PHIL 415-01, Existentialism, Fall 2004

Philosophy 415: Existentialism.

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Course Meets: Monday 6-8:30, Buckman 330

Introduction.

The Twentieth-Century witnessed the rise of a philosophical movement—Existentialism—that developed a massive cultural significance far beyond the limits of academic philosophy. Existentialist philosophy gave rise to political movements, it opened up new directions for painting, sculpture and literature, and its widespread popular appeal made it one of the most important cultural phenomena of the last hundred years. This philosophy is most famously associated with Jean-Paul Sartre, a French writer from the time of the Second World War, (though it has its origins earlier, in the Nineteenth-Century philosophies of Hegel and, especially, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche). Our study of existentialism will focus on the major works of the two most prominent figures of Twentieth-Century existentialism: Sartre's Being and Nothingness and Martin Heidegger's Being and Time. Though they are significantly different in their philosophical positions, these philosophers are united in their sense of the ultimacy and the irreducibility of the meaning-giving powers of human freedom. These philosophers will present us with the idea that human beings' deepest desire is for *meaning* in their lives, and that the primary issue in human life is whether and how we own up to this. Sartre emphasizes the responsibility we have for choosing our own lives and for defining for ourselves how our situations shall be meaningful. This leads him to a deep critique of the hypocrisy we practice in many of our regular practices of personal and social life. Sartre is a strong critic of religion and moral culture in general. Heidegger, while maintaining the insistence of our active role in the constitution of meaning, challenges the idea that the individual is the source of all meaning. Heidegger will take us through an investigation of the unconscious dimensions of our daily practical lives, and reveal to us the unnoticed sources of our values. Both of these writers have been massively influential, and their works are both exciting and personally challenging. Our route through their texts will lead us to probe deeply into questions of human psychology, into questions about our most familiar social institutions, and in general into the nature of freedom and value in human life. We will also look at the work of Gaston Bachelard, a writer heavily influenced by existentialism, and we will conclude by reading The Ethics of Ambiguity, by Simone de Beauvoir. Bachelard will take us into an investigation of the environments in which humans live. De Beauvoir focusses on the experience of the child as an entry-point into existentialism, and develops the political implications of this philosophical movement.

Tentative Schedule of Readings. (Consult this regularly to know your reading assignment. Keep in mind that this schedule is subject to change, so be diligent about checking your class email).

Week of:	Readings:

Aug 23 No class.
--Begin reading Nausea. Read at least up to p. 65.

I. Sartre and our Existential Condition: Description, Freedom and Bad Faith.

Aug 30 Introduction.
Sartre: Nausea.

Sept 6**--no class: Labor Day
Complete the reading of Nausea.
Assignment on Nausea due.

Sept 13 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, Excerpt for Introduction (pp 11-17),
--intentionality
--pre-reflective cogito [consciousness (of) self]
Chapter 1, "The Origin of Negation" (pp. 33-44, 54-56, 56-63)
--negatite, temporality

Sept 20** Sartre, Being and Nothingness, Chapter 1 (pp. 63-85)
--material on gambler, vertigo, anxiety, freedom
Chapter 2, "Bad Faith"

Sept 27** Sartre Being and Nothingness, Chapter 2, continued
--Joyce, "The Dead"

II. Heidegger and our Situated Being-In-The-World: Lived Space.

Oct 4 Heidegger, Being and Time, Division I, Chs. I, II, III
--methodological importance of looking to our "everydayness."
--being-in-the-world
--ready vs. present
--knowledge as intimacy, rather than knowledge as objectivity.
--knowledge as coping; practical know-how vs. theoretical know-that.

Oct 11** Heidegger, Being and Time, Division I, Chs. I, II, III
--lived space
--close/distant.
--"home"

Oct 18 --no class: Fall Break

Oct 25** Heidegger, Being and Time, Division I, Ch. IV

--the "they" and authenticity
Heidegger, Being and Time, Division II, Ch. 1, Section 51.
–being-towards-death
Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?"
--the Nothing, anxiety

Nov 1 Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, Chs. 1, 6.
Ch. 1, pp 3-17: phenomenologist's approach to home as origin; space vs. time
Ch. 1, pp 17-37: verticality and concentration
Ch. 6: corners: negatite

Nov 8 Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, Chs. 8, 9.
Ch. 8: intimate immensity: forms of concrete space; noticing how attitudes are embodied in spatialities.
Ch. 9: dialectics of inside/outside: spatiality of thought; open and closed.

III. Other People: Politics and Responsibility.

Nov 15** Sartre, Being and Nothingness, "The Look," pp 340-362
"Concrete Relations," pp 471-474
Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism"

Nov 22** de Beauvoir, Ethics of Ambiguity, Ch. 2

Nov 29 de Beauvoir, Ethics of Ambiguity, Ch. 3

Dec 6 de Beauvoir, Ethics of Ambiguity, Ch. 3

Course Objectives

This list of objectives will give you some idea of what you should be aiming to accomplish through your work in this course, as well as giving you an idea of some of the important principles behind my evaluation of your work in the class. You should note that some of these objectives pertain to the specific content of the course whereas others pertain to larger issues of philosophical and intellectual development in general.

--To become acquainted with some of the major philosophers who work in Existentialism and to understand their positions and arguments on key issues.

--To be able to evaluate the philosophical systems and theories of Existentialist philosophers fairly but critically.

--To be able to see the relevance of these philosophical debates to matters of central importance in human life.

--To develop more fully the ability to accurately understand difficult philosophical arguments.

--To improve the ability to participate effectively in serious and sustained philosophical discussions.

--To refine the ability to closely analyze and criticize arguments and theses.

--To develop skill in cogently and lucidly summarizing and explaining the philosophical positions of others in one's own terms, and responding critically to these positions.

--To develop the ability to think philosophically for oneself and give form to one's own philosophical perspective in dialogue with challenging and insightful texts.

Assignments and Expectations.

This is a 400-level course, so the expectations on your level of preparation and participation are high. I expect you to attend and to participate in **every** class, and more importantly to have prepared in advance for our class meetings. You will need to be self-motivated and diligent in preparing for each meeting of this class well in advance, since the content of each class meeting effectively encapsulates *one week* of regular classes, and since the material we will be reading is advanced and contains challenging philosophical content that often requires a good deal of focussed effort to understand.

I recommend something like the following strategy:

--by Wednesday, be sure you have begun reading for the next class

--by Friday, you should be well into the reading and you should have begun asking yourself active philosophical questions about it. If a paper is due, you should force yourself to begin some writing, perhaps sketching out different points you think you might cover in your answer, or writing out your preliminary thoughts in answer to the assignment question.

--by Sunday, you should be reviewing the reading and putting the final touches on your paper or you should be preparing a written summary for yourself of important points in the reading, questions that arose for you, things you didn't understand, etc. Don't think of this exercise as secondary. It will be very helpful and important to your ability to succeed in the class.

--Consistently waiting until the weekend to start your work for this class will not produce very good results. This material is best approached through sustained, regular effort at comprehension rather than overloaded last-minute work sessions.

The level of your engagement with the readings will probably be the single most important factor in determining how well you succeed. These texts are both exciting and difficult, and you need to approach them with enthusiasm and discipline.

7 x 1 pp (single-spaced) papers @ 10% 70%

–Regularly throughout the semester you will be required to submit a 1 page (single spaced) essay on an assigned question. Typically, the question will be based on an assigned reading, and the assignment will be completed before the material is discussed in class. Because two of the main purposes of these papers are (1) to encourage your development of the ability to comprehend these readings through your own efforts and (2) to ensure a high level of preparedness for the class discussion of the material, these assignments must be handed in **ON TIME**.

Group presentation in the final two weeks of class. 15%

--This will be a study of an assigned section of de Beauvoir's Ethics of Ambiguity.

Ongoing Participation. 15%

--I will be evaluating your record of attendance as well as the degree of preparation and active involvement with the material that you demonstrate by how you participate in class discussion. You should be conscious of your level of participation in this class and work to make ongoing contributions to class discussion.

Keep in mind that each class meeting represents a week of class. If you miss a single class, you should expect that your participation grade will be affected unless you put specific additional effort into participation, engagement and attendance for all subsequent classes. Missing two classes should be grounds for significant concern, will certainly affect your participation grade and will significantly undermine your relationship to the material. Missing more than two classes will jeopardize your ability to pass. Plan to attend every single class meeting. In case of extraordinary circumstances or in case of emergency, contact me as soon as you are able to discuss your situation.

--I will also periodically give homework assignments, the evaluation of which will be included in this participation grade.

--A note about evening classes: Evening classes that meet once a week are a special challenge, one which most people usually encounter only in graduate school, where seminars are often held in the evening and are usually three hours long. This format provides opportunities for sustained, in-depth philosophical work and discussion of the sort that simply cannot be achieved in 50-minute or an hour and 15-minute classes. However, it also requires stamina, energy and good planning on your part.

--I recommend working with the following checklist:

--Think carefully about your daytime schedule on Mondays. If you have other classes during the day, or are otherwise engaged in demanding activities of any kind, you may need to plan to take some kind of break to rest before coming to class at 6 p.m. Do not assume you can add this class onto the end of an already-full day without taking a break.

--Plan your meals so that you have enough nutrition to take you through the entire class meeting. Bring snacks, drinks, cookies, power bars, etc. to class to refuel when necessary - feel free to bring anything that is not disruptive to class itself. Don't assume you can make it through on an empty stomach.

--We will aim to take two breaks in this class, each one approximately 5-10 minutes long. During the breaks, be self-conscious about resting and refreshing yourself so that you will be ready to continue. Feel free to charge up and down the stairway as necessary, go outside for a breath of fresh air, do jumping jacks or

just put your head down for a while. Please keep in mind that I will expect you to return to class promptly at the end of the break.

Texts:

Sartre, Nausea, (New Directions)
Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel Barnes, (Washington Square Press)
Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson, (Harper and Row)
Bachelard, The Poetics of Space
de Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, (New Directions)
Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, Kaufmann (ed), (Meridian)
Joyce, Dubliners

If you have a documented disability and wish to receive academic accommodations, please contact the Office of Student Disability Services as soon as possible.