

Introduction to Existentialism

Course Description

If there is no God, is everything permitted? Why and how can we live meaningful lives in an absurd or indifferent universe? Is free will an illusion? Where do our values come from and why should we continue to adopt them? In what ways do we deceive ourselves about our beliefs and intentions? What does an authentic human life look like? How should we think about death and dying?

Perhaps you've asked yourself some of these existential questions and want to think more clearly about them. In this course, we will survey a variety of philosophers' and other thinkers' attempts to understand and answer these fundamental questions. Our course will be organized thematically: we will discuss whether or not life has meaning or is absurd, whether existential questions should be addressed with philosophical theories or commitments to faith, what the origins of self-deception and inauthenticity are, and whether and how we should reevaluate our values. For each theme, we will consider either a work of philosophy, literature, or film that illustrates the theme in some way. This course does not presuppose familiarity with philosophy or Existentialism.

Course Goals

- To survey various central Existential works and themes by reading philosophical works alongside works of literature and film. At the end of this course, students should be aware of the main themes of Existentialism and how various philosophers and writers approached central existential questions.
- To have discussions about the existential themes informed by these works. 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. This course will emphasize helping you form your own thoughts about these deep and difficult issues.
- 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.
- I will ask each student to write about the existential themes in a work of literature or film that we have not discussed in class to give students a chance to share their own experience with Existentialism. Students are encouraged to talk to me before drafting their papers so that I can help guide you in the right direction.

Assignments and Grading

- **7-10 page Interpretative Paper (30 pts)**
 - Your main term paper for this class asks you to provide an analysis of the existential themes presented in a work of film or literature that we have not discussed in class. Please have your film, novel, etc. approved by me before you begin drafting. It is crucial that these papers demonstrate your knowledge of the course material: I expect to see references to and citations of philosophers' work alongside your analysis of the work you're interpreting. If you would like a suggestion for something to interpret, please let me know.
- **Mid-Term and Final Exams (30 pts each)**
 - There will be two exams during the course. Each exam will ask you to demonstrate your knowledge the core ideas behind each philosopher's work by identifying a quote from an author and explaining how it illustrates one of their core ideas. These exams will be open book and note and will only cover half of the material discussed during the relevant part of the semester.
- **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 and Themes

Nihilism, the Absurd, the Meaning of Life

Week 1 – “The Grand Inquisitor” from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky,
“An Imperial Message” by Franz Kafka, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, Thomas
Ligotti (selections)

Week 2 – Film: *The Sunset Limited* (clips to be shown in class)
The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus (Preface, Chapters 1, 4)

Week 3 – “The Absurd”, Nagel
“The Wall,” Sartre (selection)

Week 4 – *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl

Week 5 – Film: *The Road* (clips to be shown in class)
Man’s Search for Meaning, continued.

Faith, Subjectivity, Anxiety

Week 6 – *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard (selections)

Week 7 – Film: *Silence* (clips to be shown in class)
Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard (selections)

Week 8 - *Postscript*, continued
“The Concept of Anxiety” (selections)

Authenticity and Freedom

Week 9 – *Being and Time*, Heidegger (selections from Division II)

Week 10 – Film: *American Beauty* (clips to be shown in class)
Existentialism is a Humanism, Sartre

Week 11 – *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (selections from Part One, Chapter Two)
Selections from *The Iceman Cometh*

The Origins and Reevaluation of Values

Week 12 – *Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche (Preface and selections from First Treatise)

Week 13 – Film: *Groundhog Day* (clips to be shown in class)
Genealogy of Morality, Nietzsche (selections from Second Treatise)
Aphorisms 285, 341 of *The Gay Science*
Thus Spoke Zarathustra (Selections)

Week 14 – *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir (selections from Part I)

Week 15 – Film: *I ♥ Huckabees* (clips to be shown in class)
The Ethics of Ambiguity, Beauvoir (selections from Part III)