Course Description:

The existential attitude “begins with a disoriented individual facing a confused world that s/he cannot accept” (Robert Solomon). In the aftermath of the Enlightenment project, existentialists sought to make meaning of the brokenness (Marcel), dislocation (Merleau-Ponty), and ambiguity (de Beauvoir) of modern life. While its origins go back to the nineteenth-century (Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche), as a specific moment in the history of ideas, existentialism was created in response to the “age of anxiety” that defined the period from the end of World War I through the 1960s. We will explore the richness and depth of the canonic figures of existentialism, but also consider how that canon was itself shaped and what this entailed for how these thinkers have been understood. We will consider how literary giants such as Dostoevsky were incorporated into the existentialist fold and how inclusion into the canon recast the work of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and describe the role Jaspers and Heidegger in Germany and the Paris School of existentialism in France played in this process. We will conclude with a discussion of why existentialism was displaced by postmodernism, but nonetheless how existentialists continue to speak to this generation’s concerns about the meaning of existence.
Required Books:


• Readings labeled Moodle will be available on Moodle as downloadable pdf files

Grade Breakdown:

- Participation: 20%
- Paper #1: 15%
- Paper #2: 20%
- Paper #3: 20%
- Final Paper: 25%

Schedule

**August**

8/22 Introductions

  • Paper #1 (500 words): What is Existentialism?

8/29 Solomon 1-33 (Kierkegaard)

**September**

9/3 Labor Day—No Class

9/5 From *Fear and Trembling* (Moodle) & Pattison (Ch. 7) and Moyn (Ch. 10) in Judaken

9/10 Solomon 34-64 (Dostoevsky and Russian Existentialism)

9/12 Val Vinokur (Ch. 1) in Judaken
9/17 Solomon 65-101 (Nietzsche)
9/19 Charles Bambach (Ch. 11) in Judaken
9/24 Jaspers (Moodle)
9/26 Solomon 156-160 (on Miguel de Unamuno) and Eduardo Mendieta (Ch. 6) in Judaken
  • Paper #2: What themes were shared by the proto-existentialists of the nineteenth century (Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche)? (1000 words)

October
10/1 Solomon 116-146 (Heidegger)
10/3 Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics” (Moodle) & Peter Gordon (Ch. 2) in Judaken
10/8 Solomon 319-329 (Buber) and Solomon 170-172 (Kafka) & Counterpoint Interview with Paul Mendes-Flohr: http://www.wknofm.org/post/interview-paul-mendes-flohr
10/10 Paul Mendes-Flohr (Ch. 8) in Judaken
10/15 Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism
10/17 Solomon 187-198 & Judaken (Ch. 3) in Judaken
10/22 Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism” (Moodle)
10/24 Kleinberg (Ch. 14) in Judaken
  • Paper #3: How and why does Heidegger critique Sartre’s Existentialism is a Humanism in the “Letter on Humanism”? (1000 words)
10/29 Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, 7-73 & Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir documentary (Moodle)
10/31 Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, 74-159

November
11/5 Beauvoir, The Second Sex (Moodle)
11/7 Bergoffen (Ch. 13) in Judaken
11/12 Fanon, Chapter 5 from Black Skin, White Masks (Moodle) & Frantz Fanon: His Life, His Struggle, His Work (Documentary by Cheikh Djemai on Moodle)
11/14 Bernasconi (Ch. 12) in Judaken
11/19 *Waiting for Godot* (Moodle)
  • Paper #4: Compare and contrast Beauvoir’s existentialist feminism with Fanon’s existentialist analysis of racism (1000 words)

11/21 No Class—Thanksgiving Recess

11/26 Solomon, 343-352 and Woessner (Ch. 5) in Judaken

11/28 Norman Mailer, “The White Negro” (Moodle)

**December**

12/3 Cotkin (Ch. 4) in Judaken

12/5 Wrap Up

12/10 **Final Paper Due 8:30 am**

**Final Paper:** In consultation with me, each student will determine a topic drawn from any aspect of the course and write a 12-page paper on that theme. These are to be reflective, analytic essays akin to your shorter essays that rely heavily on an analysis of primary sources.

**Policies and Procedures**

**Class preparation:** The reading assignments for each class meeting are set out on the class calendar. Your job is to come to class having done the reading and thought about it carefully. To encourage you in this practice we will make it our practice to write in preparation for each class. On those days when you do not have a formal writing assignment, I want you to write a single paragraph (of less than one page) discussing one interesting, perplexing, insightful, engaging thing you encountered in the reading for that day. Please note, I am not interested in a summary of key points in the reading—this assignment is to single out a kernel that you think illuminates the text(s) or an obscure piece of the texts that you believe may hold a key to unlocking its broader significance. These will be collected at the beginning of each class (typed, double-spaced). These will form the base of your participation grade.

**Participation:** I define “participation” as active engagement with the ideas, readings, and conversations that are an integral part of this course. Class attendance is necessary for class participation, since you cannot participate if you are not present. However, you do not earn a very good participation grade simply by showing up to class. Rather, you must actually contribute by joining in the class discussion, posing questions, sharing ideas, and interpreting the readings with your classmates in a thoughtful and reflective way. Note: the best form of participation is not necessarily the person who speaks the most or with the greatest enthusiasm, but rather the student whose contributions or questions contribute the most to the general class engagement with the material—those
whose contributions facilitate our communal conversation of this material will see this reflected in the best participation grades.

I will record a participation grade for every class session so that this grade accurately reflects what actually happens in each class. As indicated above, the starting point for this grade will be your typewritten paragraphs on the reading that you bring to class. This will be supplemented by what you contribute to the classroom discussion. The final daily participation grade will then reflect what you brought to class each session.

Please note that the classroom is a public space and that I will call on students and solicit responses. Your engagement with the material can also be reflected in individual conversations in office hours or via email (when that is a suitable medium for exchange), or through non-oral means (for example, by bringing in article from a publication relevant to the class material or by sending me a link to such material). All these forms of communication will count towards your participation grade.

**General Class Expectations**

1. I expect you to come to each class prepared to listen, ask questions, discuss readings, and take notes. You should bring all necessary materials to class including all reading assignments for the day, your reading notes, notes from previous classes, and materials that I may ask you to prepare for a particular class session.

2. I recommend bringing questions that you have about reading assignments or about the previous class meeting if what we discussed is not entirely clear to you. I also recommend bringing a list of comments that you wish to make during class discussion so that you will be ready to contribute. If you are someone who has difficulty speaking in class for whatever reason, please speak to me about alternative ways of participating in addition to class participation.

3. You should come to every class session. Since all of our lives are complicated, however, you are allowed to miss two class periods without it having a negative effect on your grade. I would still like to be notified by phone or email about the reasons for your absence. Please note that this policy regarding absences includes what are sometimes deemed “excused” absences. All additional absences beyond the two permitted will adversely affect your grade for the course since you cannot participate in our community of scholars if you are not present.

4. If you are absent from class, it is your responsibility to speak first to your fellow classmates and then to me to find out what you have missed. Make sure you have at least one class “buddy” who can fill you on anything we have covered in class. I cannot reiterate for you what we have discussed in a class session, especially since much of the time the content will be provided by your classmates. But I can help to clarify what your classmates have explained. I frequently distribute handouts or make additional assignments in class, so you need to check with me to find out if I have done so for the day of your absence. You are still responsible for all material covered in each class period regardless of whether you attended it.
5. Arriving late to class is a distraction to your fellow students and for me. This form of distraction reflects negatively on your participation. Still, I would rather have you come to class late rather than miss it, so when necessary please enter quietly and quickly.

4. You are each bound by the Honor Code as elaborated in the Student Handbook. No violation will be tolerated. Please review the Student Handbook if you are unclear about the details of the Honor Code, particularly the definitions in Article I, Section 3. If you are unfamiliar with the definition of “plagiarism,” you can find it there. On every assignment, you should reaffirm the Honor Code by writing the entire honor pledge and signing your name. No work will be accepted without an Honor Code pledge. Studying together and engaging in peer evaluations of one another’s papers is always a good idea, but make sure that your work is your own.