

Seminar on Existentialism

Course Description

This course offers an in-depth look at some of the central texts of Existential Philosophy. “Existentialism” is a term applied to a group of late 19th- and early 20th-century thinkers who were concerned with ultimate questions about the value and meaning of human life. These authors asked questions such as: Can we be ethical if there is no God? What is the role of reason and objectivity in knowledge and faith? What are the origins of our values and should we reexamine them? Are humans ultimately free and morally responsible? What does it mean to live an authentic life and what is the nature of self-deception? How should we think about death and dying?

This course involves intensive study of major works from Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Beauvoir. In most cases, we will only be able to read selections from these works, though students should expect to read 20-30 pages per class in preparation for class discussion. No prior experience with Existentialism or these authors is expected, but it should be noted that this advanced class is intended primarily for Philosophy majors or those with experience reading difficult philosophical works.

Course Texts

Bretall, ed. *A Kierkegaard Anthology*. ISBN: 0691019789
Dostoyevsky. *Notes from Underground*. ISBN: 067973452X
Nietzsche. *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Revised Student Edition). ISBN: 052169163X
Heidegger. *Being and Time*. ISBN: 0061575593
Sartre. *Being and Nothingness*. ISBN: 0671867806
Sartre. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. ISBN: 0300115466
Beauvoir. *Ethics of Ambiguity*. ISBN: 1480442801

Course Goals

- To do an in-depth study of various central works of Existentialism. At the end of this course, students should be aware of the fundamental similarities and contrasts between the philosophical approaches of these different authors, as well as familiar with their technical vocabulary.
- To have informed discussions about the existential themes addressed in these works. Students should leave this class knowing about, for example, Sartre’s analysis of bad faith, Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein’s relation to death, Beauvoir’s account of the origins of nihilism, and so forth. Students are expected to contribute their own thoughts about these and related themes, while making an effort to engage with the material we read for class.
- To develop your ability to slowly and carefully read and engage with difficult works of philosophy, some of which are highly technical. Students should think of the task of understanding these works as a collaborative effort: I encourage students to work with me and their peers to reconstruct the worldviews that these different philosophers defend.
- To have productive discussions about existential questions with your peers. The main goal of discussions will be to collaborate on understanding a philosophical position or argument and then to come up with an objection or another argument in support of that position. Ideal discussions will be focused and friendly, but also fun.

Achieving these Goals

- Students are expected to read assigned texts carefully before class and take notes of questions and comments you have about the text. If you would like supplemental reading material to read alongside the text, I am happy to provide it.
- I will lecture on the more difficult and technical aspects of these works as well as the “big picture” behind each philosopher’s thought. I expect students to bring questions and comments about these works and to be prepared to answer questions that I pose to the class.
- You will submit each of your papers to your peers for a guided review. The goal here is not to be merely critical of your peers’ work: you want to work together to improve your work as much as possible before submitting it.

Assignments and Grading

- **Two 10-12 page papers or one 20-25 page paper (70 pts.)**
 - For those interested in the two paper option, I will provide several paper prompts for the first paper. For the second paper, and also for the single paper option, I will ask students to come up with their own topic. Before students draft papers on topics of their choosing, I ask that they write a short abstract of their paper for me to review. All papers should be submitted to me via email by 5 PM on the date that they’re due. No paper copies will be accepted. Late papers will lose 5 points for every day that they’re late.
- **Nightly reading responses on Sakai (1 pt. each, 20 pts. total)**
 - Each night’s reading will be accompanied by study questions. Responses to these questions will always take fewer than 300 words. These questions will show up under the ‘Assignments’ tab in Sakai. I will only count 20 of the responses (1 point each), so you will be able to miss a few and still receive full credit. You must answer the study question by 8 AM on the day of the class when we discuss the reading.
- **Discussion Leadership (10 pts.)**
 - After the add-drop period has concluded, I will assign each student three days on which they are one of the “discussion leaders.” Discussion leaders are expected to come to class prepared to answer questions about the reading for that day’s class. They should also prepare a few questions about the material that can be discussed in class if time permits. Discussion leaders are welcome to discuss their readings with me before their class period.

Course Grade Guide

A: 94-100 B+: 87-89 B-: 80-83 C: 74-76 D+: 67-69 F: 0-59
A-: 90-93 B: 84-86 C+: 77-79 C-: 70-73 D: 60-69

Please see [UNC’s official grade guide](#) for an explanation of what it takes to make an A, B, and so on.

Course Policies

- Our classroom will be technology-free. I will count any student that uses an electronic device during lecture and group discussion absent for that day.
- Discussions will be respectful. No one wants to feel uncomfortable or unsafe in a classroom. Any comment or action that discriminates or harasses on the grounds of sex, gender, race, sexual orientation, nationality, or any physical characteristics will not be tolerated. If you feel disrespected in any way during the class, please contact me immediately.
- The University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill facilitates the implementation of reasonable accommodations, including resources and services, for students with disabilities, chronic medical conditions, a temporary disability or pregnancy complications resulting in difficulties with accessing learning opportunities. All accommodations are coordinated through the Accessibility Resources and Service Office. In the first instance please visit their website <http://accessibility.unc.edu>, call 919-962-8300 or email accessibility@unc.edu.
- Collaboration of any kind on papers is strictly prohibited. For more information about the Honor Code, please visit studentconduct.unc.edu.

Course Schedule

Kierkegaard

Week 1

Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments (Selections)

Week 2

Fear and Trembling (Problema 1: Is there a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?)

Dostoyevsky

Week 3

“The Grand Inquisitor: from *The Brothers Karamazov*
Notes from Underground (selections)

Week 4

Notes from Underground (continued)
“The Dream of a Ridiculous Man”

Nietzsche

Week 5

Genealogy of Morality (Preface and First Treatise)

Week 6

Genealogy of Morality (Second Treatise)

Week 7

Genealogy of Morality (Third Treatise)
Aphorisms 285, 341 of *The Gay Science*
Thus Spoke Zarathustra (Selections)

Heidegger

Week 8

Selections from *Being and Time* (Introduction, Division One)

Week 9

Being and Time (Division Two, I)

Being and Time (Division Two, II)

Week 10

Being and Time (Division Two, II) continued

Being and Time (Division Two, III)

Sartre

Week 11

Being and Nothingness (Part One, selections from Chapter One)

Being and Nothingness (Part One, Chapter Two)

Week 12

Being and Nothingness (Part Four, Chapter One)

Being and Nothingness (Conclusion)

Week 13

Existentialism is a Humanism

Beauvoir

Week 14

Ethics of Ambiguity (Parts I and II)

Week 15

Ethics of Ambiguity (Part III)