

# *Existentialism*

PHR-520 / Fall 2019  
Phillips Academy



**Instructor:** Mr. Prescott  
**Location:** Chapel 015  
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## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Black turtlenecks, cigarette smoke, Parisian cafés: these may be some of the associations you have with Existentialism. And they are, in some cases, accurate ones. More important, though, these potentially-caricatured images can remind us of the real human concerns and sentiments of the Existentialists: the quest to live an authentic life, to break free from conformity – whether that took the shape of rigid gender norms, ossified forms of organized religion, or the oppressive totalitarianism of the Nazis. These thinkers sought to confront life – all of it – as it was lived, and to explore the implications of their findings in their own lives. We will soon learn that there is no single theme or thread that unites all the individuals in this course. Some of them lived and died before the term “Existentialism” came into regular parlance. Others rejected the term outright or sought to redefine its meaning.

## **COURSE EXPECTATIONS, LEARNING GOALS, AND OTHER USEFUL INFORMATION**

**I. Learning Philosophy** - Let’s say you want to learn how to shoot free throws. The first thing you are probably going to do is practice, and you decide that, initially, the best way to shoot a free throw is to chuck the ball as hard as you can at the rim. Now, if you’ve ever taken a free throw before, you’ll know that this strategy won’t be particularly effective. And so, after a few times, you decide to change it up. Maybe you try aiming for the box on the backboard. Maybe you try utilizing a softer touch. Maybe you bend your knees a little bit more. Better yet, maybe you go find someone who already knows how to shoot a free throw and ask them to watch you and offer feedback. And, because they already know what to look for, you find that you improve at a much faster rate than you would have otherwise and, before you know it, you’re regularly putting the ball in the basket.

Learning in this class is really not that different. There are standards of learning that you don’t yet know (in this case, understanding different aspects of existentialism, rather than shooting free throws), you will have regular opportunities to practice hitting those standards (reading, writing, and discussion, rather than taking foul shots), you will make mistakes, you will get feedback on those mistakes, and, ultimately, you will respond to those mistakes. At the end of the day, I’m not interested in how many practice shots you took or whether you made it on your first attempt so much as I’m interested in whether or not the shot consistently goes into the basket.

So what does all that mean for this class?

It means that your final grade in this course will reflect your **understanding** of the subject matter, not how long it took you to learn it. Okay, so what does that mean? It means that the bulk of your grade (90% of it) will be comprised of three summative assessments (one for each unit), where you will have the opportunity to demonstrate what you have learned. Now wait a second, Mr. Prescott. Those seem like pretty high stakes! Are you trying to stress us out!?

Hold on, hold on! There's an important catch here: because it takes some of us longer to develop new understandings, and because making mistakes is a **necessary** component of the learning process, **all** of these papers can be revised as many times as you want with no penalty (see the revision policy below). Again, my goal is to help you learn!

With all that in mind, here is what you can expect of me:

- I will hold high standards. This won't be a breeze: I am going to challenge you because I believe you can meet them.
- I will be honest about where you are in relation to those standards. I'm not going to tell you that you've made a free throw if the ball isn't even hitting the rim. That helps no one!
- I will work **with** you to help you meet those standards. My job is, first and foremost, to help you learn!
- I will not penalize you for making mistakes, but will instead give you opportunities to respond to and learn from your mistakes.

Here is what I expect of you:

- I expect you to be honest about what you do (and don't yet) know.
- I expect you to work **intentionally**, which is not the same thing as working **harder**. Okay, so what does that mean? It means that repeatedly chucking the ball at the basket as hard as you can isn't going to help you learn how to shoot a free throw. Likewise, pulling an all-nighter to complete a major assignment isn't going to yield the outcome we're aiming for. Instead, I expect you to regularly **practice**, which means keeping up with the assigned work and engaging with the subject matter on a regular basis.
- I expect you to make mistakes. And, at the same time, I expect you to reflect on and respond to those mistakes.
- I expect you to read and respond to my feedback when I give it to you.

If we both uphold our end of the bargain, I have no doubt that you **will** learn in this class!

**II. Grading/Evaluation** - Here are the nitty-gritty details regarding your final grade in the course:

**i. Essays (90%)** - More specific information about the expectations for each assignment will be provided closer to their respective due dates.

- **Unit 1 Essay: The Existential Condition (20%)** - Due Tuesday, September 24
- **Unit 2 Essay: Despair and Film (30%)** - Due Thursday, October 17
- **Unit 3 Essay: de Beauvoir and Transcendence (40%)** - Due Tuesday, November 12

**ii. Class Discussion (10%)** - Classroom conversations are an important component of this course. And, much like any other academic skill, some ways of conversing are productive for our learning than others. You will receive regular feedback from me on discussions, which will give

you a chance to refine and hone your skills in this space (a final grade in this category will not be assigned until the end of term).

**III. Revisions** - As noted above, making mistakes is a **necessary** part of the learning process. With that in mind, you may revise **any** essay in the course, where the grade of the revised essay will replace the original grade on the assignment. When completing a revision, you must do the following:

- Use the “track changes” feature on Word or Google Docs and submit the revised draft **with the tracked changes visible**(this helps me see what changes you are making)
- Complete and submit responses to the revision reflection questions (posted on Canvas) with the revised draft (these ensure you are using my feedback *and* gives me insight into how you are doing so)

Revisions that do not meet the above criteria will not be accepted! Please note that assignments receiving a 3+ or lower **must** be revised.

**IV. Reflective Writing** – In addition to formal essays, your work in this class will include a fair amount of reflective writing both in and outside of class. This includes short writing prompts at the beginning and/or end of class, along with occasional homework assignments. In order to centralize this work, you should keep all reflection entries in a notebook, which I will occasionally collect and offer feedback on.

**V. E-mail/Technology** – Three notes on technology:

- Upon arriving to class, I ask that you drop your phone off at “**Cell Phone Daycare**”. There is good research showing that even the presence of a turned-off cell phone on a person’s desk reduces their cognitive functioning. Take some time to talk to others in the room!
- No laptops in class. While taking notes on computers can be helpful, the distractions of other programs is all too real. Let’s talk to each other face-to-face.
- Please limit e-mail use to requests for in-person meetings or to communicate emergencies. I will respond to these e-mails within 24 hours, though please note that any e-mail sent after 8:00 PM will not receive a response until the following morning. Plan ahead!

**VI. Absences** - There are many legitimate reasons why you may need to miss class. Andover is a busy place! I first and foremost ask that you communicate with me if you aren’t going to be present. For absences related to religious observances, please contact Ms. Ralston ([gralston@andover.edu](mailto:gralston@andover.edu)) to have the absence excused. In the event of illness, please coordinate with Skyes. For college visits, please coordinate with the Dean of Students Office.

**VII. Accommodations** – I am available to discuss academic accommodations that may be required for students with disabilities. If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact Laura Warner, Director of Student Accessibility Services. Her office is located in Pearson, on the first floor. You may email her at [lwarn@andover.edu](mailto:lwarn@andover.edu) for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. If you are already approved for official accommodations, please communicate with me during the first week of class, whether in person or via email.

## SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS

(SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

# Unit 1: The Existential Condition

### FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 6 – INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

- No assigned readings

### WEEK 1 – THE EXISTENTIAL CONDITION

#### MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 9 – EXISTENTIALISM IS A HUMANISM

- Read: John-Paul Sartre, “The Humanism of Existentialism,” in *Philosophy: A Literary and Conceptual Approach*, ed. Burton F. Porter, pp. 481-491.

#### TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10 – THE UNDERGROUND MAN

- Read: Fyodor Dostoevsky, “Notes from Underground,” in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Plume, 1975), pp. 52-66.

#### THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 12 – THE PALACE OF CRYSTAL

- Read: Fyodor Dostoevsky, “Notes from Underground,” in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Plume, 1975), pp. 66-82.

### WEEK 2 – PALACES OF CRYSTAL AND CROWDS OF UNTRUTH

#### MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 16 – THE TEMPTATION OF CHRIST

- Read: Matthew 4
- Due: Reading Reflection

#### TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 17 – THE GRAND INQUISITOR

- Read: Fyodor Dostoevsky, “The Grand Inquisitor,” excerpt from *The Brothers Karamazov*, pp. 83-99.

#### THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 19 – KIERKEGAARD AND THAT INDIVIDUAL

- Read: Søren Kierkegaard, “That Individual,” in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Plume, 1975), pp. 94-101.

### WEEK 3 – INTRODUCTION TO DESPAIR

#### MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 23 – WRITING WORKSHOP

- Due: Essay #1 Rough Draft

#### TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 24 – IN-CLASS ESSAY

- Due: Essay #1

#### THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 26 – WHAT IS DESPAIR?

- Read: Søren Kierkegaard, “A: Despair Is the Sickness Unto Death,” *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 13-21.

## Unit 2: Kierkegaard and Despair

### WEEK 4 – DESPAIR AS THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH

**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 30 – NO CLASS**

**TUESDAY, OCTOBER 1 – THE UNIVERSALITY OF DESPAIR**

- Read: Søren Kierkegaard, “B: The Universality of This Sickness (Despair),” *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 22-35.

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 3 – THE FORMS OF DESPAIR**

- Read: Søren Kierkegaard, “C: The Forms of This Sickness (Despair),” *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), selections.

### WEEK 5 – DESPAIR AND NO EXIT

**MONDAY, OCTOBER 7 – NO CLASS (WEDNESDAY SCHEDULE)**

**TUESDAY, OCTOBER 8 – NO EXIT**

- Read: Jean-Paul Sartre, “No Exit,” in *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), entire.

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 10 – DISCUSSION: NO EXIT**

- Note: No assigned homework; begin watching film

### WEEK 6 – DESPAIR AND FILM

**MONDAY, OCTOBER 14 – NO CLASS (WEDNESDAY SCHEDULE)**

**TUESDAY, OCTOBER 15 – WRITING WORKSHOP**

- Homework: Work on essays

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 17 – DESPAIR AND FILM**

- Due: Essay #2

## Unit 3: Transcending the Palace of Crystal

### WEEK 7 – THE ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY

**MONDAY, OCTOBER 21 – NO CLASS (FAMILY WEEKEND)**

**TUESDAY, OCTOBER 22 – THE SECOND SEX: SUBJECT AND OTHER**

- Read: Simone de Beauvoir, “Introduction,” in *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1949), pp. 3-17.

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 24 – THE ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY**

- Read: Simone de Beauvoir, “Freedom and Liberation,” in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Open Road, 1947), pp. 84-103.

**WEEK 8 – TRANSCENDANCE AND GENDER**

**MONDAY, OCTOBER 28 – DISCUSSION: DE BEAUVOIR AND TRANSCENDANCE**

- Due: Reading Reflection

**TUESDAY, OCTOBER 29 – THE ESSENCE OF BLACKNESS**

- Read: Frantz Fanon, “The Lived Experiences of the Black Man,” in *Black Skin, White Masks* (Pluto Press, 1952), pp. 89-118.

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 31 – PHENOMENOLOGY AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY**

- Read: David Abram, “Part I: Edmund Husserl and Phenomenology” in *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), pp. 31-44.

**WEEK 9 – THE LIMITATIONS OF LANGUAGE**

**MONDAY, NOVEMBER 4 – MERLEAU-PONTY AND PERCEPTION**

- Read: David Abram, “Part II: Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Participatory Nature of Perception,” in *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), pp. 44-72.

**TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 5 – ANIMISM AND THE ALPHABET**

- Read: David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), pp. 93-102, 183-188.

**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 7 – WRITING WORKSHOP**

- Note: Work on Essays

**WEEK 10 – TRANSCENDING THE PALACE OF CRYSTAL**

**MONDAY, NOVEMBER 11 – WRITING WORKSHOP**

- Due: Rough Draft of Essay

**TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 12 – EXISTENTIALISM AND ANDOVER**

- Due: Essay #3

**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 14 – LANGUAGE AND EMOTIONS**

- Listen: Hanna Rosin and Alix Spiegel, “[Emotions: Part I](#),” *Invisibilia*, NPR (June 1, 2017).

**WEEK 11 – FINALS WEEK**

**MONDAY, NOVEMBER 18 – CONFERENCE PERIOD DAY**

- Note: Mr. Prescott will be available to meet during normal class time

**WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 20 – LINGUISTIC PALACES OF CRYSTAL**

- Listen: Hanna Rosin and Alix Spiegel, “[Emotions: Part II](#),” *Invisibilia*, NPR (June 1, 2017).