

Existentialism

Instructor: Andrew Sullivan

Phil 159 - 20

Summer 2021

July 12 - August 13

Monday - Thursday 1-3pm

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Course Description: In this course we will be studying the philosophical movement known as existentialism. It is notoriously difficult to pin down with precision what exactly existentialism is. Although we can identify a set of loosely interrelated themes treated by the authors who are typically identified as existentialists, existentialism does not seem to be a clear doctrine or a unified philosophical outlook - as Sarah Bakewell has noted, "It is sometimes said that existentialism is more of a mood than a philosophy".¹ Indeed, most of the authors we will be examining were either writing before the term had been coined (e.g. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche) or have explicitly rejected the label (e.g., Camus and Heidegger). Nevertheless, all of them have been identified in one way or another as integral to the development of existentialism.

Accordingly, our course will proceed by examining with an open mind the philosophical writings of those authors who are typically identified as representative of existentialism. Along the way, we will consider some of the central themes that animate their writing: meaning or purpose in life; authenticity; passionate commitment; freedom and responsibility; the role and limitations of reason in human life; the relationship between society and the individual; the possibility or impossibility of objective truth; anxiety and death; and other themes. The goal will be to provide students with an introductory overview of some of the texts that have come to stand as paradigmatic of existentialist philosophy. This overview will be far from exhaustive, but should provide students with a solid basis for further exploration.

The course will progress in roughly chronological fashion, beginning with the 19th-century writings of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, then moving onto figures in the 20th century such as Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Required Texts:

Existentialism: Basic Writings (Second Edition); ed. Guignon & Pereboom. (Hackett, 978-0872205956).

Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*; trans. Dru. (Harper Perennial, 978-0061990038).

Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*; trans. Hannay. (Penguin, 978-0140444490).

(Recommended): Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café*. (Other Press, 978-1590518892).

All other materials will be provided via Canvas.

¹ From *At The Existentialist Café*, pg. 1.

Assignments:

Discussion board posts

- Students will write regular discussion board posts of around 250-300 words engaging with the materials covered in class. These discussion boards will help us prepare for discussion in class. More details will be provided at the beginning of the term.

2 short reflection papers (2-3 pages, double-spaced)

- Students will write two short reflection papers, providing a critical summary of the materials covered in class. Students can choose which materials they would like to write about.
 - First due July 23
 - Second due August 6

1 formal essay (5-7 pages, double-spaced)

- Students will write a formal critical essay on a topic of their choosing; it will be expected that students meet with me well in advance of the due date to discuss potential paper topics.
 - Due August 13

Late Policy: Unexcused late papers will be graded down a grade step (e.g. B+ to B) every 2 days after the original due date. However, I am generally happy to grant extensions if students need them. Extensions should be discussed in advance unless they are requested on the basis of sudden and unexpected emergencies.

Attendance: Attendance is required unless students have an excuse that they have communicated to me in advance (excepting sudden emergencies). It is worth emphasizing that attending class sessions and participating will be very important, as these readings are difficult. Class sessions will play an indispensable role in grappling with this material.

Grade Breakdown:

Discussion Board Posts = 25% of the total grade

Two reflection papers: 12.5% each x 2 = 25% of the total grade

Attendance/participation: 25% of the total grade

Formal essay: 25% of the total grade