Course Description

Existentialism as a philosophical movement asks basic questions about the relationship between everyday life and larger issues of death, authenticity, freedom and the relationship between the individual and community. In this course, we shall examine the major themes of existentialism (freedom, anguish, absurdity, authenticity, etc.). For the most part, we will be reading and analyzing the work of major existentialist figures. We will be looking both at the development of existentialism as a philosophical trend, and at the ways that existentialist philosophers anticipate, inspire and respond to political events.

This class will be taught in a seminar format. We will be holding an intense conversation with and about the philosophers whom we are reading and working together to understand their historical contexts. Your informed and engaged participation is crucial to the success of this class.

Texts Available for Purchase


All of these books are available for purchase at the Oberlin College bookstore.

Several additional required readings have been placed on reserve and ERes (All texts on ERes are marked with an asterisk).

Additionally, all required books have been placed on reserve.

Prerequisites and Requirements:

This course assumes that you have a basic knowledge of European history. Although I do not require that you have a background in philosophy, it would probably be helpful if you have at least a basic acquaintance with philosophical trends of the past two hundred years. If this is not the case, let me know and I can suggest additional background reading as necessary.

You must attend every class during this semester. If you miss one meeting of the seminar, you can make this up by writing a five-page response paper on the readings for the class that you missed. Any additional
absences will lead to a $\frac{1}{6}$th reduction in the final grade for the course. If you need to miss a class due to a medical or other emergency, you must provide adequate documentation (such as a doctor’s note) to avoid the absence penalty.

Over the course of the semester, you will be writing response papers for 9 class sessions of your choosing (this means that you can skip two weeks). These response papers should be 2 pages long, and engage with the author whom we have read for that week. In addition to your response to the reading, you should also provide a list of several questions for discussion (at least 3). You are required to turn in your response paper **before 9am on Monday**. These papers may be sent as an email attachment or via the Digital Drop Box on Blackboard. You may also leave a hard copy in my mailbox in the history department office (Rice 316), if you prefer. Response papers will be graded on a $\sqrt{-}, \sqrt{1}, \sqrt{+}$ system and will be returned to you at the start of each class.

You will also be writing one more substantial paper. This will be a 12-15 page paper on a topic of your choice. A draft of this paper must first be turned in to me and your reading group. The reading group consists of 3 people. You must comment on the papers of others in your group between the time you turn in drafts (the 2nd to last week of class) and the last class. Our last class will involve presenting your paper to the rest of the class. We will talk more about this paper as the semester progresses.

If you turn in the research paper draft or final version late, it will be marked down 1/3 of a grade for each day it is late (this goes for both the draft and final version, so if you turn each in one day late, you will be marked down 2/3 of a grade, etc.). If there is a genuine emergency (you know what a genuine emergency is…), let me know as soon as possible and we can try to work something out. Be aware, however, that I do not grant very many extensions and it is absolutely up to my discretion whether or not your excuse is worthy of an extension. You have the option to turn one response paper in late (by late, I mean in class on the day of discussion). These papers are crucial means for you to prepare for class discussion; thus, after this one “late” paper, no other late response papers will be accepted.

All work for this class is governed by the honor code. You must write and sign the honor code pledge at the end of each assignment. We will talk briefly about the honor code in class, but if you have further questions, please go to: http://www.oberlin.edu/students/student_pages/honor_code.html.

Your grade will roughly be determined according to the following formula:

- 35% Participation
- 15% Response Papers
- 5% Paper Draft
- 45% Final Paper

All written work must be turned in to receive credit for this course.

*Schedule of Readings and Lectures*

**February 6: Introduction—What is Existentialism? The Roots and Major Issues of Existentialist Thought**

**February 13: Kierkegaard**
Readings: Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

**February 20: Nietzsche I**

**February 27: Nietzsche II**  
Readings: Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany 1890-1990*

**March 6: Kafka**  
Readings: Kafka, *The Trial*

**March 13: Heidegger I**  
Readings: Heidegger, *Being & Time*, Sections 9, 27, 38, 46-60

**March 20: Heidegger II**  
Readings: *Wolin, The Heidegger Controversy*, selections (on reserve and available as a recommended reading from the bookstore)

**SPRING BREAK**

**April 3: Heidegger & Sartre**  
*Sartre, Existentialism is Humanism:*
http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm

**April 10: Sartre**  
Readings: *Sartre, Being and Nothingness*, selections  
*Sartre, No Exit and Other Plays* (read: “No Exit” and “Dirty Hands”)

**April 17: De Beauvoir**  
Readings: De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

**April 24: Camus**  
Readings: Camus, *The Plague*

**May 1: Camus & Sartre on Algeria**  
*Sartre, “Reply to Albert Camus,” Situations*, pp. 54-78.

**Turn in Paper Draft to me and your reading group.**

**May 8: Final Discussion**

**Final Paper is due Thursday, May 18th at 9am**