

Existentialism

Syllabus

Spring 2006

Prof. Matthew Shockey

Meetings:

TBA

Texts:

Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

Shusaku Endo, *Silence*

Course packet with selections from Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre et al.

Albert Camus, *The Stranger*

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

Description:

Existentialism is perhaps best understood as the exploration of the conflict between Enlightenment individualism – which placed the autonomous, rational self at the center of politics, morality, and knowledge – and the ineliminable non-rational or irrational forces that shape our lives, particular those characteristic of the modern age – e.g., industrialization, world war, and mass-media-induced social conformity. In this course, we will explore our own situation as modern selves by carefully reading and thinking about a number of canonical and not-so-canonical existentialist writings. We will begin with the problem of faith and the individual's relation to God, looking at Soren Kierkegaard's treatise *Fear and Trembling* and Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence*. After that we will read some selections from Friedrich Nietzsche in order to explore the problematic nature of modern morality as well as the idea of aesthetic self-creation as a substitute for religious devotion. Then we will spend some time with Jean-Paul Sartre who, along with Martin Heidegger, developed existentialism systematically on the basis of a deep engagement with the history of Western philosophy. We will conclude with a brief look at a novel from one of the movement's primary literary figures, Albert Camus, and a longer look at Simone de Beauvoir's classic existentialist-Marxist-feminist work *The Second Sex*.

Course Goals:

You will be expected to learn the views and ideas of the people we read, many of which are difficult and often obscurely expressed, thus careful reading, writing and discussion will be at the heart of the course. But the ultimate goal is for you to think for yourself about what it is to be a free, individual human being. These goals are, in the end, inseparable, for the Enlightenment rationalists were at least right about this: until you can understand and fairly and critically examine the views of others, your own thought is not free.

Classes will involve both lecture and discussion, the latter centering around written student-responses to the readings.

Course Requirements:

1. Weekly one- to two-page “response papers”: 20% (2% each)

These will give you the experience of articulating your own reactions to the works we study, which will help you integrate academic learning into your own lives and thought. I will grade these on the basis of how well you try to do this, not on the basis of your ability to regurgitate facts from the readings, or parrot back to me thoughts I or the writers studied have expressed. These will also form the basis for weekly class discussions.

2. Participation: 20%

One meeting each week will be devoted solely to discussion, to which you will be expected to contribute.

3. Two exams: 30% (15% each)

These will be in-class, closed-book essay exams, one on the material from the first half of the course, the other on material from the second half.

3. One substantial paper (10 – 15 pages): 30%

This is not a research paper. Rather, you will take up one of the authors and issues we talk about in class, write a clear exposition of that author’s position or idea and then an engaged critical response to it. Your weekly response papers will give you a basis for this.

4. Optional (but no extra credit given)

Participation in a reading group outside of class of the French edition of *The Second Sex*.

Timeline

Weeks 1-2: Kierkegaard and Endo

Weeks 3-4: Nietzsche

Weeks 5-7 : Heidegger, Sartre, Jaspers

Week 8: Camus

Weeks 9-10: Beauvoir

Bibliography

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Heidegger, Martin (1993). *Sein und Zeit*. Tubingen, Max Niemeyer. (1927).

Heidegger, Martin (1998). *Pathmarks*. Trans. W. McNeill. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. (*Wegmarken* (GA 9)).

Jaspers, Karl (1971). *Philosophy of Existence*. Trans. R. F. Grabau. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.

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