

JOSEPH CAREW
SAMPLE SYLLABUS



Existentialism

Short Course Description

“Existentialism,” like “Platonism,” “empiricism,” or “idealism,” is a term denoting a specific tradition in the history of philosophy. Its distinguishing feature is the claim that to philosophically understand the human condition, namely what it is to be a singular individual who must find meaning for her own life, we must abandon conventional philosophy, with its emphasis on the universal laws of nature, morality, and Reason. Instead, we must concentrate on concrete human experience in all its context-sensitive meaning, ambiguities, and contradictions, which leads existentialism to conclude the importance of human freedom and agency, the challenging burden of anxiety we must face at every turn, and the difficulty of leading a life that is authentically our own.

Thematic Course Description

In the Part I of this course, we will examine the origins of existentialism in two 19th-century thinkers widely considered to be the first existentialists: Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Of particular note will be what can be referred to as “the discovery of the problem of existing”: the recognition that the singular individual, in particular what matters most to her life, cannot be fully explained by a philosophical system or science. For Kierkegaard, this is shown by the fact that, when we look at the various “stage’s on life’s way” (the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious), it is impossible to fully comprehend what would motivate a singular individual to adopt one way of life over another as the true way of existing, given their inner ambiguities and contradictions. We can only comprehend concrete experience as involving an irrational “leap of faith.” In Nietzsche, we must admit this due to the fact that, when we look at the achievements of philosophy and science, we must proclaim the “death of God.” If the idea of God no longer has any purchase for our lives, then what has given our lives meaning for millennia has disappeared, requiring us to find a new foundation for existing beyond the old values of philosophy and science, what he calls the “transvaluation of values.”

In the Part II, we will examine the phenomenology of Heidegger, how it was received as a form of existentialism, and how Sartre developed his own existentialism in dialogue with it. Arguing that the categories of philosophy and science distance us from the complexities of the real-life human situation, Heidegger describes the structure of human life as it is concretely experienced by us. That is, he describes human life as the irreducible first-person experience of an individual the meaning of whose existence is an issue for her—an individual absorbed in projects, plagued by anxiety she cannot control, afraid of her own death, and who finds it difficult to be authentic and stand out from the crowd. Sartre, agreeing with Heidegger on the need to describe human experience, proposes a supplementary account that emphasizes the absurdity of the world, the radical nature of human freedom, the groundlessness of value, and the role of personal integrity in action.

Class Schedule

Week 1: Introduction: What is Existentialism?

- Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*

JOSEPH CAREW
SAMPLE SYLLABUS

Part I: 19th-Century Existentialism

Week 2: Kierkegaard on the Aesthetic Way of Life

- Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, excerpts

Week 3: Kierkegaard on the Ethical Way of Life

- Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, excerpts

Week 4: Kierkegaard on the Religious Way of Life

- Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, First and Second Problema

Week 5: Kierkegaard on “Truth is Subjectivity”

- Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, excerpts

Week 6: Nietzsche on “God is Dead”

- Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, excerpts

Week 7: Nietzsche on “Transvaluations of All Values”

- Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, excerpts

Part 2: 20th-Century Existentialism

Week 8: Heidegger on Dasein or Human Existence

- Heidegger, *Being and Time*, excerpts

Week 9: Heidegger on Being-in-the-World

- Heidegger, *Being and Time*, excerpts

Week 10: Heidegger on Moods and Anxiety

- Heidegger, *Being and Time*, excerpts

Week 11: Heidegger on Death and Authenticity

- Heidegger, *Being and Time*, excerpts

Week 12: Sartre on Immanence and Transcendence

- Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, excerpts

Week 13: Sartre on the Absurd, the Ideality of Values, and Personal Integrity

- Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, excerpts
- Sartre, *Nausea*, excerpts

Assessment

The final grade will consist of four components:

- Participation (10%)
- In-Class Midterm Exam (20%)
- Term Paper of 2500-3000 words (40%)
- Take-Home Final Exam (30%)

JOSEPH CAREW
SAMPLE SYLLABUS

Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course, students will be familiar with four key figures in the history of existentialism: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre. In particular, students will gain a familiarity with key theories they developed concerning, for instance, the paradox of religious faith, the nature of nihilism, human existence as a situational and affective “being-in-the-world,” and the absurd. Insofar as these figures are also at the origin of much of so-called “continental philosophy,” the course is also an introduction to it and some of its main methodologies. The two exams are meant to assure that students have sufficiently internalized this knowledge for their future studies. Students will also improve their critical reading and writing skills by analyzing texts and creatively putting them to use in order to explore their own philosophical interests and existential concerns through course material. The term paper, the topic of which can be freely decided by each student in consultation with the instructor, is to promote the development of such skills. Philosophy is not just a body of knowledge, but also a distinctive methodology of critical methodology best learned in practicing it.