

Phil 311: Phenomenology and Existentialism

Fall 2006 Syllabus

Instructor: Dr. Anthony Beavers
Email: afbeavers@gmail.com
Phone: 488-2682

Office: Olmstead Hall 342
Hours: 11:00-11:50/1:00-1:50 MWF
Class Time: MWF 12:00-12:50
Room: KC 125

Course Description

This course will examine some key moments in “existential philosophy.” We will begin with two foundational thinkers from the nineteenth century, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, particularly with their ideas on the construction of the social arena and what it means to be an individual within it. We will then continue with a reading of two twentieth-century, French “existentialists,” Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, before engaging Martin Heidegger’s 1947 apologetic, the “Letter on Humanism.” Finally, we will examine a few short essays by the late twentieth-century, Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas.

To tie these thinkers together, this course will aspire to demonstrate existentialism by focusing on two interrelated concerns for existentialists, the possibility of an existential ethics and the relationship between the individual and society. Dostoyevsky once wrote that “If God is dead, then everything is permitted” thereby suggesting that without an absolute, there can be no ethics. Nonetheless, existentialists have tried to develop one in a variety of ways. By and large, these attempts focus on the unfolding of human existence and human freedom in the context of interpersonal relationships. This course will follow this lead and examine human existence in a relational context by contrasting it against the institutionalized structures that make up the society within which the individual is lost.

The ultimate goal of the course will be to make cogent the anti-rational critique of existential philosophers that emerges with (or against) the positivistic tendencies of science and theory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It will also provide a general background for phenomenology and existentialism to serve as a context for further research.

Required Texts

Lawhead, William F. *The Modern Voyage: 1400-1900*. 2nd Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2002.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. NY: Vintage Books, 1966.

Camus, Albert. *The Fall*. Trans. Justin O'Brien. NY: Vintage Books, 1956.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1984.

Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Writings*. Ed. David Farrell Krell. 2nd Edition. NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. Seán Hand. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

Assignments

Students are required to come to class prepared, participate in class discussion, write two, five-page, "reaction papers," write a five-page, insight essay, and take two exams, a midterm and a comprehensive final.

Grading

30% - Reaction Papers – 15% each

15% - Insight Essay (12/4)

15% - Midterm Exam (10/6)

20% - Final Exam (12/8)

20% - Course Participation

Course Participation

Course participation grades are not automatic. They are based on oral contributions to the collective learning experience of the class as a whole in terms of asking pertinent questions, answering questions correctly or, at least, provocatively, making insightful observations, and offering other meaningful expressions of interest in the material that help encourage learning. I begin by assuming a C for each student's course participation grade and move from there. Students should realize that *it is possible to talk a lot in class and receive a low grade for course participation*. Frequent absences are also grounds for a low participation grade.

General Paper Guidelines

All papers for this class should be longer than four pages and no longer than five. They should be double-spaced in Times New Roman 12 point font with one inch margins on all sides and pages numbers at the bottom center. Be sure to include a title. Staple the paper in the top, left corner.

Reaction Paper Guidelines

Reaction papers must focus on some aspect of the thought of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Camus, Sartre, Heidegger or Levinas that is relevant to the overall themes of the course. You may choose two from the list. But, keep in mind that reaction papers are due one

week after the last class during which the thinker in question is covered, with the exception of the Levinas paper which will be due at the start of the last class. Late papers will be penalized. Plan accordingly.

Insight Essay Guidelines

Students are required to write an essay responding to the following question: *If you could choose a single insight to represent what you learned in this course this semester, what would it be? Present this insight and explain it in such a way that an uninitiated reader can understand and appreciate it.* Insight essays are due at the beginning of the last class meeting. Late essays will not be accepted.

The following remarks concerning the content of the essays may help clarify the insight question:

1. An insight is an idea, and, as such, it can (and should) be articulated in a sentence. "My insight is that . . ." It is not a feeling. It is not a state of being, like having an open mind. It is not a directive, such as "always question everything." It may involve these. Sample insights include: "It is important to have an open mind because . . ." and "It is important to question everything because . . .," though both of these are used far too frequently for me to take them seriously.
2. Insights are *somewhat* personal; what is insightful to one person may be patently obvious to another, or another might be oblivious as to why the insight is insightful. Thus, I am not concerned with what your insight is. Rather, I am concerned with your response to the last part of the assignment: "*explain [your insight] in such a way that an uninitiated reader can understand and appreciate it.*"
3. Your answer should be put in conceptual terms; I am not asking why your insight is personally important to you. These essays should not be autobiographies. Do not write about what kind of person you always were and why you are different now. Insights deal with how we *understand* the world and ourselves; though they do have an impact on who we are—what we think influences how we act—essays should focus on the conceptual level. I want to see some thinking, not emoting, asserting or opining.
4. Essays must focus on a single insight. A list of things learned in the class is inappropriate. It is unnecessary to recount the journey through the course. Also, you should not spend time explaining how your insight was formed over time. Simply state your insight in an introductory paragraph and then get to the business of explaining it. Be sure to state your insight in clear and explicit terms.

Exam Format

Both the midterm and final exams will require a response in the form of an extended essay. I will select one item from the question sets below and students will respond accordingly. Fifty minutes will be allotted for the midterm exam and two hours for the final.

Midterm Exam Study Questions

1. Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche react to Kantian philosophy or some variety of it. Explain what they are reacting to in particular and the philosophical significance of their reaction. What exactly about Kantian philosophy or its derivatives concerns them? What do they put in its place?
2. *Fear and Trembling* and *Beyond Good and Evil* both deal with the limits of conventional morality and the possibility that there might be something 'higher' or 'better'. For each thinker, what is the problem with morality, traditionally understood, and what do they recommend instead?
3. As with most 'existentialists', Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are skeptical about the masses. Describe their concerns, addressing, in particular, how the masses threaten our individuality. If we get even our concepts and language from our culture and upbringing, how is it possible to escape the herd?
4. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche each seem to have differing conceptions of the ideal type of human. Describe this ideal type for each. How do the conceptions differ? For each, how does the ideal person differ from the average person? What obstacles stand in the way of reaching this ideal?

Final Exam Study Questions

1. For many of the philosophers we have examined this semester, language is a central concern, not for the good that it serves, but mostly for its ill effects. Select three existential philosophers from the course and explain their attitudes concerning language and the good or ill that each thinks it brings.
2. Dostoyevsky once wrote that "If God is dead, then everything is permitted" thereby suggesting that without an absolute, there can be no ethics. In the wake of this, many think that existentialists lack value, that they advocate nihilism in its place. Existentialists disagree. Pick three from the course and explain their position.
3. One of the overarching themes that runs through existential philosophy is a distaste for Enlightenment conceptions of 'The Truth'. Explain the essence of this critique using three philosophers from the course. What is the real 'truth' for the three you have selected and how does each think we find it?

4. How is the human animal trapped within the confines of its sociality? Is there any escape? Is hell 'other people' as Sartre suggests, or is their room for hope? If so, for what can we hope? Address these questions speaking on behalf of three existential philosophers from the course.

Attendance

Because being present and attentive in class is part of (and perhaps the most important part of) the learning experience and because a serious comportment toward learning new ideas is necessary for understanding philosophy, I have a serious attendance policy: *final grades will be dropped a part letter grade for each unexcused absence after the first*. In order for an absence to be excused, students must submit an official university excuse in writing. I will NOT accept email for this purpose. Special consideration will be given to seniors who miss class for job and graduate school interviews that must be scheduled during class time.

Incompletes

Incompletes will be given only in rare circumstances and only when a previous arrangement has been made.

Academic Honesty

All work submitted in this course must be prepared by the student expressly for this course. A student who submits work that is plagiarized, bought, borrowed from the archives of a fraternity, copied from another student, etc., *will fail the course*. I fully support the University's Academic Honor Code. To avoid confusion, students should keep in mind that plagiarism occurs not only when someone copies an author word for word, but also when someone uses another's ideas without giving credit, even if the ideas are paraphrased (that is, put in your own words). Always document your sources!

Supplemental Bibliography

The following texts address some of the topics covered by the course. They range in difficulty from the easily-comprehensible to the exceedingly-tough. While I disagree with some of them, all are worth reading. Several were used in the preparation of this course.

Beavers, Anthony F. "Kant and the Problem of Ethical Metaphysics." In *In Proximity: Emanuel Levinas and the Eighteenth Century*, 285-302. Edited by Melvyn New. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2001.

Beavers, Anthony F. *Levinas beyond the Horizons of Cartesianism: An Inquiry into the Metaphysics of Morals*. NY: Peter Lang, 1995.

- Derrida, Jacques. "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas." In *Writing and Difference*, 79-153. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Guignon, Charles, Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Hannay, Alastair and Gordon D. Marino, Eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Harr, Michel. *Heidegger and the Essence of Man*. Translated by William McNeill. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996.
- Howells, Christina, Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Kaufmann, Walter. *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959.
- Kaufmann, Walter. *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. 4th Ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or*. Two Volumes. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Stages on Life's Way*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1965.
- Magnus, Bernd and Kathleen M. Higgins, Eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Megill, Allan. *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. NY: Washington Square Press, 1956.

Scott, Charles E. *The Question of Ethics: Nietzsche, Foucault, Heidegger*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Solomon, Robert C., and Kathleen M. Higgins, Eds. *Reading Nietzsche*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Westphal, Merold. *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*. University Park, PA: The Penn State University Press, 1987.

Tentative Course Calendar

8/23	1 class	Course Introduction / Syllabus Review
8/25 - 9/6	6 classes	Philosophical Preliminaries
9/8 - 9/20	6 classes	Kierkegaard, <i>Fear and Trembling</i>
9/22 - 10/4	6 classes	Nietzsche, <i>Beyond Good and Evil</i>
10/6	50 minutes	Midterm Exam
10/9	1 class	Fall Break
10/11-10/23	6 classes	Camus. <i>The Fall</i>
10/25 - 11/1	4 classes	Sartre, <i>Existentialism Is a Humanism</i>
11/3 - 11/15	6 classes	Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism"
11/17 - 11/29	2 classes	Levinas, "The Phenomenological Theory of Being"
11/22 & 11/24	2 classes	Thanksgiving Break
11/27 & 11/29	2 classes	Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy"
12/1 & 12/4	2 classes	Postscript on Levinas, Kierkegaard and Kant
12/4		Insight Essay Due
12/8	2 hours	Comprehensive Final Exam , 12:30-2:30 p.m., KC 125