Existentialist Metaphysics
PHIL 235
FALL 2011
MWF 2:20-3:20

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Course Description

“All living is one's own living, feeling oneself live, knowing oneself to be existing, where knowing does not imply intellectual knowledge or any special wisdom but is that surprising presence which one's life has for every one of us" (José Ortega y Gasset). For those thinkers whose work is associated with the philosophical tradition of existentialism, the understanding of human existence represents a singular gateway to the understanding of being, the general object of the study of metaphysics. But just what does it mean to exist? In this course, we will reflectively consider responses to this and other questions that play a key role within existentialist metaphysics. Typically, readings will be drawn from works by philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and José Ortega y Gasset. While there is no prerequisite for this course, some familiarity with the history of European philosophy would be helpful.
Learning goals

The learning goals for this course are organized around three themes: substance, skills, and self-awareness.

With respect to substance, this course is designed to help you acquire a critical understanding of (a) the fundamental questions, concepts, perspectives, and thematic developments within the philosophical movement known as existentialism, particularly as these evolved in the work of those philosophers whose books we will be taking up in class, and (b) how existentialist metaphysics fits within the tradition of European philosophy, both as a questioning of this tradition and its continuation.

The design of this course is also intended to give you a way of developing key skills associated with philosophy in particular and the liberal arts in general. By the end of this semester, you should be: (a) better able to read and analyze philosophical writing; (b) more experienced in “doing” philosophy, including forming philosophical questions, constructing philosophical lines of thought, and contributing to philosophical discussions, and (c) more adept in analytical and argumentative writing.

Self-awareness as a philosophical learning goal has its roots in Socrates’ dictum that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” I hope this course will expand your capacities for (a) understanding the problematicity of what it is to be a human self; (b) understanding the assumptions and predispositions you bring to the consideration of philosophical questions; and (c) respecting well-reasoned philosophical positions, even when these positions may be at odds with your own.

Required Texts


*Being and Time*. Martin Heidegger. State University of New York Press, Revised edition, July 2010. (This edition has three leaves on the front cover.)


Academic Integrity

In this class, we will strive to have an environment geared as best as possible toward facilitating individual learning and which models best scholarly practices. Please know
that in reviewing your work, I will adhere to the College’s Academic Integrity Policy as published in the Student Handbook.

Through the gift of your attention, you not only offer yourself more opportunities to be involved in class discussion, but you also help support the integrity of the learning environment. For your own sake and that of your fellow students, kindly take your phone off the “ring” setting while in class and please refrain from texting, tweeting, googling, and the like.

Coursework

For this course, you will be writing three papers, presenting one of them in class, and developing your skills as an active participant in the construction of philosophical knowledge.

For the first paper, you will be asked to present a critical analysis of a position or line of reasoning presented by Sartre in his Being and Nothingness. In the second paper, you will be asked to do the same, this time in relation to Heidegger’s Being and Time. These papers should be between 5-7 pages long.

Your work on these two papers will unfold within not only within a philosophical context but also within the context of Macalester’s writing requirement. The “W” requirement at Mac is spelled out as follows: “Macalester seeks to ensure that all students receive instruction in writing that gives attention to writing as a process (writing is rewriting), and that provides students individually with feedback on the mechanics and substance of their writing.” With this in mind, you will be expected to revise initial drafts of these papers in light of comments you receive, and resubmit them in a final form. You will have one week from when your drafts are returned to you to turn in your second, and final, version of your paper.

The third paper, due at the time of the final and also 5-7 pages long, may be on a topic from our readings in the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty; a critical, comparative paper drawing upon readings from two of the authors considered in this course; or a reaction paper to Sartre’s Existentialism is a Humanism. While you will not have to submit a draft of this paper in advance, you will be expected to present it in class toward the end of the semester, and so have the opportunity to benefit from the feedback of your peers.

In general, for any given week, on Mondays I will give a lecture that will either provide context and serve as an overview for that week’s reading assignment, or plunge immediately into the substance of the reading; on Wednesdays I will also give a lecture directly on the reading, and on Fridays we will have discussion. In order to better orient and organize our discussions, I will ask you to e-mail me before midnight on Thursday with a question you have about the reading. In formulating your reading reaction questions, it would be best to think of them as open-ended prompts for the purposes of stimulating class discussion, rather than requests for clarification of the reading, although
there are certainly times when these two might overlap. These will be marked as satisfactory/unsatisfactory; you will need to turn in 8 questions out of 9.

A late paper will be accepted without penalty if you have a good reason for turning it in late and you let me know in advance of the due date that you will not be turning it in on time. Unexcused late papers will be accepted up to one week after the due date, but you will lose half a grade (eg your grade will go from A- to B+) on the first day your paper is late, and every two days thereafter.

Coursework evaluation

Your final grade for this class will be based on the following percentages:

First paper draft 10%
First paper final 15%
Second paper draft 15%
Second paper final 15%
Third paper 15%
Oral presentation 10%
Reading questions 10%
Class participation 10%

Please note that your class participation grade will be based on your active involvement in class discussions, and not on attendance.

Class Schedule

This schedule may change at the discretion of the instructor; any changes will be announced in class and also e-mailed

Week One

Wednesday, 7 September Welcome and orientation to the course

Friday, 9 September Setting the scene for existential inquiry: what we can learn from José Ortega y Gasset’s Some Lessons in Metaphysics

Week Two

Reading Assignment: Being and Nothingness, pp. 33-56

Monday, 12 September Introduction to Sartre and to Being and Nothingness
Consciousness as consciousness of

Wednesday, 14 September Why is questioning an act of triple non-being?
Friday, 16 September  First group discussion on Sartre

Week Three

Reading Assignment: *Being and Nothingness*, pp.56-76, 86-116

Monday, 19 September  Anguish

Wednesday, 21 September  Bad faith

**Philosophy Department Picnic, 4:30, south side of Old Main—everyone invited!!**

Friday, 23 September  Second group discussion on Sartre

Week Four

Reading Assignment: *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 557-653; 680-711

Monday, 26 September  Freedom and fatigue

The paradox of freedom

Wednesday, 28 September  Am I responsible for everything?

Friday, 30 September  Third group discussion on Sartre

First Paper Due

Week Five

Reading Assignment: *Being and Time*, Sections 1-4, 9, 12-18

Monday, 3 October  Introduction to Martin Heidegger and to *Being and Time*

Wednesday, 5 October  Being-in-the-world and the tools of our lives

Friday, 7 October  First group discussion on Heidegger

Week Six

Reading Assignment: *Being and Time*, Sections 25-27, 29-31

Monday, 10 October  Dasein and the “They”

Wednesday, 12 October  TBA—I will be out of town at a conference

Friday, 14 October  Being in a mood, and more

Week Seven

Reading Assignment: *Being and Time*, Sections 35-41
Monday, 17 October  Chit-chat and other structures of disclosure
Wednesday, 19 October  Anguish once more
                    Care
Friday, 21 October  Second group discussion on Heidegger

**Week Eight**

**Reading Assignment:** *Being and Time*, Sections 46-53

Monday, 24 October  Being myself: authenticity and freedom toward death
Wednesday, 26 October  Third group discussion on Heidegger
**Second Paper Due**
Friday, 28 October  Fall Break—no class meeting

**Week Nine**

**Reading Assignment:** *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, pp. 62-100

Monday, 31 October  Introduction to Merleau-Ponty and *The Phenomenology of Perception*
Wednesday, 2 November  The body problem
Friday, 4 November  First group discussion on Merleau-Ponty

**Week Ten**

**Reading Assignment:** *Basic Writings*, pp. 101-145; 166-182

Monday, 7 November  Body intentionality
                    Perceiving and conceiving
Wednesday, 9 November  Thinking about the Cartesian cogito and looking at the boulevard trees
Friday, 11 November  Second group discussion on Merleau-Ponty

**Week Eleven**

**Reading Assignment:** *Basic Writings*, pp. 209-233

Monday, 14 November  Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Sartre: back to freedom
                    and fatigue
Wednesday, 16 November  The job philosophy has to do
Thursday, 17 November
Philosophy Café in celebration of World Philosophy Day!
Come for food and conversation; 4th floor Old Main starting at 4:30 pm

Friday, 18 November
Third group discussion on Merleau-Ponty

Week Twelve

Reading Assignment: Basic Writings, pp.247-271; 272-289

Monday, 21 November
Bodies as beings of “two leaves”

Wednesday, 23 November
The painter’s way of seeing
Why do we never get away from our life?

Friday, 25 November
Thanksgiving Holiday—no class meeting

Week Thirteen

Reading Assignment: Existentialism is a Humanism

Monday, 28 November
Group discussion of Existentialism is a Humanism

Wednesday, 30 November
Third paper oral presentations

Friday, 2 December
Third paper oral presentations

Week Fourteen

Monday, 5 December
Third paper oral presentations

Wednesday, 7 December
Third paper oral presentations

Friday, 9 December
No class meeting—Senior Philosophy (Capstone Presentation) Day in the Campus Center— you are welcome to attend

Week Fifteen

Monday, 12 December
End-of-semester course wrap-up

Friday, 16 December
Third paper due
Your papers may be turned in to me in my office during our final exam time, 1:30 to 3:30 pm