

## Introduction to Existentialism (Prospective Syllabus)

### Course Description

In the twentieth-century, existentialism was arguably the most exciting philosophical movement and inarguably the most exciting one for culture, arts, and popular thought. Existential thought focused on an old question—what is the human condition?—but reinvigorated investigations into this question by considering the darker and irrational aspects of the modern human condition, e.g., examination of the notions of consciousness, freedom, angst, despair, guilt, and bad faith. The course will be structured as follows. First, we shall examine how Nietzsche responds to the modern threat of nihilism and his proposal for a transvaluation of all values. Second, the religious existentialism of Kierkegaard will be considered as a contrast to the atheistic thought of Nietzsche. Finally, we shall consider the French existentialist thought of Sartre and de Beauvoir, who see human freedom and social relations of paramount importance for understanding the human condition. My hope is that we can evaluate whether existentialism—with its ideal of authenticity—can be a philosophy that speaks to us today.

### Texts

*The Nietzsche Reader*. Edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson and Duncan Large. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. [ISBN: 0-631-22654-0]

*The Essential Kierkegaard*. Edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Long. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. [ISBN: 0-691-01940-1]

*The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*. Edited by Robert D. Cumming. New York: Vintage Books, 1972. [ISBN: 0-394-71808-9]

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. New York: Citadel, 1976. [ISBN: 0-8065-0160-X]

### Schedule of Readings [each "\*" corresponds to 1-2 class sessions]

*Socrates, Plato, and the Traditional Philosophical Project*

\* Plato, *Meno* [selection]

\* Plato, "Allegory of the Cave"

### Unit 1: Nietzsche and the Threat of Nihilism

*Nietzsche: "God is Dead", Nihilism, and Living Dangerously*

\* *The Gay Science*, §125, "The Madman" (p. 224); §§264-290 (pp. 225-230); "The meaning of our cheerfulness", "How we, too, are still pious", "Morality as a problem", "Our question mark" §§343-346 (pp. 362-366)

*Nietzsche: Nihilism and Philosophy*

\* *Twilight of the Idols*: "The Problem of Socrates", "'Reason' in Philosophy", "How the 'Real World' Finally Became a Fable", "Morality as Anti-Nature", "The Four Great Errors" (pp. 459-473)

*Nietzsche: Genealogy of Morality*

\* *On the Genealogy of Morality*: Preface and First Essay (pp. 390-407)

*Nietzsche: The Overman*

\* "Zarathustra's Prologue" (pp. 254-263)

*Nietzsche: Eternal Recurrence*

\* "Of the Vision and the Riddle" (pp. 277-280); "The Convalescent" (pp. 282-286)

### **Unit 1 Paper Prompts**

\* Paper on Socratic Definition. [see above for the prompt from my introduction to philosophy syllabus]

\* How does Nietzsche's genealogy of morality and its concepts differ from the traditional philosophical project exemplified by Socrates' quest for definitions?

\* What does Nietzsche mean by "God is dead"? What is included under 'God' in this assertion? Who or what does Nietzsche think "killed" God?

### **Unit 2: Kierkegaard's Religious Existentialism**

*Kierkegaard: Criticism of Aestheticism*

\* "Early Journal Entries" (pp. 7-12) and "Diapsalmata" (pp. 38-46)

\* "Rotation of Crops" (pp. 50-62)

\* "The Seducer's Diary" (pp. 62-65)

*Kierkegaard: Faith and Morality*

\* *Fear and Trembling*, "Preface" (pp. 93-99)

\* *Fear and Trembling*, "Problema I" (pp. 99-101)

*Kierkegaard: Despair*

\* *The Sickness unto Death* (pp. 350-363)

\* *The Sickness unto Death* (pp. 363-372)

### **Unit 2 Paper Prompt**

\* Kierkegaard describes three "lifestyles" (aesthetical, moral, and religious). Try to come up with a distinct lifestyle (and give it a name) that meets Kierkegaard's criteria for counting as a lifestyle: describe what ultimately counts for a person living the lifestyle you pick, try to find an appropriate literary or real person to serve as a symbol for that lifestyle, and describe a kind of characteristic negative emotion that inevitably goes with that lifestyle.

### **Unit 3: French Phenomenology and Existentialism**

*Sartre: Phenomenology, Anguish, Nausea, and Emotions*

\* PS pp. 51-57, Selections from *Transcendence of the Ego*

\* PS pp. 58-73, Selections from *Nausea*

\* PS pp. 74-76, Selection from *The Emotions*

\* *Age of Reason*: pp. 245 (Mathieu's pure consciousness)

*Sartre: Freedom*

\* "Existentialism is a Humanism"; "The Resistance" (PS pp. 233-234)

\* "Cartesian Freedom"

*Sartre: Phenomenological Ontology, Anguish, and Freedom*

\* PS pp. 101-136

*Sartre: Bad Faith*

\* PS pp. 137-166

*Sartre: Facticity, Freedom, Situation, Responsibility, and the Desire to Be*

- \* PS pp. 167-170 ("Facticity")
- \* PS pp. 263-268 ("Freedom")
- \* PS pp. 268-277 ("The Given", "My Past", "My Situation")
- \* PS pp. 277-281 ("My Responsibility")
- \* PS pp. 292-296 ("The Desire To Be")

*Beauvoir: Freedom and Authenticity*

- \* "Ambiguity and Freedom" (pp. 7-34)

*Beauvoir: Freedom and Others*

- \* "Personal Freedom and Others" (pp. 35-73)

*Beauvoir: The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity*

- \* "Freedom and Liberation" (pp. 78-96)
- \* "Ambiguity" (pp. 129-155)
- \* "Conclusion" (pp. 156-169)

### **Unit 3 Paper Prompts**

- \* For Sartre, what is the relation between freedom and anguish? What is the relation of freedom to value? How are the answers to the two questions related?
- \* How does Sartre's example of his student, who must choose between fighting in the Resistance and staying with his mother, illustrate Sartre's existentialist conception of the choice of oneself?
- \* Compare Sartre's existentialism to Beauvoir's. How are they the same or different? Whose seems to you superior, and why?