

Existentialism

Instructor: Dr Kraal

Latest update: April 17, 2025

1 Course Description

“Existentialism” is a branch of modern philosophy that addresses big questions about the meaning of life in the context of a philosophical dialogue with canonical books on these questions written by authors such as Søren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and a few others.

It's not possible to study all these canonical books in a course of this length, so instead we will focus on two books by Søren Kierkegaard, the father of the existentialist movement, namely his *Either/Or* and *Sickness Unto Death*. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard contrasts a life of fun with a life of duty and commitment, and raises questions about whether there is an ultimate justification of one of these lives over the other. In *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard offers a pioneering and celebrated analysis of despair, which he thinks provides the underlying framework of human life.

In addition to the above texts, we will also look at some selected passages from Kierkegaard's other writings (*Fear and Trembling*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, *Crumbs*, *Postscript*), and shorter essays by 20th Century existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre (*Existentialism is a Humanism*) and Simone de Beauvoir (*What is Existentialism?*).

2 Teaching style

This course is run a bit like a large book club, in that we read sections of the books before each class and then I give a lecture on those sections. The lectures aim to be “conversational” in the sense that I will mostly sit and talk to you about the book, reading specific passages out loud, providing commentary on those passages, and using the projector to write down some key terms and ideas that I encourage you to include in your notes.

I will not be using power point slides in this course, nor will I be posting recordings. *Students who strongly rely on power point slides and recordings should carefully consider, before taking the course, whether they are willing to take a course with no power points or recordings.*

3 Lectures. MW 1:00-4:00pm

4 Policy on missed lectures

Students can request the Instructor to make a posting on their behalf on Canvas Announcements asking for notes. Please note that Instructors or TA's cannot repeat the contents of missed lectures, or summaries of missed lectures, in emails; that is not considered a reasonable request.

5 Instructor. Dr. Anders Kraal (anders.kraal@ubc.ca)

6 Instructor Office Hours. TBA on Canvas Announcements

7 Instructor Email Policy. Instructor will reply to emails weekdays, typically within 48h.

8 How to address me: “Dr Kraal” or “Professor Kraal” are okay. Out of respect for academic tradition you should avoid calling me by my first name.

9 Teaching Assistants. TBA on Canvas.

10 Marking. The TA’s will be marking all the exams in this course.

11 Required Texts.

Kierkegaard, Either/Or, trans. Hannay (Penguin edition) (In bookstore).

Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, trans. Hannay (Penguin edition) (In bookstore).

12 Course Requirements

Your mark is determined by your results on 3 midterms and a final exam (worth 25% of your final grade each). You will need a computer and internet connection to write the exams.

Midterms (x3). Midterms are worth 25% each. They are written via Canvas using Respondus Lockdown Browser. Questions occur in random order, and in different order for different students, and you will not be able to see all the questions at once, and you cannot go back and revise an answer to a question which has been submitted. These exams are open book (you can have course materials and written notes with you while writing). In these exams, you will be asked to provide answers to a few questions dealing with matters brought up in class prior to the date of the exam. If you miss one or more of these exams, for any reason, the weight will automatically be transferred to your final. There is no need to apply for academic concession. There will be no alternate arrangements to make up for missed exams (no makeup exams, no special arrangements).

Final Exam: The final exam is worth 25% and will be held during UBC’s final examinations period. It is written via Canvas using Respondus Lockdown Browser. Questions occur in random order, and in different order for different students, and you will not be able to see all the questions at once, and you cannot go back and revise an answer to a question which has been submitted. These exams are open book (you can have course materials and written notes with you while writing). In these exams, you will be asked to provide answers to a few questions dealing with matters brought up in class prior to the date of the exam. A missed final exam will be assigned 0p unless an explanation is provided that is acceptable by the standards of the UBC Academic Calendar (in which case there will be a standing deferred final exam after the course is over and administered by UBC Student Advising, not by the Philosophy Department).

Note: if you have an internet glitch during an exam, that will not be accommodated, so whatever you were able to write during the time you had internet connection is what will be marked. (If we were to seek to accommodate claims as to glitches it would be impossible to ensure the integrity of the exam, as it would be impossible to distinguish actual glitches from made-up glitches.) The only exception to this is if Student Advising writes to the instructor supporting an exemption. It is the student's responsibility and not UBC's to ensure a reliable internet connection.

13 Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course the student will be expected to be familiar with some main ideas in the writings to be discussed in this course. The student will be expected to be able to provide critical reflection on the aforementioned ideas on written exams.

14 Marking Parameters

Your mark in this course will be a function of three main factors i) your performance on the examinable momenta *relative to your peers*, ii) your comprehension of the course material, iii) demonstration of skill in assessing and evaluating philosophical ideas.

15 Marking Scale

A+ 90-100% / **A** 85-89% / **A-** 80-84% / **B+** 76-79% / **B** 72-75% / **B-** 68-71%

C+ 64-67% / **C** 60-63% / **C-** 55-59% / **D** 50-54% / **F** 0-49%

The degree of difficulty on the examinable momenta will be set so as to *aim* at a class average outcome that by and large conforms to the department average for this course down the years. Scaling may be used to this effect.

16 Policy on Exam Feedback

Marks on exams and papers will be posted on canvas.

Generic feedback on expected outcomes of exams and papers will be provided (typically by the Instructor) in so-called Feedback Sessions during class time.

Additional *specific feedback* on your exam may be provided at the discretion of the TA who marks your exam. Note that TA's are working under substantial time restrictions (often they are allotted no more than 20min by the University for the marking of each exam), and students cannot expect as a matter of principle specific feedback beyond what the TA has or has not already provided. Any concerns about the marking of an exam should be submitted to the marker via email, and will be responded to via email. Unresolved issues can be emailed to the Instructor during the final exam period towards the end of the course.

17 Plagiarism

Plagiarism is intellectual theft, and occurs where a student submits or presents the oral or written work of another person as his or her own. Scholarship quite properly rests upon examining and referring to the thoughts and writings of others, but when another person's words (i.e. phrases, sentences, or paragraphs), ideas, or entire works are used, the author must be acknowledged in the text, in footnotes, in endnotes, or in another accepted form of academic citation. Where direct quotations are made, they must be clearly delineated (for example, within quotation marks or separately indented). Failure to provide proper attribution is plagiarism because it represents someone else's work as one's own. Plagiarism should not occur in submitted drafts or final works. A student who seeks assistance from a tutor or other scholastic aids must ensure that the work submitted is the student's own. Students are responsible for ensuring that any work submitted does not constitute plagiarism. Students who are in any doubt as to what constitutes plagiarism should consult their instructor before handing in any assignments.

See also <http://www.calendar.ubc.ca/Vancouver/index.cfm?tree=3,54,111,959>

18 UBC Values and Policies

UBC values respect for the person and ideas of *all members* of the academic community. This includes students, graduate students, instructors, and staff.

Harassment and discrimination are not tolerated.

Suppression of academic freedom is not tolerated.

UBC provides appropriate accommodation for students with disabilities and for religious and cultural observances.

UBC provides resources to support student learning and to maintain healthy lifestyles but recognizes that sometimes crises arise and so there are additional resources to access including those for survivors of sexual violence.

UBC values academic honesty and students are expected to acknowledge the ideas generated by others and to uphold the highest academic standards in all of their actions. Details of the policies and how to access support are available here: <https://senate.ubc.ca/policiesresources-support-student-success>.

Students are expected to conduct themselves respectfully towards each other as well as towards their TA's and their course instructor.

19 Schedule (a more detailed schedule will be published on canvas)

July 2: Introductory remarks / Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*

July 7: Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*

July 9: Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*

July 14: Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* [Exam1 at 1:00-1:50pm]

July 16: Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*

July 21: *Either/Or* [**Exam2 at 1:00-1:50pm**]

July 23: *Some writings in between* *Either/Or* and *Sickness unto Death*

July 28: *Sickness unto Death*

July 30: Digression on Sartre and de Beauvoir

August 4: *Sickness unto Death* [**Exam3 at 1:00-1:50pm**]

August 6: *Sickness unto Death*

[**Final exam** at some point between August 12-16]