Introduction to Existentialism

Jerry Piven, Ph.D.

In case of emergencies, I can be reached at (201) 936-5843, or email me at jerry.piven@rutgers.edu

What is the purpose of our existence? Why are we here on earth? What is the meaning of life? How do we endure death? Existentialism is concerned with the human condition, the purpose of life, authenticity in one’s purpose and being, the attempt to find meaning amidst the absurdity and finitude of existence. Philosophers have asked how life can be meaningful in the face of the grave, and whether life matters. This course explores some of the great works of existentialism, pondering the meaning (or meaninglessness) of existence, the death of God, moral responsibility, and our struggle against fate.
Everything is false! Everything is permitted!  
- Nietzsche

And nothing can we call our own but death, and that small model of the barren earth that serves as paste and cover to our bones.
- Shakespeare

There’s no idea greater than the fact that God doesn’t exist. Human history supports me. The only thing man has done is to keep inventing God to go on living and not to kill himself; this alone constitutes global history up to now. During the entire course of history I alone am the first person who doesn’t want to invent God.
- Dostoevsky

I haven’t the strength to submit to the dark force which assumes the form of a tarantula…. Can’t I simply be devoured without being expected to sing praises to what is devouring me?… If I could have never been born, I certainly would never have chosen existence on such ludicrous terms. Well, why shouldn’t I take advantage of the last possibility to act? A protest is sometimes no small matter.
- Dostoevsky

Is there any meaning in my life that will not be destroyed by my inevitably approaching death?
- Tolstoy

I will tell you the greatest secret…. Mirrors are the doors through which Death comes and goes. Besides, look at yourself in the mirror throughout your life and you will see Death at work like bees in a glass hive.
- Cocteau

…when one comes face to face with death and the existence of self—one’s ‘self-existence’—stands out clearly in relief against the backdrop of nihility. Questions crowd in upon one: Why have I been alive? Where did I come from and where am I going? A void appears here that nothing in the world can fill; a gaping abyss opens up at the very ground on which one stands. In the face of this abyss, not one of all the things that had made up the stuff of life until then is of any use.
- Nishitani

…since a natural world is a world of continuous change and therefore continuous loss, how and why does loss matter?
- Phillips

…to live is to play at the meaning of life…. childlike foolishness is the calling of mature men.
- Becker

…one of the most significant of human characteristics is that we are more clearly defined by what we do not know about ourselves than by what we do understand.
- Carl Goldberg
**Required Texts:**
(Bring these to class!)

Gordon Marino (Ed.): *Basic Writings of Existentialism*
Thomas E. Wartenberg: *Existentialism: A Beginner’s Guide*

**Assignments and Grading:**
In *addition* to the required reading, the students will be assigned:

1) **A midterm essay**
   of 4-6 pages
   (40% of total grade)

2) **A final take-home essay exam**
   of 5-7 pages
   (40% of total grade)

3) **The task of participating!**
   You are expected to participate in online forum discussions and debates (20% of total grade)

*Grading* will be determined by the effort of the student, her/his evidence of having carefully read and contemplated the material, and her/his expression of independent thought on the ideas. Late assignments will suffer penalties as follows: the subtraction of one grade increment per day the assignment is late.

*Readings* consist of the required texts. There will also be a number of *optional* handouts supplied to help students understand the primary readings and provide perspective. Suggested readings appear below the required & optional handout readings and are for your interest and edification only.
IMPORTANT:

Class Credo and Ethic: Like all classes, philosophy is about the free exchange of ideas as well as relentless questioning of beliefs and concepts. You are entitled to your beliefs but in a philosophy class no idea is spared from questioning or examination. If you do not want your beliefs or faith questioned, you are strongly advised to enroll in other classes more suitable to your beliefs and temperament.

Participation and Conduct: Students are expected to engage in lively discussion and spirited exchange. They need not agree with one another and they are encouraged to question ideas, but they must also be respectful towards other students and the instructor. You can argue forcefully for or against an idea, but are required to comport yourselves with civility.

Communications: You may email me with concerns and questions, but do not expect me to recapitulate class lectures or discussions. Feel free to call me for office hours phone conversations (or an occasional meeting on campus) if you wish to discuss the ideas or other issues.

Academic Honesty: Violations of Rutgers policies on academic honesty will not be tolerated in this course. Plagiarism and cheating will be grounds for failure, if not expulsion from the university.
Course Outline:

I. Introduction to Existentialism
Overview and Course Goals
Existential Questions
Finitude, Freedom, and Absurdity
What Existentialism Is and Is Not

Readings:
- Rilke: The Ninth Elegy (handout)
- Chomei: The Hojoki (handout)
- Marino: Introduction
- Kohn: Existentialism Here and Now (handout)

Suggested Readings:
- William Barrett: Irrational Man
- Walter Kaufmann: Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre (Introduction)
- Kevin Aho: Existentialism: An Introduction
- Maurice Friedman: The Worlds of Existentialism
- David Cogswell: Existentialism for Beginners
- Steven Crowell: The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism
- Robert Solomon: Phenomenology and Existentialism

II. Meaning, Despair, and Faith
Consciousness is Despair
Unconsciousness is Despair
Leaps of Faith
Literal and Figurative Faith

Readings:
- Kierkegaard: Fear & Trembling / The Sickness Unto Death (Marino, pp. 7-110)

Suggested Readings:
- Blaise Pascal: Pensees
- Leo Tolstoy: Confession
- Walter Kaufmann: Kierkegaard. In From Shakespeare to Existentialism
- Alastair Hannay: The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard
- John Caputo: How to Read Kierkegaard
- William Hubben: Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Kafka
- Ernest Becker: The Birth & Death of Meaning
- Ernest Becker: The Denial of Death (sections on Kierkegaard)
- M.D. Faber: Culture and Consciousness

III. The Demise of Faith
Reason & Faith
Miracle, Mystery, & Authority
The Death of God
Dionysus vs The Crucified
Amor Fati & Eternal Recurrence

Readings:
- Nietzsche: *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Marino, pp. 111-192)
- Dostoevsky: *Notes from Underground / The Grand Inquisitor* (Marino, pp. 193-256)

Additional Optional Readings:
- Abe: Zen and Nietzsche. In *Zen and Western Thought* (handout)
- Caputo: Atheism, A/theology, and the Postmodern Condition (handout)
- Peterson: Resurrecting the Death of God (handout)
- Daly: *Beyond God the Father* (handout)

Suggested Readings:
Arthur Schopenhauer: *The World as Will and Representation* (esp. On Man’s Need for Metaphysics)
Rollo May: *The Cry for Myth*
Fyodor Dostoevsky: *Devils* (*Katz translation*)
Sigmund Freud: *Civilization and Its Discontents*
Walter Kaufmann: Nietzsche and Existentialism. In *Existentialism, Religion, and Death*
Peter Berger: *The Sacred Canopy*
Arthur C. Danto: *Nietzsche as Philosopher*
Robert Solomon & Kathleen Higgins: *What Nietzsche Really Said*
Michael Harrington: *The Politics at God’s Funeral*
Charles Winquist: *Desiring Theology*
John Caputo: *The Weakness of God / After the Death of God*
Diane Jonte-Pace: Modernity, Melancholia, and the (In)Ability to Mourn: When Throne and Altar Are in Danger. In *Speaking the Unspeakable*

IV. BEING, NEGATION, AND NONEXISTENCE
The Tragic Sense of Life
Death and the Absurdity of Being
Authenticity & Inauthenticity
Being (Dasein) & Presence
Mindlessness & Oblivion
Existenz-Existenz
Ontology and Periechontology

Readings:
- Unamuno: *Saint Manuel Bueno, Martyr* (Marino, pp. 257-298)
- Unamuno: *The Tragic Sense of Life* (handout)
- Heidegger: *Being and Time* (Marino, pp. 299-340)
- Kaufmann: Existentialism and Death (handout)
Additional Optional Readings:

- Arendt: Eternity versus Immortality (handout)
- Bauman: *Morality, Immortality, & Other Life Strategies* (chapter 3, handout)

Suggested Readings:

- Hannah Arendt: What is Existential Philosophy? In *Essays in Understanding*
- Walter Davis: *Inwardness and Existence*
- Keiji Nishitani: *Religion and Nothingness*
- Masao Abe: *Zen and Western Thought*
- Ernest Becker: *The Denial of Death*
- Robert Jay Lifton: *The Broken Connection*
- Irvin Yalom: *Existential Psychotherapy*
- James McCarthy: *Death Anxiety*
- Frederick Holck: *Death and Eastern Thought*
- Hendrik Ruitenbeek: *Death: Interpretations*
- Herman Feifel: *The Meaning of Death*
- Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition / The Life of the Mind*
- Walter Kaufmann: *Existentialism, Religion, and Death*
- J.S. Piven: *The Psychology of Death in Fantasy and History*
- Elemers Hankiss: *Fears and Symbols*
- Joyce McDougall: Sexual Deviance and Psychic Survival. In *The Many Faces of Eros*

V. NAUSEA, BEING, AND NOTHINGNESS

Nausea & Futility
Alienation
Freedom & Responsibility
Morality Sans God or Certainty
Meaninglessness
Autochthonous Purpose

Readings:

- Sartre: Existentialism / *Being and Nothingness* (Marino, pp. 341-411)
- Sartre: *No Exit / Nausea* (handout)
- Beauvoir: *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Marino, pp. 413-440)

Additional Optional Readings:

- Becker: *The Inner Self*. In *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (handout)
- Frankl: Logotherapy in a Nutshell (section on The Existential Vacuum). In *Man's Search for Meaning* (handout)
- Abe: Zen is Not a Philosophy, but.... In *Zen and Western Thought* (handout)
Suggested Readings:
Albert Camus: *The Stranger*
Rollo May: *Man's Search for Himself*
Erich Fromm: *The Sane Society*
C.G. Jung: *The Undiscovered Self*
Karen Horney: *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*
William Barrett: *Ego and Instinct*

**VI. DESPAIR AND AFFIRMATION**
Recurrence & Resignation
Spirit, Negation, & Annihilation
Existential Vortices & Vacuums
Affirmation & Joy
Inhumanity & Humanity

Readings:
- Camus: *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Marino, pp. 441-494)
- Ellison: *The Invisible Man* (Marino, pp. 495-505)
- Agosin: *Mother, Speak to Us of War* (handout)

Additional Optional Readings:
- Langer: The Fabric of Meaning. In *Philosophy in a New Key* (handout)
- Davis: Men of Good Will: Toward an Ethic of the Tragic. In *Death's Dream Kingdom*

Suggested Readings:
William Baldwin: *The Fire Next Time*
Enchi Fumiko: *The Waiting Years*
Viktor Frankl: *The Will to Meaning / The Case for a Tragic Optimism.*
In *Man's Search for Meaning*

Martin Buber: *I & Thou*
Paul Tillich: *The Courage to Be*
R.D. Laing: *The Divided Self*
Rollo May: *The Courage to Create*
Ron Leifer: *Vinegar Into Honey*
David Loy: *Lack and Transcendence*
Marcia Cavell: *Becoming a Subject*
Clement Rosset: *Joyful Cruelty*

**VII. CONCLUSIONS & OTHER EXISTENTIALIAE**
Alterities of Experience
Worldview, Ideology, Religion, & Violence as Existential Phenomena
Humanism, Dehumanization, and Postmetaphysics
Moral & Nihilistic Responsibility
Existential Engagement
Suggested Readings:

Terrence Des Pres: *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (esp. The Excremental Assault)

Edith Wyshogrod: *Spirit in Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger, and Man-Made Mass Death*

Nawal El Sadaawi: *The Hidden Face of Eve*

Evelyne Accad: *The Excised / Sexuality and War*

Jessica Stern: *Terror in the Mind of God*

Ruth Stein: *Evil as Love and as Liberation*

Nel Noddings: *Women and Evil*

Weston La Barre: *The Ghost Dance: Origins of Religion*

Ludwig Binswanger: *Insanity as Life-Historical Phenomenon. In Existence*

Joyce McDougall: *The Many Faces of Eros*

Paul Ricoeur: *The Symbolism of Evil*

Orlando Patterson: *Rituals of Blood / The Children of Sisyphus*

Calvin Warren: *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*

Walter Davis: *Deracination*

Walter Kaufmann: *Religion in Four Dimensions: Existential, Aesthetic, Historical, Comparative*

Diane Jonte-Pace: *Speaking the Unspeakable*

Mohammed Bamyeh: *Of Death and Dominion: The Existential Foundations of Governance*

Stephen Diamond: *Existential Roots of Anger, Rage, and Violence. In Anger, Madness, and the Daimonic*

Carl Goldberg: *Speaking With the Devil*

Sue Grand: *The Reproduction of Evil*