

Existentialism

Philosophy 159
Fall 2013

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Course Syllabus

Course Description:

Existentialism was a literary, artistic, and philosophical movement that was primarily concerned with various threats to the possibility of human freedom. These threats can be loosely organized around several themes. *Nihilism* can take the form of either a rejection of life-orienting values or a denial that anything is valuable. Some authors came to worry about nihilism by way of moral and religious disillusionment (e.g., Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche), others in light of the worry that life either is or can be ultimately devoid of meaning or absurd (Kafka, Sartre). Other authors were more worried about a perceived *abstraction* or *homogenization* in modern life, a “levelling off” of possibilities for leading a distinctively individual life (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche). Sometimes this worry is expressed as a fear that *the triumph of modern science and rationality* strips the individual of the capacity to stamp his or her own life with a distinctive outlook or set of values (Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche).

Although existentialism is just as much literary and artistic 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.

In this course students will (a) acquire an introductory familiarity with existentialism as a philosophical movement, as well as with (b) some of the doctrines of several major existentialist authors. Students will also learn (c) how to analyze and assess a philosophical argument.

We will start with some of the basic threats to human freedom felt by the existentialists. In this first phase of the course we will rely on literary treatments (and a movie), as well as some philosophical readings. We will then explore the philosophical responses to these threats offered by Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Course Requirements:

This course will be run through Blackboard. Students must check the Blackboard announcements page for the course regularly. Assignments will be posted and submitted *via* Blackboard, and the Schedule of Readings is posted there.

Students in this course write three short (5 pp.) formal papers, which will be due in October, November, and December. Students will also write three short reflection papers that will be due during the first month of the course.

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 generally designed to complement the reading and discussion in the classroom. For this reason, submitting them late often makes very little sense. I will indicate for each short assignment what the policy will be for late submission.

Attendance policy: Attendance is required. 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: As signatories to the Georgetown University Honor Pledge, and indeed simply as good scholars and citizens, you are required to uphold academic honesty in all aspects of this course. You are expected to be familiar with the letter and spirit of the Standards of Conduct outlined in the Georgetown Honor System and on the Honor Council website. As your instructors, the teaching assistants and I are also obligated to uphold the Honor System and will report all suspected cases of academic dishonesty. 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.

This course counts as a "non-Ethics" general education course. Coupled with Introduction to Ethics (Phil 10), the Liberal Arts Seminar, Philosophy of Sport (Phil 98), or Political and Social Thought (Phil 99), this course will complete General Education requirements in philosophy.

Texts:

- Kaufmann, ed. *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*. Modern Library. List, new: \$18.00
- Dostoyevsky. *The Grand Inquisitor: With Related Chapters from the Brothers Karamazov*. Edited by Charles Guignon. Hackett. 978-0452009301. List, new: \$8.95
- Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling*. Translated by Hannay. Penguin. 978-0140444490. List, new: \$14.00
- Nietzsche. *The Portable Nietzsche*. Translated by Kaufmann. Penguin. 978-0140150629. List, new: \$18.00