

UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

PHIL 2170 Existentialism
Winter 2011

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The central principle of existentialism is that there is no such thing as human nature, and no ultimate grounding for human decisions; there is only pure choice. In other words, existence precedes essence. Existentialism flourished in the mid 20th Century, with the work of Sartre, de Beauvoir, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, and we will focus on these philosophers. But we will also touch on earlier existentialists like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard (and his religious version of existentialism), and more recent existentialists like Levinas. We will discuss the relations between existentialism and phenomenology, surrealism, and deconstruction. Most important, we will focus on the main concepts of existentialism: freedom, subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, anxiety and death, humanism and revolution. And we will discuss the possible implications of existentialism for morality.

Texts:

Existentialist Philosophy, edited by L. Nathan Oaklander (EP)
The Ethics of Ambiguity, Simone de Beauvoir (EA)
--Coursepack (CP)

Readings:

Jan 11 Existentialism as Humanism, EP 310-19, Sartre
Jan 18 Ambiguity and Freedom, EA 7-34, de Beauvoir; and EP 253-58, Sartre
Jan 25 Freedom and Others, EA 35-96, de Beauvoir
Feb 1 Bad Faith, EP 258-78, Sartre
Feb 8 The Look: Shame and Sadism, EP 281-300, Sartre [during class, we will watch a 35-minute filmed interview with Sartre and de Beauvoir]
Feb 15 Existentialist politics. EA 96-159
Mar 1 Fear and Trembling (Abraham and ethics), EP 46-68, Kierkegaard; and Will to Power, EP 106 and 115-21, Nietzsche
Mar 8 Being-towards-Death, EP 168-9, 180-94, Heidegger
Mar 15 Surrealism, CP, Breton; and Absurdity and Suicide, EP 357-69, Camus
Mar 22 I-Thou (existentialism and God), CP, Buber
Mar 29 Existentialism and Gender, CP, de Beauvoir; and Existentialism and Anti-Colonialism, CP, Fanon
April 5 Existential experiment—no reading;
AND In-class test

Grading scheme:

Short essay on Sartre or de Beauvoir	25%
*Written question submitted at the beginning of each class	10
**Written discussion starter, submitted after the break in each class	10
Final term paper, March 29	40
In-class test, April 5	15

Note that there is no Final Exam in this course

* Two or three written sentences posing a question about the text. You must show that you have read the text and thought about it. The question could have the form: When the philosopher says X, does he/she mean A or B? Or it could have the form: Isn't the philosopher's position refuted by the following problem...? Your question could take other forms too, as long as it shows you have read the text. You will hand this in at the beginning of each class (7 pm).

** There will be small-group discussions at the beginning of the second half of each class. The topics will be given out in advance. Bring two written sentences indicating what position you expect to start with in the discussion. Of course, you are free to alter your views once the discussion begins. You will hand this in just after the break in each class (around 8:30 pm).

Small-group discussion questions:

Jan 14 Does willing oneself free imply willing oneself moral (EA 24)?

Jan 21 De Beauvoir invents and describes various figures of people who do not succeed in the existential balance of freedom and facticity, for example, the sub-man, the serious man, the adventurer, and the passionate man. Invent your own figure along the same lines, and describe in two or three sentences that person's success or failure in achieving that balance.

Jan 28 Is Sartre's example on pp. 272-73 (of the waiter in the cafe) really a case of bad faith, or is he exaggerating the self-deception involved? (Make sure you are using his definition of "bad faith" correctly.)

Feb 4 Some interpreters think that Sartre introduces the "caress" (pp. 299-300) in order to leave open the possibility of authentic inter-subjective desire that goes beyond sado-masochism. Other interpreters think that Sartre thinks the caress is just another, milder, form of sado-masochism, i.e. of "taking the other's body". Which do you think Sartre is trying to say? And do you think he is right? (Answer the first question in one sentence, and the second in two.)

Feb 11 De Beauvoir suggests that existentialists might be prepared to use violence for the sake of bringing freedom, but only if both the means and the end are genuinely directed towards freedom. For example, a people fighting for their freedom might be justified in taking violent action, up to a point, against informers working on behalf of the army that has taken their freedom (p. 149). Is her analysis correct?

Feb 25 Would it really be possible for us today to return to the value of "nobility", as Nietzsche's "will to power" advocates?

March 5 Is it possible to have an authentic relation towards one's own death?

March 12 Is suicide an appropriate choice for an existentialist?

March 19 Is religious existentialism a contradiction in terms, or is it a natural continuation of the engagement with the freedom of others?

March 26 Politics seems to involve consensus across groups, whereas existentialism seems to involve individual choices and encounters. Yet Fanon and de Beauvoir use existentialism as a ground for political theory and practice. Is this a good idea?

SEVEN STANDARD STATEMENTS – WINTER '11

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 e-mail contact. See the undergraduate calendar for information on regulations and procedures for Academic Consideration:

<http://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/undergraduate/current/c08/c08-ac.shtml>

Drop Date

The last date to drop one-semester **Winter '11** courses, without academic penalty, is **Friday March 11th**. For regulations and procedures for Dropping Courses, see the Undergraduate Calendar:

<http://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/undergraduate/current/c08/c08-drop.shtml>

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.

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:

<http://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/undergraduate/current/c08/c08-amisconduct.shtml>

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. It can be found at:

<http://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/undergraduate/current/>