

Community Education - Fall Quarter 2026

Course Title: Introduction to Existentialism: Freedom, Meaning & the Self

Instructor: Sam Busick

Email: sbusick@clark.edu



Course Description

What does it mean to live a meaningful life in a world that may provide no meaning of its own? This course explores existentialism through philosophy and literature, beginning with its nineteenth-century roots and continuing through the major existential thinkers of the twentieth century. Through Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus, Heidegger, Sartre, Beauvoir, Frankl, and Foucault, we will examine some of philosophy's most enduring questions: Are we truly free? What responsibilities come with freedom? How do we confront anxiety, alienation, suffering, and death? Can life have meaning without certainty? Rather than treating existentialism as a single philosophical system, the course examines a continuing conversation about the individual and the problem of human existence. Rather than treating existentialism as a single philosophical system, the course examines a continuing conversation about the individual and the problem of human existence. Major Existential Themes: Freedom, Responsibility, Anxiety and anguish, Authenticity, Absurdity, Alienation, Death and finitude, Meaning creation, Bad faith, and The Other

Course Schedule

Session 1: The Birth of Existentialism

Theme: Faith, freedom, anxiety, and the crisis of meaning

Part 1: The Existential Problem

- What is existentialism?
- The individual versus society
- Freedom and responsibility
- Anxiety and uncertainty

- The search for meaning
- The problem of suffering and death

Part 2: Søren Kierkegaard — The Grandfather of Existentialism

- The individual and subjective truth
- Anxiety, despair, and freedom
- Faith and the "leap"
- Choosing how to live
- The individual versus the crowd

Key works:

- *Fear and Trembling*
- *The Sickness Unto Death*

Important precursor: Blaise Pascal

- Faith and uncertainty
- Human insignificance and greatness
- The limits of reason
- Pascal's influence on Kierkegaard

Part 3: Friedrich Nietzsche — The Death of God

- "God is dead"
- Nihilism and the collapse of traditional values
- Creating values rather than inheriting them
- The Übermensch
- Self-overcoming
- Becoming who you are

Key works:

- *On the Genealogy of Morality*
- *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Part 4: Fyodor Dostoevsky — Freedom Underground

- Radical freedom
- Irrationality and human nature
- Alienation from society
- Suffering and responsibility
- What happens when reason cannot explain human behavior?

Key work:

- *Notes from Underground*

Discussion Question:

If freedom creates anxiety, uncertainty, and responsibility, why do human beings value it so highly?

Session 2: The Absurd and the Individual

Theme: Alienation, absurdity, and the search for meaning

Part 1: Philosophy in Literature

- Why existentialism flourished in novels, plays, and stories
- Literature as philosophical experimentation
- The isolated individual
- Modern society and alienation
- The breakdown of certainty

Part 2: Franz Kafka — The Alienated Individual

- Isolation and powerlessness
- Bureaucracy and incomprehensible authority
- Identity and dehumanization
- The individual trapped in an irrational world

Key work:

- *The Metamorphosis*

Part 3: Albert Camus — The Absurd

- Humanity's desire for meaning
- An indifferent universe
- The absurd
- Revolt rather than surrender
- Living without certainty

Key works:

- *The Stranger*
- *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Camus's Central Question

If life has no inherent meaning, why not commit suicide?

Camus argues that recognizing the absurd does not require despair. Instead, it creates the possibility of living consciously, freely, and defiantly despite the absence of ultimate answers.

Part 4: Creating Meaning

- Must meaning come from religion?
- Can individuals create their own meaning?
- Is happiness possible without certainty?
- Does accepting absurdity make us freer?
- Can meaning exist even if the universe itself is meaningless?

Discussion Question:

If the universe does not provide us with meaning, can the meaning we create for ourselves be enough?

Session 3: Freedom, Responsibility & Society

Theme: Authenticity, bad faith, ethics, power, and the responsibility of being free

Part 1: Martin Heidegger — Being and Authenticity

- What does it mean "to be"?
- Being thrown into a world we did not choose
- Anxiety as a confrontation with existence
- Authentic versus inauthentic living
- Death and finitude
- Heidegger's influence on Sartre

Part 2: Jean-Paul Sartre — Condemned to Be Free

- "Existence precedes essence"
- Radical freedom
- Freedom creates responsibility
- Anguish
- Bad faith
- Authenticity
- The problem of other people

Key works:

- *Nausea*
- *Being and Nothingness*
- *No Exit*

Part 3: Simone de Beauvoir — Freedom and the Other

- Existentialism and ethics
- My freedom versus the freedom of others
- Oppression and responsibility
- Ambiguity
- The ethical consequences of freedom

Key work:

- *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

Part 4: Viktor Frankl — Meaning Despite Suffering

- Meaning in conditions we cannot control
- Responsibility and choice
- Suffering and human dignity
- Purpose as a psychological and existential necessity

Key work:

- *Man's Search for Meaning*

Part 5: Michel Foucault — The Critique of the Free Self

- How society shapes identity
- Institutions and social control
- Knowledge and power
- Normality and deviance
- Are our choices really our own?
- Can we ever completely escape the systems that shape us?

The Existential Conversation

Kierkegaard → Nietzsche → Dostoevsky → Kafka → Camus → Heidegger → Sartre → Beauvoir → Frankl → Foucault

The course concludes by asking whether existentialism provides an answer to the problem of existence—or simply teaches us how to confront the problem honestly.

Final Discussion

- Are human beings truly free?
- Does freedom require responsibility?
- What does it mean to live authentically?
- Can suffering have meaning?
- Do we discover meaning or create it?
- How much of the "self" is actually created by society?

- Is existentialism ultimately pessimistic—or surprisingly optimistic?
 - Which thinker offers the most useful philosophy for living today?
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Suggested Films/Clips

- *The Seventh Seal*
 - *Ikiru*
 - *No Exit*
 - *The Stranger*
 - *The Truman Show*
 - *The Matrix*
 - *Everything Everywhere All at Once*
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Class Evaluation

- Class evaluations are sent by email.
 - If you don't see it right away, check your **junk/spam folder**.
 - Evaluations are **anonymous** and come directly from Clark College.
 - If you don't receive one, contact:
 - Email: continuingeducation@clark.edu
 - Phone: 360-992-2939
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 - Community Education may also cancel classes independently if travel is unsafe.
 - If canceled, you will be notified by both phone and email.
 - Please check that your contact information is correct on the class roster.
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