

The Writers of Existentialism
(ENGL4/5391 or PHIL 3511, sec. 921)

Course Description

Existentialist writers fall somewhere between the lines dividing Philosophy and Literature. They write works of fiction and - like all good literature - contain an element of "truth". But because their use of language is evocative and expressive, they are not generally regarded as philosophers (whose own writings usually aim to be strictly denotative). And yet there are a number of philosophical concepts conveyed in their work, concepts which – in part, because of the philosopher's insistence on strict denotation – have evaded the very discipline which prides itself on "getting things right". And in many ways this difference in writing styles enables these writers to express truths about the human condition that often escape the scrutiny of more analytical minds.

For, in addition to reviving perennial concerns about the relation between theory and practice (philosophy and its application), about the existence of God, and about the nature of the human mind, these existentialists have generated new ways of asking about the meaning of life, the specter of death, and whether genuine morality was any longer possible. In the process, they developed some novel terminology of their own, including Nihilism, The Absurd, Authenticity, and The Will to Power. And as grim as some of their topics are, most of the writers in this movement were not simply trying to dwell on the most depressing aspects of life. Each, in their own way, was hoping to confront those aspects of life which are often overlooked, denied, or repressed in order to find the strength (either individually or collectively) necessary to deal with them. As a result, existentialist writings have diverse connections – in fields ranging from psychology and theology to economics and politics, from how to become a genuine individual to how to create the most free and open of societies. In this course, we'll see these writers not only question the ways in which we are tethered to the past, but what the future might be like if we did not try to shirk the challenges facing those of us who happen to be alive today.

Course Objectives

The primary objective of the course will be to gain a better understanding of writers whose work can collectively be described as "existentialist," and to learn the ways in which those artists conveyed these philosophical notions in their works.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, the student should have a better understanding of the themes common to existentialist writers. In particular, the student should be able to:

- to better recognize existential issues in philosophical texts.
- to know how to form arguments.
- to know the views of the various existentialists.
- to understand the philosophical issues associated with existentialism.
- to understand the nature of philosophical argumentation.
- to present and to defend your own views regarding the above issues.
- to recognize philosophical questions.
- to define key concepts in philosophical thought.
- to write an analytical text-based argumentative essay.

Course Requirements

READINGS:

Students will be expected to keep up on the weekly reading assignments for the course, and to formulate relevant questions about, and/or criticisms of, those readings.

EXAMS:

There will be 2 examinations on material from the reading and class lectures, and there will be no make-up exams.

TERM PAPER:

Each student will also be required to write a term paper of not less than 3,000 words on a philosophical subject of his or her choice. The paper is due by the last day of class, and will not be accepted late.

Attendance

Regular *attendance* is required, and will count toward the final grade. Missing a day of class will result in the loss of one letter grade (e.g. A + 1 day of absence = B).

Grading

The term paper will count for 30% of the overall score, and each exam will count as 20%. The remaining 10% will be determined by attendance and class participation.

Required Texts

William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study In Existential Philosophy* (Anchor/Doubleday), 1962.

Gordon Marino (ed.), *Basic Writings of Existentialism* (Modern Library), 2004.

Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (Plume), 1975.

Also Recommended:

Hugo Bedau - *Thinking and Writing about Philosophy* and/or

Zachary Seech - *Writing Philosophy Papers*

Additional readings may vary according to each student's chosen paper topic

Academic Integrity:

Academic integrity is fundamental to the process of learning and to evaluating academic performance. Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, the following: cheating, plagiarism, tampering with academic records and examinations, falsifying identity, and being an accessory to acts of academic dishonesty. Refer to the UNO Judicial Code for further information. The Code is available online:

http://www.uno.edu/~stlf/Policy%20Manual/judicial_code_pt2.htm

Disability Accommodations:

UNO is committed to providing for the needs of students who have disabilities under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Students who qualify for services will receive academic modifications to which they are legally entitled. It is the responsibility of students who may require such services or modifications to register each semester with the Office of Disability Services (University Center 260) and follow its procedures for obtaining assistance.

Classroom Conduct/Sexual Harrassment

Feel free to speak openly to me or to your peers, but please tailor your remarks so as not to be uncivil, offensive, or inappropriate. There will be no toleration for ANY abusive language or behavior, personal attacks, or name calling.

Tentative Reading and Test Schedule

July 4 – Introduction (Syllabus & Timeline); The Advent of Existentialism - Barrett pp. 3-22

July 5 – The Advent of Existentialism - Barrett pp. 69-91

July 8 – Early Sources of Existentialism - Barrett pp. 92-119

July 9 – *Tuesday Evening Reading*

July 10 – Kierkegaard - Kaufmann pp.14-18; 83-99; Barrett pp. 149-176; Marino pp. ix-xvi; 3-105

July 15 – Dostoevsky - Kaufmann pp. 11-14; Marino pp. 193-254; Tolstoy – The Kingdom of God

July 16 – *Tuesday Evening Reading*

July 17 – Nietzsche - Barrett pp. 177-205; Marino pp. 111-187; Kaufmann pp. 19-22; 100-112

July 18 – *Midterm*

July 22 – Kafka - Kaufmann pp. 121-130; “The Metamorphosis”; Heidegger - Barrett pp. 206-238

July 23 – *Tuesday Evening Reading*

July 24 – Sartre - Barrett pp. 239-263; Kaufmann pp. 40-48; 222-311

July 29 – Beauvoir - Marino pp. 411-439

July 30 – *Tuesday Evening Reading*

July 31 – Camus - Marino pp. 437-492; The Stranger

August 1 – Integral v. Rational Man: Barrett pp. 267-305; Kaufmann pp. 48-51; Term Papers Due

August 2 – *Final Exam*

