

SYLLABUS FOR *EXISTENTIALISM*

WEEK ONE

DAY ONE (MONDAY): INTRODUCTIONS

Morning Session

- The challenge of defining existentialism. Discussion of Rilke's poem: *Archaic Torso of Apollo*. Existentialism and deliberate living. Four important existential themes: (1) limit experiences, (2) death and the absurd, the individual versus the crowd, (3) the importance of choice, (4) the difficulty of infusing life with meaning.
- Introduction to the course. Activity: ask the students to draw up a list of responsibilities: my response to them, their responsibilities to me, their responsibilities to each other, and their responsibilities to themselves. Generate a list of class rules. Discuss the honor code.
- Break
- Ice-breaker writing assignment: revelatory objects.
- What is philosophy? Student definitions and sample problems.
- The branches of philosophy. The three main periods of philosophy.
- Begin reading the *Meno*. (If there's time. Ask them to explain what they think M means by *virtue*.)

Afternoon Session

- Begin reading and discussing the *Meno*. What does it mean to "succeed" in life? Who should you ask? Can it be taught? The implications of the question.
- Writing assignment: come up with your own theory about what it means to succeed in life. What is success in life? Why this choice? Be prepared to defend it against objections. What *arête* does one need to cultivate for it?
- Socrates' Paradox: Can we knowingly do evil?
- Prep the nights' homework.

Homework

- Spend ten minutes reviewing for test one.
- Finish reading the *Meno*. (Study questions: Socrates and Meno debate about virtue but eventually reach a point where they're both confused about the topic. This leads them to ponder a broader question: *what is knowledge? What does it mean to know anything at all? How do we come to learn (i.e., know) about the world around us?* Socrates uses an example drawn from geometry. What's the point of the example?)
- Read Epicurus and (optional reading) as much of the Epictetus as you can.
- Optional reading assignment: look over the recommended secondary materials I've assembled.

DAY TWO (TUESDAY): INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY I

Morning Session: Plato's Epistemology

- Writing exercise: questions about previous nights' reading: set the goals for the day. Discussion of Plato's *Meno*: Plato's epistemology. Bring in copies of the allegory of the cave and ask the students to draw pictures of it.
- Break.
- Discuss Epicurus. Pleasure as the highest good. Is hedonism morally irresponsible?
- Activity: break the students up into three groups. Ask each group to read Epicurus's Principle Doctrines and report on his ideas about death, God, and the limits of pleasure.
- In-class reading assignment: read the Epictetus.

Afternoon Session: Epicureanism and Stoicism

- Quiz 1. (Quiz should cover course rules, basic branches and keywords of philosophy, beginning of *Meno*.)
- Discuss stoicism. The stoic critique of Epicureanism: virtue as the highest good.
- In-class debate: split the class up two (three?) ways.
- A preview of existential ideas in stoicism and Epicureanism: freedom, authenticity, and the “deep self” (stoicism) and alienation and finding meaning in a meaningless universe (Epicureanism), Kierkegaard’s ways of life.
- Set-up homework by discussing Descartes’ method. Photocopy opening pages of *Discourse on Method*. Discussion of radical skepticism.

Homework assignment: read Meditations I, II, of *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Write up answers to the following questions: Why does Descartes try to doubt everything? What can’t he doubt? How does he prove in Meditations in II? Why does Descartes want to prove God’s existence in Meditation III and how does he do it?

DAY THREE (WEDNESDAY): INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY II

Morning Session: Descartes

- Discussion of Descartes’ radical skepticism. How can I know that I’m not dreaming all of this?
- Break
- The problem of exterior reality and the problem of other minds.
- Descartes’ proof of God’s existence.
- Why is Descartes important for the existentialists?

Afternoon Session

- Activity: Design the first paper topic. Break the students up into groups: have them each propose a paper topic for the next test. (They can begin the paper in study hall but need to finish it in class tomorrow.)
- Students fill out the first course evaluation
- Guest lecture by T.A. on Pascal.

Study Hall

Study for the next test. Begin the first paper. Read *The Myth of Sisyphus*

DAY FOUR: (THURSDAY) INTRODUCTION TO EXISTENTIALISM

Morning Session: Romanticism

- Discussion of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Discussion questions: Who was Sisyphus? Why was he punished by the Gods? Why is he an absurd hero? Why is he a tragic hero? Can we invent a worse punishment? What is the force of the essay’s last claim: We must imagine Sisyphus happy. Must we? Why?
- Break
- Movie Screening: *The Seventh Seal*

Afternoon Session

- Discussion of *The Seventh Seal*. Discussion questions: What approaches to life and death are represented by each character? Does the film favor one particular view? What is the knight’s one meaningful act?
- Quiz 2.

Study Hall

Read Kierkegaard’s *Diary of the Seducer*.

DAY FIVE: (FRIDAY) KIERKEGAARD ON MODES OF EXISTENCE

Morning Session: Introduction to Kierkegaard's Philosophy

- Brief lecture on Kierkegaard's life and writings. Key ideas. Indirect Method.
- Begin reading *The Rotation Method* together in class.
- Writing Assignment: The rotation method in action.

Afternoon Session

- Discussion of *Diary of the Seducer*. The Ethical versus Aesthetic way of life. Despair.
- Break
- Prep the students up by discussing (1) the relationship between faith and reason. Are they contradictory or are they compatible? Also, (2) bring in photocopies of the relevant passages from Genesis discussing the Abraham and Isaac story. Break students up into groups and have each group summarize them. Discussion: why does God test Abraham? What is his test supposed to prove?

Study Hall

- Read selections from *Fear and Trembling* in the *Kierkegaard Anthology*. Conduct individual conferences with students during the Sunday evening study hall.

WEEK TWO

DAY ONE: (MONDAY) KIERKEGAARD ON FAITH AND SUBJECTIVITY

MORNING SESSION

- Kierkegaard on Faith. Discussion of the Knight of Faith and the Knight of Infinite Resignation.
- Break
- Introduce Spade's table for Kierkegaard's Modes of existence. Warn them that it will be on the next test. Group activity: invent your own way of life. Groups must invent a way of life by (1) identifying its criterion, hero figure, and aversive emotion. Then they need to defend the claim (against Kierkegaard) that this way of life can't be reduced to one of Kierkegaard's three. Rather than write essay, the groups will create posters.

Afternoon Session:

- Share posters. And debate them.
- The idea of criterion-less choices. Radical choice and anxiety. In-class reading and performance of *The Concept of Anxiety*.

Study Hall

- Read selected passages from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*. Finish the first round of individual conferences.

DAY TWO : (TUESDAY) INTRODUCTION TO NIETZSCHE

Morning Session: Niets

- General introduction to Nietzsche's philosophy. Nietzsche's life and writings. Bring in various copies of the *God is dead* passage from *The Gay Science*. What does it mean to say that God is dead?
- Break
- In-class reading: *Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*.
- Discussion of *Truth and Lie*. Nietzsche's *nominalism, skepticism, and critique of philosophy*.

Afternoon Session

- Activity. Have each student pick a quotation from Nietzsche that they wish they understood better. They then pass it to their partner. Their partner has to explain what they think it means. Have each person share his/her interpretation of Nietzsche.
- Discussion of Nietzsche's distinction between master and slave morality. His critique of Christianity. Perfectionism.

Study Hall

- Spend fifteen minutes reviewing for Quiz Three. (Quiz Three will be on Kierkegaard. It will have two parts: definitions and short exegeses. Give the students a list of ten keywords. Tell them they will be asked to give definitions for three of them. Keywords: *knight of faith*, *knight of infinite resignation*, *anxiety*, *aesthetic way of life*, *ethical way of life*, *religious way of life*, *rotation method*, *objective truth*, *subjective truth*, *indirect method*. Tell them they will also be asked to explicate a key quotation from Kierkegaard. Give them a list of four. Tell them that two will appear on the quiz. Let them study in groups.)

DAY THREE: (WEDNESDAY) NIETZSCHE

Morning Session

- Guest lecture by T.A. on eternal recurrence. Distribute oral presentation topics. (Students need to work in teams to prepare fifteen minute presentations on a topic in Nietzsche. Possible topics include: free spirits, tragedy, will to power, the Übermensch, Nietzsche's perspectivism, God is dead. Note: work with TA to generate more research topics.)
- Break
- Trip to Dickinson library to do research.

Afternoon Session:

- Student presentations.
- Quiz Three
- A general introduction to Sartre: the three opening objections of *Existentialism is a Humanism*.

Study Hall

- Finish reading *Existentialism is a Humanism*.

DAY FOUR: (THURSDAY) SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALISM

Morning Session

- Morning session: lecture on Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenology. Writing exercise on phenomenological method. Bring in Sartre's essay on the phenomenology of stickiness. (Let the Academic Dean know that you will be having class outside for part of the morning.)
- Return to the classroom. Students share their phenomenological research.

Afternoon Session

- Discussion of *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Sartre's metaphysics: being-in-itself versus being-for-itself.
- Break
- Sartre on Freedom and Responsibility. Has Sartre answered the moral anarchy objection?
- Announce Quiz Four. (Quiz Four will be on Nietzsche.)

Study Hall

- Read selection from *Being and Nothingness* on *Self-Deception*

DAY FIVE: (FRIDAY) SARTRE ON SELF-DECEPTION AND THE GAZE

Morning Session

- Discussion of Sartre on self-deception. The Waiter example. What does Sartre mean when he concludes that our nature is to "be what we are not."

- Break
- In-class reading: *The Wall*.
- Discussion of *The Wall*. Use *The Wall* to give the students some practice in identifying philosophic ideas in Sartre's literary writings.

Afternoon Session

- Lecture on The Problem of Other Minds and "The Gaze." General introduction to the problem of other minds. Explain the problem. Invite students to try to solve it. Discuss Sartre's novel solution. Bring in copies of Cindy Sherman's photographs to illustrate the notion of gaze. Have the students describe them. Then explain Sartre's solution.

- Break

- Describe the play project and begin reading *No Exit*. (Break the students up into four groups. Two groups of actors and two groups of critics. The actors need to perform the play on Monday: each takes one half of the play. The critics need to prepare questions, watch their performance, and write reviews of it.)

Study Hall

- Finish reading *No Exit*. Students prep up for the play.

WEEK THREE

DAY ONE: (MONDAY) HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE

Morning Session

- Student performances of *No Exit*.
- Break (Critics write their responses)
- Critics share their responses. Actor/Actresses respond. Discussion of the play. Why does Sartre conclude that "hell is other people?"
- Film Screening: *Vertigo*.

Afternoon Session

- Finish watching *Vertigo*.
- Discussion of the film—existential (Sartrian) themes in *Vertigo*.
- Discuss final project ideas. Announce the last Quiz.

Study Hall

- Read selection from Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Study for the last quiz. Individual conferences with students to discuss their final projects.

DAY TWO: (TUESDAY) OTHER EXISTENTIALISTS: HEIDEGGER AND BEAUVOIR

Morning Session

- Discussion of Heidegger's essay: metaphysics, anxiety, being-toward-death.
- Break
- Trip to library so that students can conduct research for their final projects. Have the T.A. print up a "conference schedule" for the students in the other existentialism course.

Afternoon Session

- Quiz Five
- Bring selections from Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*. Discussion of existential feminism. Beauvoir's critique of Sartre.

Study Hall

- Read selection from Levinas's *Time and the Other*. Spend 30 minutes prepping up final projects.

DAY THREE: (WEDNESDAY) OTHER EXISTENTIALISTS: LEVINAS

Morning Session

- Discussion of *Time and the Other*. Who was Levinas? Life and Writings. The Problem of the Other.
- Break
- The Face of the Other. Ethics as First Philosophy. Existential ethics.

Afternoon Session

- "Dress rehearsal" for final projects. Have the students present their final projects to the class. Let the class give them feedback.

Study Hall

- Final revisions for final project. Also, have the students select music that reminds them of existential ideas.

DAY FOUR: (THURSDAY) FINAL PROJECTS

Morning Session

- Invite students in the other existentialism course – and anyone else interested – to visit class for student-organized conference. Three student panels, each of which consists of four presentations.

Afternoon Session

- Students bring in music that reminds them of existential ideas.
- Writing assignment: write the liner notes for our existentialism CD.

Day Five: (Friday)

Morning Session

- Class Party. Bring in copies of CDs for the students. Listen to them together. Students designer album covers and liner notes. Pass out certificates and student evaluations. Discuss the course.