Existentialism

Selfhood, Authenticity, and Freedom in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, & Sartre

PHLU 3670
Fall Semester, 2008
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Office Hours: Fridays 2:30 - 5:30 pm; Tuesdays 5:30 on, and some Weds by appointment.
Mondays I can be reached by email at home. Many Weds. I'm at RH for meetings.

Course Goals. The existentialist movement in 19th and early 20th century thought developed out of several opposing sources, from romanticism and the 'disenchantment' of the universe to German idealism and phenomenology, along with their renewed emphases on freedom and the importance of individuals. In this course, we will examine and discuss a few key texts by major authors in this movement, such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre. We'll consider five principal themes that distinguish their work from earlier treatments of human nature or what it means to be a person:

1. the concept of "authenticity" (closely related to sincerity, integrity, autonomy and originality) and often contrasted with passivity, self-deception, crowd-following and "aestheticism" (a way of life ruled by attraction to enjoyment and "the interesting").
2. nihilism vs the search for a life that is meaningful to the agent living it; the possibility and grounds for a meaningful life.
3. existential freedom as control over moral character vs determinism, character-fatalism, and eudaimonist conceptions of happiness as the defining goal or telos in human nature. Is authenticity a different existential telos towards which persons need to develop to become fully personal beings?
4. the status of religious faith and our relation to death or mortality. Can death clarify what we ought to care about? Or does death render life ultimately meaningless?
5. our relation to time (past, present, future), including the temporal structure of our lives: is life just a sequence of moments or is it bound together in some way like a unified narrative? Is there a minimal unity as well as a stronger unity that is made by volitional effort.

All these themes involve two crucial ideas offered by the existential tradition that perhaps need further philosophical clarification:

- the idea of "will" or volitional activity as decision and also as self-motivation, commitment, active effort to engage in roles and relationships, resolve or determination to persevere.
- the idea that a person, as an agent who can be responsible not only for particular actions but also for her character, is capable of cognitive and volitional relations to her own psyche that are not simply functions of her social relations.

This reflexive or intrasubjective dimension of human life is held by several existential thinkers to


help explain how our volitional capacities can operate to achieve autonomy and authenticity, and how the temporal structure of our lives can be woven into a unified narrative or story rich with personal meaning.

However, this does not mean that the intrasubjective dimension is entirely independent of interpersonal relations as a constitutive fact of our lives – an issue that is tied to fundamental questions about whether there are any objective moral requirements. This class will not focus on moral theory, but several of our readings will have opposing or rival implications concerning the status of ethical values and obligations to others. Along the way, some attention will also be paid to questions of aesthetic value and possible social implications of existentialism.

**Required Texts:** (must be the right edition so we are all on 'the same page'):
(1) Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, tr. Hong & Hong (Princeton University, 1983)
(7) Course packet for all other readings. $20 paid by money order to Fordham University.

**Course Assignments:**
An oral report (or 3rd short essay) 15%  
Class presentation on one of the assigned readings (with 2-3 page written version for instructor).
Two short essay assignments 30%  
4-page essays in first half of semester.
Take-home test questions 25%  
Short-answer questions due four times during semester.
One final paper 25%  
10 pages + on topic agreed with me in advance.
Class participation 15%  
Includes attendance and advance reading to prep for active participation in class discussion.

**Attendance** is absolutely vital, since this course focuses on discussion and writing. More than two absences will seriously affect your in-class participation grade. Papers also need to be on time, since our semester schedule is tight here. As per standard policy, each day late is half a grade, unless (for extraordinary reasons) you arrange an extension beforehand.

**Honesty and Citation:** Cheating is the one unforgivable sin. Handing in work you did in another class without clearing it with me is cheating. Handing in work written by anyone else or from any secondary source without citing it (indicating the original source) constitutes plagiarism, and is grounds for failing the course. You are welcome to bring in ideas and quotes from secondary sources, but you must cite them either *by full footnotes or parenthetical references* referring to a Works Cited section at the end of the paper. Either method of citation is fine with me.
- This includes paraphrases: even if you reword what the author said, cite the page number.
- It also includes websites: give the full URL of the page you cite. Note that webpages should never be the only source you cite in college essays. Use the Routledge or Stanford webpages on Philosophy, not Wikipedia (which is not an authoritative source).
- Remember that your own interpretation of the primary texts is most important to me.
Course Schedule

Sept. 5: Historical Introduction: Sartre's definition of "Existentialism"
(1) Five major course themes introduced.
(2) Historical background to Existential Thought:
   – Classical eudaimonism, German idealism, and modern romanticism.
   – Empiricism and rationalism: Hegel's high point.
   – Reformation theology and Cartesian individualism.
   – The phenomenological school: Brentano and Husserl.
(3) Introduction to Jean-Paul Sartre's definitive essay, "Is Existentialism a Humanism?" (packet)

Sept. 9 - 12: Aesthetics as Non-Choice: Sartre and Kierkegaard
(1) Sartre's "Is Existentialism a Humanism?" continued.
(3) Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* vol. I selections: the aesthetic young man "A" in the "Diapsalmata" and "The Rotation of Crops" (course packet)
(4) Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the will and the concept of a person," from *The Importance of What We Care About* (course packet) – on wantonness vs. higher-order will.

Sept. 16 - 19: Kierkegaard on the Ethical Stage
(1) Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* vol. II selection: parts of Judge William's letter, "The Balance Between the Aesthetic and Ethical" (course packet)
(2) Flynn, *Existentialism*, first half of ch.2, 24-37 on Kierkegaard's three stages.
(3) Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, ch.15 on agency and the narrative unity of life.

Sept. 20-21: Critical Theory Roundtable conference at Fordham - LC.

Sept. 23 - 26: Kierkegaard on Religious Faith
(1) Kierkegaard's *Either/Or II* selections continued.
(2) Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, beginning through Problema I.
(3) Rival interpretations: singular ethical duties vs eschatological hope.

Sept. 30 - Oct. 3: Kierkegaard vs Nietzsche (Happy Rosh Hashanah)
*Short response essay #1 due (on Kierkegaard): Sept.30.*
(1) Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Problema II.
(2) Nietzsche's *Gay Science*, Books I-II, 73-129 (through section 72).
(3) Nietzsche's *Gay Science*, Book III, 167-198 (through section 154)

Oct. 7 - 10: Nietzsche's *Gay Science* continued
(1) Nietzsche's *Gay Science*, Book IV, 221-275.
(2) Flynn, *Existentialism*, second half of ch.2, 37-44.
(3) Begin Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* in *The Portable Nietzsche*: 565-656

Oct. 14 - 17: Nietzsche's *Antichrist* and Responses
(2) William Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought?*, ch.6 on Nietzsche (course packet).
(3) Flynn, *Existentialism*, ch.3 sections on Camus and Heidegger: 45-54.

**Oct. 21 - 24: Heidegger's Analytic of Dasein and Inauthenticity**
(3) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Part One, Division I, ch.IV (The They): 149-224
(4) Brief comparison with Kierkegaard's "The Present Age" (if time permits).

**Oct. 28: Heidegger on Authenticity and Death**
(2) Bernard Williams, "Persons, character, and morality," in *Moral Luck* (course packet)

**Oct. 31:** professor away at AAR conference; film *My Dinner with Andre* shown in class.
*Short response essay* #2 due (on Nietzsche or Heidegger): due in my box by Oct. 31.

**Nov. 4:** Election Day, no classes.

**Nov. 7: Heidegger on Authenticity continued**

**Nov. 11 - 14: Later Heidegger and Introduction to Sartre**
**Veteran's Day.**
(1) Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," from *Poetry, Language, Thought* (course packet)
(2) Powerpoint on Heidegger's conception of dwelling in architecture and in Tolkien's fantasy.
(3) Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Introduction on Pre-Reflective Consciousness: 3-31.

**Nov. 18 - 21: Sartre on Freedom and Bad Faith**
(1) Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, on Nothingness, Possibility, Freedom: 44-84
(1) Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, on Bad Faith: 86-116

**Nov. 25 : Sartre on Bad Faith** continued
(1) Flynn, *Existentialism*, ch.4 on authenticity and Bad Faith.
(2) A Frankfuritian analysis of Bad Faith

**Nov. 28:** No class; Happy Thanksgiving!

**Dec. 2 - 5: Sartre, Nagel, and Metz on the Absurd and the Meaning of Life**
(1) Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* on For-Itself and Selfhood: 147-158
(3) Thaddeus Metz, "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life" (packet).

**Dec. 9: Alternatives: Nihilism vs Logotherapy:**
(1) Flynn, *Existentialism*, ch.5: Existential Thinkers and Social/Political Questions
(2) Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, selections (course packet)
(1) Presentation of themes from *Will as Commitment and Resolve*: selections from ch.13 on aretaic commitment.

*Final papers due*