

## EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy 311  
Fall, 2017

Dr. Joel R. Smith  
Skidmore College

A study of the central ideas and values of existential philosophy as found in the literary and philosophical writings of such thinkers as Kafka, Camus, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Buber, and Nietzsche.

- Texts:**
1. Buber, Martin, I and Thou, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971).
  2. Camus, Albert, The Plague, tr. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1988 or 1989).
  3. Camus, Albert, The Stranger, tr. Matthew Ward (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1991).
  4. Kafka, Franz, The Metamorphosis, tr. Stanley Corngold (New York: Bantam Books, 1972 not 1996 and not 2013).
  5. Kierkegaard, Soren, Either/Or: A Fragment of Life, tr. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin Books, 1992).
  6. Kierkegaard, Soren, Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de silentio, tr. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).
  7. Kierkegaard, Soren, The Sickness unto Death, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).
  8. Nietzsche, Friedrich, Beyond Good and Evil, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1989 not 1966)
  9. Sartre, Jean-Paul, Existentialism Is a Humanism, tr. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
  10. Tolstoy, Leo, The Death of Ivan Ilych and Other Stories, tr. Rosemary Edmonds (New York: Penguin Books, 1960 or 1989).
  11. Wiesel, Elie, Night, tr. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

### **BOUNDARY SITUATIONS: WAKING UP TO DESPAIR**

#### September

- 6: (a) Gill/Sherman, "from The Fabric of Existentialism" (handout);  
(b) Sartre, Existentialism Is a Humanism (17-72 **only**);  
(c) Wiesel, Night; Film: "Night and Fog."
- 11: Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilych.
- 13: Kafka, The Metamorphosis.
- 18: Camus, The Stranger;  
Sartre, A Commentary on *The Stranger* (pp. 73-98).
- 20: Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus & An Absurd Reasoning (handout).
- \*\*22(Friday): Essay #1 due by 4:00 sharp in Ladd 217. (No email version.)

## KIERKEGAARD ON THE AESTHETIC, THE ETHICAL, AND THE RELIGIOUS

- 25: Either/Or: A Fragment of Life edited by Victor Eremita: Preface (27-37)--Diapsalmata (39-57)--Crop Rotation (223-241).  
27: Either/Or: The Seducer's Diary (247-312).  
\*\*29: optional discussions outside of class on Camus, The Plague.

### October

- 2: Either/Or: The Seducer's Diary (312-376).  
4: Either/Or: The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage (383-391, 412-415, 424-429, 432-435, 440-474).  
  
9: Either/Or: Equilibrium between Aesthetic & Ethical (475-511).  
11: Either/Or: Equilibrium between Aesthetic & Ethical (511-556).  
\*\*13: optional discussions outside of class on Buber, I and Thou.  
  
16: Either/Or: Equilibrium between Aesthetic & Ethical (556-590);  
Last Word -- The Edifying in the Thought that  
Against God We Are Always in the Wrong (591-609).  
18: (a) Abraham/Isaac story from Genesis (handout);  
(b) Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de  
*silentio*: Preface--Attunement--Speech in Praise of Abraham--  
Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical? (38-95).  
  
23: Fear and Trembling: Is there an absolute duty to God?--Was it  
ethically defensible of Abraham to conceal his purpose from  
Sarah, from Eleazar, from Isaac? (96-147).  
25: The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition) for  
Upbuilding and Awakening by Anti-Climacus: Despair is the  
Sickness unto Death (1-42).  
  
30: The Sickness unto Death: Despair Defined by Consciousness (42-74).

### November

- 1: The Sickness unto Death: Despair is Sin (77-131).  
  
6: "Truth is Subjectivity" from Concluding Unscientific Postscript to  
Philosophical Fragments by Johannes Climacus. (handout)  
May, "To Be and Not to Be." (handout).  
8: Bernasconi, 'I Too Was Superfluous' & 'I Am Obligated to Want Others  
to Have Freedom' (handout);  
Blackham, Jean-Paul Sartre (handout);  
Bergoffen, Contesting Intentional Anxieties: *The Ethics of  
Ambiguity*" (handout).

## NIETZSCHE ON THE FREE SPIRIT BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

13: Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil: Preface (Nietzsche's Preface, not Translator's Preface) & On the Prejudices of Philosophers (1-32).

15: Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil: The Free Spirit (33-56).

20: Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil: What Is Religious (57-76).

\*\*21 (Tuesday): Essay #2 due in Ladd 217 by 4:00 (no email version).

22: Thanksgiving break.

27: Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil: Natural History of Morals (95-118).

29: Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil: Our Virtues (143-170).

### December

4: (a) Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil: What Is Noble (199-237);

(b) Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil: Epigrams (79-94).

6: Review Nietzsche.

\*\*12 (Tuesday, first day of exams): Essay #3 due at 12:00 noon sharp in Ladd 217. (An email version will **not** be accepted.)

There is no final exam for this course.

### Course Requirements:

**(1) Participation (20%)** will count 20% of your final course grade and includes: (a) participation in discussion, (b) class attendance, (c) study guides, and (d) discussion focus--

**(a) Participation in class discussion** is essential to your learning in this course, so I urge you to participate fully and actively in our class discussions. I have strategies to help shy people, so come talk to me.

**(b) ATTENDANCE IS REQUIRED AT ALL CLASSES** except for certified medical illness, religious holidays, or family emergencies. (Don't even think about missing the class just before or after Thanksgiving break.) Even one unexcused absence will severely damage your grade. The following guidelines express my expectations about participation:

A or A- = attend all classes and make useful contributions to discussion in every class.

B+ or B = attend all classes and make regular contributions.

B- = attend all classes but seldom speak.

C, D, or F = one or more absences no matter how much you talk.

Please don't arrive in class late. Please do not leave the room during class unless it is absolutely necessary. (Leaving class unnecessarily is rude and distracts me and other students. It also suggests a lack of

concentration or lack of interest on your part.) Please be sure that your electronic devices are turned off. Laptops may not be used in class unless you have special permission from me.

Since learning during class depends directly on the reading and writing assignments, all assignments must be completed on time. Your understanding of class discussions, and the quality of class discussion itself, depend on how well you have prepared the reading assignments, so read the assignments carefully and critically. Underline, take notes or outline the readings so you are well prepared for class discussion. The study guides will help you prepare for our discussions.

The Skidmore College guideline is that students should study two to three hours outside of class for every hour of class time. Note that this course earns four, not three, credits, so this course involves considerable more work than a three credit course. Compared to a three credit course, this course has an additional 30 minutes for each class, and also an additional hour of work outside of class for each class. Since each class is 1 hour and 50 minutes long, I expect you to spend a minimum of 3 1/2 hours preparing for each of our classes, and I have assigned work based on that expectation. I suggest that you work out a study schedule that sets aside a regular study period to prepare for each class. Use the full study time--if you finish the reading quickly, go back to reflect on the reading more deeply by re-reading, by underlining, by taking notes, and so forth.

**(c) Study Guides (SG):** Written assignments on the readings will be assigned regularly to help you prepare well for our discussions and essays. These will be graded pass/fail. They will be due at the beginning of class, and late study guides will receive no credit or only partial credit. They must be typed with the SG questions attached as a cover sheet to your answers. Please give page numbers for all answers.

**(d) Discussion Focus (DF):** Five times during the semester I will ask you and a partner to focus our discussion on a particular issue that catches your eye in that day's reading: something you think is especially insightful or problematic or needs clarification. You are not to summarize anything in the reading. Identify one specific passage in class and raise an issue about it for the class--question it or criticize it or defend it or elaborate on it or apply it. Find a way for both of you to speak in class about your chosen passage. You and your partner must meet face-to-face at least once outside of class to prepare.

**(2) One short essay** (20%) on Kafka will be due at 4:00 p.m. sharp on Friday, September 22 and will count 20% of your final course grade. It must be typed (double-spaced) and absolutely no more than 6 pages long. I will provide detailed written instructions later.

(3) **Two major essays** (60%) will be due, one on Kierkegaard on Tuesday, November 21 (just before Thanksgiving break), the other on Nietzsche on Tuesday, December 12 (the first day of exams). Each essay will count 30% of your final course grade. Each should be about 9 pages long. I will provide detailed written instructions later.

**Camus and Buber for A/A- or extra-credit:** Camus' The Plague and Buber's I and Thou are very important books of existential philosophy. Since we don't have time to include them in our regular class sessions, they are not required for the course. However, to be eligible for a course grade of A or A-, you must read them and join me and others from class in a small group discussion for 45 minutes outside of class. They will count as extra-credit if your course grade is below A-. We'll meet on Friday, September 29 for Camus and Friday, October 13 for Buber, so have them read by then if you choose to exercise this option.

**Learning disability:** Please let me know right away if you have a learning disability (whether it's officially certified or not) so we can discuss how to work with it.

**Honor Code:** Skidmore has a strong Honor Code that I will strictly enforce. I will discuss issues about documentation and plagiarism when I give you the essay topics. Before then, read The Academic Integrity Handbook available on-line through the Office of Academic Advising, especially the excerpts there on "Documentation and Plagiarism" from The Skidmore Guide to Writing. Skidmore considers unintentional plagiarism still to be plagiarism that earns sanctions, so read carefully these sections in The Academic Integrity Handbook and The Skidmore Guide to Writing.

**Sexual and Gender-based Misconduct:** Skidmore College considers sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students' personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore's values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal regulations. Skidmore College faculty are committed to supporting students and upholding gender equity laws outlined in Title IX. If a student chooses to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that faculty or staff member is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Deputy Coordinator. The Title IX Deputy Coordinator will assist the student in connection with all possible resources for support and reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the College's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, the Counseling Center staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates are all options available. More information can be found at <http://www.skidmore.edu//sgbmm/> or by

contacting the Title IX Deputy Coordinator.

**Warning and Invitation:** Our course will focus on dark and troubling aspects of life including anxiety, alienation, forlornness, despair, guilt, meaninglessness, death, and suicide. Our readings employ literary approaches which often bring these troubling issues close to us in intense emotional ways. Please consider carefully whether or not you want to engage these dark issues, especially as winter approaches during the semester and the days grow shorter, darker, and colder. Further, some of the literary characters we will discuss are troubled figures who sometimes express sexist and racist views that can be quite offensive. If you are uncomfortable with these darker aspects, please be kind to yourself and drop the course. However, if you choose to engage these dark themes, I believe you will find doing so very rewarding, even enjoyable, in unexpected ways. Existential thinkers seek to describe the inauthentic ways we live our lives in order to explore how to live authentically. Seeing more clearly how we and others may be living inauthentically can challenge, awaken, and enliven us to live more authentically.

**Learning Goals:**

This course introduces selected philosophical and literary expressions of the European tradition of existential philosophy with the following goals:

- (1) study selected primary works by the following European existential thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: Buber, Camus, Kafka, Kierkegaard, May, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Tolstoy;
- (2) compare literary and analytical expressions of existential philosophy, exploring why existential philosophers use literary modes of expression so much;
- (3) compare atheistic (Camus, Nietzsche, Sartre) and religious (Buber, Kierkegaard) existential thinkers, wondering how both can be existential;
- (4) explore the three spheres of existence developed by Soren Kierkegaard, the father of modern European existential philosophy;
- (5) critically evaluate the existential critique of mainstream Western philosophy;
- (6) discuss the relationship of existential philosophy to literature, psychology, and religion;
- (7) develop subtle reading, writing, imaginative, and critical skills, including critical evaluation, by discussing readings in class and by writing essays about them;
- (8) develop productive and enjoyable working relationships in class and outside of class with others in the seminar (including me!);
- (9) explore your own philosophy of life;
- (10) have fun even as we discuss such themes as alienation, anxiety, despair, forlornness, guilt, meaninglessness, and death.

**Office Hours:** I will be delighted to talk with you outside of class.  
Make an appointment to see me or come by during my office hours:

Monday & Wednesday: 2:30- 3:30  
Tuesday & Thursday: 4:00- 5:00  
Friday: 1:00- 2:00  
(other times by appointment)

Office: Ladd 217.

Office phone: (518) 580-5407 (Please don't call me at home.)

Email: [jsmith@skidmore.edu](mailto:jsmith@skidmore.edu)