

# Existentialism

Instructor: Dr. Joseph Carew

## 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.

## Detailed Course Description

In the Part I of this course, we will examine the origins of existentialism in two 19<sup>th</sup>-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.

## Student Evaluation

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|---------------------|-----|
| • Participation     | 10% |
| • Essay 1           | 20% |
| • Take-Home Midterm | 20% |
| • Essay 2           | 30% |
| • Take-Home Final   | 20% |

*Essay 1:*

The first essay will be of a historical and exegetical nature. You will contextualize and summarize key concepts of an important and influential textual passage and reconstruct its formal argument. The essay will be 1500 words.

*Midterm:*

Short-answer questions on course readings and class discussions up to the midterm.

*Essay 2:*

The second essay will be a reflective essay that deals with a topic of your choice and argues for your own position on this topic. I will circulate a list of topics, although you are encouraged to choose a topic of your own in consultation with me if there is a specific theme you would like to explore further. This essay can be a place for you to investigate your philosophical interests and existential concerns through the course material. The essay will be 2000 words.

*Final:*

Short-answer questions on course readings and class discussions after the midterm.

## **Class Schedule**

### **Introduction to Existentialism**

Week 1: The Surprising Legacy of Existentialism Inside and Outside Philosophy

- Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, excerpts.

### **Part I: 19<sup>th</sup>-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: 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Existentialism

Week 8: Heidegger on Human Existence as “Dasein” (Being-There)

- 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.

### Course Procedures and Policies

- 1 *Email*: I will respond within 2 business days. If something is urgent, please indicate so in the subject line so that I can prioritize getting back to you.
- 2 *Missed Exams*: Please contact me within 24 hours, if possible. If you are excused (for medical reasons, bereavement, etc., as determined on a case-by-case basis), you must reschedule.
- 3 *Late Essays*: Any essay handed in late will be penalized by 5% per day for a maximum of 7 days. Late essays after this point will not be accepted, except under extenuating circumstances.