

# 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](mailto: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 nihilism. 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 in class!**

You are expected to come to class prepared for a cordial and informed discussion of the material  
(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 for every class the assignment is late.

\* **Attendance** is mandatory. After the 3<sup>rd</sup> absence one letter grade will be subtracted from your final course grade. **Lateness** will not be tolerated. It is rude and disruptive, and may be considered a complete absence. Visible lack of preparation for a session will also be counted as a missed class and will result in a proportional deduction of points from the final grade.

\* **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:**

Cell phones, computers, MP3 players, video games, and other non-class-related accouterments will absolutely be turned off during class. There will be no web surfing, instant messaging, texting, tweeting, game playing, or any similar activities during class. These activities are disrespectful and disrupt the instructor and your fellow classmates. 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 come by for office hours if you wish to discuss the ideas or other issues. Office hours will be by appointment, and usually before or after class sessions.

### **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)
- Barrett: *Irrational Man*, Chapter 1 (handout)
- Wartenberg: Introduction & Chapter 1, *Existence* (pp. 1-30)
- 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)
- Wartenberg: Chapter 4, Anxiety

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)
- Nietzsche: *The Birth of Tragedy*, chapter 7, *The Gay Science*, section 125, *The Antichrist*, selections (handout)
- Dostoevsky: *Notes from Underground / The Grand Inquisitor* (Marino, pp. 193-256)
- Wartenberg: Chapter 2

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)
- Jaspers: *Reason and Existenz* (handout)
- Kaufmann: *Existentialism and Death* (handout)
- Wartenberg: Chapters 5 & 7

##### Additional Optional Readings:

- Abe: *The Problem of Death in East and West: Immortality, Eternal Life, Unbornness*. In *Zen and Comparative Studies* (handout)
- 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*  
 Elemer 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)
- Wartenberg: Chapters 3 & 6

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)
- Miller: Orestes: Myth and Dream as Catharsis. In *Myths, Dreams, and Religion* (handout)
- Giegerich: The Rescued Child, or The Misappropriation of Time: On the Search for Meaning.  
 In *Soul Violence* (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*  
 David Loy: The Pain of Being Human. In *Lack and Transcendence: The Problem  
 of Death and Life in Psychotherapy, Existentialism, and Buddhism*

## **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 EXISTENTIAE**

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*