**UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS**

**PHIL 4500.001**

**Existentialism**

Fall 2015 Dr. George James (James@unt.edu)

T TH 11:00am-12:20pm Office: EESAT 225e

Wooten Hall 210 Hours: T TH 2:00‑3:00pm

and by appointment

**Scope of the Course**:

What is existentialism? The term refers properly neither to a specific body of doctrines nor to a school of thought. Few persons who are labeled existentialists have called themselves by this name, and among them there are few if any specific ideas upon which all agree. Existentialists can be atheistic, theistic, mystical, agnostic, humanistic, and so on. As most often used, the term existentialism describes a widespread *revolt* against philosophy as traditionally pursued, and against the self-confidence of its insights. This revolt expressed itself most fully in the twentieth century, especially in the years following the First World War, and it has had a profound influence upon diverse areas of contemporary European and American cultural life: art, literature, film, theatre, psychology, theology, etc. This existentialist revolt also forms the background of many significant changes that have occurred in the manner in which such disciplines as literary criticism, political theory, and communication theory have pursued their subject matter. It remains a significant feature in the background of what has been called the postmodern context.

The purpose of this course is to gain an informed appreciation for this movement. Unfortunately we cannot simply trace its development from a single founder. It doesn’t have a single founder! Yet among persons who receive this label there has been a profound interest (often for very different reasons) in three key nineteenth century thinkers. Because of the importance of these thinkers for existentialists of widely differing views they are a reasonable place to begin. Our first task will be to examine some of the key insights of Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, and Nietzsche. After attempting to understand the contribution of each of these thinkers to the existentialist revolt we will turn to some important expressions of existentialist writing in the twentieth century. Secondly, in doing so we will try to see the manner in which the themes and concerns of these nineteenth century figures have been repeated, augmented, and developed in more recent work. The works we will examine in this part of the course will include some of the key writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and others.

In the final part of the course we turn to two contemporary works influenced by a number of seminal existentialist thinkers. Because both of these could be called religious thinkers their relationship to the most celebrated themes of existentialism are especially engaging. Through their insights we may be better able to understand some of the insights of contemporary religious thought in the context of contemporary life and culture. The first of these books will be *I and Thou* by the Jewish theologian Martin Buber, the second book we will *The Courage to Be,* by the Christian existentialist theologian, Paul Tillich.

Our concern in this course is neither to promote nor to refute existentialism, but to gain a genuine and informed appreciation for its principal concerns, to understand the perspective it offers, and to determine how the best insights of existentialist thinkers can be integrated into an intellectually responsible philosophy of life.

**Requirements**:

1. Your coming to terms with the issues of this course will require considerable interaction with the material and with others who are dealing with it. For this reason class participation will be an essential requirement for the course. But effective class discussion is possible only if everyone is in regular attendance. You should come to class prepared: a) to recapitulate the thesis or argument expressed in the reading of the week, b) to say something significant about it, and c) to defend your views about the material.

2. Weekly reading assignments must be read with utmost care! Your task is to understand what the author in question is saying, and to think about the points that are being raised. You should determine whether you agree with the author in question or not, and try to determine where your agreements and disagreements lie. As questions occur to you, write them out.

3. In the course of the semester there will be three open-book, take-home exams. All of the questions on these exams will require essay answers. The questions for these exams will be distributed about a week before they are due. Your answers for these exams must be typed or computer printed and they must be in on time in hard copy. The last of these exams will serve the function of a final exam and will be due on the final exam date. In addition small unannounced quizzes over the reading for the week may be given at any time. If you are prepared for class they will be no problem.

**Grades**:

Grades will be based upon the quality of class participation, the results of exams and quizzes, and the instructor’s subjective evaluation of the degree to which the student has mastered the material of the course. *All work for the course must be completed to receive a passing grade for the course*.

**Attendance Policy:**

Students are expected to be in attendance in class, every class session, unless prevented by accident or serious illness. While the instructor cannot maintain records for every absence, attendance records are kept on the basis of occasional attendance checks. The result is that at the end of the semester the instructor does not have a record of absences, but a fairly accurate record of students whose attendance is perfect or nearly perfect. A record of perfect or near perfect attendance will be considered in the calculation of final grades, and may be crucial when the result of other material puts the student on the margin of a grade category. The presumption is that if all your absences are the result of serious injury or illness they will be rare, and your record of attendance will be nearly perfect. Please do not bother me with excuses. Inordinate absences from class will constitute grounds for dropping you from the course for non-attendance.

**Policy on Absences from Exams**:

If you are absent from any major exams because of accident or serious illness, arrangements for a make-up exam will be made only on receipt of a letter or other notification from the appropriate medical authority. There are no make-up exams for unannounced quizzes.

**Policy on Papers Printed by Computer**:

Your answers to essay questions for the course must be typed and handed in on time. You are welcome to use a computer to produce the final copy of your paper. Nevertheless, it is your responsibility to see that the paper is submitted by the date and time required. Any malfunction that may have caused a file to have been mysteriously lost by the computer is your responsibility alone.

**Policy on Grades of I (Incomplete)**:

A grade of I will be given for the course only in the case of extenuating circumstances such as accident or serious illness that make it impossible to complete all the requirements for the course and only when the material remaining to complete the course is minimal.

**Drop Policy**:

A student may drop the course with instructor's permission until the last day allowed by the university to drop the course with instructor's permission. That date is Monday November 2, 2015.

**Academic Dishonesty**:

An explanation of the university’s Academic Dishonesty policy is available at the following web site: http://www.vpaa.unt.edu/academic-integrity.htm

**Americans with Disabilities Law and the Office of Disability Accomodation (ODA)**:

The University of North Texas is committed to both the spirit and letter of federal equal opportunity legislation; reference Public Law 92-112 – The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended. With the passage of new federal legislation entitled Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), pursuant to section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, there is renewed focus on providing this population with the same opportunities enjoyed by all citizens.

***Approximate* Schedule of Topics and Readings Assignments**:

**Week of**

Aug 24 "Introduction" in Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism Dostoevsky to Sartre*.

31 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, "Notes from Underground.” in Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism Dostoevsky to Sartre*. The Self as the Focus of Philosophical Inquiry.

Sept 7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*. The Existentialist rejection of Christian morality and God.

14 Sören Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Religious and Philosophical approaches to existence.

21 "That Individual," "Freedom and Dread," and "Truth as Subjectivity." In *Existentialism Dostoevsky to Sartre*. An Existentialist Analysis of the Human Condition. (First exam).

28 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*. The Human Condition in Existentialist Perspective

Oct 5 Jean‑Paul Sartre, *Nausea* cont'd

12 Sartre cont'd. Existentialism and Ethics: Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," "Self-Deception," and "Portrait of an Anti-Semite."

19 Martin Heidegger. “Letter on Humanism,” "What is Metaphysics," and "The Origin of the work of Art." (Second Exam).

26 Human Relationships in Existentialist Perspective: Martin Buber, *I and Thou.*

Nov 2 Martin Buber, *I and Thou* cont’d

9 An Existentialist Theology: Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*

16 Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*. continued

23 *The Courage to Be,* continued

30 Final discussion and conclusions

Dec 7 Final Exam Week. Final Exam Tuesday Dec. 8, 2015 10:30am-12:30pm