

Existentialism

Philosophy 159
Spring 2008

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Course Syllabus

Course Description:

Existentialism is more than anything else a revolt against excessive abstraction in philosophy and in human life in general. Existentialists see abstraction in the "leveling down" of human life by diverse forces of homogenization, such as universal morality and rationality, mass society, and modern science. In each of these forces existentialists see a threat to human freedom, a threat to the individual's distinctive identity and her ability to commit herself in her own voice (rather than in the voice of reason or morality or custom) to a life-defining commitment. Although existentialism is just as much literary and cultural as philosophical, in *Philosophy 159* we will focus mostly on the philosophical aspect of existentialism. Existentialism is, moreover, a loose philosophical movement, rather than a school of thought. For this reason, we will be looking at several approaches to a group of problems or worries, rather than at the development of a set of doctrines.



We will start with some of the basic threats to human freedom felt by the existentialists. We will then explore the philosophical responses to these threats offered by Jean-Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche. We will conclude the semester with a look at the ethical sources and implications of existentialism.

Course Requirements:

This course will be run partially off Blackboard. Students must check the Blackboard announcements page for the course regularly. Most assignments will be posted in Blackboard, and the Schedule of Readings is posted there.

Students in this course write three (3) short (5 pp.) formal papers (due Feb. 25, Apr. 9, and May 7) as well as a handful of short (1-2 pp.) assignments.

Grades will be based on written work, a straight average of the formal papers modified by performance on the short papers and intangibles.

Late papers (for the two formal papers): unexcused late papers will be graded down one grade step (e.g., B+ to B) per two business days late (weekends count as one business day). Please discuss legitimate excuses with me as early as possible, and consult my blurb on good excuses (on the Web). Having to take midterms on the same day or having several assignments from multiple classes due at the same time are not legitimate. The two paper assignments will be posted two weeks in advance of the due date. Plan in advance!

Late work (for the shorter assignments): the shorter assignments are designed to complement the reading and discussion in the classroom. For this reason, submitting them late makes very little

sense. Therefore, I will accept them no later than the first class after they are due, and if you do not have a legitimate excuse, I will reduce the assignment's grade by one step.

Attendance policy: Attendance is required. I will keep attendance in order to encourage you to come to class, and if I notice an "attendance problem" emerging, I will discuss it with you. Bear in mind that the readings are difficult and that lecture and class discussion are almost certainly indispensable to your ability to write good papers. Also, some of the shorter assignments will not make a lot of sense apart from the class sessions that set them up. If you do miss a class session, do not request a make-up lecture or review session in my office. Get notes from a classmate.

Academic Integrity: In accordance with university policy, any suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be turned over to the Honor Council for investigation. If the Honor Council confirms that a violation of the Honor Code has taken place, the violator will receive an "F" grade for the course (not just the assignment).

Course Prerequisites:

In order to enroll in this course, you must have completed one prior philosophy course (either a course numbered 001-099, or the Liberal Arts Seminar). This course is open to philosophy majors, minors, dabblers, tasters, and requirement satisfiers.

If you have taken a First Philosophy course in Ethics (Phil. 50-99) or the Liberal Arts Seminar, this course will complete your philosophy requirements. If you have not taken one of these courses, I'm pretty sure this course will not complete your philosophy requirements.

Texts:

Guignon and Pereboom, eds. *Existentialism: The Basic Writings*. 2d ed. Hackett.

Dostoyevsky. *Notes from Underground*. MacAndrew, trans. Signet.

Dostoyevsky. *The Grand Inquisitor*. Garnett, trans. Guignon, ed. Hackett.

Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling*. Hannay, trans. Penguin.

Taylor. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard.

Guignon, *On Being Authentic*. Routledge. (Optional)