

PHIL 3455 Existentialism: 19th Century

Winter semester 2021: Mondays & Wednesdays, 10:00-11:15 A.M. (remote delivery)

Instructor: Mr. Renxiang Liu (renxiang.liu@smu.ca)

Office hours: Mon 11:30 A.M.-12:30 P.M. (appointment required)

Course Description

This course examines existentialism as an undercurrent in 19th-Century philosophy. We take as our clue two key concepts: the immanent critique of rationality, and the intrinsic articulation of human finitude.

While, for the human being, reason has always meant a pursuit of intelligibility of our life-world, in the 19th Century it has rapidly turned into an abstract and even mechanistic rationality, which prioritizes generality over individuality, homogeneity over diversity, and constancy over fluidity. Many have lamented the loss of ‘meaning’ despite, or perhaps because of, the booming of the positive sciences.

The way existentialism questions rationality does not entail a campaign for irrationalism. Rather, it is an event where reason overcomes the boundaries it has set for itself and grows “bigger-hearted” so as to embrace, rather than skip over, the meaningfulness of lived-experience. All this, moreover, is carried out *immanently*—that is, philosophically, using the apparatuses of reason itself.

The existential thinkers of the 19th Century—Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Fyodor Dostoevsky, among others—sought to revalorize what is properly human, to give it a reasonable voice, and above all to articulate human finitude in a positive and *intrinsic* manner. They were looking for a way to appropriate our limitedness—for example, being situated, embodied, fallible, vulnerable, and mortal—not as marks of inferiority to an infinite being (God, or an ideal ‘rational man’) but as essential to our unique dignity. This pursuit marks their continuity with the explicit movement of existentialism in the 20th Century and motivates the retroactive appropriation of their thought as ‘existentialist’.

Through this journey, we will study 19th-Century existentialism as an attempt to remedy reason’s digression by again paying attention to each person’s life-events, to the tiniest moments of feeling, and to humanity’s eternal struggle with the encroachment of death. It may have presented a gloomy picture of life as a result, but the aim is always to nurture our strength, so that we may face the tragic aspects of life, recognize their necessity, and overcome them in a way that we ‘contain’ them in ourselves without being overwhelmed. In the same process, we will problematize the subjectivist, even voluntarist, overtone often found in the vulgarization of existentialism.

It is part of the course’s aim to develop a sensitivity to the philosophical issues that matter, as well as to form a highly engaged reading habit. Students will be able to ‘massage’ a short excerpt, i.e., to peruse it with conceptual acuity and critical insight. They will also learn to carry out an independent reflection on the basis of an in-depth comprehension of the philosopher’s problematics.

Course Format

The course is delivered remotely. In a typical week, the class meets on Monday and Wednesday via Zoom, from 10:00 to 11:15 A.M. (AST). All sessions begin with lecture. In the Monday sessions, the lecture is followed by Q&A concerning that week's topic. In the Wednesday sessions, the lecture is followed by discussion (in small groups, then on the class scale).

Course Requirements

1. **Reading.** This course is heavily based on textual analyses. **Students are expected to have gone through the week's reading material before coming to the Monday session.** All readings will be made available online.
2. **Attendance (5%).** The course follows a synchronic format; it is mandatory to come to class. Each student is allowed 3 unexcused absences throughout the semester.
3. **Discussion questions (10%).** Each week, the student may post in the online forum **one critical question related to that week's reading.** This is **due by the end of each Tuesday**, and in this way the student gets ready for Wednesday's discussion. The student is expected to post **10 questions** throughout the semester, each of which is worth 1 point.

The student may also reply to another student's question in the online forum. This is optional and is not part of assessment.

The questions are graded according to their relevance. They are expected to be substantial, that is, *philosophical*. The aim is to critically dialogue with the author of the text. A valid question is formulated in 3 sentences. The first clarifies the immediate context from which the question arises. The second presents the question itself. The third specifies why the question matters philosophically. In total, they should not exceed 150 words, and it is a good sign if less is needed.

4. **Explication of text (20%). 700 words. Prompt posted by January 27; due 23:59 on February 12.** Pick one from the assigned passages excerpted from mandatory readings and explain (a) what the author means in the passage; (b) how the passage contributes to their overall project.
 5. **Term paper proposal (25%). 800 words. Prompt posted by March 10; due 23:59 on March 26.** Select one from the assigned topics, take a critical position towards the issue, and draft a summary of arguments supporting the position.
 6. **Term paper (40%). 3,000 words. Due 23:59 on April 20.** Based on the proposal and the feedback the instructor gives on it, write a focused essay. The essay must incorporate at least one instance of careful analysis of a passage from the semester's readings.
- For 4, 5 and 6, please set the documents in: **Times New Roman, 12pt, double-spaced, 1-inch (2.54 cm) margins, .docx or .pdf format.**

Grading Criteria

A written work will be graded according to its relevance to the topic, organization of presentation, accuracy of interpretation, carefulness of reading, clarity of expression, rigor of argumentation, and originality of ideas.

The grader does not take off marks from 100%. Rather, they work from a B (~72.5%) and check if the essay deserves more or less. The following gives a general sense what each grade means:

- An “A” indicates a substantial grasp of the material, which means that the student not only understands it accurately but can also flesh out its nuances, implications and difficulties with the help of a conceptual framework that both makes sense for the thinker and shows the student’s original reflection.
- A “B” reflects an above-average comprehension of the material without any serious misinterpretation; a “B” work, however, tends toward accurate summary rather than independent analysis. In other words, it tends to give a superficial reading rather than entering the philosophical architecture of the thinker, figuring out the issue at bottom, and working from within it.
- A “C” suggests a struggle with the material that manages an average, basic comprehension of it but is flawed by some significant misunderstandings or errors.
- A “D” means only a rudimentary comprehension of part of the material with most of the material being misunderstood. This category also includes unnecessarily lengthy and rambling works as well as those failing to adopt a critical stance, i.e., arguing in a partisan, ideological or thoughtless manner.
- An “F” work either totally misses the topic or exhibits no understanding of the material.

Late Policy

Late submissions without an extension will be penalized by **5% every 24-hour period** (rounded up) beyond the deadline.

If the student needs an extension for task 4, 5, or 6 above, be sure to inform the instructor by email (renxiang.liu@smu.ca) **before the official deadline**. The instructor and the student will then figure out a reasonable schedule for the student to complete the assignment.

Email Policy

Be sure to include “PHIL 3455” in the title of any email communication. Allow 24 hours (excluding weekends and holidays) for a response. Emails that are brief and clear about your demands will get a quicker response.

If you need an extensive reply, consider coming to office hours instead.

Office Hour Format

To make an office hour appointment, use the following web form to sign up for a 15-min slot: https://docs.google.com/document/d/19nxdyVZdowmzc0tdc9mWJYII_zzWM9-74cZ0AyVseDg/edit?usp=sharing. I will then send you a Zoom link.

The 15-min length is for scheduling purposes only. Time permitting, and depending on the nature of the topic, meetings can take longer or shorter.

The web form will be cleared up every Wednesday afternoon, so that it is open for the next week’s appointments.

Etiquette in Online Sessions

Familiarize yourself in advance with basic Zoom features—mute/unmute; turn video on/off; raise a hand; type in the chat-box; join a breakout room; “ask for help” when in a breakout room; leave a breakout room (and return to main session). Be aware how the virtual format affects the way you participate in the discussion and be prepared to adjust to the situation.

When in an online session, include your first name/preferred first name in your ID. **Speak more slowly and enunciate your words**, allowing for some loss of sound quality in transmission. Mute microphone, especially when the environment is noisy; but **don’t forget to unmute before speaking**. Raise a hand (virtually) to let the instructor know you want to speak. **Attending with video on is not mandatory but strongly encouraged**, as it gives the instructor immediate feedback and contributes greatly to vivid and thought-provoking discussion.

Reading Schedule

(KA = A Kierkegaard Anthology)

(PN = *The Portable Nietzsche*)

(The schedule is tentative and is subject to modification.)

Week 1 (Jan 6) Introduction: existentialism *ex post facto*

Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Introduction (excerpt), pp. 11-14.

MODULE 1 THE IMMANENT CRITIQUE OF REASON

Week 2 (Jan 11, 13) The hegemony of '2×2=4'

Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part One: III; VII-IX (pp. 10-14; 19-31).

Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book V, Chapter 5 "The Grand Inquisitor" (pp. 209-224).

Week 3 (Jan 18, 20) Kierkegaard: "truth is subjectivity"

Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (excerpt), KA 195-215; 226-228.

Week 4 (Jan 25, 27) Nietzsche: truth and the ascetic ideal

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 344 (PN 448-450).

Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Third Essay, 11-13; 23; 27-28 (pp. 84-89; 109-110; 118-120).

Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "How the 'true world' finally became a fable", PN 485-486.

Week 5 (Feb 1, 3) Kierkegaard's critique of the Present Age

Kierkegaard, *The Present Age* (excerpt), KA 260-269.

Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (excerpt), KA 231-239.

Week 6 (Feb 8, 10) Nietzsche's Antichrist

Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, First Essay, 10 (excerpt), PN 451-452.

Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 2-7; 16-17; 39; 43 (PN 570-574; 582-585; 612-614; 618-620).

Week 7 (Feb 15, 17) Winter break

MODULE 2 THE INTRINSIC ARTICULATION OF FINITUDE

Week 8 (Feb 22, 24) The meaning of despair and dread

Dreyfus, "'What a monster then is man': Pascal and Kierkegaard on being a contradictory self and what to do about it" (excerpt), in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, pp. 96-103.

Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, I, §5 (pp. 37-41).

[Optional: Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* (excerpt), KA 341-371.]

Week 9 (Mar 1, 3) Finite temporality in the aesthetic and ethical stages

Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* (excerpt), KA 80-97.

Week 10 (Mar 8, 10) The leap of faith?

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (excerpt), KA 116-134.

Week 11 (Mar 15, 17) The rope to *Übermensch*

Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "Zarathustra's Prologue", I-V; "On the Three Metamorphoses"; "On the Thousand and One Goals"; "On the Way of the Creator". PN 121-131; 137-140; 170-172; 174-177.

Week 12 (Mar 22, 24) Affirmation in eternal recurrence

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 341, PN 101-102.

Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 12(A); 1041; 1052 (pp. 12-13; 536-537; 542-543).

[Optional: Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "On the Vision and the Riddle"; "The Seven Seals"; "At Noon". PN 267-272; 340-343; 387-390.]

Week 13 (Mar 29, 31) Hegel the existentialist?

[Optional: Hegel, *Lectures on the Proofs of the Existence of God*, Lecture 13-14 (pp. 111-126).]

Week 14 (Apr 7) Recapitulation

*No class on Apr 5 (Easter Monday)

Bibliography

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. 2002. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. 2004. *Notes from Underground*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Dreyfus, Hubert. 2012. "What a monster then is man': Pascal and Kierkegaard on being a contradictory self and what to do about it." In *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, edited by Steven Crowell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 96-110.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 2007. *Lectures on the Proofs of the Existence of God*. Translated by Peter C. Hodgson. Oxford: Clarendon.

Kaufmann, Walter. 2004. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. New York: Plume.

Kierkegaard, Søren. 1973. *A Kierkegaard Anthology*. Edited by Robert Bretall. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1976. *The Portable Nietzsche*. Edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann. London: Penguin.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1994. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Translated by Carol Diethe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.