

# SYLLABUS

## PHIL 211 ~ Existentialism.

Winter 2020 (CRN 24964: 4 Credits).

Lectures: Tuesday & Thursday 1600-1720, 101LLCS.

Discussion sections on Fridays.

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Office hours: Tuesdays 1200-1400, and by appointment (246 SCH).

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## COURSE OVERVIEW

This lecture course serves as a general introduction to the tradition of existential thought and literature as it emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The preliminary objective is an understanding of the basic questions and experiences to which this tradition is a response. This tradition will be considered primarily as it describes and elaborates lived human experience rather than as a set of dogmatic claims under the rubric of existentialism.

While some attention will be given to the historical origins of existential thought in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century – for example, in the philosophical work of Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard – the focus of the course will be on texts written in the last century. In this regard, we will be interested in how the existentialist 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 also take note of the pervasive presence of existential themes in contemporary literature, film and popular culture. The existential critique of rationalism, science and technology will also be considered.

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 refers not only to a disfunctional pathology 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 an original 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. We will read the Caribbean writer, **Frantz Fanon**, who offers 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 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 basic human experiences, such as identity and difference, freedom and



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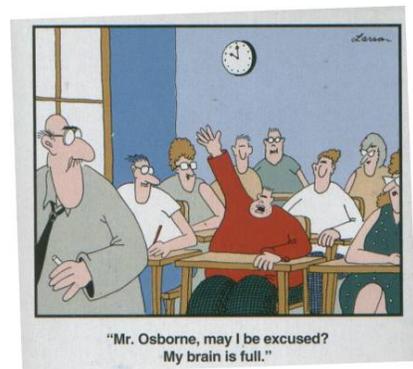
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compulsion, birth and death, hope and despair, anxiety, fear and courage, love and enmity, absurdity, meaningless, nihilism, boredom, joy, loneliness and being with others.

As a way to orient and guide our discussion, the lectures will begin by emphasizing two existential assumptions, each of which enacts an inversion and a displacement 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.* 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 must proceed first of all from the 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 original 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 the radical contingency that defines our way of being.

(2) *Being precedes thought and is irreducible to it.* 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 something *lived through*, and as such always exceeds our power to comprehend it. We simply find ourselves delivered over to the sheer fact of our existential situation and it is this inexplicable facticity that gives rise to all possible thought. No thought is ever able to render this “existential facticity” transparent to itself through reflection or conceptual clarification.



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)

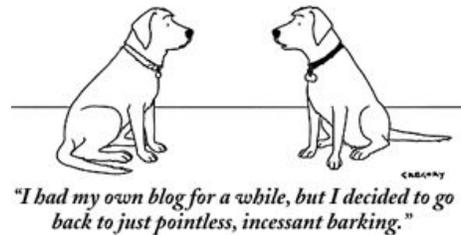
“It is completely correct and in the best order to say: ‘one can get nothing done with philosophy.’ Only it is misplaced to maintain that the judgment concerning philosophy has thereby been settled. For a small addendum follows in the form of an opposing question: if indeed *we* can do nothing with philosophy, 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 their office hours. (You should do this *at least once* during the term.) Please understand that your GE is your first contact for this course. They 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 your GE 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. Three texts must be purchased at the Duckstore or online. (See the list below and the bibliography at the end of the syllabus.) 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.

##### Texts to purchase:

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.
2. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*.
3. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

**Please note: the use of electronic devices in class, such as computers and tablets is permitted but only for class related activities.** Please keep in mind that these devices can distract your neighbors and easily disrupt the learning environment.

#### 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 three 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.

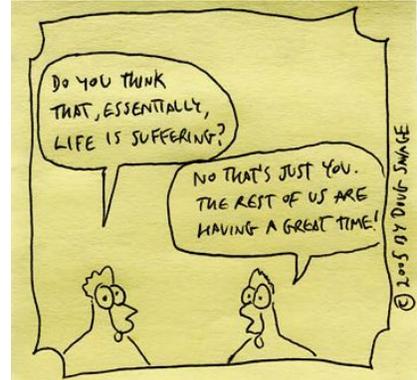
**Papers.** There will be two shorter papers assigned during the term (3-4 pages) and one final paper (6-7 pages) due during finals week. Paper topics will be assigned at least one week before the papers are due. These papers will ask you to interpret the readings and to provide textual evidence for 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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## PHIL 2II ~ Existentialism.

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

WEEK	DATE	AUTHOR	READING
I	1.07		Syllabus and Introductions Recommended: <i>On the Genealogy of Morals</i> , II §§1-7, III §28, F. Nietzsche. (On Canvas.)
	1.09	Marcel	“On the Ontological Mystery,” 9-30. (Canvas.) Recommended: “The Unconditional Imperative,” Karl Jaspers. (Canvas.)
	1.10		Discussion
II	1.14	Marcel	“On the Ontological Mystery,” 31-46. Recommended: “The Being of the Encompassing,” Karl Jaspers. (Canvas.)
	1.16	Camus	“An Absurd Reasoning,” 3-21. (Canvas.) Recommended: “The Myth of Sisyphus,” Albert Camus. (Canvas.)
	1.17		Discussion
III	1.21	Camus	“An Absurd Reasoning,” 21-48. [First paper assigned.]
	1.23	Tillich	<i>The Courage To Be</i> , 32-63. (Canvas.) Recommended: <i>The Meaning of Anxiety</i> , Rollo May. (Canvas.)
	1.24		Discussion
IV	1.28	Tillich	<i>The Courage To Be</i> , 64-85. Recommended: <i>Existence</i> , Rollo May. (Canvas.) <b>FIRST PAPER DUE</b>
	1.30	Tillich	<i>The Courage To Be</i> , 123-154. Recommended: <i>Existence and Freedom</i> , Calvin Schrag. (Canvas.)
	1.31		Discussion
V	2.4	Beauvoir	<i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , 5-35. (Purchase at Bookstore or online.) Recommended: <i>Existentialism is a Humanism</i> , J-P Sartre. (Canvas.)
	2.6	Beauvoir	<i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , 37-61 Recommended: “What is Existential Philosophy?,” H. Arendt. (Canvas.)
	2.7		Discussion
VI	2.11	Beauvoir	<i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , 61-78.
	2.13	Beauvoir	<i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , 79-124.
	2.14		<b>FIRST MID-TERM EXAM</b>
VII	2.18	Beauvoir	<i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , 124-173 [Second paper assigned.]
	2.20	Fanon	Introduction to <i>Black Skin, White Masks</i> , xi-xviii. (Canvas)
	2.21		Discussion
VIII	2.25	Fanon	“The Black Man and Language,” <i>Black Skin, White Masks</i> , 1-23.
	2.27	Fanon	Continued discussion of Fanon, <i>BSWM</i> . Recommended: “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” from <i>Black Skin, White Masks</i> , 89-119. <b>SECOND PAPER DUE</b>
	2.28		Discussion

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IX	3.3	Ellison	<i>Invisible Man</i> (Purchase at Bookstore.) Recommended: <i>Existential America</i> , G. Cotkin. (On Canvas.)
	3.5	Ellison	<i>Invisible Man</i> Recommended: <i>The Waste Land</i> , T. S. Eliot.
	3.6		<b>SECOND MID-TERM EXAM</b>
X	3.10	Kundera	<i>The Unbearable Lightness of Being</i> (Purchase at Bookstore.) [Final paper assigned.]
	3.12	Kundera	<i>The Unbearable Lightness of Being</i>
	3.13		Discussion
Finals	3.18		<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.  
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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Jaspers, Karl. *Philosophy of Existence*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971.  
Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or, Part I*. Princeton University Press, 1987.  
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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.  
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Marcel, Gabriel. *Man against Mass Society*. St. Augustine Press, 2008.  
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Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Yale University Press, 2007.  
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Schrag, Calvin. *Existence and Freedom*. Northwestern University Press, 1970.  
Yalom, Irvin. *Existential Psychotherapy*. Basic Books, 1980.