

PHIL 239: Existentialism

Fall 2022 / Monday 7:30–10:00pm (Stokes 14)

Instructor: Chuck Goldhaber
Office Hours: Tuesday 2:00–4:00

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Course Description

In the modern era, a tradition of philosophers and artists began to question the meaning-giving status of social custom, and eventually of rationality and religion. How can we go on when the ground is shaken and disappears? The breakdown of rational and religious authority raises the threat of nihilism, the total absence of meaning or value. It also calls for a new kind of thinking, a new vocabulary, and an alternative to rational argumentation to find meaning independently of God or reason. This course follows the development of existentialism from its religious beginnings in Pascal and Kierkegaard, through Dostoyevsky's masterpiece *The Brothers Karamazov* and Nietzsche's atheistic affirmation of life, and into its 20th century applications to gender, race, and absurdity in de Beauvoir, Fanon, and Camus. We will also explore the way existentialist ideas have been articulated in French New Wave and contemporary cinema.

Course Goals

By the end of the term, you will be able to . . .

- speak and write clearly about existentialist themes in philosophy, literature, and film.
- share personal experiences with existential angst, nihilism, and finding meaning in life.
- think both abstractly and vividly about the human condition and its sources of value.
- understand the historical developments which led to a crisis of meaning in modern European culture, and assess a variety of responses made by existentialist thinkers.

Course Requirements

- Up to 60 pages of dense philosophy, or 250 pages of literature, per week
- Regular participation in class discussion
- Five journal entries of 300–500 words 25%
- Three 3–4 page (900–1200 word) papers 25% each

Required Texts

- Søren Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling*. 1843/1986. Trans. Alastair Hannay. Penguin. (ISBN: 978-0-140-44449-0)
- Fyodor Dostoyevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov*. 1880/1990. Trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky. Picador. (ISBN: 978-1250788450)
- Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Gay Science*. 1882/1974. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. Vintage. (ISBN: 0-394-71985-9)
- Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. 1949/2011. Trans. Constance Borde & Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. Vintage. (ISBN: 030727778X)
- Franz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 1952/2008. Trans. Richard Wilcox. Ingram. (ISBN: 9780802143006)

Recommended Further Readings

- Ed. Walter Kaufmann. *Existentialism: From Dostoyevsky to Sartre*. Expanded edition. 1975. Penguin. (ISBN: 978-0-452-00930-1)
- Sarah Bakewell. *At The Existentialist Cafe: Freedom, Being and Apricot Cocktails*. 2016. Vintage. (ISBN: 978-0-345-81094-6)

Films

- *Hiroshima mon Amour* (1959), dir. Alain Resnais
- *Breathless* (1960), dir. Jean-Luc Godard
- *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), dir. Daniel Kwan, Daniel Scheinert

Screening will occur in class, except for *Everything Everywhere...* (see schedule). DVDs are available on reserve in the library for those who want to rewatch the films for writing papers, etc. All films are also available on major streaming platforms.

Readings

In the schedule below, readings are listed underneath the dates by which they must be read. Many readings, even the more literary pieces, can be dense and tough. Make sure you budget enough time to read the reading carefully, and perhaps several times.

Always bring the week's required reading to class. Please acquire the exact editions of the books listed above, since these are the best translations available. (Try searching by ISBN, if buying online.) I will make several copies of each book available at the library.

Participation

Regular verbal participation in group discussions is crucial for developing philosophical reasoning skills, which are very closely related to conversational and debate skills. If you are feeling shy in class, come to office hours, and let's start talking there. Consistent and thoughtful class participation will boost borderline final grades.

Journal Entries

Journal entries (300–500 words) should be thoughtful reflections on the reading. A good strategy is to start out by summarizing some aspect of/argument from the reading, using one or more brief quotations. You should then think about what you find puzzling, or interesting, or outrageous about the reading, and write about that. Getting deeply personal is often a good way to grapple with existentialist themes, but there is no pressure to divulge anything you would rather keep to yourself. This is an open-ended exercise, so feel free to get creative. But it should be taken seriously. Take your time writing each reflection; make sure you are thoughtfully engaging with the reading.

You must submit *five* (5) journal reflections during the course. You can submit them whenever you'd like, so long you follow these guidelines: (a) You submit at least two in the first half of the course, at least two in second half (b) Each journal reflection must discuss a reading we have not yet discussed in class, and must be submitted via email at least *five* (5) hours before the beginning of the relevant class; absolutely NO reflections will accepted after that! It's your responsibility to know/follow these guidelines; I won't chase after anyone!

Each journal reflection is worth 5% of your final grade and will be graded out of 5: 5 for a thoughtful, clear, well-written, and creative reflections; 3 for entries that show some understanding of the reading, but are shallow, hard to follow, or treat the subject unfairly; 1 for entries that show little understanding of the reading or veer off-topic.

I encourage you to post entries on the Moodle message board, but this is not required.

Papers

You must write three papers (3–4 pages, 900–1200 words). The papers are due 10/3, 11/14, and 12/16 *by noon*. The first two papers are to be submitted hardcopy in my mailbox on the second floor of Gest, while the final paper is to be submitted via email. Each paper must address one of several provided topics concerning the course readings and/or films, unless you get my approval for your own topic at least a week before the deadline. Provided topics will be distributed 9/19, 10/31, and 11/28.

All papers must be clear, concise, rigorous, and well argued. They must use quotes and citations when presenting the authors' views or arguments. Each paper must evaluate these views and arguments through use of objections and replies. You can't just explain what the authors think. Your job is to use course readings as a springboard for articulating your own views, and to argue for them convincingly.

Writing Resources

I am happy to discuss paper ideas and drafts in Office Hours. I encourage you to take advantage of the Writing Center. Info: <https://www.haverford.edu/writing-center>. You can easily make an appointment with a writing consultant online.

Late Policy

Late work will drop 1/3 of a letter grade per each 24 hours late (e.g., A- to B+). Due to university policies, I cannot accept late final papers. Plan ahead and start early!

Academic Stressors, Resources on Campus, and Learning Differences

I am committed to partnering with you on your academic and intellectual journey. I also recognize that your ability to thrive academically can be impacted by your personal well-being and that stressors may impact you over the course of the semester. If the stressors are academic, I welcome the opportunity to discuss and address those stressors with you in order to find solutions together. If you are experiencing challenges or questions related to emotional health, finances, physical health, relationships, learning strategies or differences, or other potential stressors, I hope you will consider reaching out to the many resources available on campus. These resources include CAPS (free and unlimited counseling is available), the Office of Academic Resources, Health Services, Professional Health Advocate, Religious and Spiritual Life, the Office of Multicultural Affairs, the GRASE Center, and the Dean's Office. Additional information can be found at <https://www.haverford.edu/deans-office-student-life/offices-resources>.

Additionally, Haverford College is committed to creating a learning environment that meets the needs of its diverse student body and providing equal access to students with a disability. If you have (or think you have) a learning difference or disability—including mental health, medical, or physical impairment—please contact the Office of Access and Disability Services (ADS) at hc-ads@haverford.edu. The Director will confidentially discuss the process to establish reasonable accommodations. It is never too late to request accommodations—our bodies and circumstances are continuously changing.

Students who have already been approved to receive academic accommodations and want to use their accommodations in this course should share their accommodation letter and make arrangements to meet with me as soon as possible to discuss how their accommodations will be implemented in this course. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice in order to successfully implement.

If, at any point in the semester, a disability or personal circumstances affect your learning in this course or if there are ways in which the overall structure of the course and general classroom interactions could be adapted to facilitate full participation, please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

It is a state law in Pennsylvania that individuals must be given advance notice that they may be recorded. Therefore, any student who has a disability-related need to audio record this class must first be approved for this accommodation from the Director of Access and Disability Services and then must speak to me. Other class members need to be aware that this class may be recorded.

Prohibitions

Cell phones must be silenced and put away during class. I prefer that no laptops be used in the classroom, but understand that there may be good reasons for making exceptions. Please reach out, if you would like to use a laptop.

No eating is allowed in the classroom, aside from a designated “snack break.” Drinks are OK, when allowed by the College’s current COVID-19 policies.

Academic Integrity

Any form of cheating, including plagiarism, will be reported to the Honor Council. You are responsible for knowing what counts as plagiarism or cheating. Please consult the Honor Code’s webpage: <https://honorcouncil.haverford.edu/the-code/>.

To ensure a safe and constructive learning environment for all, please join me in the commitment to respect everyone’s identities and rights, regardless of differences.

Schedule

Assignments

Meeting 1 (8/29) – Introduction, Questioning Custom

- Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, §§24–25, 53–68, 140–46, 149, 228, 418–31, 525, 913

Meeting 2 (9/12) – The Knight of Faith

- Kierkegaard, *Fear & Trembling*, Preamble from the Heart, Problema I

Meeting 3 (9/19) – Life-Defining Commitment

Paper 1 topics

- Kierkegaard, *Fear & Trembling*, Problema II
- In-class movie screening: *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (dir. Alain Resnais)

Meeting 4 (9/26) – Extreme Situations

- Dostoevsky, *Brothers*, Books I–II

Meeting 5 (10/3) – Tearing Open

Paper 1 due

- Dostoevsky, *Brothers*, Books III–IV

[*Fall Break*]

Meeting 6 (10/17) – Existentialized Christianity

- Dostoevsky, *Brothers*, Books V–VII

Meeting 7 (10/24) – Earthly Life

- Dostoevsky, *Brothers*, Books VIII–X

Meeting 8 (10/31) – Demons

Paper 2 topics

- Dostoevsky, *Brothers*, Books XI–XII, and Epilogue

Meeting 9 (11/7) – The Death of God

- Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Preface to Second Edition §§1-4; §§1, 2, 4, 26, 37, 39, 108, 109, 110, 122, 124, 125, 132, 135, 143, 151, 153, 279, 283, 289, 290–91, 295, 302–03, 307, 319, 320, 328, 334–35, 343, 344, 347, 349, 357–58, 371, 374, 375, 377, 382

Meeting 10 (11/14) – Nihilism

Paper 2 due

- Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §§2–3, 12–15, 22
- In-class movie screening: *Breathless* (1960), dir. Jean-Luc Godard

Meeting 11 (11/21) – The Woman in Love

- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Vol. I, Introduction; Vol. II, Chs. 12, 14

Meeting 12 (11/28) – Race, Colonialism, Psychopathology Final paper topics

- Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Chs. 4–6

Meeting 13 (12/5) – Choice, Death, Absurdity

- Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”
- Movie screening Weekend of 12/3–4, details TBA: *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), dir. Daniel Kwan, Daniel Scheinert

*** Final papers due by December 16, noon via email ***