

Existentialism

Fall 2021

Term Paper Essay

Due: Wednesday, December 15

Write a 6-10 page essay on any topic relevant to this course. This final paper should develop at least one of your earlier essay assignments. The following topics are examples that you may consider. An excellent paper will be well written, have a good exposition of the philosophy of at least one of the thinkers covered in the course, and also include some decent reflection about the issues raised in the texts.

Possible Topics

The Death of God.

Explain how the “death of God” brings on a “crisis of modernity” that sets the agenda for Existentialism. Discuss how the philosophies of at least two of the thinkers covered in the course can be said to be a response to this event. Evaluate to what extent this crisis of modernity is relevant today and also to what extent any of these thinkers offer a way out of this crisis.

The Problem of Freedom.

“I tell Thee that man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find someone quickly to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature is born.” Explain why the inquisitor in Dostoevsky’s story considers the gift of freedom such a terrible burden. Discuss how some of the Existentialist philosophers challenge us to take up that gift of freedom. Do any of these philosophers have anything relevant to say to us today here in the “land of the free”?

Human Existence.

How does the view of human existence put forth by Existentialist philosophers challenge the traditional view in the history of Western thought? Discuss what some of the Existentialist philosophers have to say about human existence, about the relationship between the soul and the body, reason and the passions. Evaluate what these thinkers have to say about what it is to be a human being.

Authenticity

One of the most important themes of Existentialism is the notion of authentic existence. Compare at least two of the Existentialist philosophers in their criticism of social conformity and their conception of authentic existence.

Heidegger and Sartre

Explain why Heidegger thinks that the crisis of modernity can be traced back to a question that has been forgotten since the days of the ancient pre-Socratic philosophers. What is this question—what is the *ontological difference* between being and Being that has been overlooked in the history of metaphysics according to Heidegger? Why does Heidegger pursue this question in *Being and Time* with a phenomenological analysis of *Dasein*’s everyday existence? What are the main features of this analysis and what are the implications for our understanding of ourselves, and for our understanding of the world? Why does Heidegger distance himself from Sartre and Sartre’s conception of Existentialism? Sartre speaks of flight from anguish where Heidegger speaks of flight from anxiety. Sartre speaks of bad faith where Heidegger speaks of inauthenticity. What is the difference between the two thinkers in their thinking concerning human existence? Evaluate to what extent each of these thinkers provides an adequate response to the crisis of modernity.

Sartre and de Beauvoir

What does Sartre mean in “The Humanism of Existentialism” by the phrase “existence precedes essence” and why is this so, for Sartre, for human beings only? In *Being and Nothingness* what is Sartre saying when he describes consciousness as a meaning-giving activity? Why does he suggest that it is human consciousness that introduces the “not” or “nothingness” into experience? Why does Sartre suggest that “we are condemned to be free”? What does he mean, in *Being and Nothingness* when he suggests that “We have the war we deserve” and that “in a certain sense I choose being born? What does Sartre mean by “bad faith” and why is it so difficult to avoid? In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, how does Simone de Beauvoir attempt to work out an existentialist ethics in developing and going beyond Sartre’s account in *Being and Nothingness*? What did she find lacking in Sartre’s account of freedom? What are the various stages she describes in the development toward *genuine freedom*? For de Beauvoir, what is this *genuine freedom* that is, for her, the only authentic moral freedom? To what extent is she successful in working out an ethics from an existentialist position?

Camus

How does Nietzsche's thought influence Camus in *The Plague* and the *The Myth of Sisyphus*? What does Camus mean by “absurdity” and how is the notion of the “absurd hero” brought out in his writings? What is the one truly serious philosophical problem” which Camus addresses in the *Myth of Sisyphus*? Why does Camus say that we must imagine Sisyphus happy? To what extent would you agree with Camus?