

Existentialism

PHR-520 / Winter 2019-20
Phillips Academy



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Location: Chapel 016
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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 Goals - By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- Identify major existentialist themes in contemporary contexts, including (but not limited to) philosophy, film, television, art, journalism, or literature
- Explain how existentialist thinking fits within the larger historical and philosophical tradition
- Identify and explain key differences between existentialist philosophers
- Articulate your ideas in a clear, cogent manner (both in discussion and in writing)

II. 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. 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 how to do, you will have regular opportunities to practice hitting those standards, 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 take or whether you make it on your first attempt so much as I'm interested in whether or not you can consistently put the ball 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. 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 give you many opportunities to meet those standards.
- I will work **with** you to help you meet those standards. My job is, first and foremost, to help you learn!
- 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 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**. 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!

III. Grading/Evaluation - This course utilizes a standards-based approach, which means your final grade will reflect your level of competency in relation to specific standards of learning. A breakdown of the final grade and scale are provided below:

- **Overarching Standard (60%)** - More information about learning standards (including the grading scale) are located at the end of the syllabus.
- **Argumentative Writing (30%)** - The standards for argumentative writing are broken down into four main categories: thesis/argument, evidence/analysis, organization, and mechanics. This standard will be assessed primarily through formal essays, though reading reflections and short prompts may also be used to assess your competency in these categories.
- **Class Discussion (10%)** - The standards for class discussion will be assessed throughout the term. Students will receive regular feedback on their performance in relation to this standard throughout the term.

- **6:** 5.5 to 6 **5:** 4.5 to 5.5 **4:** 3.5 to 4.5 **3:** 2.5 to 3.5 **2:** 1.5 to 2.5 **1:** 1 to 1.5

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 within two weeks of the essay's return. 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 re-assessed!

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) 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 lwarner@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

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 5 – INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

- No assigned readings

WEEK 1 – NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

MONDAY, DECEMBER 9 – NO CLASS

- Note: Class will not meet

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 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, DECEMBER 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 – KIERKEGAARD AND COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

MONDAY, DECEMBER 16 – 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.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 18 – COLLEGE AND THE CROWD

- Read: William Deresiewicz, Chapter 1 in *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), pp. 7-25.

HAPPY BREAK!

Unit 2: Kierkegaard and Despair

WEEK 3 – INTRODUCTION TO DESPAIR

TUESDAY, JANUARY 7 – THE EXISTENTIAL CONDITION

- No assigned readings

THURSDAY, JANUARY 9 – 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.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 10 – NO CLASS

- Note: Mr. Prescott away at Dartmouth Relays

WEEK 4 – THE MANY FORMS OF DESPAIR

MONDAY, JANUARY 13 – DISCUSSION: KIERKEGAARD

- Due: Reading Reflection

TUESDAY, JANUARY 14– 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, JANUARY 16 – 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, JANUARY 20 – MLK DAY (NO CLASS)

TUESDAY, JANUARY 21 – NO EXIT

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

THURSDAY, JANUARY 23 – WRITING WORKSHOP

- Due: Watch film of choice

Unit 3: Anxiety & Intersubjectivity

WEEK 6 – DESPAIR AND FILM

MONDAY, JANUARY 27 – WRITING WORKSHOP

- Due: Rough Draft of Essay

TUESDAY, JANUARY 28 – THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS

- Due: Essay #1
- In-Class: Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essay*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage Books), pp. 119-123.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 30 – 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.

WEEK 7 – PHENOMENOLOGY AND PERCEPTION

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 3 – NO CLASS (MID-WINTER LONG WEEKEND)

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 4 – EDMUND HUSSERL 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.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 6 – MERLEAU-PONTY AND THE “FLESH”

- 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.

Unit 4: Freedom & Identity

WEEK 8 – THE PORTRAIT OF AN ANTI-SEMITES

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 10 – WRITING WORKSHOP

- Due: Rough Draft of Essay #2

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 11 – TBD

- Due: Essay #2

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 13 – THE PORTRAIT OF AN ANTI-SEMITES

- Read: Jean-Paul Sartre, “Portrait of the Antisemite,” in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Plume, 1975), pp. 329-345.

WEEK 9 – EXISTENTIALISM, GENDER, AND RACE

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 17 – THE SECOND SEX: SUBJECT AND OTHER

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

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 18 – THE ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY

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

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 20 – 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.

WEEK 10 – FINAL PROJECTS

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 24 – FINAL PROJECT BRAINSTORM

- Due: Meet with groups over weekend

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 25 – PROTOTYPE WORKSHOP

- Due: Initial Prototype

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 27 – PROTOTYPE WORKSHOP

- Due: Revised Prototype

FINALS WEEK

MONDAY, MARCH 2 – CONFERENCE PERIOD DAY

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

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4 – FINAL PROJECT SHOWCASE

- Due: Existentialism Game