

EXISTENTIALISM

College of Mount Saint Vincent
Spring 2011
Professor Eric Anthamatten

Why be? What is the truth of our existence? Is the universe ultimately meaningless? Are there no answers that are ready-made or pre-given? If not, then what? Is anything possible?

Existentialism is an "ism" that in many ways is anti-ism. That is, it resists systematicity, and rejects any overt attempt to totalize it as a clear school of thought. Rather, existentialism is a way of being, a comportment to the world that reminds us that it is we individuals who make the world--its values, its institutions, its meaning. It is we individual who are radically free. It is we individuals who determine the truth of our life, nobody else (God, state, morality, reason). And, ultimately, it is we who must take responsibility--warts and all--for that world and that "I" that is created.

Required Texts:

Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism, from Dostoyevsky to Sartre* (ISBN-13: 978-0452009301)

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground* (ISBN-13: 978-0679734529)

Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* (ISBN-13: 978-0486290300)

Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (ISBN-13: 978-0553210354)

Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (ISBN-13: 978-0679720201)

Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit* (ISBN-13: 978-0679725169)

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (ISBN-13: 978-0802144638)

Suggested:

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Double*; Robert C. Solomon, *Existentialism*; *The Existentialism Reader*, ed. Paul S. MacDonald; *Existentialism Philosophy: An Introduction*, L. Nathan Oaklander; Thomas R. Flynn, *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*; Richard Appignanesi, *Introducing Existentialism*; David Cogswell and Joe Lee, *Existentialism for Beginners*; *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Robert C. Solomon; *The Basic Kafka*; William Hubben, *Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Kafka*

Suggested Films: Ingmar Bergman, *Seventh Seal* (1957); Alain Resnais, *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961); Hiroshi Teshigahara, *Woman in the Dunes* (1964); Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* (1976); Harold Ramis, *Groundhog Day* (1993); David O'Russell, *I <3 Huckabees* (2004); Duncan Jones, *Moon* (2009)

Other Resources:

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Society for Phenomenological and Existential Philosophy

Assessment

Reflection 1	20
Reflection 2	20
Film Summaries	10
Final Paper Outline	5
Final Paper	35
Attendance/Participation	10

Course Objectives

Learning Outcomes	Assessment Methods
1. Understand the basic themes of existential philosophy	Through reflection pieces, in class participation, and a final paper, students will exhibit a basic understanding of the themes of existential philosophy: freedom, risk, absurdity, the uncanny, death.
2. Develop skills to read, understand, and write about philosophy in general	Students will not only learn how to read carefully and critically for this course, but also with regards to other philosophical texts
3. Critically apply philosophical themes to a creative work (literature, film, poetry)	Evaluation of a specific work of art using a thinker and relevant themes from the course.

ATTENDANCE

Students are required to attend all classroom, laboratory, and clinical sessions. Students are expected to arrive at classes on time. Individual instructor variations must be written on course syllabi. It is the responsibility of the student to notify the instructor if they will miss class and it is the responsibility of the student to make up all work if absent from class. For prolonged absences, the student must notify the Office of Academic Advisement.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Academic integrity should be reflected in all aspects of student work: Examinations, papers, laboratory work, oral reports, logs, and any other materials submitted in fulfillment of course requirements must be the student's work. All types of academic fraud, the illicit giving and receiving of information on tests, the presentation of false data, multiple submissions, and plagiarism are all forms of cheating. Plagiarism is the passing off as your own someone else's words or ideas whether from an electronic or print source. This may be done intentionally or unintentionally by documenting incorrectly, but in all cases is still plagiarism.

If students are unsure whether a specific course of action would constitute plagiarism or cheating, it is their responsibility to consult with their instructor in advance. It is also the students' responsibility to read the College's full plagiarism policy. The plagiarism policy can be found in hard copy in Humanities Hall and on line on the College's web site: www.mountsaintvincent.edu.

The College of Mount Saint Vincent is committed to helping students to uphold the ethical standards of academic integrity in all areas of study. The instructor has the right to use electronic devices to help prevent plagiarism.

GRADES

A/A+: Paper is on time, well-presented, minimal grammatical errors, clear statement of ideas, cited properly, the student's personal style is evident in a way that does not intrude upon the clarity of the text.

B+/A-: Paper is on time, well-presented, minor grammatical errors, idea is clear but perhaps a bit obfuscated, the student writes well but makes little effort to "personalize" the style, that is, the paper fulfills the most *basic* requirements of the assignment.

B-/C+: Paper may be on time, but in this situation is most likely late, minimal to egregious grammatical errors, main argument/idea of paper is evident, but not explicit from a first reading of the paper, no citations, no effort is made to stylize the text

C-/below: Paper is more than two weeks late, egregious grammatical errors, ideas are unclear, no citations

Reflection 1: "To Be, or Not to Be" (750-1000 wds.)

Why be? Why do you continue to exist, get up every morning, go through your various routines? Is it for some purpose? What purpose? What is the meaning of your existence? Is it a meaning that you have created for yourself, or is it a meaning that someone or something else has created for you? **DUE: February 26th**

Reflection 2: Being-Towards-Death (obituary)

Imagine that Death appears to you at this moment and says, "Tomorrow will be your last day. You must write your own obituary tonight." Would you respond with joy, horror, or indifference? What would your obituary say? **DUE: April 13**

Film Summaries (500 wds.)

Students are to write 500 wd. summaries for each of the two screened films. Most of the content will be summary, but an effort should be made to include existentialist themes present in the movie and how the film may relate to the thinkers and authors we have discussed. **DUE: One week after film is screened.**

Outline for Final Paper (1-2 pgs.)

Students will present a 1-2 page outline of the work of art (literature, theater, film, poetry) that they will be analyzing using existential themes from the course. A bibliography with three sources as well as a listing of relevant quotes should be included.

Final Paper (2000 wds.):

Students are to analyze a work of art (literature, film, theater, music) under the lens of specific existentialist themes drawn from the philosophy we have studied. Students will clearly state the work that is being analyzed, offer a brief summary, and utilize existential themes from **three thinkers** discussed. Students are to cite no less than 6 sources (4 directly from the course, two from outside sources) and intelligently incorporate no less than 5 quotes from the text. **DUE: May 11th, no later than 5pm.**

Weekly Journal (blog? moleskin (buy them all moleskins?))

Students are encouraged to keep a daily/weekly journal of the various ideas we have discussed in class. This will help not only organize your thoughts for the course, but hopefully be an invaluable habit of practice to get into for *your life*. If for whatever reason the student feels that they have a borderline grade at the end of the semester, the student may turn in selections from their journal that will be *considered* as the instructor assesses the final grade for the course.

COURSE SCHEDULE

The course is divided into two units. Unit I corresponds roughly to the 19th Century and focuses on so-called "proto-existentialists" like Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Kafka. In this unit, basic themes of existentialism will be explored: freedom, anti-reason, absurdity, alienation, choice. Unit II corresponds to the major existential thinkers of the 20th Century, with a special focus (because the course is cross-listed in "French Studies") on the great French triumvirate of Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus. Two films will be screened: Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal* and Hiroshi Teshigahara's *Woman in the Dunes*, after which students are required to write a **500 wd. summary** due the following week

UNIT I

19th Century Proto-Existentialism

Week 1 (1.26)

Why Be?

General Themes, Background (the "modern" individual, enlightenment rationality, scientific utopianism, positivism)

Readings: Introduction (WK, pp. 11-51), Hamlet ("To be, or not to be..."; "Alas, poor Yorick!")

Week 2 (2.2)

Irrationality & the Uncanny

The Underground Man, reason vs. irrationality, necessity vs. freedom, the Uncanny, the absurd, alienation, the situation

Readings: Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground* (Part I: Underground, pp. 3-41); Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*; Kafka, "The Couriers" (WK, p. 151)

Suggested: Dostoyevsky, *The Double*; Philip Glass, "Metamorphosis Suite (for Solo Piano)"

Week 3 (2.9)

"The Dizziness of Freedom"

Kierkegaard: "Subjectivity is Truth", The Concept of Anxiety, The Single One, The Crowd, Despair, Sin, The Leap into the Absurd; I angst, therefore I am.

Readings: "That Individual" (WK, pp.94-101); "Dread and Freedom" (WK, pp. 101-5); "Subjectivity is Truth" (WK, pp. 110-20); Genesis 22: 1-18

Suggested: Karl Jaspers, "Kierkegaard and Nietzsche" (WK, 185-211)

Week 4 (2.16)

Amor Fati

Friedrich Nietzsche: Birth of Tragedy (excerpts), Apollo & Dionysus, Nihilism, *amor fati*, laughter/joy, transvaluation of values, live dangerously, Zarathustra, "God is Dead", Eternal Recurrence, the Will to Power

Readings: All Nietzsche(WK, pp. 121-33)

Suggested: Hubben, "Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky"

DUE: REFLECTION 1, "Why Be?"

Week 5 (2.23)

Seventh Seal

Screening (in class): Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal*
Summary (500 wds.) due following class (3.2)

UNIT II
20th Century Existentialism

Week 7 (3.2)
"Nowhere Man"

Heidegger I: Dasein, Being-in-the-World, Angst, Care, Fallenness, Facticity, Authenticity, the Nothing, (idle talk, scribbling, curiosity, ambiguity), Das Man, silence

Jasper's "Situation"

Readings: Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" (WK, pp. 242-64);

Suggestions: The Beatles, "Nowhere Man"; Karl Jaspers, "Philosophizing Starts with Our Situation"

Week 8 (3.9)
Being Towards Death

Heidegger II: Being-Towards-Death, Resoluteness

Readings: Heidegger, *Being and Time* (selections); Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (*Vorhandenheit* of death)

Suggested: Michel de Montaigne, "To Philosophize is to Learn How to Die"; John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*

SPRING BREAK (3.14-3.18)

Week 9 (3.23)
Condemned to be Free

J.P. Sartre: "existence precedes essence", Self-Deception/Bad Faith (the lover's hand), radical freedom, "condemned to be free"

Readings: "Existentialism is a Humanism" (WK, pp. 345-69); "Self-Deception [*Mauvaise Foi*]" (WK, pp. 299-328)

Suggested: J.P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* [*L'etre et le néant*]

Week 10 (3.30)

The Other

The Look, Freedom & Responsibility, "Hell is other people."

Readings: J.P. Sartre, *No Exit*; J.P. Sartre "The Look" (handout)

Suggested: J.P. Sartre, *La Nausée*; J.P. Sartre, "The Wall" (WK pp. 281-98)

Week 11 (4.6)

Seriousness & Ambiguity

Seriousness, Ambiguity

Readings: Simone de Beauvoire, "The Ethics of Ambiguity" (selections)

Week 12 (4.13)

Woman in the Dunes

Screening (in class): Teshigahara, *Woman in the Dunes*

Summary (500 wds.) due following class (4.27)

Suggested: Kobo Abe, *The Woman in the Dunes*

DUE: Reflection 2, "Being-towards-death"

EASTER (4.20)

Week 13 (4.27)

Choosing our Stone

Readings: Camus, *The Stranger* [*L'étranger*]; Camus, from Myth of Sisyphus (WK, pp. 375-8)

Suggested: Camus, *The Plague*; J.P. Sartre, "A Commentary on *The Stranger*"

Week 14 (5.4)

Silence

4'33", *Waiting for Godot*

Readings: Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

Suggested: Beckett, *Happy Days*; Beckett, *Act Without Words*; John Cage, *Silence*

Week 15 (5.11)

FINAL PAPER: **DUE: No later than 5pm.**