

Continental Philosophy: Existentialism

80-253, Summer I 2005

Course Information

Time: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, 12:00 – 1:20

Room: Baker Hall, 150

Instructor

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Office Hours: by appointment

Course Objectives

This course explores the existential movement in European philosophy as it emerged from the rationalistic tradition of Kant and Hegel. In part, existentialism considers questions no person can avoid: the status of human existence in the face of death, the meaning and impact of the God-Idea, the significance of our interpersonal relationships, the source of our moral values, and the role of reason and emotion in understanding our lives. Generally, existentialists believe that life has little “objective” value, while arguing that the “subjective” individual must create his or her own values by affirming life and living it. This separates existentialism from the more traditional philosophical movements. In particular, we shall examine how the philosophies of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus address these fundamental problems. In addition, short fiction of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and Franz Kafka, and films of Akira Kurosawa, Ingmar Bergman, Jean-Luc Godard, and Woody Allen will augment our understanding of existentialism.

This course is broken into three parts. We will begin with a whirlwind tour of those major philosophers who, while not themselves existentialists, lay the groundwork for the possibility of existentialism. This includes Rene Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Hegel. Then we shall proceed to study the 19th century precursors of existentialism: Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. While they predate the “official” existential movement of the 20th century, they do address the problems that the later existentialists will take up. The remainder of the course will involve studying two major existential philosophers of the 20th century, Sartre and Camus. Additional topics relating existentialism to contemporary issues, such as artificial intelligence and feminism, may be pursued if time and interest allows.

By the end of this term, I expect that you will be able to

- Describe key figures in existentialism along with their basic ideas,
- Compare and contrast their different approaches and arguments,
- Evaluate and provide arguments for and/or against the positions they hold, and
- Reflect on how the above expands your understanding of those difficult questions that Existentialism seek to resolve.

Requirements

Class Summaries/Presentations	= 10%
Daily Reading Quizzes	= 25%
Take-Home Exam #1	= 20%
Take-Home Exam #2	= 20%
Final Take-Home Exam	= 25%

Philosophy is a full-contact sport. However, we will wrestle with arguments and not attack those advocating them. In order that you seriously digest the material, attendance is required and I will encourage class participation. You are allowed 2 absences, no questions asked. Each additional absence will result in 2 points deducted from your final grade.

Texts

- Robert Walter Bretall (ed.). 1946. *A Kierkegaard Anthology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Albert Camus. 1991. *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays*. Trans. Justin O'Brien. New York: Vintage Books.
- Fyodor Dostoyevsky. 1989. *Notes From Underground*. Trans. Michael R. Katz. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.
- Walter Kaufmann (ed.). 1967. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. New York: Random House.
- Jean Paul Sartre. 1967. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. Trans. Bernard Frechtman and Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library.
- . 1989. *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. Trans. Stuart Gilbert and Lionel Abel. New York: Vintage International.

Handouts will comprise the remaining reading material.

Course Outline

Part I, "Rational Origins" of Existentialism [Weeks I – II]

Section 1: Descartes

Section 2: Kant

Section 3: Hegel

Epilogue: The Escape from Rationalism

Part II, The 19th Century Precursors of Existentialism [Weeks II – IV]

Section 1: Kierkegaard

Interlude: Schopenhauer

Section 2: Nietzsche

Part III, 20th Century Existentialism [Weeks IV – VI]

Preface: Heidegger

Section 1: Sartre

Section 2: Camus

Plagiarism – The Short Note

plagiarism (plā'jě-rīz'ēm) *n* 1: a piece of writing that has been copied from someone else and is presented as being your own work. 2: the act of plagiarizing; taking someone's words or ideas as if they were your own.

Plagiarism is bad. Do not do it. It amounts to lying, cheating, and stealing. Anyone caught doing it can fairly assume that they will not pass this course.

Plagiarism – The Long Note

The straightforward disclosure of the sources used in completing course work is essential to the integrity of the educational process. In that way one acknowledges the ideas of others and helps to highlight what is distinctive of one's own contribution to a topic. It also enables instructors to be more effective teachers by providing an accurate sense of the student's grasp of course material.

Students are expected to use proper methods for citing sources; such methods can be found in style guides like the Chicago Manual of Style, or the most recent MLA Handbook. In general, an acceptable method of citation provides enough information to allow a reader to track down the original sources. You should consult your professor, if you have any questions about which method to use, or which kinds of collaboration or assistance to disclose.

Failure to acknowledge the ideas of others is a serious violation of intellectual integrity and community standards. It is the individual student's responsibility to be aware of the university policy on cheating and plagiarism. This is available online at: <http://www.cmu.edu/policies/documents/Cheating.html> and in the section on "University Policies" of The Word: Undergraduate Student Handbook. Students who plagiarize face serious sanctions at both the course level, and the university level. At the course level, faculty members have significant discretion to determine the sanctions that are appropriate to individual cases of cheating and plagiarism.

Within the Philosophy Department, it is customary for professors to give plagiarized assignments a failing grade and, when appropriate, fail students for the course.

Additionally, a letter may be sent to the Dean of Students indicating that the student in question has submitted plagiarized material and received a course-level sanction. Plagiarism is also a violation of the community standards of Carnegie Mellon University. As such, allegations of plagiarism may be brought before a University Academic Review Board, which will determine whether community standards have been violated and level additional sanctions, if appropriate. Although this body also has significant discretion over the sanctions that it levels, plagiarism can result in academic probation, suspension, and even expulsion.