

Syllabus

Existentialist Themes

Sec 01: DeBartolo 225, MWF 8:20 - 9:10 am

Sec 02: DeBartolo 241, MWF 9:25 - 10:15 am

Instructor: Naomi Fisher

Email: nluce1@nd.edu

Office hours: TBD, in the meantime, by appointment

Texts (to buy):

De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Frechtman, Citadel, ISBN 9780806501604

Dostoevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers*, trans. I. Avsey, Oxford, ISBN 9780199536375

Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, trans. Garnett, Dover, ISBN 9780486270531

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans Hannay, Penguin, ISBN 9780140444490

Texts (to be handed out):

Nietzsche, selections from *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*,
Genealogy of Morals

Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*

Movies (streaming on library website—on reserve for this course; watch at home):

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) Stanley Kubrick

Blade Runner (1982) Ridley Scott

Fitzcarraldo (1982) Werner Herzog (optional)

Tree of Life (2012) Terrence Malick

Narrative:

Does life have meaning or value? What role does God or religion play in coming to terms with the meaning or absurdity of life? Are there rules or standards of a meaningful life, or are we free to create our own standards of meaning or value?

These are questions that we will examine in this course, through various works in the existentialist tradition, which was inaugurated in the mid-nineteenth century by the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard and continues today. As it progressed, this focus on the individual and her activity as the locus of value became separated from its original religious context. Towards the end of the course we will examine the fate of these ideas in the 20th century, examining the possibility of an ethics in an atheist existentialist framework.

This course thus has a dual purpose: you will leave this course better able to recognize and identify the roots of existentialism in our culture. You will also be able to articulate your answers to the questions above. The main activities for the course (and the basis for evaluation) will be class discussion, reading responses, and writing assignments.

Class Preparation and Reading Responses (30%):

I will hand out questions to accompany the readings throughout the semester. You are to think about these questions as you read the texts. We will work through the questions in class, often (but not always) in small groups at first and then opening it up to a general class discussion. Thinking about these questions and preparing responses to them are an essential part of class preparation. Approximately twice a week—whenever reading is due—you will write a reading response (as an assignment on Sakai), which should be no more than a couple sentences long. The response should be a response to one of the reading questions, or, if you prefer, it can take the form of a question about the reading. *If you do not turn in the assignment by 7:00 am on the day the reading is due, the system will not allow you to turn it in at all.* To allow for emergencies, forgetfulness, etc. I will drop your two lowest grades. The reading responses will be graded as follows (no in-between grades):

- A Thoughtful response, it is clear the student read and thought about the reading.
- C Not clear that there was thoughtful reading.
- F Did not turn anything in.

Discussion and Participation (10%):

You are expected to come to class prepared and to participate in class discussions. I will record when you are absent or late and will dock your participation grade. 3x late = 1 absence. Please let me know if there is some reason you are going to miss class. It is always better to let me know. Your grade will mostly be based on your contribution to group and class discussions. Active engagement in your small group discussion as well as in the large group discussion will result in a higher participation grade. I expect you to be civil and respectful in discussion to your peers and to me, even in the midst of disagreement. Here is a ‘rubric’ to let you know how your grade will be determined (in-between grades, like A-, C+ are possible):

- A Comes to class prepared and on time, ready to discuss the texts, contributes thoughtfully to both small group and larger group discussions. Has 0-2 unexcused absences.
- B Often contributes to group discussions, but also sometimes is unprepared or uninterested in the discussions. Has 3-4 unexcused absences.
- C Rarely contributes to discussions, often is unprepared. Has 5-6 unexcused absences.
- F Anything worse than C.

Writing Assignments (45%):

Each of 3 main writing assignments will be 4-5 pages long, and each will be worth 15% of your grade. I will give you more specific instructions when I hand out the assignments. I will usually hold especially long office hours two days before the assignment is due. Please note that it may be difficult for me to set up an appointment with you on short notice, and I am rarely available to meet before noon. I will, however, always be available by email.

I will accept only hard copies at the beginning of class on the day the paper is due. (If there is some reason this is not possible, I will accept an emailed copy of the paper until you can get me

the hard copy. You can always drop a hard copy off in 118 Malloy, where the philosophy mailboxes are.)

With respect to extensions, etc. I think you will find that I am reasonable, as long as you are communicating with me. I am not so lenient when it comes to after-the-fact requests.

Honor Code:

Violations of the honor code will not be tolerated. There are many ways to violate the honor code, and you are responsible to know what counts as a violation of the honor code. If you have any doubt, send me an email and I will let you know. Plagiarism can take many forms, but the most common are as follows: using another author's idea in your paper without citation, paraphrasing someone else's work without citation, inserting phrases from another person's work without quotation marks, and extensive collaboration with other students. While discussing the ideas in your paper with other students is worthwhile and I would encourage you to do this, you must write your paper on your own. Most forms of plagiarism can be avoided by simply not consulting any material for your paper except the course readings. Do not consult sources that originate on the internet (e.g. wikipedia). For more information, see philosophy.nd.edu/assets/77703/plagiarism.pdf

Laptops, phones, iPads, etc.:

They are not allowed to be out in class at any time.

Grading

All grading will be done in letter grades, and averaged like a GPA. Your final grade will be determined as follows:

30% reading responses
10% class participation
3 x 15% writing assignments
15% final

Extra Credit

Over fall break, there will be an optional extra credit assignment, which will involve watching a movie (*Fitzcarraldo*) and writing a single-spaced, one page response to that movie, comparing it to the themes in *Fear and Trembling*. An excellent response will result in a 2/3 of a letter grade bump on the following writing assignment (from A- to A+, for instance). A mediocre response will result in a 1/3 of a letter grade bump on the following assignment. No extensions will be granted for the extra credit assignment.

Tentative Schedule:

<i>Week of/Date</i>	<i>Reading assignment</i>	<i>Topic</i>
8/26	Introduction and discussion	Meaning and value
8/28	Dostoevsky <i>Notes from Underground</i>	How to live?
Week of 8/31	Dostoevsky <i>Notes/Brothers Karamazov</i>	Rebellion
Week of 9/7	Dostoevsky <i>Brothers Karamazov</i>	Rebellion, Grand Inquisitor
Week of 9/14	Dostoevsky <i>Brothers Karamazov</i>	Life of Zosima
Week of 9/21	<i>Tree of Life</i> , Kierkegaard	Nature and grace
Week of 9/28	Kierkegaard, <i>Fear and Trembling</i>	Knight of faith

Wednesday, 9/30 Writing Assignment #1 due

Week of 10/5	Kierkegaard, <i>Fear and Trembling</i>	Ethics?
Week of 10/12	<i>Fear and Trembling</i> /Nietzsche	"God is dead"

Week of 10/19 FALL BREAK

Monday, 10/26 Optional extra credit due (*Fitzcarraldo*)

Week of 10/26	Nietzsche	Will to Truth/Last Man
Week of 11/2	<i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> /Nietzsche	Overcoming/Nihilism

Monday, 11/9 Writing Assignment #2 due

Week of 11/9	Nietzsche	Morality?
Week of 11/16	Sartre "Existentialism"	Pessimism, Nihilism, Absurdity
Monday, 11/23	De Beauvoir <i>Ethics</i>	Ambiguity and freedom

11/25-29 THANKSGIVING

Week of 11/30	De Beauvoir <i>Ethics</i> , <i>Blade Runner</i>	Existentialist ethics
Week of 12/7	Conclusion	

Wednesday, 12/9 Final Paper due

Wednesday, 12/16 (by 8 am, emailed) Writing Assignment #3 (*Bladerunner* dialogue) due