

# SYLLABUS

## PHIL 211 ~ Existentialism.

Winter 2017 (CRN 26078: 4 Credits).

Lectures: Tuesdays & Thursdays 1400-1520, 110 FEN.

Discussion sections: Fridays, either 1100-1150 (122MCK)  
or 1200-1250 (201 CON).

Instructor: Peter Warnek, [warnek@uoregon.edu](mailto:warnek@uoregon.edu)

Office hours: Tuesdays, 1200-1350, and by appointment (246 SCH).

GE: Joshua Kerr, [jkerr@uoregon.edu](mailto:jkerr@uoregon.edu)

Office hours: Tuesdays, 1100-1250 (158 SCH).



## COURSE OVERVIEW

This lecture course provides a general introduction to the tradition of existential thought and literature as it emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The main objective of the course is an understanding of the basic tenets of this tradition as they account for fundamental human experiences. But the existential tradition will be considered in this course more as a way of thoughtfully responding to such experiences, rather than as a conceptual system or explicit philosophical doctrine. We will be more concerned with the existential descriptions and elaborations of such lived experience and less concerned with assessing a dogmatic position under the rubric of existentialism. While some attention will be given to the historical origins of this tradition in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century – for example, in the philosophical work of Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and others – the focus of the course will be on texts written in the last century. In this regard, we will be interested in how the existential concern can be viewed both as a continuation of its preceding philosophical tradition and also as a rebellion against it. As we work our way through our readings, we will take note of the pervasive presence of existential themes in popular literature, film and culture. We will also consider the existential critique of rationalism, science and technology, as they now dominate our modern world.

The course begins with readings from two French authors, **Gabriel Marcel** and **Albert Camus**, in order to contrast the religious and atheistic dimensions of existential thought. The differences between these two authors will be articulated around the question of hope. Whereas Marcel speaks of existential hope as an authentic affirmation of our human condition, Camus insists that hope of any kind remains a form of self-deception, the desperate lie we tell ourselves in order to hide from the inescapable “absurdity” of human life. We then turn to selections from **Paul Tillich’s** *The Courage to Be* in order to examine existential interpretations of anxiety, fear, guilt and boredom, and the importance these interpretations have for the development of an existential psychotherapy. We will consider how, from the existential point of view, the experience of anxiety can refer not only to a dysfunctional psychological state but, more importantly, to an essential human experience. The pathological character of anxiety, in all its various forms, is thus interpreted as an experience grounded in our existential condition.

At the beginning of the second half of the course, we turn to **Simone de Beauvoir’s** *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. This will give us an opportunity to consider the ethical and political consequences of existential thought, as Beauvoir responds to the criticism that existentialism promotes a life of despair and nihilistic irresponsibility. This ethical concern will lead us to ask whether and how historically established identities, such as culture and race, might complicate the existential point of view. In this regard, we will read texts from two Caribbean writers, **Frantz Fanon** and **Derek Walcott**, who each offer important and unique criticisms of the existential position, especially as it is developed by Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. The last two weeks of the term are reserved for a discussion of two novels, **Ralph**



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Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. These novels exhibit in literary and narrative form many of the conceptual issues dealt with during the term. These include the meaning and possible interpretations of very basic human experiences, such as identity and difference, freedom and compulsion, birth and death, hope and despair, anxiety, fear and courage, love and enmity, absurdity, meaningless, nihilism, boredom, joy, loneliness and being with others.

As a way to orient and guide our discussion, the lectures will begin by emphasizing two axiomatic presuppositions or assumptions, each of which enacts a reversal or an inversion of a traditional ordering or hierarchy. While these assumptions call for further discussion, which will take place in the context of our readings, they can be presented here in a preliminary way:

(1) *Existence refers to a way of being which remains a question for the being who exists.* As such, existence names the utterly distinctive phenomenon of being human, the way that human life finds itself to be, the way of being peculiar to human life. It thus remains essentially incomparable and irreducible to the ways in which other entities in the world come to be, whether these appear naturally or as produced artifacts. While other kinds of beings *are*, only humans can be said *to exist*. Moreover, any understanding we might have of our world and the entities found in it must proceed first of all from the absolute priority of this experience of existing. The very meaning of what it is for anything to be must be interpreted from the primacy of this existential situation, not the other way around. Human existence does not have a "nature," like other natural beings, nor is it produced, like the artifacts of human culture. This axiomatic starting point is especially important because it refers us to our freedom and to our existential responsibility for this freedom, as a freedom that we originally are.

(2) *Being does not follow thought but thought follows being.* The inexplicable fact of existence is given prior to all thought, comprehension and understanding. From this existential starting point, the meaning of existence does not first depend upon our ability to make sense of it or to render it conceptually clear. Existential philosophy does not seek to justify experience by making it rationally comprehensible but begins instead by accepting that human experience is first of all *lived through*, and as such always exceeds and already precedes any power to comprehend it. We first find ourselves delivered over to the inexorable fact of our existential situation and this fact first gives rise to all possible thought. But no thought is ever able to render this "existential facticity" transparent to itself through reflection.



Now, in light of these two reversals, please consider the following passages:

"Philosophy demands: seek constant communication, risk it without reserve, renounce the defiant self-assertion which forces itself upon you in ever new disguises, live in the hope that in your very renunciation you will in some incalculable way be given back to yourself." (Karl Jaspers)

"We are interrogating our experience precisely in order to know how it opens us to what is not ourselves. This does not even exclude the possibility that we find in our experience a movement toward what could not in any event be present to us in the original and whose irremediable absence would thus count among our originating experiences." (Maurice Merleau-Ponty)

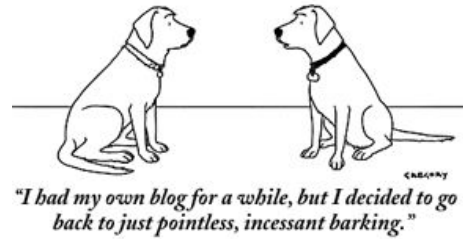
"It is completely correct and in the best order to say: 'one can get nothing done with philosophy.' Only it is misplaced to maintain that the judgment concerning philosophy has thereby been settled. For a small addendum follows in the form of an opposing question: if indeed *we* can do nothing with philosophy, the question is whether philosophy in the end cannot do something *with us*—assuming, of course, that we allow ourselves to get involved with it." (Martin Heidegger)

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### DISCUSSION SECTION AND YOUR GE

Your attendance and participation in discussion section is a requirement of this course and will have a bearing on the grade you receive for the course. Take the time to get to know your GE by visiting his office hours. (You should do this *at least once* during the term.) Please understand that Joshua is your first contact for this course. He will grade your exams and submit your final grade. If you are unable to attend class or must miss an exam, or will be unable to complete a paper on time, please take this up with Joshua directly and as soon as possible.



### TEXTS AND READINGS

Readings are assigned for each lecture. Many of these will be available for downloading on Canvas. Other texts are available for purchase at the Duckstore. (See the Bibliography below.) You should come to lecture and section having read and taken notes on the material for the day. Please be sure to bring the assigned reading to class. Helpful tip: as you read the material, if you encounter words that are unfamiliar to you, make a point of looking them up in a dictionary. This will make you a better reader and also expand your vocabulary. Please also note which passages you find most difficult to understand.

**Please note: the use of electronic devices in class, including computers, cell phones and mp3 players, is not permitted.** These devices distract your neighbors and disrupt the learning environment. Please print out the pdfs of the readings that are available on canvas and use this hardcopy for your work.

### COURSE REQUIREMENTS

**Discussion.** Active participation in discussion sections. You are also invited to raise questions and to contribute to discussion in lecture. We will try to reserve the last minutes of lecture for discussion.

**Reading.** Keep up with the assigned readings. Come to lecture and discussion having read the assigned material for the day. Please reread and study the material in preparation for the exams and as you write your papers. Study guides will be posted on Canvas to help you prepare for the exams. You should make use of this material as you review your readings. Exact pages to be discussed each day will be updated in class as we proceed. *It is recommended that you begin reading the novels early in the term rather than waiting until the last two weeks.*

**Attendance.** It is important to attend lecture and section. Material is presented in class that is not found in the readings. The lectures will present an interpretation of the readings and will help you to focus on key passages. ***There is also an attendance policy for this course: It is not possible to receive a grade higher than C- if absent without an excuse at three or more meetings of discussion section. It is also not possible to receive a grade higher than C- if you miss more than four lectures without an excuse.*** You may be asked to sit in an area of the lecture hall designated for your discussion section to aid the GE in recording attendance. If you do not sit in this area, you may be marked absent. If you need to miss a discussion section or cannot attend lecture, or have to reschedule an exam, ***please arrange this directly with your GE.***



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**Exams.** There will be two examinations in section. See the schedule below. The exams will consist of short answer, short essay, and multiple choice questions. These exams will test your comprehension of the concepts and vocabulary in the readings and lectures.

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**Papers.** There will be two shorter papers assigned during the term (3-4 pages) and one final paper (6-7 pages) due during finals week. Paper topics will be assigned at least one week before the papers are due. These papers will ask you to interpret the readings and to provide textual evidence for this interpretation. See the schedule below for due dates.

### GRADE BREAKDOWN

Participation	20% (of total grade)
Midterm Exams (2)	30%
Midterm Papers (2)	30%
Final Paper	20%

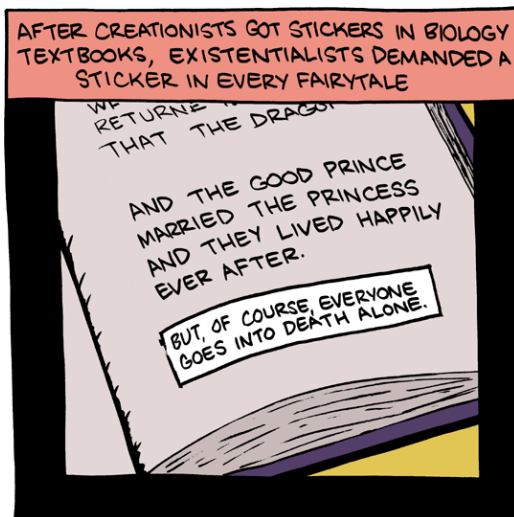
### DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS

If you have a documented disability and anticipate needing accommodations in this course please notify me or your GE within the first two weeks of the course. Please request a letter from Disability Services verifying your disability and stating your needed accommodations.



### LEARNING OUTCOMES

In addition to improving the basic skills developed through a study of the humanities and the liberal arts – such as an increased awareness of the limits of instrumental reason, greater care in critical thinking, more articulate and effective communication, whether spoken or written – this course exposes the student to the defining cultural legacy of the existential tradition, as it continues to make itself manifest within Europe, the Americas and beyond. In particular, the course raises the question of individual and collective freedom and responsibility, and through an exposition of this question, encourages the student’s active participation in the social and communal world, by promoting good citizenry and fostering an awareness of the unique challenges facing human agency, political or otherwise. The course also furthers a sensitivity to racial, ethnic and cultural differences, by providing the student an opportunity to consider how these very differences do not divide our shared world but enrich it. In short, the course serves as an antidote to the numbing, leveling effects of mass society, by challenging its tendency to promote thoughtless, apathetic lives.



4  
There is nothing in the room.  
Peter is confused.  
Jane is confused.  
Mummy is happy.  
“There is nothing in the room because God is dead,” says mummy.  
“Oh dear,” says Peter

new words God Dead Confused



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## CLASS SCHEDULE (LECTURES, DISCUSSIONS & EXAMS):

WEEK	DATE	AUTHOR	READING
I	1.10		Syllabus
		Nietzsche	<i>On the Genealogy of Morals</i> , III §28. (On Canvas.) Recommended: <i>On the Genealogy of Morals</i> , II §§1-7. (On Canvas.)
	1.12	Marcel	"On the Ontological Mystery," 9-30. (On Canvas.) Recommended: "The Unconditional Imperative," Karl Jaspers. (On Canvas.)
	1.13		Discussion
II	1.17	Marcel	"On the Ontological Mystery," 31-46. Recommended: "The Being of the Encompassing," Karl Jaspers. (On Canvas.)
	1.19	Camus	"An Absurd Reasoning," 3-21. (On Canvas.) Recommended: "The Myth of Sisyphus," Albert Camus. (On Canvas.)
	1.20		Discussion
III	1.24	Camus	"An Absurd Reasoning," 21-48. [First paper assigned.]
	1.26	Tillich	<i>The Courage To Be</i> , 31-58. (Purchase at Bookstore.) Recommended: <i>The Meaning of Anxiety</i> , Rollo May. (On Canvas.)
	1.27		Discussion
IV	1.31		<b>FIRST PAPER DUE</b>
		Tillich	<i>The Courage To Be</i> , 59-78. (Purchase at Bookstore.) Recommended: <i>Existence</i> , Rollo May. (On Canvas.)
	2.2	Tillich	<i>The Courage To Be</i> , 114-142. Recommended: <i>Existence and Freedom</i> , Calvin Schrag. (On Canvas.)
	2.3		Discussion
V	2.7	Beauvoir	<i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , TBD. (Purchase at Bookstore.) Recommended: <i>Existentialism is a Humanism</i> , J-P Sartre. (On Canvas.)
	2.9	Beauvoir	<i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , TBD.
	2.10		<b>FIRST MID-TERM EXAM</b>
VI	2.14	Beauvoir	<i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , TBD. Recommended: "What is Existential Philosophy?," H. Arendt. (On Canvas.)
	2.16	Beauvoir	<i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , TBD.
	2.17		Discussion
VII	2.21	Fanon	"Introduction" and "The Black Man and Language," from <i>Black Skin, White Masks</i> , xi-xviii; 1-23. (On Canvas.) [Second paper assigned.]
	2.23	Fanon	"The Lived Experience of the Black Man," from <i>Black Skin, White Masks</i> , 89-119.
	2.24		Discussion
VIII	2.28		<b>SECOND PAPER DUE</b>
		Walcott	"The Muse of History," 36-45. (On Canvas.) Recommended: "What the Twilight Says," D. Walcott. (On Canvas.)
	3.2	Walcott	"The Muse of History," 45-64.
	3.3		Discussion

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IX	3.7	Ellison	<i>Invisible Man</i> (Purchase at Bookstore.) Recommended: <i>Existential America</i> , G. Cotkin. (On Canvas.)
	3.9	Ellison	<i>Invisible Man</i> Recommended: <i>The Waste Land</i> , T. S. Eliot.
	3.10		<b>SECOND MID-TERM EXAM</b>
X	3.14	Kundera	<i>The Unbearable Lightness of Being</i> (Purchase at Bookstore.) [Final paper assigned.]
	3.16	Kundera	<i>The Unbearable Lightness of Being</i>
	3.17		Discussion
Finals	3.22		<b>FINAL PAPER DUE ON WEDNESDAY BY 1600</b>

### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

#### REQUIRED READINGS ARE FOUND IN THESE BOOKS:

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Open Road, 2015. PURCHASE AT THE DUCKSTORE.  
Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Vintage Books, 1991.  
Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. Vintage Books, 1995. PURCHASE AT THE DUCKSTORE.  
Kundera, Milan. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Harper, 2009. PURCHASE AT THE DUCKSTORE.  
Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press, 2008.  
Marcel, Gabriel. *The Philosophy of Existentialism*. Citadel Press, 2002.  
Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Vintage, 1989.  
Tillich, Paul. *The Courage To Be*. Yale University Press, 2014. PURCHASE AT THE DUCKSTORE.  
Walcott, Derek. *What the Twilight Says: Essays*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.

#### FOR FURTHER READING:

Arendt, "What is Existentialism?" in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*. Schocken, 2005.  
de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Classics, 2015.  
Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Vintage Books, 1998.  
Cotkin, George. *Existential America*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.  
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Frankl, Victor. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Beacon Press, 2014.  
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Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. SUNY Press, 2010.  
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Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or, Part I*. Princeton University Press, 1987.  
———. *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*. Princeton University Press, 1983.  
———. *The Concept of Anxiety*. Princeton University Press, 1981.  
———. *The Sickness Unto Death*. Princeton University Press, 1983.  
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Laing, R. D. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. Penguin Psychology, 1965.  
Luijpen, W. & Koren, H. *A First Introduction to Existential Phenomenology*. Duquense, 1995.  
Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good & Evil*. Vintage Books, 1989.  
———. *The Gay Science*. Vintage Books, 1971.  
Marcel, Gabriel. *Man against Mass Society*. St. Augustine Press, 2008.  
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———. *The Meaning of Anxiety*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2015.  
Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Yale University Press, 2007.  
———. *Being and Nothingness*. Washington Square Press, 1993.  
Schrag, Calvin. *Existence and Freedom*. Northwestern University Press, 1970.  
Yalom, Irvin. *Existential Psychotherapy*. Basic Books, 1980.