



# PHIL\*2170 Existentialism

Fall 2018

Section(s): C01

Department of Philosophy

Credit Weight: 0.50

Version 1.00 - August 29, 2018

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## 1 Course Details

### 1.1 Calendar Description

Existentialism is a philosophy built around the experience of human freedom. This course focuses on the character of the subject who makes choices, and on the personal and political responsibilities that attach to the making of decisions. The course will examine this and other themes associated with Existentialism through nineteenth and twentieth century representatives, which may include Kierkegaard, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus and others.

**Pre-Requisite(s):** 2.00 credits or (1 of PHIL\*1000, PHIL\*1010, PHIL\*1050)

### 1.2 Course Description

**"All the sculptures of today, like those of the past, will end one day in pieces...So it is important to fashion ones work carefully in its smallest recess and charge every particle of matter with life." - Alberto Giacometti**

Existentialism is a school of thought that emphasizes the individual's subjective pursuit of meaning. Existentialist thought finds its roots principally within the nineteenth century, popularized in the twentieth century and remains relevant in the present. The primary concern for existentialists, despite their numerous differences, is understanding the possibility of meaningful human experience in a seemingly meaningless world. For the purposes of this course, existentialist thought will be chiefly defined as an effort to sufficiently answer the following question: how does reflection on and investigation of human experience and its creative capacities give meaning to one's life – particularly in dark times?

Students will explore various themes within the course: death, love, freedom, resistance and self-creation. Students will examine key figures (e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon and José Ortega y Gasset) and their critics, and interact with paintings, poetry and film alongside themes in the course. PHIL 2170 complements studies in social and political philosophy, aesthetics, environmental philosophy and ethics.

Students will engage with various existentialist philosophers, artists and practices which deepen questions about life, loss, being and death. These figures, separately and together, present us with the fragility and possibility found in human life. The truths of our lives and existence, rather than abstracted away, are felt and lived.

## 1.3 Timetable

Lecture: Tues & Thursday, 11:30 to 12:50, MCKN 226

Office Hours: Wed, 12:00 to 1:00, MCKN 361 (or by appointment)

Timetable is subject to change. Please see WebAdvisor for the latest information.

## 1.4 Final Exam

Exam: Thursday, Dec. 6, 11:30 to 1:30 - Room TBA

Exam time and location is subject to change. Please see WebAdvisor for the latest information.

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## 2 Instructional Support

Instructor: Josh Grant-Young

Office: MCKN 361

Email: jgrantyo@uoguelph.ca

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## 3 Learning Resources

### 3.1 Required Resource(s)

#### Textbooks (Textbook)

Aho, Kevin. *Existentialism: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity, 2014.

Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V. Hong, and Edna H. Hong. *The Essential Kierkegaard*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*. Penguin, 2003.

Romm, James. S. *How to Die: An Ancient Guide to the End of Life*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

*\*Note: The instructor, for student use in assignments (or personal interest), will provide a list of additional texts and films of interest on Courselink. Students may access these additional materials through the University of Guelph library (subject to availability).\**

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# 4 Learning Outcomes

## 4.1 Course Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

1. Understand, explain and assess key concepts in existentialist thought and apply them to pressing modern issues in areas such as social and political thought, and environmental ethics.
  2. Prepare a sustained piece of philosophical writing in which a topic is articulated clearly and a stance on that topic is supported by appropriate and well-conducted research. Students will also formulate a creative piece of philosophical writing demonstrating their comprehension of key course concepts and novel approaches to practical application of them.
  3. Demonstrate a considerable breadth of knowledge and sophisticated sense of the complexities of social-political, environmental, ethical and aesthetic issues. Students will be immersed within past and present Existentialist thought, along with philosophical traditions from Ancient Greece and India, and aesthetic traditions in Japan.
  4. Develop research methods for gathering a wide range of primary and secondary source material, and synthesize this material and evaluate its credibility.
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# 5 Teaching and Learning Activities

## 5.1 Lecture

### Week 1

**Topic(s):** *Introduction to Existentialism*

Sept.6: "Introductions / What is Existentialism/ Why Practices and Art?"

**Readings:** "What is Existentialism" and "The Insider's Perspective" in *Existentialism: An Introduction*

### Week 2

**Topic(s):** *Death-Contemplation as Existential Practice*

Sept. 11: "Buddhism: Japanese Aesthetics, Impermanence and Reflection on Death"

Sept. 13: ""Seneca on Death, Existentialist Responses to Stoicism & Can One Truly Prepare for Death?"

**Readings:** *How to Die: An Ancient Guide to the End of Life* (pg. 1-33) and "Self & Dukkha" (pg. 154-158) in *Existentialism: An Introduction*

### Week 3

**Topic(s):** *Cultivating Silence as Existential Practice*

Sept. 18: "Silence, God & Introducing Kierkegaard"

Sept. 20: "Embracing Silence & Experiencing the World and Divine – Buddhism and Kierkegaard"

**Readings:** Excerpts from "The Lily Field and the Bird of the Air" (pg. 333-338) & "The Changelessness of God" (pg. 482-492) in *The Essential Kierkegaard*.

Media: "The Ministry of the Stove" (video link on CourseLink)

### Week 4

**Topic(s):** *Traversing Fragile Times: Walking as Existential Practice*

Sept. 25: "Psychogeography: Discovering Ourselves and Others in the World"

Sept. 27: "The Existentialist and Creative Spirit: Alberto Giacometti & Jean-Paul Sartre"

**Readings / Media:** Jean-Paul Sartre's "The Quest for the Absolute: On Giacometti's Sculpture" (see ARES) "Existentialism as a Cultural Mood" in *Existentialism: An Introduction*.

### Week 5

**Topic(s):** *Nietzsche and Artistic Creation as Existential Practice*

Oct. 2: **\*TEST IN-CLASS\***

Oct. 4: "Artistic Creation & an Introduction to *Birth of Tragedy*"

**Readings:** *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music* (pg. 16-59)

### Week 6

**Topic(s):** *Nietzsche on Life and Emotion*

Oct. 9: **NO CLASS**

Oct. 11: "*Birth of Tragedy* pt.2"

**Readings:** *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, (pg. 60-117)

## Week 7

**Topic(s):** *"Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia": The Project of Life"*

Oct. 16: "José Ortega y Gasset and Undertaking the 'Project of Life'"

Oct. 18: "The Self as a Tension" - Gasset & a Return to Kierkegaard

**Readings:** "Self & Others" in *Existentialism: An Introduction*, "The Balance Between the Esthetic and the Ethical in The Development of The Personality" in *The Essential Kierkegaard* (pg.71-83)

## Week 8

**Topic(s):** *Freedom, Responsibility, Existence – Existentialist Ethics*

Oct. 23: "Existentialism, Responsibility, Freedom: Jean-Paul Sartre"

Oct. 25: "Ethics of Ambiguity: Simone de Beauvoir"

**Readings:** "Ethics" in *Existentialism: An Introduction*

## Week 9

**Topic(s):** *The Shoah, Jewish Existentialism and Bearing Witness*

Oct. 30: "The Shoah & Jewish Existentialism"

Nov. 1: "Recognition, Faith, and Bearing Witness"

**Readings:** Forman - Barzilai, David "Agonism in Faith: Buber's Eternal Thou After the Holocaust" (see ARES)

## Week 10

**Topic(s):** *Existentialism and Resistance*

Nov. 6: "Simone de Beauvoir: The Second Sex"

Nov. 8: "Frantz Fanon's 'Africana Existentialism' and Political Resistance"

**Readings:** "Existentialism Today" (pg.141-149) in *Existentialism: An Introduction* and Sithole, Tendayi. "Frantz Fanon: Africana existentialist philosopher" (see ARES).

## Week 11

**Topic(s):** *Existentialism and Environmental Thought*

Nov. 13: "Becoming Part of the Whole" – Deep Ecology and a Brief Return to Buddhism & Stoicism

Nov. 15: "Co-existentialism – Moving Beyond Existentialism Strictly 'As Humanism'"

**Readings:** *How to Die*, (pg. 92-116)

## Week 12

**Topic(s):** *Existentialism and the Affirmation of Life*

Nov. 20: "Amor Fati – Returning to the Stoics and Nietzsche"

Nov. 22: "The Eternal Recurrence"

**Readings:** *How to Die*, 59-91 and "The Eternal Recurrence" (see ARES)

## Week 13

**Topic(s):** *Postscript*

Nov. 27: Course Debrief / Exam Review

Nov 29: Makeup Lecture (Oct.9) - "Building, Dwelling, Thinking: The Poetry of the World"

**Readings:** None

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# 6 Assessments

## 6.1 Assessment Details

### Test (25%)

In lieu of a midterm exam, students will write a short test in lecture with the following format:

Part A: Multiple Choice - students will demonstrate knowledge of textbook (Aho textbook) material from assigned chapters. 1 mark for each answer. **(/10)**

Part B: Short Answers - a list of 10 topics will be circulated to students beforehand by email. Students will choose three of these topics and write a short paragraph encompassing the following: (a) what is the concept? (3 marks) and (b) its importance for the course (2 marks). **(/15)**

### Existential Practices Assignment (20%)

Students will complete a **800 - 1000 word paper** choosing one of the 'existential practices' covered in the first portion of the course, exploring one of these practices (death-contemplation, walking, silence, artistic creation) in relation to the following question: "How has (x practice) informed my understanding of existentialism?" Student, in completing this assignment, are encouraged to immerse themselves within a practice.

Students will: (1) Give a **brief account** of the practice, (2) draw from course material (e.g. readings) to **connect the practice to texts from the course** and (3) discuss how **their own application** of said practice has **informed/deepened their understanding of existentialism**. Guidance for this assignment regarding format and outcomes will be provided on Courselink in the coming weeks.

## Final Paper (25%)

This paper will represent a cumulative exploration of course material. Students are expected to draw principally from the course material, though use of other materials on specific philosophers and some secondary sources are appropriate (further guidance on this will be posted on Courselink). The instructor will be available for consultation with students during office hours to aid in paper development and will ask students to contact them (by email or in person during office hours) to discuss the topic of their paper by **two weeks preceding the deadline**. The paper will be **1500 - 2000 words in length**. Students will be asked to frame their paper around **ONE of THREE** questions:

### **(1) “What can pain, tragedy and death tell us about what it means to be human?”**

Throughout this course, students will encounter various traditions (e.g. Stoicism, Buddhism) and thinkers who consider how pain, tragedy and death have a role in understanding our own humanity. Students choosing this paper should, given the length restriction, choose one of these themes (pain, tragedy, death) and one or two thinkers to explore the subject.

### **(2) “Can existentialist philosophy articulate a coherent ethics?”**

As the Aho text notes, existentialists (e.g. Sartre, Camus) are often criticized for their “rejection of moral absolutes and emphasis on individual freedom” (Aho, 105). Such a rejection, for critics, often complicates the ability for a coherent ethics. Drawing from at least one existentialist thinker from the course and one critic, students choosing this paper should endeavour to argue for a position on the question (Yes, or, No).

### **(3) “How might existentialism be understood as a political philosophy?”**

In the latter portion of our course, we explore the philosophies of Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon, along with contemporary sources that draw on the political importance of their work. Students should consider the question in relation to another: how do these existentialist thinkers approach issues of sex, race or colonialism through political resistance? We also consider the legacy of the Shoah (Holocaust) and its effect on existentialist thought. Jewish existentialism and writers (as well as artists from lecture) following the Shoah wrote concerning faith, recognition and bearing witness to the evils of Nazism. How might such efforts inform political philosophy? Students choosing this question should attempt to focus their paper on one or two thinkers in this endeavour, depending on their focus.

## Final Exam (30%)

Thursday, Dec. 6, 11:30 to 1:30 - Room TBA. Format for the final exam will be confirmed at a later date.

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# 7 University Statements

## 7.1 Email Communication

As per university regulations, all students are required to check their e-mail account regularly: e-mail is the official route of communication between the University and its students.

## 7.2 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 e-mail contact. The regulations and procedures for [Academic Consideration](#) are detailed in the Undergraduate Calendar.

### **7.3 Drop Date**

Courses that are one semester long must be dropped by the end of the fortieth class day; two-semester courses must be dropped by the last day of the add period in the second semester. The regulations and procedures for [Dropping Courses](#) are available in the Undergraduate Calendar.

### **7.4 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.

### **7.5 Accessibility**

The University promotes the full participation of students who experience disabilities in their academic programs. To that end, the provision of academic accommodation is a shared responsibility between the University and the student.

When accommodations are needed, the student is required to first register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS). Documentation to substantiate the existence of a disability is required, however, interim accommodations may be possible while that process is underway.

Accommodations are available for both permanent and temporary disabilities. It should be noted that common illnesses such as a cold or the flu do not constitute a disability.

Use of the SAS Exam Centre requires students to book their exams at least 7 days in advance, and not later than the 40th Class Day.

More information: [www.uoguelph.ca/sas](http://www.uoguelph.ca/sas)

### **7.6 Academic Misconduct**

The University of Guelph is committed to upholding the highest standards of academic integrity and it is the responsibility of 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. University of Guelph students have the responsibility of abiding by the University's policy on academic misconduct regardless of their location of study; faculty, staff and students have the responsibility of supporting an environment that discourages misconduct. Students need to remain aware that instructors have access to and the right to use electronic and other means of detection.

Please note: Whether or not a student intended to commit academic misconduct is not relevant for a finding of guilt. Hurried or careless submission of assignments does not excuse students from responsibility for verifying the academic integrity of their work before submitting it. Students who are in any doubt as to whether an action on their part could be construed as an academic offence should consult with a faculty member or faculty advisor.

The [Academic Misconduct Policy](#) is detailed in the Undergraduate Calendar.

### **7.7 Recording of Materials**

Presentations which are made in relation to course work—including lectures—cannot be recorded or copied without the permission of the presenter, whether the instructor, a classmate



or guest lecturer. Material recorded with permission is restricted to use for that course unless further permission is granted.

## **7.8 Resources**

The [Academic Calendars](#) are the source of information about the University of Guelph's procedures, policies and regulations which apply to undergraduate, graduate and diploma programs.

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