University of Manitoba – Department of Philosophy  
Fall 2019 - PHIL 2710 – A01 - CNR 12998  
Twentieth-Century European Philosophy: Existentialism  
Sep. 5 - Dec. 5, 2019

Professor: Simone Mahrenholz  
Times: TUE/TH 1:00 p.m. -2:15 p.m.  
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Course Description

The philosophical movement called Existentialism is often associated with European thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, or Camus. Its origins, however, lie in part in Greek antiquity as well as in phenomenology (Hegel, Husserl), and its consequences are still very much present in contemporary philosophy, literature and film. This course will give a survey, both in systematic as well as in historical respects, of a philosophical and literary movement that examines what it means to exist as a human being: addressing topics such as the “self” and our responsibility for ourselves, the problem of a meaning of life, of emotions such as anguish or alienation, the threats of nihilism and of our own death, or our being “condemned to be free” (Sartre) after the “death of god” (Nietzsche).

Importantly, Existentialism criticized the main academic philosophies of its time, in particular ‘positivist’ and ‘rationalist’ forms, including those that conceive philosophy as a purely ‘objective’ science. Whereas the common dualist view neatly distinguishes between the inquiring subject and the examined object, existentialism claims the subject’s participation in what it perceives as objects. (Philosophers such as David Hume or Immanuel Kant however had made this point already earlier.) Further, the existentialist movement adds to the question “What can we know?” the equally crucial question: “How should we live”? This implies: How can we mentally and emotionally thrive and persist in a situation devoid of solid moral, spiritual and epistemic foundations? In the aftermath of the Enlightenment and World War II, this was a pressing question in political, scientific and ethical terms, and it strongly influenced the everyday life in Europe and beyond. Sören Kierkegaard took “Angst” (existential anguish) as a starting-point of human existence, and thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir subsequently focused on sensitivities and moods that address the temporal and existential finitude into which humans are “thrown” (Heidegger). These thinkers reflected the difficult conditions of ‘freedom’ under which we are bound to live: including the obligation to choose who we want to be and according to what moral principles we want to act.
The course will focus on central ideas and arguments by Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Nietzsche, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. There will be plenty of opportunities in class to discuss crucial questions regarding our existence, not the least of them regarding the challenge of living an ‘authentic’ life.

**Course Objectives**

At the end of the course the students are expected to (a) be familiar with key topics, problems, and arguments of existentialist philosophy, (b) know central authors of the movement and their thinking, such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, and de Beauvoir, (c) are expected to be able to relate the readings to their own lives and to giving their reflections a voice: in writing as well as in class- and group-discussions.

**Course Organization**

The reading of approximately 25-40 pages of primary text per week is required. Material is mostly from the textbook, additional texts will be made available electronically, and students are expected to print them out for reading and to bring them to class. Optional background-literature (or videos/podcasts/blogs) will be provided electronically on a regular basis.

All students are expected to have read the texts assigned for upcoming class-sessions thoroughly, have the texts with them in class, and be prepared to discuss them. Discussion will play a significant role in the course, as Existentialism is about developing a personal stance towards one’s own life and the topics addressed. Participation will be evaluated primarily on the basis of continuous commitment and intellectual and personal engagement. The course aims at providing a protected atmosphere of mutual trust, encouraging an open exchange of ideas and positions, ideally without sentiments of intimidation, or of being judged. ‘Mistakes’, ‘errors’ or digressions are not something to be avoided by all means (which would prevent an open, lively and honest discussion) but rather they contain the potential of being enlightenment and growth for the whole group. Do not hesitate to come to my office hours, send me an email or schedule an extra appointment whenever you have questions, want to discuss topics or readings addressed in class or wish to discuss your work.

**Required Texts**

(available in the U of M bookstore)


Additional texts will made available electronically.
Program

Preliminary schedule – changes are possible. The final version will be distributed in class.
Week:
1 Kierkegaard (background: Hegel, excerpt from Phenomenology of Spirit)
2 Nietzsche
3 Heidegger: Being and Time: Wholeness and Death
4 Heidegger: Nothingness: What is Metaphysics II
5 Camus: The Myth of Sisyphus
6 Sartre: Existentialism is a Humanism
7 Recap and Test (Oct. 24)
8 Sartre: Being & Nothingness I - Background: Husserl: Phenomenology & Anthropology
   Info on Final Essay
9 Sartre: B&N II
10 De Beauvoir: The Second Sex
11 Julia Kristeva / Contemporary Feminism
12 Joker

Evaluation / Grading

- In-class test (75 min., Oct. 24th) 35 %
- Final paper, about 10 pages (due Dec. 5th, 1:00 p.m.) 40 %
  to be submitted in class in print and via email
- Oral participation in class, regular attendance, incl. pop-up quizzes or brief written assignments 25 % all

Note: You MUST be present on the date of the in-class test. No make-up tests will be scheduled without a documented medical excuse.

Grading Scale
A+: 93-100 A: 86-92 B+: 79-85 B: 72-78
C+: 64-71 C: 56-63 D: 51-55 F: 0-50

Letter Grade Grade Point Value
A+ 4.5 Exceptional
A 4.0 Excellent
B+ 3.5 Very Good
B 3.0 Good
C+ 2.5 Satisfactory
C 2.0 Adequate
D 1.0 Marginal
F 0 Failure

Attendance

Regular attendance is expected in all sessions. Absences must be excused beforehand, except in extra-ordinary cases, otherwise it will result in a deduction of 2% of the overall grade for each missed unexcused session. More than 4 unexcused absences will lead to an automatic “F” in the class, cf. section on ‘Attendance and Withdrawal’ in the ‘General Academic Regulations’ 7.1.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism or cheating will result in an F for the assignment, and may carry additional penalties as per university policy.
Students should acquaint themselves with the University's policy on plagiarism, cheating, exam personation, and duplicate submission, see

Withdrawal Deadline

The last date for voluntary withdrawal from courses in the Fall 2019 term is Nov. 18th, 2018. Students will receive evaluative feedback on parts of their work before that date.

A NOTE ON RECORDING CLASSES

Unless a student has a medical reason for doing so, recording classes is prohibited.

Late Policy

Overdue papers will only be accepted with a documented medical excuse.