

Existentialism (PHIL 3670)

Christopher R. Myers (cm Myers28@fordham.edu)

Fordham University, Fall 2026

Keating Hall 205: Tues. & Fri. 2:30pm-3:45pm

Office Hours (Collins Rm. 121): TWF 4:00pm - 6:00pm & by appt.



In this course we will study the defining writers, texts, and themes of existentialist philosophy. We will begin by examining some of the writings which helped establish existentialism within France during the 1940's. Then we will examine its philosophical beginnings in the 19th century. This will enable us to move back to the major texts and ideas of 20th century existentialism in pursuit of an essentially philosophical understanding of existentialism (beyond its influence on literature and culture).

Course description:

The aim of our course is to examine some of the core themes of existentialist philosophy, including death, absurdity, anxiety, facticity, the creation of meaning, bad faith, and otherness. What connects these themes is their fundamental importance for the meaning and nature of human existence. As we will see, however, these themes are very complex and near impossible to describe without simplifying the depth of human existence. In order to achieve a better understanding of these themes, we will study some of the writers and philosophers most closely associated with existentialist philosophy, including Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Heidegger, and Fanon. Although the term 'existentialism' was not formalized until after many of these writers were dead, we will see that the themes of existentialist philosophy have a long history and can be traced back to radical transformations of society during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Required texts:

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. [*Notes from Underground*](#), trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Vintage, 1994. ISBN #: 978-0679734529

Heidegger, Martin. [*Being and Time*](#), trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008. ISBN#: 978-0061575594

Sartre, Jean-Paul. [*Existentialism is a Humanism*](#), trans. Carol Macomber. Yale University Press, 2007. ISBN#: 978-0300115468

Recommended texts:

de Beauvoir, Simone. [*Ethics of Ambiguity*](#), trans. Bernard Frechtman. New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2018. ISBN#: 978-1504054225
Kierkegaard, Søren. [*Fear and Trembling/Repetition*](#), trans. Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983. ISBN#: 978-0691020266
Nietzsche, Friedrich. [*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*](#), trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Modern Library, 1995. ISBN#: 978-0679601753

Course requirements:

[1] Attendance/participation	10%
[2] Coursework (on Perusall)	20%
[3] Existentialist Literature Presentation	15%
[4] Midterm Exam	20%
[5] Final Exam	20%
[6] Final Symposium	15%

[1] Attendance/participation:

I will take attendance at the beginning of each class. You are allowed two unexcused absences before I must start taking points away from your overall attendance/participation grade. I will excuse an absence for a religious holiday, a serious illness, a death in your immediate family, or your participation in a university-sponsored holiday. To get an absence excused, you must send me a formal, written explanation *before* the class in question.

Your attendance grade is also dependent on (a) your active participation during class time, and (b) your bringing all required reading materials to class (either by physical copy or computer access). Concerning class participation: our in-person class meetings will be devoted *entirely* (100%) to discussion about the assigned readings, and this means that your active participation during class time is absolutely essential. My expectation is that you will not only maintain strong attendance throughout the semester, but also contribute your thoughts during class discussions and act respectfully toward your classmates. Listen thoughtfully, keep an open mind, and contribute what you think. Philosophy is most worthwhile when it is enlivened by discussion and exchange.

[2] Coursework (on Perusall):

For all of our assigned readings this semester, you must complete an online Perusall assignment (via the course Blackboard page). Perusall allows students to collaboratively make annotations and comments on a reading. Everyone in the class is required to post at least *three* comments on our reading(s) in advance of every class meeting, and these comments can be posted directly onto the reading itself or in response to one of your classmates' previous comments. Your grade on these assignments will be based on completion. At the same time, I reserve the right to take off points for inaccuracy or irrelevance.

The deadline for all coursework on Perusall is 1:30pm on the day of the class in question. No late coursework will be accepted as the purpose of these assignments is to create conversation about the readings in advance of our discussions in class.

[3] Existentialist Literature Presentation:

This semester each of you will be assigned to a small group and required to deliver a 30-minute presentation on one of the following works of literature: Albert Camus' *The Stranger*; (2) Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*; (3) Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*; and (4) Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*; (5) Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*; and (6) Simone de Beauvoir's *The Woman Destroyed*. The purpose of the assignment is to broaden your understanding of existentialism and to practice your skills at group work, exposition, and analysis. You will receive your group assignment in early September and it is expected that you will be read the book, be present on the day of your presentation, and be prepared to discuss the book in front of the rest of the class.

Your group presentation should do two things: (a) provide an exegesis of the book that clarifies its key themes and describes its plot and style; and (b) participate in a 'fishbowl' group discussion that engages the book intellectually and reflects on its relevance for existentialism as a whole. Concerning (a): your group will be responsible for providing a summary of the book, identifying its central themes and philosophical claims, and relating the book to previous assigned readings. It's your job to help your classmates understand the relevance of this work for our class, and this will require detail and explanation. This part of your presentation should only last about 5-12 minutes. Concerning (b): after you have summarized the book, your group will then take part in a collective discussion in which you reflect on the book's themes and share your thoughts on its overall appeal and persuasiveness. It is recommended that you organize this discussion by preparing 5-7 discussion questions that will facilitate participation from each member of the group. This part of your presentation should involve more discussion of the way in which your book intersects with the fundamental themes of existentialism. This part of your presentation should also last about 15-20 minutes.

Your group will be graded on the accuracy of your presentation, the quality of your delivery, and your ability to engage in thoughtful discussion and analysis. Please consult our class' 'Guide for Class Presentations' handout for more detailed information and requirements.

[4] Midterm Writing Exam + [5] Final Writing Exam

We will have two writing exams this semester: a midterm exam (Tuesday Oct. 27th) and a final exam (Tuesday Dec. 8th). The purpose of these writing exams is to demonstrate your comprehension of the main themes and arguments of our assigned authors, as well as your ability to compare and evaluate these positions. These exams will be conducted in class and they must be written in line with the requirements laid out in the provided writing prompts. I will provide more information on the writing prompt for each of these exams in advance.

[6] Final Symposium:

We will spend our final exam period on Tuesday December 15th holding a symposium in which everyone will deliver a presentation and take a position on the following question: *why do we need existentialist philosophy today?* The purpose of these presentations is not to reflect generally on the value of existentialism, but rather to take a *specific* position on some single area or respect in which existentialist philosophy has something important to say to 21st century readers. With this in mind, there will be three key requirements for these presentations: (1) you must remain under two minutes, (2) you cannot use notes during your presentation; and (3) you are allowed to use only one presentation slide. The aim of these presentations is to contribute original thoughts on the applications of the themes of our class, so I want to see you bring your voice to this assignment and try to think outside of the box. Your presentation will be graded based on the quality of your thesis, the effectiveness of your delivery, and the accuracy of your exegesis of our assigned authors. Your presentation will also have a chance to win a prize, which will be decided by a class vote at the end of the symposium. I will provide more information on this assignment closer to the end of the semester.

Course policies:

Late penalty policy:

For every day (weekend days included) that an assignment is late, this assignment will be penalized. If you suspect that you will not be able to turn an assignment in on time, reach out to me *at least 24 hours in advance* and we can talk about extending the deadline. I am considerably generous about extending paper deadlines - but I will not extend deadlines *immediately before the deadline*. No late coursework on Perusall will be accepted.

Technology policy:

During class time you are permitted to use a computer, laptop, or tablet. Your use of these devices is restricted to class use, however, and I expect that you will not allow these devices to divert your attention or the attention of others away from discussion. Remember: this course revolves around active discussion and participation. If your use of electronic devices inhibits class discussion, I reserve the right to adjust our technology policy accordingly.

Academic integrity:

All students are expected to abide by the rules of academic integrity as laid out in the Fordham Handbook. This especially includes plagiarism. Any assignment that is found to have involved plagiarism will automatically receive a failing grade. Furthermore, your professors (including me) are obliged to automatically report all cases of plagiarism to the Dean. With this in mind, it's a good idea to familiarize yourself with what qualifies as plagiarism.

The Fordham Handbook defines plagiarism as follows: "Plagiarism occurs when individuals attempt to present as their own what has come from another source. Plagiarism takes place whether such theft is accidental or deliberate." In a nutshell, plagiarism involves taking

credit for someone else's work in one's own writing – intentionally *or* unintentionally. Plagiarism might mean copying an idea or quotation exactly as it is written elsewhere (in a book, online article, Chat GPT, a newspaper, etc.), paraphrasing an idea or quotation without properly including a citation, or using an idea that is not your own without citing the author(s) of this idea. To avoid plagiarism make sure you properly cite the sources you use. If you're unsure of whether you are properly citing something, come and ask me before you submit the assignment. Stay on the safe side.

To avoid plagiarism make sure you properly cite the sources you use. If you're unsure of whether you are properly citing something, come and ask me before you submit the assignment. Stay on the safe side.

ChatGPT and GenerativeAI policy:

ChatGPT is capable of many things, but ChatGPT is not you. Having a bot answer questions or generate essays is not the same as working out your own thoughts. This semester our class will adhere to three guidelines concerning AI technology: (1) If you use ChatGPT/GenAI in any way, you *must* cite it—that is to say, you must cite the AI technology you used, indicate what prompt you gave it, and indicate how you revised it. (2) Uses of ChatGPT/GenAI without citation will be penalized. Submitting ChatGPT/GenAI products without citation is a violation of Fordham's academic integrity policies—specifically, it is a form of plagiarism and outsourcing. (3) ChatGPT/GenAI are tools and they are here to stay—so we will keep our channels of communication open about their advantages and the best frameworks in which to deploy them. Additionally, we will use the reading skills we develop in this class to reflect critically *on* information that ChatGPT/GenAI provide about the history of philosophy. We will do this during class time, but you might consider doing this also in your coursework paragraphs.

Students with special needs and/or disabilities:

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, all students, with or without disabilities, are entitled to equal access to the programs and activities of Fordham University. If you believe that you have a disability that may interfere with your ability to participate in the activities, classwork, or assessment of the object of this course, you may be entitled to accommodations. Please schedule a meeting to speak with someone at the Office of Disability Services (Phone number: 718-817- 0655). (Locations: Lincoln Center – Lowenstein, Room 207; Rose Hill - O'Hare Hall, Lower Level).

Further study in philosophy:

For further information on majoring or minoring in philosophy, contact the Department Associate Chair for Undergraduate Studies: Professor Specker-Sullivan (lspeckersullivan@fordham.edu).

Reading Schedule:

[Any readings that are not in the required texts will be available on Blackboard. They are marked below with an asterisk (*)]

<u>Date:</u>	<u>Reading:</u>	<u>Notes:</u>
--------------	-----------------	---------------

Friday Aug. 28 th	(Introduction to Existentialism)	
------------------------------	----------------------------------	--

Existentialism during the 1940's: what is existentialism?

Tuesday Sept. 1 st	de Beauvoir: "What is Existentialism?"* & Sartre: <i>Existentialism Is a Humanism</i>	
-------------------------------	--	--

Friday Sept. 4 th	Camus: <i>Myth of Sisyphus</i> , Selections*	
------------------------------	--	--

Existentialism during the 19th century: faith, unreason, decadence, and death

Tuesday Sept. 8 th	Kierkegaard: <i>Fear and Trembling</i> , pp. 1-34	
-------------------------------	---	--

Friday Sept. 11 th	Kierkegaard: <i>Fear and Trembling</i> , pp. 34-67	
-------------------------------	--	--

Tuesday Sept. 15 th	Dostoevsky: <i>Notes from Underground</i> , "Part One: Underground"	
--------------------------------	--	--

Friday Sept. 18 th	Dostoevsky: <i>Notes from Underground</i> , "Part Two: Apropos of the Snow" Selections	
-------------------------------	---	--

Tuesday Sept. 22 nd	Nietzsche: "Birth of the Tragic Idea"	
--------------------------------	---------------------------------------	--

Friday Sept. 25 th	Nietzsche: <i>Joyful Science</i> , Selections	
-------------------------------	---	--

Tuesday Sept. 29 th	Nietzsche: <i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i> , Selections	
--------------------------------	---	--

Friday Oct. 2 nd	Nietzsche: <i>On the Genealogy of Morality</i> , "Preface" & "First Essay"	
-----------------------------	---	--

Tuesday Oct. 6 th	<u>Existential literature discussion #1:</u> Camus' <i>The Stranger</i> & Kafka's <i>The Metamorphosis</i>	
------------------------------	--	--

Friday Oct. 9 th	-- No class meeting ---	
-----------------------------	-------------------------	--

Tuesday Oct. 13 th	-- No class meeting ---	
-------------------------------	-------------------------	--

Existentialism during the early 20th century: existence, being, time, and anxiety

Friday Oct. 16 th	Heidegger: <i>Being and Time</i> , §4-5 (32-40)	
------------------------------	--	--

<u>Date:</u>	<u>Reading:</u>	<u>Notes:</u>
Tuesday Oct. 20 th	Heidegger: <i>Being and Time</i> , §9, §11-12, & §14-16 (67-71, 76-86, 91-107)	
Friday Oct. 23 rd	Heidegger: <i>Being and Time</i> , §25-27 (149-168)	
Tuesday Oct. 27 th	-- Midterm Exam --	
Friday Oct. 30 th	Heidegger: <i>Being and Time</i> , §28-31 & §35 (169-188, 211-214)	
Tuesday Nov. 3 rd	Heidegger: <i>Being and Time</i> , §40-43 (228-256)	
Friday Nov. 6 th	Heidegger: <i>Being and Time</i> , §46-47 & 50-53 (279-285, 293-311)	
Tuesday Nov. 10 th	<u>Existential literature discussion #2:</u> Ellison's <i>Invisible Man</i> & Kundera's <i>The Unbearable Lightness of Being</i>	

Existentialism during the 1940's: existence, freedom, nothingness, and the other

Friday Nov. 13 th	Sartre's <i>Being and Nothingness</i> , Selections I*	
Tuesday Nov. 17 th	Sartre's <i>Being and Nothingness</i> , Selections II*	
Friday Nov. 20 th	de Beauvoir: <i>Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , "Ambiguity and Freedom"*	
Tuesday Nov. 24 th	de Beauvoir: <i>Second Sex</i> , "Introduction"*	
Friday Nov. 27 th	-- No class meeting ---	
Tuesday Dec. 1 st	Fanon: <i>Black Skin, White Masks</i> , "Introduction" and "Chapter Five"*	
Friday Dec. 4 th	<u>Existential literature discussion #3:</u> Sartre's <i>Nausea</i> & de Beauvoir's <i>The Woman Destroyed</i>	
Tuesday Dec. 8 th	-- Final Exam --	
Tuesday, Dec. 15 th	-- Final Presentation Symposium --	