

PHIL 342: EXISTENTIALISM

California State University, Northridge

Spring, 2018: TR: 11:00am 12:15

Prof. Robin Muller

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Office Hours: T/R 12:30 2:00pm [or by appointment]

I. COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The term “existentialism” gathers together a number of disparate threads in philosophy and literature. As a philosophical movement, it can be difficult to circumscribe, in part because a number of the thinkers considered central for twentieth-century existentialism (for example, Martin Heidegger and Albert Camus) renounced involvement in any movement, and in part because classifications of earlier thinkers as existentialist are necessarily retrospective. Nevertheless, “existentialism” is widely taken to stand for the philosophical examination of individual human existence, with an emphasis on questions of meaning, freedom, responsibility, alienation, and death.

In this course, we will trace the major developments of existentialist philosophy. Beginning with the widely acknowledged “forefather” of existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard, we will follow the evolution of existentialist themes from the nineteenth century through the phenomenological tradition of mid-twentieth-century Continental thought. Finally we will turn attention to questions about gender and racial identity, considering how existentialist thought finds timely application in social and political questions more broadly. Although we will occasionally look at the parallel developments of existentialist themes in literature, our perspective on that literature will always be philosophically informed.

II. COURSE MATERIALS:

The following materials are available in the CSUN campus bookstore. You are required to bring hard copies of the relevant texts with you to class:

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age* (Harper, 2010).
2. Gordon Marino, ed. *Basic Writings of Existentialism* (Modern Library, 2004).
[BW]

All other materials (indicated on your syllabus with an asterisk) will be provided on Canvas.

III. COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Careful completion of assigned readings; thoughtful engagement in discussion; and consistent presence in and contribution to the classroom are essential to the success of this course. Beyond these basic requirements, you will be asked to complete the following:

1. Short reflections* due to be submitted on Canvas *prior to* the beginning of each class.
2. One medium-length (5-6pp.) midterm paper.
3. One final exam.

* Reflections are considered, thoughtful responses to a specific question posed about the reading. You will find the questions posted on Canvas, and your response must be submitted *prior to* the beginning of the class on the day the reading is to be discussed; no late papers are accepted under any circumstances.

My grading system for the weekly reflections is as follows:

- 1) You get **one point** for completing the assignment, and **one additional point** for an especially thoughtful response. A thoughtful response is one in which you demonstrate careful consideration of the question, respond in a thorough way, engage directly with the text, citing specific examples, and/or raise insightful questions or concerns.
- 2) I do not award points for responses that are late, incomplete, or that fail to demonstrate completion of the reading.
- 3) If you hand in all the reflections and get one point on each of them, you get a B- (80) for this portion of the final grade.
- 4) For every reflection you *fail* to hand in, or for which you do not receive a point, your overall reflection assignments grade is lowered two points (e.g., from 80 to 78).
- 5) For every reflection on which you receive two points, your overall reflection assignments grade is raised two points (e.g., from 80 to 82, to a maximum of 100).

IV. SCHEDULE OF CLASSES:

I. Introduction

1/23: What Is Existentialism? Existentialist Themes in Philosophy and

Literature

Tobias Wolff, "A Bullet in the Brain"

II. Existentialism, Meaning, and Absurdity

1/25: Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*.

1/30: Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, cont'd.

2/1: Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, cont'd.

2/6: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §§1, 108-9, 125, 341-4. *

2/8: Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Prejudices of the Philosophers," from chap. 1 of *Beyond Good and Evil*.

2/13: Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Free Spirit," from chap. 5 of *Beyond Good and Evil*

2/15: Fyodor Dostoevsky, pt. 1 of *Notes from Underground* (BW)

2/20: Fyodor Dostoevsky, pt. 1 of *Notes from Underground* (BW)

2/22: Albert Camus, "An Absurd Reasoning" from *The Myth of Sisyphus* (BW)

2/27: Albert Camus, "An Absurd Reasoning" from *The Myth of Sisyphus* (BW)

3/1: Camus, "An Absurd Reasoning," cont'd. and "The Myth of Sisyphus" from *The Myth of Sisyphus* (BW)

III. Existentialism and Phenomenology

3/6: Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism" (BW)

3/8: Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism" (BW)

Last day to hand in midterm rough draft

3/13: Sartre, "Existentialism," cont'd.

3/15: Sartre, "Freedom and Responsibility" and Stephen King, "All that You Love Will Be Carried Away."

SPRING BREAK

3/27: Simone de Beauvoir, "Ambiguity" (BW)

3/29: Simone de Beauvoir, "Ambiguity," cont'd, and Joy Harjo, "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window."

Midterm paper due

4/3: Sartre, "Self-Negation" (BW)

4/5: Sartre, "Self-Negation," cont'd.

4/10: Sartre, "The Encounter with the Other" (BW)

4/12: Sartre, "The Encounter with the Other," cont'd.

IV. Existentialism, Race, and Gender

4/17: Simone de Beauvoir, Introduction to pt. 1 of *The Second Sex* *

4/19: Beauvoir, "The Independent Woman," from *The Second Sex* *

4/24: Beauvoir, "The Independent Woman," cont'd, and conclusion to

The Second Sex

4/26: W. E. B. DuBois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," and "Of the Passing of the First Born," from *The Souls of Black Folk* *

5/1: Frantz Fanon, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," in *Black Skin, White*

Masks *

5/3: Fanon, "Lived Experience," cont'd.

5/8: Ralph Ellison, prologue to *The Invisible Man* (BW)

5/10: Exam Review

V. GRADING POLICY:

Your grade for the course will be broken down according to the following rubric:

Attendance and participation: 10%

Reflections: 30%

Midterm paper: 30%

Final exam: 30%

1. Your final attendance grade for the course will be calculated according to the following scale:

A	(100)	0 absences
A	(95)	1-2 absences
B+	(87)	3 absences
B-	(80)	4 absences
C	(75)	5 absences
D	(60)	6 absences
F	(0)	7 absences

More than 7 absences may result in failure of the course.

2. If you are not in the classroom when your name is called, you will be marked late. Every 2 late arrivals will count as 1 absence. *N.B.* Tardiness in excess of ten minutes will constitute an absence.

3. If a *documented* emergency prevents you from attending class, you may earn back a maximum of 1 absence by writing (and receiving a passing grade on) a 3-page paper outlining the central argument of the text covered on the day you were absent; absence papers will be graded pass/fail.

4. Your attendance will be posted to Canvas each class session. If you believe I have counted you late or absent in error you must let me know *by the end of the*

day you were marked late or absent.

VI. METHOD OF GRADING:

A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F
100-94	93-90	89-87	86-84	83-80	79-77	76-74	73-70	69-67	66-64	63-60	59-0

VII. OTHER CLASS POLICIES:

1. All written assignments must be typed, double-spaced, and in 12-point Times New Roman (or comparably sized) font. No late assignments will be accepted; no exceptions. If you will have difficulty completing an assignment it is your responsibility to discuss the issue with me in advance.
2. Plagiarism is a serious offense, a violation of academic integrity, and a violation of the trust of professors and fellow students. It will not be tolerated. Plagiarism of any assignment will result in a 0 on the assignment(s) *or* failure of the course and will be reported to the University.
3. You should contact me regarding your grade *only if you believe there has been an error in calculating your grade*. I do not entertain requests for grade revisions (either on assignments or for the course) that are not the result of calculation error. If you think there has been an error in calculating your final grade, here is the procedure you must follow:
 1. Carefully re-read the course syllabus where the course requirements are clearly stated.
 2. Submit electronic copies of *all* of your course work *along with* records of your class attendance in an email that clearly explains why you believe there is a discrepancy between the final grade you received and the grade you think you ought to have received.
 3. Only after you have presented the *full* documentation and evidence for a discrepancy will I consider your grade dispute.
 4. Consideration of a grade dispute does *not* guarantee a change in grade.
4. Although I do not anticipate it, this syllabus and the course requirements are subject to change. Any changes will be communicated in class and announced on Canvas.