</td>
<td>Simone Weil, read Blackboard selections: Two Moral Essays; final paper précis due</td>
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<td>December 16</td>
<td>Final paper due, delivered or sent to 228 New North by COB</td>
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HONOR CODE

MALS and DLS students are responsible for upholding the Georgetown University Honor System and adhering to the academic standards included in the Honor Code Pledge stated below:

_In pursuit of the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life, I commit myself to respect and uphold the Georgetown University Honor system: To be honest in any academic endeavor: and to conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community, as we live and work together._

DISABILITIES STATEMENT:

If you believe you have a disability, then you should contact the Academic Resource Center (arc@georgetown.edu) for further information. The Center is located in the Leavey Center, Suite 335. The Academic Resource Center is the campus office responsible for reviewing documentation provided by students with disabilities and for determining reasonable accommodations in accordance with the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) and University policies.