

# PHIL 159: Existentialism

Fall, 2019

MW, 3:30 – 4:45 in Healy 106

*Instructor:* Benjamin Elzinga

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## Office Hours:

Thursday 12:00pm-2:00pm, New North 205

## Course Description:

Existentialism was a literary, artistic, and philosophical movement that was primarily concerned with various threats to the possibility of human freedom. These threats can be loosely organized around several themes. Nihilism can take the form of either a rejection of life-orienting values or a denial that anything is valuable. Some authors came to worry about nihilism by way of moral and religious disillusionment (e.g., Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche), others in light of the worry that life either is or can be ultimately devoid of meaning or absurd (Kafka, Sartre). Other authors were more worried about a perceived abstraction or homogenization in modern life, a “levelling off” of possibilities for leading a distinctively individual life (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche). Sometimes this worry is expressed as a fear that the triumph of modern science and rationality strips the individual of the capacity to stamp his or her own life with a distinctive outlook or set of values (Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche). We will start with some of the basic threats to human freedom identified by the existentialists. In this first phase of the course we will rely on literary treatments, as well as some philosophical readings. We will then explore the philosophical responses to these threats offered by Jean-Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

## Course Goals:

- 1) Students will gain knowledge and appreciation of some of the deep problems in the history of philosophy and will also have an opportunity to grapple with more contemporary issues.
- 2) Students will develop a set of analytic tools that will help them to find answers to hard theoretical questions, whether philosophical questions or questions that arise in their broader engagement with the world.

## Required Texts:

- 1) Guignon & Pereboom, eds., *Existentialism: Basic Writings*. Second ed. (Hackett, 978-0-87220-595-6)
- 2) Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. by Garnett.
- 3) Dostoevsky, *The Grand Inquisitor, with Related Chapters from the Brothers Karamazov*, ed. by Guignon, trans. by Garnett. (Hackett, 978-0-87220-193-4)
- 4) Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. by Hannay.
- 5) Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*. (Harvard, 9780674268630) **(Not required to purchase)**

### Course Requirements:

Your course grade will be based on three short papers (5 pages max, times new roman, 12 point font, double spaced) and participation including weekly reflection assignments or in class quizzes:

#### 1) Three Short Papers (each worth 25% of total grade)

In these papers, your task will be to do some philosophy yourself. For example, the typical philosophy paper has three parts:

- a) explaining an argument that is developed by one (or more) of the philosophers whose work we have examined;
- b) offering a plausible objection to this argument;
- and c) explaining how the philosopher in question would respond to your argument.

#### 2) Weekly Assignments (15% of total grade)

Students will be required to complete short weekly assignments or in-class quizzes to assess their level of engagement with the material and to facilitate in class participation.

#### 3) Participation (10% of total grade)

The material that we are going to cover in this class is difficult and likely to be unfamiliar. Thus, careful attention to each text will be expected and required. There will always be some opportunity for you to ask pressing and important questions, bring up something you find confusing, raise an objection against something we've read, etc.

Your participation grade will be determined by your active, participation in class. Receiving full credit will require zero unexcused absences and a consistent effort to genuinely engage with the material and with your classmates each time we meet.

### Late Work and Extensions:

Late papers will automatically be penalized 1/3 of a grade (A- to a B+, B+ to a B, etc) for each day that they are late. Extensions may be possible but only if requested and approved before the due date.

### Attendance:

Your participation grade is in part determined by your attendance. In addition, after TWO unexcused absences your *course grade* will be reduced by 1/3 of a grade (e.g. B+ to B) for each additional absence.

### Grading:

These are the general criteria I use for assigning specific grades on written work. What matters most is not the content of your ideas, but the expression of them.

- A: original ideas very clearly expressed and organized; full grasp of the material and its implications; especially insightful reflection on the relevant texts
- B: reasonably original ideas clearly expressed and organized; good grasp of the material and its implications; good reflection on the relevant texts
- C: adequate expression and organization of ideas; adequate grasp of the material and its implications; adequate reflection on texts
- D: inadequate expression and organization of ideas; inadequate grasp of the material and its implications; inadequate reflection on texts
- F: mostly for serious sins of omission, like turning in only part of an assignment

### Academic Integrity

This course will be conducted under the strictest standards of academic integrity. Plagiarism or other forms of dishonesty are contradictory to the goals of this class and hence, will not be tolerated. Cases of suspected academic dishonesty will be referred to the Honor Council for investigation, and I reserve the right to fail a student for the entire course in the case of demonstrated violation. Please see *The Undergraduate Bulletin* or, for more information, visit the university's Honor System website at <http://www.georgetown.edu/honor>. The website has useful guidelines about what constitutes plagiarism and how to cite properly.

### Health Help

#### 1. Student Health Center

"The health center is staffed by Family Practice faculty physicians and nurse practitioners with particular training and experience in college health, and who are dedicated to providing high quality health care."

- <http://www3.georgetown.edu/student-affairs/health/index.html>
- Ground Floor, Darnall Hall

#### 2. Counseling and Psychiatric Service

"CAPS offers a broad range of psychological and psychiatric services that attempt to balance the unique needs of individual students with the broader demands of a diverse campus community. Accordingly, in order to best serve the needs of our campus at large, open-ended or extended psychotherapy and medication maintenance services are limited and cannot be routinely offered. Such service offerings are based on staff availability and student need."

- <http://caps.georgetown.edu/>

#### 3. Health Education Services

"Health Education Services is comprised of health professionals who are available to help students deal with a range of personal health issues, including pregnancy, alcohol and drug use and abuse, adult children of alcoholics, eating disorders, sexual assault, relationship violence, stalking, sexual health, stress management, and general health promotion. In addition, Emotional Intelligence is an area of interest and expertise for the staff of Health Education Services. All services are individualized, confidential, and free for students, unless otherwise stated. Staff members are also available to facilitate training and educational programs in these areas."

- <http://www3.georgetown.edu/student-affairs/healthed/staff.html>

**Course Schedule:  
(subject to revision)**

#	Date	Topic	Reading
1	8/28	Introduction	NA
2	9/2	No Class	
3	9/4	Challenges to Freedom	Dostoyevsky, <b>Notes from Underground</b>
4	9/9	Challenges to Freedom	Dostoyevsky, <b>Notes from Underground</b>
5	9/11	Religious Disillusionment	Dostoyevsky, <b>The Grand Inquisitor</b>
6	9/16		
7	9/18	Religious Disillusionment	Dostoyevsky, <b>The Grand Inquisitor</b>
8	9/23	The Absurd	Camus, " <b>The Myth of Sisyphus</b> " and excerpts from Kafka.
9	9/25	The Absurd	Camus, " <b>The Myth of Sisyphus</b> " and excerpts from Kafka
11	9/30	Nihilism	Nietzsche, Gay Science (GS), § 125
12	10/2	Nothingness	Ortega, "History as a System" and Sartre, The Humanism of Existentialism.
13	10/7	Nothingness	Ortega, "History as a System" and Sartre, The Humanism of Existentialism.
14	10/9	Choice	Sartre, The Humanism of Existentialism
15	10/14	No Class	
16	10/16	Responsibility	"Freedom and Responsibility."
	<b>10/19</b>	<b>Paper 1 Due</b>	
17	10/21	Criticism of Radical Freedom	excerpt from Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception
18	10/23	Passion	<b>Fear and Trembling</b> , "Preface" & "Attunement"
19	10/28	Passion	<b>Fear and Trembling</b> , "Speech in Praise of Abraham"
20	10/30	Passion	<b>Fear and Trembling</b> , "Preamble from the Heart"
21	11/4	Passion	<b>Fear and Trembling</b> , "Problema I"
22	11/6	Passion	<b>Fear and Trembling</b> , "Problema I"
23	11/11	Passion	"Truth is Subjectivity," from Concluding Unscientific Postscript, in EBW, pp. 85-92
24	11/13	Moral Skepticism	GS, Preface to the Second Edition, and §§116-122, 335, 345-7, 353
25	11/18	Skepticism about Science	GS, §§110-112, 344, 348-349, 355, 373-374

26	11/20	The Free Spirit	GS, §§56-58, 290, 343, 347, 356, 370, 382
	<b>11/23</b>	<b>Paper 2 Due</b>	
27	11/25	Saying "Yes"	GS, §4 of the Preface (pp. 127-8) & §§270, 276, 283, 290, 341, 377, 383
28	11/27	No Class	
29	12/2	Authenticity	Taylor, <b>The Ethics of Authenticity</b> , chs. 1-3
30	12/4	Authenticity	Taylor, chs. 4-6
31	12/9	TBD	TBD
	<b>12/19</b>	<b>Paper 3 Due</b>	