

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
PHIL 4500.001
Existentialism

Spring 2006
 Time: 11 a.m.-12:20 p.m.
 Room: ENV 391

Dr. George James
 Office: Eesat 225e
 Hours: TBA
 Dr. Dale Wilkerson
 Office: Eesat 320C
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 Hours: T 12:30-1:30 p.m.
 W 2-3 p.m. (and by appt.)

Scope of the Course:

What is existentialism? The term refers properly neither to a specific body of doctrines nor to a school of thought. Few persons who are labeled existentialists have called themselves by this name, and among them there are few if any specific ideas upon which all agree. Existentialists can be atheistic, theistic, mystical, agnostic, humanistic, and so on. The term existentialism describes a widespread revolt against philosophy as traditionally pursued, and against the self-confidence of its insights. This revolt expressed itself most fully in the twentieth century, especially in the years following the First World War, and it has had a profound influence upon diverse areas of contemporary European and American cultural life: art, literature, film, theatre, theology, etc. This existentialist revolt also forms the background of many significant changes that have occurred in the manner in which such disciplines as literary criticism, political theory, and communication theory have pursued their subject matter. It is a significant feature of the background of what has been called the postmodern context.

The purpose of this course is to gain an informed appreciation for this movement. Unfortunately we cannot simply trace its development from a single founder. Existentialism is thought by many of its key figures to allude to the human being's fundamental condition as a being in the world, one that has perhaps the unique capacity to question the meaning of its existence. Although such a question is not easily raised and is frequently covered over in everyday and typically "inauthentic" ways of living, existentialists believe that the question binding us all precedes traditional patterns of philosophical and scientific inquiry. For this reason, after a week of introductory readings from handouts, we will begin the class in earnest with discussions of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, a Greek tragedy laced with themes important to existentialist-style thinkers. Next, we will discover that during the existentialist movement there has been a profound interest (often for very different reasons) in three key nineteenth century thinkers, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche. Our task, then, will be to examine some of the insights of these key figures. After attempting to understand the contribution of each of these thinkers to the existentialist revolt we will turn to some important expressions of existentialist writing in the twentieth century. In doing so we will try to see the manner in which the themes and concerns of these nineteenth century figures have been repeated, augmented, and developed in more recent work. The works we will examine in this part of the course will include some of

the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger and others. In the final part of the course we turn to the existentialist theologian, Paul Tillich in his work, *The Courage to Be*.

Our concern in this course is neither to promote nor to refute existentialism, but to gain some genuine appreciation for its principal concerns, to understand the perspective it offers, and to determine how the best insights of existentialist thinkers can be integrated into an intellectually responsible philosophy of life.

Dr. Wilkerson will teach the first half of the semester, and Dr. James will teach the second half. The student's final grade will be determined by work completed during each half of the course.

Requirements:

1. Your coming to terms with the issues of this course will require considerable interaction with the material and with others who are dealing with it. For this reason class participation will be an essential requirement for the course. But effective class discussion is possible only if everyone is in regular attendance. You should come to class prepared: a) to recapitulate the thesis or argument expressed in the reading of the week, b) to say something significant about it, and c) to defend your views about the material.
2. Weekly reading assignments must be read with utmost care! Your task is to understand what the author in question is saying, and to think about the points that are being raised. You should determine whether you agree with the author in question or not, and try to determine where your agreements and disagreements lie. As questions occur to you, write them out.
3. During the course of the semester, students will be assigned to write one (1) INTERPRETIVE ESSAY (5-7 pp) and one (1) SUMMARY PAPER (2-3 pp) before Spring Break. The Essay will focus on a topic to be assigned February 23. Each student will be responsible for scheduling the due date of his or her Summary Paper, which will then summarize the due date's assigned reading. After Spring Break, students will be expected to complete one or two WRITTEN TAKE-HOME EXAMS and a FINAL EXAM. All written work prepared outside of class must be typed, double spaced, and in 12 point font. All assignments must be completed and handed in on time! In addition to the assignments mentioned above, small surprise quizzes may be given at any time. If you are prepared for class they will be no problem.

Grades:

The Essay will count 30% and the Summary 15% towards the student's final grade. Students will have the opportunity to present their Summary Papers orally to the class for extra credit (in addition to delivering the work in written format which, of course, is required). Work completed after Spring Break will account for 45% of the student's final grade. Class participation over the whole semester will count 10% towards the final score.

Attendance Policy:

Students are expected to be in attendance in class, every class session, unless prevented by accident or serious illness. While the instructor cannot maintain records for every absence, attendance records are kept on the basis of occasional attendance checks. The result is that at the end of the semester the instructor does not have a record of absences, but a fairly accurate record of students whose attendance is perfect or nearly perfect. A record of perfect or near perfect attendance will be considered in the calculation of final grades, and may be crucial when the result of other material puts the student on the margin of a grade category. The presumption is that if all your absences are the result of serious injury or illness they will be rare, and your record of attendance will be nearly perfect. Please do not bother me with excuses. Inordinate absences from class will constitute grounds for dropping you from the course for non-attendance.

Policy on Absences from Exams:

If you are absent from any major exams because of accident or serious illness, arrangements for a make-up exam will be made only on receipt of a letter or other notification from the appropriate medical authority. There are no make-up exams for unannounced quizzes.

Policy on Papers Printed by Computer:

Your answers to essay questions for the course must be typed and handed in on time. You are welcome to use a computer to produce the final copy of your paper. Nevertheless, it is your responsibility to see that the paper is submitted by the date and time required. Any malfunction that may have caused a file to have been mysteriously lost by the computer is your responsibility alone.

Policy on Grades of I (Incomplete):

A grade of I will be given for the course only in the case of extenuating circumstances such as accident or serious illness that make it impossible to complete all the requirements for the course and only when the material remaining to complete the course is minimal.

Drop Policy:

The student may drop the course with instructor's permission until the last day allowed by the university to drop the course with instructor's permission.

Reading Materials

During the semester, we will distribute several handouts required for reading. In addition, this course has assigned seven books, available at the University Store in the Student Union Building, and at Voertman's, 1314 W. Hickory Street. The following books are required: 1) Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*; 2) Sophocles, *Sophocles I*; 3) Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*; 4) Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*; 5) Sartre, *Nausea*; 6) Camus, *The Plague*; and 7) Tillich, *The Courage to Be*.

Approximate Schedule of Topics and Readings Assignments:

- Jan. 17 INTRODUCTION; Handout: Nietzsche's *Madman* (from *The Gay Science*) and selections from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (One and Two); and selections from Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (from Division One, Chapter VI)
- 19 Discuss: Heidegger, from *Being and Time* ("Care as the Being of Da-sein")
- 24 Discuss: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*
- 26 Discuss: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*
- 31 Discuss: "Introduction" in Kaufmann, *Existentialism Dostoevsky to Sartre* (11-51)
- Feb. 2 Discuss: Fyodor Dostoyevsky, "Notes from Underground." (Kaufmann, pp52-82)
- 7 Discuss: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (First Essay).
- 9 Discuss: Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (First and Second Essays)
- 14 Discuss: Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (Second and Third Essays)
- 16 Discuss: Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (Third Essay)
- 21 Discuss: Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (pp 1-53)
- 23 Discuss: Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (pp 54-123)
- 28 Discuss: Jean-Paul Sartre, "Self-Deception," and "Portrait of an Anti-Semite" (Kaufmann, pp 299-345); Handout: Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism"
- Mar. 2 Discuss: Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," (Kaufmann, pp. 345-369)
- 7 Discuss: Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism"
- 9 **INTREPRETIVE ESSAY DUE**; Discuss: Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism"

MARCH 13- 18: Spring Break

READINGS FOR THE WEEKS OF:

- Mar. 20 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*.
27 Jean Paul Sartre, *Nausea*
- Apr 3 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*
10 Albert Camus, *The Plague*
17 An Existentialist Theology: Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*.
24 *The Courage to Be*, continued
- May 1 Final discussion and conclusions
- May 7 Final Exam Week: Final Exam Session TBA