

Phil 2170-01: Existentialism

Instructor: John Russon, Mackinnon 338

Office Hours: Thursdays 2:30-3:30 or by appointment

Course Meets: Tuesday and Thursday, 4:00-5:20 in MACK 031

Existentialism takes as its central concern the nature of freedom and the question of how there is meaning in human life. Existentialist philosophical analyses range from studies of the basic structure of meaningful experience in general, (e.g., studies of perception, embodiment, temporality, etc.), to studies of the personal, interpersonal and political relationships and structures that are the substance of our everyday lives. We will take our primary orientation in this course from Jean-Paul Sartre's masterpiece, Being and Nothingness, which is generally taken to be the definitive text of existentialist philosophy. We will contextualize our reading of Sartre with the reading of selected works of literature by Rainer Maria Rilke and Anne Carson. We will then turn to Martin Heidegger, possibly the most important philosopher of the past hundred years, and we will study his essays on art, history and technology (in the collection Basic Writings). We will conclude with a consideration of ethics and politics in an existentialist philosophy through a consideration of Hannah Arendt's The Human Condition.

Course Objectives:

1. The single most important objective of this class is to get each of you individually to take your own lives seriously, and to reflect with care, subtlety and insight on how you are shaping your life and what you can do to make for yourself a fulfilling present and future. The existentialist writers are not presenting you with dry facts about the external world, but are calling upon you to participate in reflection on your own experience and, through that reflection, to engage actively and self-critically in shaping *how* you exist.
2. In addition to offering profound and subtle reflections on how we make meaningful lives for ourselves, the writers we are studying this term are also some of the most rigorous and sophisticated thinkers our culture has ever produced. These writers have transformed the way philosophers understand knowledge, embodiment, desire, art, space, time, death, our experience of other people, politics and more. Study of these thinkers should teach you to be much more discerning and articulate in your understand of all of these aspects of reality.
3. A further important objective of this course is to introduce you to one of the most powerful and definitive cultural movements of recent human history. By studying these existentialist writers, you are learning about what has been going on in your world in recent past, and that allows you to understand something about what is happening in your world right now.

4. Finally, working with these challenging texts should help you to improve substantially in your skills of reading, writing, argumentation, analysis, synthesis and critical reflection, and with your appreciation of art and literature.

--With respect to all of these objectives, the extent to which you reap these rewards will depend directly on how much you devote yourself to the work and to pursuing these objectives.

Schedule of Readings:

You are required to complete the scheduled readings in advance of the class meeting. You must come to class have read and digested the assigned texts, and you must be prepared to discuss them in class. Bring the assigned text with you to class.

Date: Reading

Introduction: Rilke: The Course of Life.

Jan 8, 10 Rilke: "Duration of Childhood," p. 265
 Rilke: "Imaginary Career," p. 259
 Rilke: "Autumn Day," p. 11
 Rilke: "Washing the Corpse," p. 63
 Rilke: "Evening," p. 13
 Rilke: "8th Duino Elegy," pp 193-197

I. Sartre and Carson: First- vs. Third-Person Perspective

Jan 15, 17 Sartre: Being and Nothingness: Being-for-self; negation and freedom
 "Introduction," pp 11-17
 "The Origin of Negation," pp 34-44, and 54-64

 22, 24 Sartre, Being and Nothingness: Anxiety and Bad Faith
 "The Origin of Negation," pp 64-78
 "Bad Faith," 96-116

 29, 31 Sartre, Being and Nothingness: Other People
 "The Look," pp 301-303, and 340-362
 "Concrete Relations with Others," pp 474-491, and 497-508

Feb 5, 7 Carson, Autobiography of Red

 12, 14 Carson, Autobiography of Red
 Tuesday February 12: First essay due

 19, 21 —Reading Week—no classes

II. Heidegger: The World, Art and Technology.

- Feb 26, 28 Heidegger, "Origin of the Work of Art," pp 165-182
Rilke: "The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge," pp 91-115
- Mar 5, 7 Heidegger, "Origin of the Work of Art," (cont'd)
Heidegger, "Question Concerning Technology," pp 311-328
- 12, 13 Heidegger, "Question Concerning Technology," pp 328-341

III. Arendt: Politics and Action

- 19, 21 Arendt, Human Condition, Chs 1-2, pp 7-11, 22-28, 50-73
Tuesday March 19: Second Essay Due.
- 26, 28 Arendt, Human Condition, Ch. V, pp 175-220
- Apr 2, 4 Arendt, Human Condition, Ch. V, pp 220-247

Final Examination: April 8, 11:30-1:30

Texts:

Required:

Sartre, Jean-Paul, Being and Nothingness, Barnes (trans), (Washington Square).

Heidegger, Martin, Basic Writings, Krell (ed), (Harper).

Arendt, Hannah, The Human Condition, (Chicago).

Carson, Anne, Autobiography of Red, (Vintage).

Rilke, Rainer Maria, Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, Mitchell (trans.) (Vintage).

Recommended:

Crews, Frederick, The Random House Handbook, (Random House).

Assignments:

In addition to reading the assigned texts and regularly attending and participating in the class meetings, you are required to complete a number of written assignments, listed below. The precise details of these assignments will be handed out in class.

Critical Essay on Sartre and Carson	35%
--6 pp, due in class February 12	
Critical Essay on Heidegger and Rilke	35%
--6 pp, due in class March 19	
Final Exam on Arendt	30 %
--April 8, 11:30-1:30	

College of Arts Policy Statements

E-mail communication

As per university regulations, all students are required to check their <uoguelph.ca> email account regularly: email is the official route of communication between the university and its students.

When you cannot meet a course requirement

When you find yourself unable to meet an in-course requirement because of illness or compassionate reasons, please advise the course instructor (or designated person, such as a teaching assistant) in writing, with your name, id#, and email contact. [See the Undergraduate Calendar](#) for information on regulations and procedures for [Academic Consideration](#).

Drop date

The last date to drop one-semester Winter 2013 [courses](#), without academic penalty, is *Friday, March 8, 2013*. For regulations and procedures for Dropping Courses, [see the Undergraduate Calendar](#).

Copies of out-of-class assignments

Keep paper and/or other reliable back-up copies of all out-of-class assignments: you may be asked to resubmit work at any time.

Student Rights and Responsibilities

Each student at the University of Guelph has rights which carry commensurate responsibilities which, broadly, being a civil and respectful member of the University community. The Rights and Responsibilities are [detailed in the Undergraduate Calendar](#).

Academic misconduct

The University of Guelph is committed to upholding the highest standards of academic integrity and enjoins all members of the University community—faculty, staff, and students—to be aware of what constitutes academic misconduct and to do as much as possible to prevent academic offences from occurring. The Academic Misconduct Policy is [detailed in the Undergraduate Calendar](#).

Recording of materials

Presentations which are made in relation to course work—including lectures—cannot be recorded in any electronic media without the permission of the presenter, whether the instructor, a classmate or guest lecturer.

Resources

The [Undergraduate Calendar](#) is the source of information about the University of Guelph's procedures, policies and regulations which apply to undergraduate programs. If you find yourself in difficulty, contact the undergraduate advisor in your [program](#), or [the BA Counseling Office](#).