

PHIL 181: Existentialism

Syllabus

Summer Session II 2008

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Course Description

This course covers classical texts, figures, and issues of existentialism. Center stage will be occupied by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre. Literary works by Dostoevsky and Camus, important figures associated with Existentialism, will also be read and discussed. The final session of the course will deal with the historically significant theme of the connection between Existentialism and Psychoanalysis.

Existentialism is a diverse philosophical movement with disputed boundaries and containing a variety of conflicting positions and an anti-systematic attitude. Nevertheless, it is a historically important movement with a cluster of core concerns. Central to the project is the attempt to understand what is special about *human* existence. In carrying out that project, Existentialist thinkers have developed concepts of authenticity, subjectivity, inwardness, alienation, and the absurd; they have developed a critique of rationality; they have attempted to make human activity, personal experience, and everyday life central matters of everyday concern.

The object of this course is to gain a working knowledge of the major figures of Existentialism and their major concerns, to engage with the issues and ways of thinking that these key figures have pursued, and to understand the place of this distinctive movement in history and the course of philosophy. Students in this course should further develop their skills of reflective thinking, critical discussion, reading and interpretation of difficult texts, and writing of philosophical arguments.

Books

- E: *Existentialism: Basic Writings* (Second Edition)
- K: *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*
- PN: *The Portable Nietzsche*
- S: Camus, *The Stranger*
- NU: Dostoyevsky, *Notes From Underground* (Recommended)
- DD: Becker, *The Denial of Death*
- IM: Barrett, *Irrational Man* (recommended)

Requirements

This is an upper-division course in the humanities. It will be a reading and writing intensive course, and it will be presumed that students have some skill with reading difficult texts, navigating primary and secondary source material, and making academic arguments. Students who do not feel comfortable with doing so should consult with the instructor. No particular knowledge of philosophy is prerequisite, though prior coursework in philosophy is a good way to ensure that you have the prerequisite skills.

You are required to attend every meeting of the course, with no exceptions. More than one absence will lead to an **F** in the course. If you anticipate any problems with attendance or turning your work in on time, please contact me as soon as possible prior to the development of a problem. I will do my best to help accommodate you, though the small number of meetings makes the requirements fairly inflexible.

You will be graded on your participation in class, a daily journal, a short research paper, and a final exam.

Class Participation - Your intellectual contribution to class discussions and to close readings of the text undertaken in class.

Daily Journal - You will keep a journal for this class where you reflect on readings, lecture, class discussion, and anything else in your life relevant to the topics and themes of this course. Your work will be periodically collected and checked to make sure you are contributing regularly. You should write in the journal at least 5 days a week, at least 200 words a day.

Research Paper - Assignment to be handed out in the first week of class. A 6–8 page paper addressing both primary and secondary sources.

Final Exam - In-class, format to be discussed at least a week prior.

Evaluation Standards

The following is a clarification for the purposes of this course. of UCSD's official policy with respect to grading standards.

- An **A** grade indicates *excellent* work. **A** work has something to say and says it well. It displays a subtle and nuanced understanding of the text, develops arguments clearly and effectively, and reflects insightfully on the course material. It often rises above other work in terms of creativity and sophistication, or it may add something valuable to the discussion that goes beyond merely fulfilling the letter of the requirements. Only few, minor mistakes are present.
- A **B** grade indicates *good* work. Such work displays a clear understanding of the text, develops arguments consistently towards a clear claim, and is thoughtful and careful. The presence of serious errors must not impair the clarity of an argument or the overall understanding of a text. **B** work is in many ways successful, but lacks the sophistication or originality of **A** work.
- A **C** grade indicates *adequate* work. It shows an adequate understanding of the key parts of the text. Arguments aim at a central claim, though they may rely on unsupported or insufficiently developed ideas. More serious errors may be present, so long as the central claims and basic understandings are not undermined.
- Work which deserves a grade less than **C** will display some of the following problems: it fails to show adequate understanding of the text; it fails to understand the assignment; it fails to articulate a coherent or adequate argument; it fails to reflect on the content of the course; it displays such pervasive grammatical errors as to be highly obscure in meaning.

A Word About Note-Taking and Laptops

Extensive note-taking in class is strongly discouraged, especially in those parts of class meetings that are not primarily lecture-based. Taking good notes is no guarantee of good performance in the course, and taking extensive notes can interfere with activities that make a greater contribution to your performance: listening, looking at the text, and participating in class discussion. The instructor and teaching assistant will work together to provide a record of the crucial points of lecture and class discussion.

For this reason, there should be no reason to bring laptop or handheld computer to class. Doing so will be frowned upon, unless some special need requires it (in that case, speak to me privately about your concern).

Class Schedule

| Day | Topic | Readings |
|--------|---------------------------------|---|
| M 8/4 | Introduction | E: xiii-xxxvii; K: vii-xxx <i>Recommended: IM: 3-41</i> |
| W 8/6 | Kierkegaard | K: 3-40, 111-148 |
| M 8/11 | Kierkegaard | K: 41-110, 149-188 <i>Recommended: IM: 149-176</i> |
| W 8/13 | Dostoyevsky | <i>Notes From Underground</i> Part I NU: 84-117 (e-reserves) <i>Recommended: IM: 133-146</i> |
| M 8/18 | Nietzsche | <i>Twilight of the Idols</i> PN: 463-563 <i>Recommended: Ecce Homo (excerpts); IM: 177-205</i> |
| W 8/20 | Heidegger | E: 183-210, 211-254 |
| M 8/25 | Camus | <i>The Stranger</i> S:3-123 <i>Recommended: IM: 42-65</i> |
| W 8/27 | Sartre | E: 290-362 |
| M 9/1 | Holiday | — |
| W 9/3 | Psychoanalysis & Existentialism | DD: 1-92, 159-175, 255-285 <i>Recommended: DD: 93-158, 176-207; IM: 283-294</i> |
| F 9/5 | Final Exam | — |