

Senior History Seminar
SPRING 2024
smiller@oakwoodfriends.org

Existentialism: Questions of Meaning



Course Description:

Does Life have any meaning? Why should we go on? In the face of the modern world, is a beautiful life still possible? People have debated questions about identity and meaning at least as long as they have been able to write books. In this class we will look at a few prominent modern schools of thought involving questions about how individuals relate to society, to each other and to themselves. In doing so, we discuss God, death, life, freedom, absurdity, horror, cruelty and beauty. We will read from the major writers in this field, including passages from Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Kafka, Heidegger, de Beauvoir, Arendt, Fanon, Beckett, Sartre, recent Feminist and Disability Phenomenology and perhaps Foucault. Additionally, we will study films, poetry and modern art using the theories of these writers. The reading for this class will be difficult but rewarding.

Course Policies:

A discussion based class works only if everyone is prepared, open-minded and above all respectful. This is especially true of an Existentialism class, since many of you may have strong and deeply held religious and/or personal beliefs. I would ask that everyone remember that the point of this class is to *UNDERSTAND* and *ANALYZE* these viewpoints. In short, this is an academic class like any other -- you will be responsible for **understanding** these ideas. Whether or not you choose to believe anything we study is a personal choice of yours.

At each session, each student should bring the text and at least **one** question about the reading for that day. This can be either a point that you're confused about that you'd like cleared up ("What does Heidegger mean when he says...?"), an objection you see to the argument in the readings ("How can Sartre claim p, since elsewhere he said q, which seems to conflict with p?" "If Camus really thinks p, doesn't q follow, which is clearly absurd?"), a query about how something said in the reading relates to something else ("When Camus claims that p, is what he is saying here different from Sartre's claim that q?"), or anything else. Make sure also to mark passages you think are either **KEY** or **MYSTERIOUS**.

Another major concern involves **plagiarism**. Plagiarism will not be tolerated in any form. Regardless of the source (newspaper, magazine, textbook, internet, etc...), if you want to use someone else's description of an idea, it is imperative that you give it full credit. I have been reading these texts and the secondary sources since I was 17 or so. I will notice if you plagiarize. New info: using AI to write your work is academic dishonesty. AI writes ugly papers and is instantly recognizable.

Course Requirements:

1. Attendance & participation: It is in the nature of a Philosophy class that the material needs to be worked through together; if you're not in class you'll miss the discussion and your participation grade will suffer. This class SHOULD NOT be lecture-based. I need everyone to come to class prepared for discussion and willing to be courageous enough to share.

2. Response papers: You will be responsible for 2 papers responding to the readings or class discussions. You may choose the topic. These papers will be about 3 pages each, but I expect them to be polished of grammar and spelling mistakes, to be thoughtful and to stick to the topic. A short response paper is designed to go deeply into a **VERY** narrow idea that you find interesting. It should not attempt to comment on a number of issues. If you choose to do more than 2 response papers, the 2 highest grades will count.

3. Midterm and Final Exams: The midterm and final exams will each consist of essays, mostly of a compare/ contrast style and short answer questions of the "What does Dostoevsky claim about Freedom in the "Grand Inquisitor?" type. These may be all or partially take-home, depending on how the class progresses.

4. Classroom: We use Google classroom for this course. Your daily homework will be here. Comments should be textually specific, thoughtful and accurate.

Grade Breakdown:

2 Response Papers	40%
Daily questions/ HW	10%
Midterm	20%
Final Exam	20%
Participation	10%

Course Texts:

The course reading will include Albert Camus' *The Fall*, and the Gordon Marino, ed. text *Basic Writings of Existentialism* (2004).

Schedule of Topics with Readings:

- A tentative outline of the course looks like this (VERY subject to change!!):
- This may look intimidating...keep in mind it shows WEEKLY reading and that some of this reading will be done in class.

Week 1

Background : Descartes, and modernism: The Existential Situation and Attitude

- Reading: Dostoevsky *Notes from Underground*
- View Samuel Beckett's "Breath"

- Dashiell Hammett from *Maltese Falcon*
- Week 2** Religious Existentialism...Absurdity and Faith
- Readings: Kierkegaard
 - Dostoevsky "Grand Inquisitor" (*Brothers Karamazov*)
- Week 3** Secularization and its consequences: Nihilism
- Readings: Nietzsche, "The Gay Science"
 - Camus excerpt from *Myth of Sisyphus*
 - Kafka parables "An Imperial Message", "Before the Law"
 - View parts of *Waiting for Godot*
- Week 4** Absurdity and Ethics: *The Fall*
- Readings: Camus, p. 1-71
- Week 5** Sickness, Health and Defiance: *The Fall*
- Readings: Camus, p. 72-147
 - Nietzsche excerpt on *Sickness and Nihilism*
- Week 6** A Beautiful Death= a Beautiful Life?
- Readings: Nietzsche "On Free Death" p. 128
 - Heidegger excerpt from *Being and Time*
 - View Kurosawa's *Ikiru*
- Week 7** Being-with: Thrownness, Bad Faith and Authenticity
- Nietzsche from *The Gay Science*
 - Sartre "NO EXIT"
 - Educational Archives films
- Week 8** The Problem of Others: Responsibility and Ethics
- Readings: Nietzsche from *Genealogy*
 - Beauvoir *A Very Easy Death*
 - Susan Sontag *Illness as Metaphor*
- Week 9** Responsibility
- Readings: Sartre on Bad Faith
 - Hannah Arendt "Banality and the Problem of Evil"
- Week 10** Freedom and Limitations
- Beauvoir excerpt from the *Second Sex*
 - Foucault excerpt from the *History of Sexuality*
 - *My Dinner With Andre* excerpt
- Week 11** What does it all mean? How to live The Good Life.
- Readings: Nietzsche on Amor Fati, Eternal Return

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*: Act 2:

Pozzo: ...have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (*Calmer.*) **They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.**

Didi: Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be?

(*Estragon, having struggled with his boots in vain, is dozing off again. Vladimir looks at him.*) He'll know nothing. He'll tell me about the blows he received and I'll give him a carrot. (*Pause.*) Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full. The air is full of our cries. (*He listens.*) But habit is a great deadener. (*He looks again at Estragon.*) At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (*Pause.*) I can't go on! (*Pause.*) What have I said? of our cries. (*He listens.*) But habit is a great deadener. (*He looks again at Estragon.*) At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (*Pause.*) I can't go on! (*Pause.*) What have I said?



