

**No Excuses:
Existentialism
and the
Meaning of Life
Part I
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No Excuses: Existentialism and the Meaning of Life

Scope:

Existentialism is, in my view, the most exciting and important philosophical movement of the past century and a half. Fifty years after the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre gave it its identity and one hundred and fifty years after the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard gave it its initial impetus, existentialism continues to win new enthusiasts and, in keeping with its still exciting and revolutionary message, vehement critics.

The message of existentialism, unlike that of many more obscure and academic philosophical movements, is about as simple as can be. It is that every one of us, as an individual, is responsible—responsible for what we do, responsible for who we are, responsible for the way we face and deal with the world, responsible, ultimately, for the way the world is. It is, in a very short phrase, the philosophy of “no excuses!” Life may be difficult; circumstances may be impossible. There may be obstacles, not least of which are our own personalities, characters, emotions, and limited means or intelligence. But, nevertheless, we are responsible. We cannot shift that burden onto God, or nature, or the ways of the world. If there is a God, we choose to believe. If nature made us one way, it is up to us to decide what we are to do with what nature gives us—whether to go along or fight back, to modify or transcend nature. As the delightfully priggish Kate Hepburn says to a wonderfully vulgar Humphrey Bogart in the movie *The African Queen*, “Nature is what we are put on this earth to rise above.” That is what existentialism is all about. We are responsible for ourselves.

There are no excuses.

But to say that the basic message of existentialism is quite simple and straightforward is not to say that the philosophers or the philosophies that make up the movement are simple and straightforward. The movement itself is something of a fabrication. None of the major existentialist figures, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Camus—only excepting Sartre—would recognize themselves as part of a “movement” at all. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were both ferocious individualists who vehemently rejected all movements. To belong to a philosophical movement, each of them would have said, would be to show cowardice and a lack of integrity, to be simply one of the “herd.” Heidegger was deeply offended when he was linked with Sartre as one of the existentialists, and he publicly denounced the association. Camus and Sartre once were friends, but they quarreled over politics and Camus also broke the association and publicly rejected it.

Many of the other writers and philosophers who have been associated with the movement would have been equally hesitant to embrace the title had they known of it. The main exceptions were those who have wanted or needed to derive some fame and notoriety by associating themselves with existentialism. In the 1950s in the United States, for example, Norman Mailer proudly took up the title, giving it his own definition, “hip.”

The existentialists’ writings, too, are by no means simple and straightforward. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche write beautifully but in such challenging, often disjointed, exhortations that trying to summarize or systematize their thoughts is something of a hopeless venture. Heidegger is among the most difficult writers in the entire history of philosophy, and even Sartre—a lucid literary writer when he wants to be—imitates some of the worst elements of Heidegger’s notorious style. Much of the challenge of this course of lectures, accordingly, is to free the exciting and revolutionary message of existentialism from its often formidable textual enclosures.

The course begins, after a brief introduction to the historical context and the very notion of “existentialism,” with a discussion of the twentieth-century writer and philosopher Albert Camus (1913–1960). Chronologically, Camus is already late in the game. (We will trace existentialist ideas as far back as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in the mid-nineteenth century, but we will not explore those figures—say Socrates or Saint Augustine—who with some justification might be called their predecessors.) Philosophically, it is often said that Camus is more of a literary figure, a lyrical essayist, than a philosopher. But the art of persuasive personal writing rather than dry philosophical analysis is one of the earmarks of existentialism. (Even the obscure writings of Martin Heidegger [1889–1976] are remarkable in their rhetorical and emotional efficacy.)

In this sense, Camus is exemplary in his combination of deep contemplation and often poetic writing and, because his ideas are less complex than the probing and systematic works of the other existential writers before him, he makes an ideal beginning. We will start with his most famous novel, *The Stranger*, published in the early 1940s, which combines a disturbingly “flat” descriptive style with a horrifying sequence of events, introducing us to a

character whose reactions to the world are indeed “strange.” It is our reaction to this character, however, that makes the novel so deeply philosophical. What is it that makes him so strange? The answer to that question starts us thinking about the way we think about ourselves and each other, what we take for granted and do not normally notice.

After an analysis of *The Stranger*, I want to take us through a number of Camus’s later works, beginning with a philosophical essay he wrote about the same time, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he introduces his infamous concept of “The Absurd.” Then, in Lectures Five and Six, I want to examine two later novels, *The Plague* and *The Fall* (the last novel Camus published in his lifetime, although his daughter recently published an unfinished novel he was working on at the time of his death). My aim in these first half dozen lectures will be to set a certain mood for the rest of the course, a rebellious, restless, yet thoroughly conscientious mood, which I believe Camus exemplifies both in his writings and in his life.

In Lectures Seven through Nine, I want to turn to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and his revolutionary work. Kierkegaard was a deeply religious philosopher—a pious Christian—and his existentialist thought was devoted to the question, “What does it mean to be—or rather, what does it mean to become—a Christian?” We should thus be advised that, contrary to some popular misunderstandings, existentialism is by no means an anti-religious or unspiritual philosophy. It can and often does embrace God, as well as a host of visions of the world that we can, without apology, call “spiritual.” (We will see that Nietzsche and Heidegger both embrace such visions, although in very different ways.)

In Lectures Ten through Thirteen, I want to consider in some detail the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and his role in this rather eccentric movement. Nietzsche is perhaps best known for his bold declaration “God is dead.” He is also well known as a self-proclaimed “immoralist.” In fact, both of these phrases are misleading. Nietzsche was by no means the first person to say that God is dead (Martin Luther had said it three centuries before), and Nietzsche himself was anything but an immoral person. He attacks morality—or rather, he attacks one conception of morality—but nevertheless he defends a profound view of ethics and human nature.

In Lecture Fourteen, I want to turn briefly to three diverse but exemplary figures from the history of literature. All three display existentialist themes and temperaments in their works: Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881), the great Russian novelist; Franz Kafka (1883–1924), the brilliant Czech novelist and story writer; and Hermann Hesse (1877–1962), a twentieth-century Swiss writer who combined a fascination with Asian philosophy with a profoundly Nietzschean interest and temperament.

In Lecture Fifteen, I would like to briefly introduce the philosophical method of a philosopher who could not be further from the existentialist temperament but yet had a profound influence on both Heidegger and Sartre. He is the German-Czech philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who invented a philosophical technique called “phenomenology.” Both Heidegger and Sartre, at least at the beginning of their careers, thought of themselves as phenomenologists. In the rest of that lecture and in Lectures Sixteen and Seventeen, I would like to consider Martin Heidegger’s very difficult but extremely insightful philosophy.

Finally, in Lectures Eighteen through Twenty-Three, I want to consider the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), and in Lecture Twenty-Four, I would like to finish with a comparison and contrast with French philosophy since his time. My suggestion will be that much of what is best in “postmodernism” is taken more or less directly from Sartre, despite the fact that he is typically attacked as the very antithesis of postmodernism. Existentialism, I want to argue, was and is not just another French intellectual fashion but a timely antidote to some of the worst self-(mis)understandings of the end of the century.

How should one approach these lectures? My advice on the lecture on *The Stranger* is a good example of how I think each lecture should be approached. Although the lectures are self-contained, it would be ideally desirable to read the “Essential Reading” (in this case, the novel) before hearing or viewing the lecture. That way, you come to the lecture ready to question and challenge with your interpretation and ideas. This will be true even for the very difficult readings from Heidegger and Sartre. It is very helpful to have contact with their style and vocabulary even if the ideas at first seem impenetrable. Initial contact is even more desirable with our other two major authors, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Both write in a strikingly personal, provocative style, and nothing will impress the reader more than an immediate, first-hand confrontation with their witty and sometimes shocking aphorisms and observations.

Of course, many if not most viewers of the lectures will not have the opportunity to read the material before every lecture. I do suggest, however, that some attempt be made to read the essential material soon after. (I hope the lectures entice one to do so.) The questions are designed to help the reader straighten out the ideas and vocabulary, make various comparisons, and most important, work out his or her own views regarding the material in the lectures. In general, the introductory questions presume only a hearing of the lectures and perhaps some of the essential reading. The advanced questions invite further reading and more extensive thought.

Existentialism is, first of all, a philosophy of life, a philosophy about who we are. The ultimate intent of the course, accordingly, is not only to inform the viewer about a very exciting philosophy but also to enrich his or her life and make all of us think about who we are in a very new and bold way. The main texts for the lectures can be found in Robert C. Solomon, ed., *Existentialism* (New York: McGraw Hill/Modern Library, 1974). Secondary texts that follow the perspective of the lectures can be found in Robert C. Solomon, *From Rationalism to Existentialism* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), and *Continental Philosophy Since 1750* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

Lecture One

What Is Existentialism?

Scope: Existentialism is best thought of as a movement, a “sensitivity” that can be traced throughout the history of Western philosophy. Its central themes are the significance of the individual, the importance of passion, the irrational aspects of life, and the importance of human freedom. We will be looking primarily at five very different figures, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Outline

- I. Existentialism is a movement, a “sensitivity,” not a set of doctrines.
 - A. It is not, as it is too often said, a necessarily “gloomy” philosophy. It is, rather, invigorating and positive.
 - B. Nor is it necessarily atheistic, a form of “secular humanism.” Søren Kierkegaard, the “first” existentialist, was profoundly religious.
 - C. In a world pervaded by victim psychology, existentialism offers a refreshing sense of empowerment.
- II. Existential attitudes can be found as far back as ancient times.
 - A. It is possible to trace existentialism, defined one way or another, back to Socrates and Augustine, perhaps even to Heraclitus.
 - B. We will limit our examination to five definitive figures, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre.
 1. They do not form a “school” or share any particular outlook on religion and politics.
 2. Kierkegaard is a pious Christian; Nietzsche and Sartre are atheists.
 3. Kierkegaard despised politics; Sartre was a Marxist; Camus, a humanitarian; Heidegger, a Nazi.
 - C. Strictly speaking, perhaps, the only true existentialist was Sartre, who defined the term to refer to his own work during and immediately after the Second World War. He pursued the idea that “we make ourselves.”
 - D. Expanding our vision, however, the movement certainly includes such literary figures as Fyodor Dostoevsky and Franz Kafka, among others.
- III. Three themes pervade existentialism:
 - A. A strong emphasis on the individual (although this is variously defined and understood).
 1. A lot of these writers were truly eccentric.
 2. Each of them takes individuality in a different direction.
 - B. The central role of the passions, as opposed to the usual philosophical emphasis on reason and rationality. The emphasis instead is on a passionate commitment. For the existentialist, to live is to live passionately.
 - C. The importance of human freedom. Existentialists are concerned with personal freedom, both political freedom and free will.
 1. This is central to Kierkegaard and Sartre, but not so obviously to Nietzsche and Heidegger.
 2. The relationship between freedom and reason is particularly at issue.
 3. Traditionally, acting “rationally” is said to be free, while acting out of emotion is considered being a “slave to one’s passions.” The existentialists suggest that we live best and are most ourselves in terms of passion. Kierkegaard’s notion of “passionate commitment” is central.
- IV. The special meaning of the central term, “existence,” is first defined by Kierkegaard to refer to a life that is filled with passion, self-understanding, and commitment. For Nietzsche, to really “exist” is to manifest your talents and virtues—“becoming the person you really are.”
 - A. The key component of existentialism’s general “sensitivity” is the striking realization of one’s own “contingency.”
 1. One might have never been born, or been born in a different place, at a different time, as a different person, or possibly not as a person at all. Heidegger’s image of “thrownness” suggests how much of our lives is given, not chosen.

2. Kafka's "Metamorphosis," in which a very ordinary middle-class man wakes up to find himself changed into a giant cockroach, is a spectacularly unusual example of the contingency of our particular existence.
- B. Descartes's "I think, therefore I am" is a problem, not a solution to the question of existence. The existentialists challenge the idea that human existence is so tied up with thinking.
 - C. Existentialism basically urges us to live our lives to the fullest, although what this means will take somewhat different forms. Of all philosophers, it seems to me that existentialists are the most geared to our own needs and expectations.
 - D. Although its origins are European, existentialism is perfectly suited to contemporary American thought.

Essential Reading:

Solomon, *Existentialism*, Introduction.

Recommended Reading:

Any decent short overview of existentialism, e.g., many encyclopedia entries (*Collier's*, *Grolier*, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and so on).

For a lighter treatment, read the mock interviews in Solomon, *Introducing the Existentialists* (Hackett). For an eye-opener, there is always Kafka's "Metamorphosis."

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. What do you mean by the phrase "personal freedom"? What counts as "being free" for you?
2. What is an individual? What (if anything) makes a person an individual, even "unique"?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. Are the passions, by their very nature, "irrational"? What is meant by the term "rationality"? Is rationality always a good thing?
2. Do you believe in fate? What would this mean? If I were to introduce you to a very good fortune teller (who had an accuracy rate of over 95%) and she offered to tell you the outcome of your marriage or the date of your death, would you be willing to ask her? Why or why not?

Lecture Two

Albert Camus—*The Stranger*, Part I

Scope: Camus's novel *The Stranger* is an excellent example of the new existentialist literature of the 1940s. Meursault, "the stranger," is critically devoid of basic human attributes. When he kills a man, we see him forced into philosophical reflection and humanity.

Outline

- I. Camus's novel *The Stranger* is an excellent place to begin studying the peculiar shifts of mind that best characterize existentialism.
 - A. Camus resented being labeled an "existentialist," and he rejected the term. Nevertheless, *The Stranger* is the epitome of the new existentialist literature of the 1940s.
 - B. The book is set in Algeria, in the middle of an intensifying civil war (which is never mentioned).
 - C. It concerns the fate of a rather dull young man (Meursault), who gets caught up in a murder and is sentenced to death.
 - D. Meursault is something of a Rorschach test for readers; different generations see different attributes in his peculiarities. In the 1960s, my students saw him as "cool"; in the 1980s, they saw him as a nerd.
- II. What is "strange" about Meursault is that he seems to feel nothing. He doesn't seem to think for himself or engage in reflection at all.
 - A. He does not grieve the death of his mother. ("Out of sight, out of mind.") Where any of us would feel shock or abandonment, such emotions are lacking in Meursault.
 - B. He has no sense of morality or morals. (He is incapable of judgment.)
 - C. He is not repulsed by the activities of his neighbors (a pimp and a sleazoid).
 - D. He has no ambitions. (He is offered a post in Paris and doesn't see the point.)
 - E. He does not respond to love. (When Marie asks him, "Do you love me?" he doesn't understand. Love involves decisions and commitments, but Meursault understands none of that. Nor does he have any conception of what marriage entails.)
 - F. He does not respond to the fact that he has killed a man and will himself die on account of it. (Nor does he manifest any signs of fear or guilt or anxiety.)
 - G. Meursault simply has no conception of the future and only an occasional fleeting thought of the past. He makes no plans and has no regrets. He lives moment by moment.
 - H. He also has no feelings, except for the physical sensations of heat and light, smell and taste. A life without reason is not necessarily a life of intensified feeling. People without thoughts are often without feelings, too.
- III. The oddity of the murder is: Was there a murderer? The description of the murder makes it seem as though the killing "just happens."
 - A. Is Meursault ever an "agent" of his own actions? The murder scene is frightening, because Meursault feels no moral qualms or anxieties.
 - B. The strangeness of the trial is manifest in Part II. Was Camus politically naive?
 1. What is the author's purpose in portraying a trial of a Frenchman condemned to death for killing a "foreigner" (in self-defense)? The vicious racial tensions of the time appear nowhere.
 2. The trial has primarily philosophical significance, as in Kafka's novel, *The Trial*. (Kafka depicts a young man who is put to death without ever knowing the charge.)
 3. The novel ends with Meursault facing his execution philosophically.
 - C. The ultimate point of the novel is the nature of guilt and innocence. But it is also a celebration of life for life's sake. The point of the trial is to turn Meursault into a human being.

Essential Reading:

Camus, *The Stranger*, Part I, 1946 (“British” translation); 1988 (“American” translation).

Recommended Reading:

Lottman, *Camus: A Biography*.

Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. Have you ever met someone like Meursault? What do you think of him (or her)?
2. To whom is Meursault a “stranger”? In what ways is he “strange”? Is this “lifestyle” attractive or appealing to you? Why or why not?
3. Can a person live without caring? Does the idea of a life without passions sound attractive to you? Why or why not?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. Could a person literally live “for the moment,” with no sense of past or future?
2. What is required to be the “agent” of one’s actions? Is causing something to happen sufficient?

Lecture Three

Camus—*The Stranger*, Part II

Scope: *The Stranger* captures the philosophical conflict between reason and experience. It raises the question of the meaning and worth of rationality and reflection. It also raises basic questions about self-consciousness, good and evil, and innocence and guilt. Meursault opens his heart to “the benign indifference of the universe.”

Outline

- I. The flat, matter-of-fact portrait of Meursault in *The Stranger* captures an age-old philosophical dilemma—the role of reason and consciousness in human nature.
 - A. The juxtaposition of “lived experience” and reflection raises the question of their inter- and independence. In *The Stranger*, we have the sense that consciousness sometimes interferes with life.
 1. What does it mean to be rational?
 2. Rationality requires the ability to reflect on one’s life. In this sense, Meursault isn’t rational.
 3. Rationality requires the ability to anticipate consequences.
 4. Rationality requires the ability to adhere to standards and values. Rationality, thus, has a social dimension.
 - B. To what extent do our emotions and moral responses depend on reason?
 1. Emotions are essentially conceptual, intentional.
 2. Emotions require the basic elements of rationality. What we call “rationality” is bounded by our emotions.
 3. Emotions are often unreflective, but many emotions depend on the ability to reflect.
 4. Emotions essentially involve values. The “rational” thing to do may be that which makes the most emotional sense.
 5. Emotions are essentially about the self.
 - C. Do experience and reflection oppose one another?
 1. Camus suggests that this is the case. When Meursault stops living his life (when he goes to prison), he begins to reflect.
 2. What he reflects on is precisely the life that he has lost.
 3. In fact, the relationship between experience and reflection is much more complicated than this simple opposition would suggest.
 - D. The notion of reflection turns on two different but related metaphors:
 1. Reflection as in one’s reflection in a mirror.
 2. Reflection as in introspection, a “turning in” on oneself.
 3. The first sense may be aptly compared with “seeing yourself as others see you.”
 4. The second sense may be illusory, or utterly dependent on the first sense. In what sense can your consciousness be *your* consciousness?
 - E. Since Hegel, it is generally agreed that self-comprehension depends on the recognition of others.
 1. Meursault becomes self-aware only with the scrutiny of the judicial process.
 2. With self-awareness comes self-identity and reflection—along with Meursault’s new feelings of guilt.
- II. What does it mean to be innocent?
 - A. Meursault is innocent in the straightforward sense that he is unaware of the moral significance of his actions.
 1. The Biblical story of Adam and Eve takes innocence as the ignorance of good and evil.
 2. Meursault is incapable of being repulsed by cruelty (Salamano and Raymond).
 - B. Meursault is certainly not innocent in the even more straightforward sense that he murdered a man.
 1. He is guilty in the sense that he did it; that is, he caused the death of the Arab.
 2. He is guilty in the legal sense that he is declared “guilty” by the court.

3. What is not clear is the extent to which he is morally guilty, that he did in fact know what he was doing.
- C. To reflect is to be guilty; not to reflect is to be innocent. Camus was adamant about issues of social justice.
- D. In one sense, guilt (e.g., “original sin”) affects all of us, whatever we have done, just by virtue of consciousness.
- E. Camus’s experiences in wartime are clearly expressed here. Except for children, there are no innocents in war.

III. *The Stranger* ends in a meditation on the meaning of life.

- A. When the prison chaplain queries Meursault about his vision of the afterlife, “he flies into a rage and insists, ‘this life is the only one that means anything!’” This is the first true emotion he has felt in the course of the book.
 1. Asked to imagine an afterlife, he can think only of living this life again.
 2. He realizes that life is so rich that after only one day of it, one could spend an eternity dwelling on the details.
- B. He thinks about how he has lived and decides that it doesn’t matter how one has lived. It only matters that one has lived.
 1. Later, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he will say, “there is only quantity of life.”
 2. Quality of life is in some sense a bogus notion.
- C. He then opens his heart to “the benign indifference of the universe.”
- D. This dramatic phrase sums up much of Camus’s philosophy. We will see it again in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.
- E. The notion of “a happy death” haunts all of Camus’s work. (His first novel, before *The Stranger*, was entitled *A Happy Death*.)

Essential Reading:

Camus, *The Stranger*, Part II.

Recommended Reading:

For a lyrical introduction to Camus’s life in Algeria and his thought, see his *Notebooks*. A harshly critical but worthwhile general analysis is O’Brien, *Camus*; see also Solomon, “Camus’s l’etranger and the Truth,” in *From Hegel to Existentialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). A somewhat dated biography is Bree, *Camus*. More recent are Lottman and Todd (see Lecture Two).

For parallel insights, read Kafka, *The Trial*; Melville, “Billy Budd, Sailor,” *Billy Budd, Sailor, and Other Stories*; Kosinski, *Being There*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. You will recall that Meursault shot the Arab only after the latter had drawn his knife—a knife that he had used to slash Meursault’s friend a short time earlier. Why does his attorney not plead “self-defense”?
2. What is the meaning of “guilt” in Part II of *The Stranger*? Why does the jury find Meursault guilty? What is the point of this somewhat “absurd” trial? Why does the magistrate call him “Mr. Antichrist”?
3. Do you believe that Meursault’s immersion in “lived experience,” with its corresponding lack of reflection, is the optimal way of getting the most from life? Or does reflection play an essential and positive role in even our most elementary experiences (feeling the warmth of the sun, the taste of chocolate, and so on)?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. Years after *The Stranger* was published (in 1955), Camus retrospectively described Meursault as “a man who doesn’t lie.” Yet he does lie, as evidenced by his willingness to perjure himself for Raymond when the police came to arrest him for beating his Arab girlfriend. Can Camus’s claim be reconciled with such incidents? Is it enough to be a “hero for the truth” if one simply doesn’t lie—or doesn’t think—about the meaning of what happens?

2. The “little robot” woman appears twice in the novel, once in the first part and once in the second part. What role does this fleeting character play for Camus? How does she illustrate the central division between Meursault’s bland observations and his being “looked at” and judged?
3. Do you believe that the self (and self-consciousness) arises only with the reflection and judgment of other people?
4. In the very last line of the book, Meursault tells us that he hopes spectators at his execution greet him with “howls of execration.” Why would he have such a desire? Is there anything in the logic of the novel to prepare us for this?

Lecture Four

Camus—*The Myth of Sisyphus*

Scope: *The Myth of Sisyphus* is a philosophical theory, a vision of “the absurd.” Sisyphus is an example of all of us, life spent in futile quests. The absurd is born, Camus says, of our increasingly impersonal, abstract, scientific view of the world. Ultimately, only personal experience is meaningful.

Outline

- I. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus gives us a philosophical theory, or rather, perhaps, a vision, to accompany the odd and disturbing view of the world of *The Stranger*.
 - A. Sisyphus was condemned by the Olympian gods to spend all eternity in fruitless labor, rolling a rock up a mountain until it would roll back down of its own weight, again and again and again.
 - B. Nothing could be more absurd, Camus tells us, than a life of such futility.
- II. The “absurd” is this vision, this sensibility that has come to preoccupy the modern mind.
 - A. Camus defines the absurd as a confrontation between “rational” human beings and an “indifferent” universe.
 1. It is the view that, despite our hopes and expectations (for justice, for salvation, for peace and harmony), the world does not deliver or care.
 2. Meursault accepts the indifference of the universe as “brotherly” in *The Stranger*.
 - B. Camus is an atheist. (But he also says that if there were a God, it would not matter—life would still be absurd.)
- III. In *The Stranger*, Camus suggests that death makes life absurd.
 - A. This view has been around since ancient times.
 - B. The character of Sisyphus makes it painfully clear that an eternity of futility is more absurd than a mere lifetime of futility. Death, then, is a kind of blessing, an escape from perennial boredom.
 - C. *Sisyphus* and Ecclesiastes both suggest the absurdity that our lives amount to nothing.
- IV. One of Camus’s targets in the *Myth* is the contemporary glorification of science and “objectivity.”
 - A. Galileo’s retractions before the threats of the Church were more comic than tragic, Camus suggests, because it is life, not truth, that really counts.
 - B. The absurd is born, Camus suggests, of the impersonal, abstract, scientific view of the world and what one contemporary philosopher has called “the view from nowhere.”
 - C. Ultimately, only personal experience is meaningful.
- V. Reason is characterized by the question “why?”
 - A. This is a quest for explanation, for justification, for an account that makes an action or an event comprehensible.
 1. But every “why?” leads to another “why?”
 2. All series of “why?” questions end nowhere.
 - B. In terms of understanding as well as satisfaction, life is essentially absurd.
 1. Understanding does not give us satisfaction.
 2. The absurd is a confrontation between our rational minds and an “indifferent” universe.
 - C. Sisyphus can be interpreted in two ways in this context.
 1. He devotes himself to his labor so completely that he must be considered happy. Thus, the role of reflection, of reason, is a problem. It leads to a question—“what does this amount to?”—to which the answer is “nothing.”
 2. He undertakes his task with resentment, and his resentment of the gods thereby makes his life meaningful. Sisyphus rebels by refusing to accept the absurdity imposed on him.

VI. Camus presents reason as a problem.

- A. “Rationality” has different meanings.
 - 1. It refers to “consciousness” on the one hand. Only human consciousness can see absurdity in a repeated pattern.
 - 2. It refers to the intelligibility (comprehensibility and justice) of the world on the other.
- B. In this, Camus reminds us of some characters invented by the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, in particular, Ivan Karamazov and the spiteful figure in *Notes from Underground*.

VII. In what sense is Meursault an absurd hero?

- A. For him, there is no commitment. In the first part of the novel, he doesn’t rebel. In the second part, he rebels when he rebuffs the priest.
- B. Either we find the meaning of life *in* our lives, Camus seems to be saying, or not at all.
- C. From *The Stranger* and *Sisyphus*, the answer is that life is its own meaning; philosophical reflection does not give us meaning.
- D. In Camus, only insofar as we are engaged in our lives do our lives make sense.

Essential Reading:

Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*; partially reprinted in Solomon, *Existentialism*, pp. 177–188).

Recommended Reading:

Camus’s later elaborations on the *Myth* are in his book *The Rebel*; for a more “metaphysical” perspective on “the absurd,” see Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*. For a somewhat larger interpretation of Camus’s philosophy, see Sprintzen, *Camus*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

- 1. Camus begins *The Myth of Sisyphus* with the assertion that “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.” Do you agree with him? Why would he make such a seemingly outrageous suggestion?
- 2. What is “the absurd”? Camus gives us several possible ways of living in the face of “the absurd.” What are they? Do you think that they are equally meritorious? What is “philosophical suicide”?
- 3. Do you agree with Camus when he asserts that our existence is no less absurd than that of Sisyphus? Explain.

Advanced Questions to Consider:

- 1. Camus characterizes a man gesturing behind a glass partition while he speaks on the telephone as a “dumb show,” which leads us to ask why he is alive. We can appreciate this characterization—at least at first blush. But ask yourself: Would we also consider the scene a dumb show and question why the man is alive if we could hear his conversation—if we could hear that his gestures flow from his just having been told that his house is on fire? Consider your own telephone conversations. Aren’t they also merely “dumb shows” that would lead an observer to question the significance of your existence? What does this tell you about the relationship between vantage point or perspective and meaning?
- 2. Camus, who considered himself a political moderate and a humanist, states that “to abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem.” Elsewhere, he emphasizes the need for “metaphysical revolt.” Who or what is Camus, an avowed atheist, revolting against?
- 3. Would “the absurd” simply disappear in the face of irrefutable evidence that God exists?

Lecture Five

Camus—*The Plague* and *The Fall*

Scope: *The Plague* is Camus's most social-minded work. The plague is a metaphor for the absurd. The theme of the novel is impending but unpredictable death, both individual and collective. Camus represents himself (more or less) as Tarrou, who faces the plague with both determination and irony.

Outline

- I. The plague represents the social dimension of the absurd.
 - A. The plague is often seen as a metaphor for the Nazi occupation.
 - B. The novel is set in Algeria, but Camus wrote it in southern France in the early years of the German occupation.
 - C. As a metaphor for the Nazi occupation, the impersonality of the plague was the subject of considerable criticism.
 - D. It is worth noting that Camus treats Nazism as a faceless evil, not as the result of the evil intentions of one man.
- II. More important, *The Plague* is an exploration of how people together face the absurdity of a lethal threat.
 - A. The plague cannot be cured or prevented.
 - B. It cannot even be explained, although accounts proliferate along with the plague itself.
 1. Should one fight it, albeit without palpable success?
 2. Should one try to run and evade it?
 3. Should one take advantage of it? (Compare Sartre: "Each of us gets the war we deserve.")
- III. Camus's characters represent these different ways of approaching both the absurdity of life and social solidarity.
 - A. Among Camus's characters are a doctor, who would seem to be the hero of the novel, fighting the plague (the absurd), even with the knowledge that the plague cannot be beaten or prevented.
 - B. There is also a very ordinary man, ironically named M. Grand, whom Camus curiously identifies as the hero, perhaps precisely because of his ordinariness.
 - C. A young man, Rambaud, is separated from his wife by the quarantine. He spends his time trying to flee to join her.
 - D. An ironic and witty character, Tarrou, is torn between saintliness and cynicism.
 1. Tarrou is clearly closest to Camus in the novel, even if Rieux and Grand are identified as the heroes.
 2. Tarrou's irony (to be distinguished sharply from cynicism) establishes the philosophical poignancy of the novel and best illustrates Camus's conception of the absurd.
 - E. A scoundrel, Cottard, profits from the plague. He is utterly amoral, the most human manifestation of evil in the novel.
 - F. A priest, Father Paneloux, blames the plague on the sins of the people (and then dies of plague himself).
 1. We think immediately of the chaplain in *The Stranger*, trying to impose an otherworldly interpretation on a disaster that is straightforwardly secular.
 2. Camus harshly denounces the attempt to declare all men evil, bringing into relief his seemingly opposed thesis in *The Stranger* (and, later, in *The Fall*).
- IV. All in all, *The Plague* is a portrait of how we face death and the injustices of life.
 - A. The true evils in life are often faceless, and they are inevitable. In *The Plague*, the absurd confronts *all* of us, engendering a sense of solidarity.
 - B. To deny these evils, or to attempt an escape from them, is what Camus (in *The Myth of Sisyphus*) condemns as "philosophical suicide."
 - C. Camus disagreed with his Marxist contemporaries, who defended Stalinist cruelties.

- V. In Camus's last novel, *The Fall*, he returns to the theme of reflection and lived experience, innocence and guilt.
- A. In a seedy bar in Amsterdam, we meet (Jean-Baptiste) Clamence, a once extremely successful, high-powered Parisian attorney.
1. He reports to us, in considerable detail, his prowess before the bar, his good works, his charming and winning personality, his prowess with women.
 2. He makes it very clear to us that he has had an enviable life. In an important sense, Clamence's life is flawless and he has everything one could desire.
 3. At the same time, he describes to us his undoing—three seemingly trivial incidents that undermined him in the most profound way: a fight with a motorcyclist, a peal of laughter on a bridge, and his witnessing of an apparent suicide.
- B. As elegant, articulate, and thoughtful as Meursault was thoughtless, Clamence leads us through a meandering but captivating monologue.
1. Although there is a virtually silent interlocutor at the bar, it is evident that we, the readers, are the audience to whom Clamence addresses his "confession."
 2. If Meursault was "strange" because he thought, judged, and evaluated so little, Clamence is burdened by an apparent inability to stop thinking, judging, and evaluating.
 3. The target of his most bitter judgments is, it seems, himself.
 4. But, in fact, these judgments tend to ricochet back to the reader.
- C. As Clamence describes to us the hypocrisy and folly of his own successful life, we too are seduced into doubting ourselves and our own integrity.

Essential Reading:

Camus, *The Plague*.

Recommended Reading:

Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, an account of the actual lives of the people of the region of France where Camus wrote *The Plague*. For parallel reading, see Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. Does Rieux fit the image of the "absurd" hero? Consider your response in the light of *The Myth of Sisyphus*.
2. Do you think that the citizens of Oran are responsible for the plague as Paneloux suggests? How does Paneloux's own death affect your conclusion?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. When Rieux says that he would rather be a man than a saint, Tarrou replies "Yes, we are looking for the same thing, but I am less ambitious." What do you think Tarrou means by this?
2. Contrast Grand with Meursault. Both seem to be perfectly "ordinary" heroes. But in what sense is either of them a hero at all?

Lecture Six

Camus—*The Fall*, Part II

Scope: In *The Fall*, Camus displays reflection and guilt in extreme form. Clamence, the attorney, has become a “judge-penitent,” and he confesses his supposedly hypocritical life to us, the reader. But his intent is seduction, not expiation.

Outline

- I. Clamence describes himself as a judge/penitent.
 - A. He describes even his past accomplishments and virtues as hypocritical and manipulative.
 1. Clamence presents many of his past actions—including some of the most seemingly benevolent, altruistic actions—as motivated by vanity and selfishness.
 2. The real question is whether the misdescription and manipulation lie in his reports rather than in his past deeds themselves.
 3. The question of self-deception is unresolvable. Does Clamence really believe what he is saying to us?
 4. The pervasive question of the novel is why Clamence is telling us all this. It is not just that he is a compulsive talker. It is clear that he is trying to do something with us.
 - B. With Clamence, consciousness seems to become a disease.
 1. In comparison with Meursault’s happy innocence, Clamence, an extremely intelligent, successful, sophisticated cosmopolitan, wallows in misery and guilt.
 2. In comparison with Meursault’s unreflectiveness, Clamence’s pathological reflections throw one of the basic premises of philosophy (“the examined life”) into question.
 3. The idea that consciousness can become a “disease” comes from both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*.
 4. In one sense, Clamence is an extremely rational (articulate, strategic, manipulative) person.
 5. In another sense, he is clearly irrational. He gives up the good life, chooses misery over happiness, and undermines others out of what looks like sheer sadism of the “misery loves company” variety.
 6. The dominant aspect of Clamence’s consciousness has been interpreted as pride, one of the seven deadly sins. The “fall,” accordingly, is the fall of pride.
 7. Wounded pride becomes resentment, but resentment itself becomes the cause of self-justification.
 8. His arrogant pride at the end of the novel is no less outrageous than it was at the beginning.
- II. Critics have claimed that Clamence never considers Christian redemption.
 - A. But there are numerous allusions—from the book’s title to the name Jean-Baptiste—that recall this tradition.
 - B. The theme of judgment runs all the way through the novel.
 1. Clamence forces us to examine our lives.
 2. He doesn’t judge us, but manipulates us into judging ourselves.
 - C. Camus’s notion of original sin has no religious overtones, however. Insofar as we are reflective, we will feel guilty.
- III. Toward the end of his life, Camus intended to study Indian philosophy.
 - A. Camus was killed in a car crash (the car was driven by his publisher).
 - B. One can imagine the turns his thought might have taken and in what ways the path from *The Stranger* to *The Fall* might lead to Buddhism.
 - C. The question Camus poses remains: How does one reconcile reflection and experience?

Essential Reading:

Camus, *The Fall*.

Recommended Reading:

For parallel reading to *The Fall*, see Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. What three discrete events led to Clamence's fall? Do you consider it plausible that these events should have had such an effect on Clamence, enough to make him throw off his entire enviable, successful life? Why do you think that they had such an effect?
2. Clamence calls himself a "judge-penitent." What does this mean? He says: "Don't wait for the Last Judgment. It takes place every day." Who is doing the judging? On what basis are we being judged?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. Do you believe Clamence when he claims that the impetus behind the good deeds he performed in Paris was simply his own vanity? If not, why would he lie to us?
2. Contrast Doctor Rieux (in *The Plague*) with Meursault and Clamence. If Meursault's existence in the first part of *The Stranger* can be characterized as pure lived experience and Clamence's existence in Amsterdam as (more or less) pure reflection, how might Rieux be characterized? Does he surmount the limitations of the other two?

Lecture Seven

Søren Kierkegaard---“On Becoming a Christian”

Scope: Søren Kierkegaard was, in many ways, the first existentialist. He was also a devout Christian. He rejected both career and marriage to pursue religious mission. He also rejected much of what his compatriots considered “being a Christian.” Accordingly, he came to question the role of reason and suffering in life and to celebrate individual choice and passion both in religion and life more generally.

Outline

- I. Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) did not, in the usual sense, have a very happy or fulfilling life.
 - A. He was crippled in both his appearance and in his emotional development.
 - B. He was burdened by an oppressive sense of guilt and inadequacy.
 - C. He spent virtually his entire life in Copenhagen while he despised bourgeois complacency and the whole of “the present age.”
 - D. As a young man, he carried on for a year in Berlin with his somewhat more hedonistic friend, Hans Christian Andersen.
 1. Hedonism was not for him, however. He experienced it as self-defeating, shameful, and humiliating.
 2. He rejected both the life of pleasure and the life of friendship.
 3. Pleasure (“the aesthetic”) would remain a problem for him throughout his career.
 - E. He rejected a promising career in the ministry and a potentially happy marriage to pursue his lonely and often controversial philosophical and religious mission.
- II. The place of reason and the role of suffering and passion in life became some of Kierkegaard’s primary concerns, in particular with regard to religion and religious belief.
 - A. He described his own mission in philosophy as “to redefine what it means to be (or become) a Christian.”
 1. He rejected the idea that simply being born a Christian is sufficient to be one.
 2. He also rejected the idea that simply growing up with certain beliefs was sufficient to make one a Christian.
 3. He insisted, much to the dismay of many of his Christian compatriots, that it is easier to be(come) a Christian if one is not already born one. Christianity is a commitment, not something to which one passively adheres.
 - B. Most so-called Christians, Kierkegaard says (the “mob” of what he disdainfully calls “Christendom”) are not that at all.
 1. He accuses most Christians of blatant hypocrisy, empty belief conjoined with banal social membership.
 2. Most Christians display no passion for their faith at all.
 3. Most of Christianity is a mass or “herd” phenomenon.
 - C. Christianity is not to be understood in terms of doctrines, rituals, or social belonging.
 1. Belief in doctrines is a part of Christianity, but not the essential part.
 2. Rituals are at most a minimal accouterment of Christianity. (This is obviously a reflection of Kierkegaard’s Lutheranism and part of his rejection of Catholicism.)
 3. The fact that other Christians exist in the world is somewhat irrelevant. One is, ultimately, a Christian all by oneself.
 - D. Christianity is a paradox, but this paradox demands passionate faith.
 1. The paradox is one of belief, but its proper response is passion.
 2. In Kierkegaard’s day, one of the reigning paradoxes was the idea that God could be both eternal and temporally present as a man.
 3. Today, a more pressing paradox for most Christians would be the so-called “problem of evil,” the idea that an all-powerful, all-knowing, good and kind God would allow so much suffering in the world. For Kierkegaard, a leap of faith is necessary for a passionate religious belief.

III. Kierkegaard's philosophical *bete noir* was G. W. F. Hegel.

- A. As a student, Kierkegaard studied with Friedrich Schelling in Berlin.
 - 1. Schelling denounced Hegel's philosophy as "negative."
 - 2. Schelling and Hegel had been college roommates and competitors.
- B. Hegel, who (along with Kant) dominated philosophical thought in Denmark, defended the idea of a supra-historical collective world-spirit (or *Geist*), leaving little room for the individual.
- C. Hegel's *Geist* was, according to the popular interpretation, identical with human consciousness and the world.
 - 1. Hegel thus denied the identity of God as entirely separate from his creation and from human beings.
 - 2. Hegel also defended the idea that *Geist* was rational and could be rationally comprehended by human beings.
 - 3. Kierkegaard, by contrast, offers the fear and trembling of a personal confrontation with God. He rejected both the collectivity of *Geist* and the idea that God could be rationally understood.
- D. Hegel's relationship with Schelling was complicated.
 - 1. Schelling became famous very early, while Hegel was still struggling to find his way in philosophy.
 - 2. Later, Hegel became even more famous, Schelling's star faded, and Schelling was filled with jealousy and wounded pride.
 - 3. None of this was evident to Kierkegaard, but Schelling's prejudices fit in perfectly with his own predispositions.
- E. While Kierkegaard was studying in Berlin, two of his other classmates were the proto-Marxist Friedrich Engels and the anarchist Mikhael Bakunin.
- F. In Hegel, Kierkegaard found a paradigm of collective, rationalist thinking.
- G. In reaction, Kierkegaard became the champion of "the individual."

Essential Reading:

Kierkegaard, *Journals*, (excerpted with other readings in Solomon, *Existentialism*, pp. 3–28).

Recommended Reading:

Gardiner, *Kierkegaard*; for a more literary perspective on Kierkegaard, see Mackey, *A Kind of Poet*.

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*. To appreciate Kierkegaard's polemic against Hegel, take a look at Hegel's *Introduction to The Philosophy of History*; for Kierkegaard's relation to Hegel, see also Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard's Relation in Hegel*, and Solomon, *Continental Philosophy Since 1750*, "Kierkegaard."

Introductory Questions to Consider:

- 1. Kierkegaard claimed that "it is easier to become a Christian when I am not a Christian than to become a Christian when I am one." What did he mean by this?
- 2. Would Kierkegaard have approved of the attempts by philosophers and theologians to prove that God exists? Why not?

Advanced Question to Consider:

- 1. For Kierkegaard, God's existence is more palpable than anything else that he encounters in this world. Yet, in attempting to proselytize his reader, he deliberately refrains from insisting on the truth of God's existence. Why?

Lecture Eight

Kierkegaard on Subjective Truth

Scope: Kierkegaard took “subjective truth” to be the central element in a meaningful life. There are only subjective answers to the question “How should I live?” Subjectivity is “inwardness and passion.” It is personal choice, “taking hold” of one’s life by committing oneself passionately to what one chooses.

Outline

- I. The central concept of Kierkegaard’s philosophy is “subjective truth”: making a commitment, making the leap of faith to believe.
 - A. Kierkegaard allows that objectivity is fine in its place (e.g., in science).
 1. Kierkegaard is happy to say, “all power to the sciences, but...”
 2. Questions concerning God and religion are not objective questions.
 3. Science attempts to undermine the miracle by making it plausible—e.g., the case of Moses crossing the Red Sea.
 - B. Objectivity should not be allowed to invade the existential realm, the realm of personal meaning and significance.
 1. This is the realm of religion.
 2. It is also the realm of ethics, which Kierkegaard identifies with the philosophy of Kant.
 3. Kierkegaard puts great stress on what he calls “the ethically existing individual,” the focus of his existentialism.
 - C. To believe with Hegel that the world is ultimately rational does not give an answer to the question “How should I live?”
- II. Subjectivity is, first of all, “inwardness and passion.”
 - A. It is a commitment, not a mere discovery or “correctness.”
 - B. Subjectivity is the realm where we find that very special sense of “existence” (from which “existentialism” will eventually get its name).
 1. It is living fully, which may not be outwardly evident.
 2. It is living inwardly, in the depth and richness of one’s feelings.
 3. Passions, for Kierkegaard, are not mere feelings (sensations) but profound insights into the beings we really are.
 4. To say that a passion is subjective is to say (for one thing) that it can be known and appreciated only “from the inside,” by the person whose passion it is.
 - C. Personal choice is the key to subjectivity, “taking hold” of one’s life.
 1. One does this by committing oneself passionately to what one chooses.
 2. Kierkegaard’s own choice, which he advocates throughout his twenty-some volumes of writing, is Christianity, redefined in his own passionate way.
- III. Christianity requires faith, which is not rational, but involves passion and commitment.
 - A. The paradoxes of Christianity, quite the contrary of making faith less plausible, are required to provoke the passion that faith requires.
 - B. Christianity—and existence more generally—involves “inwardness.”
 1. Not only may it not be discernible “from the outside,” but it may well seem meaningless to anyone else. You can love someone with all your heart without it being evident to anyone else.
 2. Kierkegaard gives the example of two people making love, a performance that would seem ludicrous to anyone other than the couple.
 - C. Religious passion cannot, therefore, be collectivized into an organized religion. Collectivism is the very opposite of what a religious community might be (for example, a monastery where each individual keeps his faith to himself). Kierkegaard says he wants to break back into the monastery. Most of what he says could be translated to virtually any other religion.

- D. Because there is no “correct” form of subjectivity, it remains to a subjective author to seduce his readers, not to convince them rationally. Kierkegaard’s books are an elaborate seduction. You can coax, not argue, someone into authentic existence.

Essential Reading:

Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, (excerpted with other readings in Solomon, *Existentialism*, pp. 3–28).

Recommended Reading:

Gardiner, *Kierkegaard*; for a more literary perspective on Kierkegaard, see Mackey, *A Kind of Poet*.

Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. What is the relationship between “subjective truth” and “objective uncertainty”? Are they in conflict? Is the very notion of “subjective truth” self-contradictory? What is the relationship between “subjective truth” and that which we take to be objectively certain, such as science, particularly with regard to religion?
2. In what sense is believing in God necessarily irrational? Is this necessarily a bad thing?

Advanced Question to Consider:

1. Kierkegaard, like Camus, introduces a notion of “the absurd.” For Kierkegaard, “the absurd is—that the eternal truth has come into being in time, that God has come into being, has been born, has grown up, and so forth...” For Camus, it is “the perpetual opposition between my conscious revolt and the darkness in which it struggles.” How do you see their two very different perspectives on “the absurd,” one having to do with the incomprehensibility of God, the other having to do with the impossibility of a rational life? How are they related?

Lecture Nine

Kierkegaard's "Existential Dialectic"

Scope: Kierkegaard contradicts Hegel's philosophy with his "existential dialectic." An "existential dialectic" has no ultimate purpose, no rational direction, only various choices, "modes of existence" that must be approached subjectively. Kierkegaard distinguishes three modes, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Although each mode of existence might dictate its own priorities or rationality, there is no reason or rational standard for choosing one rather than another.

Outline

- I. In conscientious contradiction to Hegel's philosophy, Kierkegaard develops an "existential dialectic."
 - A. Hegel developed a grand historical "dialectic," proving that history and humanity have an ultimate purpose, a pervasive rationality.
 - B. Kierkegaard develops his "existential dialectic," a personal dialectic with no ultimate purpose, no rational direction. In Hegel, history develops through conflict, an idea later echoed in Marx. But Kierkegaard's dialectic is solely about the individual.
 1. We are faced with various choices, various "modes of existence" or "lifestyles."
 2. Although each mode of existence might dictate its own priorities or rationality, there is no reason or rational standard for choosing one rather than another.
 3. Kierkegaard distinguishes three such modes: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.
- II. The aesthetic mode of existence is the life of pleasure, of desire and satisfaction. Unlike many philosophers, Kierkegaard saw this mode—or its refusal—as a choice.
 - A. The aesthetic mode might be exemplified in the life of Don Juan, the Spanish libertine. (Kierkegaard's favorite opera was Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.)
 1. Don Juan pursued his own pleasures, without consideration for others.
 2. He lived a life devoted to personal satisfaction.
 - B. But the aesthetic life need not be so vulgar. Mozart himself could also be seen as living the aesthetic life.
 1. He lives in pursuit of the ideal satisfaction of beauty, to be found (or expressed) in the perfect piece of music.
 2. Nevertheless, the aesthetic life depends on personal satisfaction.
 - C. The problem with the aesthetic life is its tendency to boredom.
 1. One becomes jaded with the very pleasures one pursues.
 2. Thus, one becomes insatiable, and the aesthetic life becomes self-defeating (Kierkegaard's own youthful experience). As in *Sisyphus*, the repetition is numbing.
 3. Goethe writes in *Faust*: "from desire I rush to satisfaction; from satisfaction I leap to desire." Thus, there is no aesthetic satisfaction.
- III. The ethical mode of existence is the life of duty. The choice of being ethical is, for Kierkegaard, not itself a rational choice.
 - A. Kierkegaard follows the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant by insisting on the centrality of duty and moral principle.
 - B. Kierkegaard also believes, like Kant, in the universality of reason, but with a subtle twist. Reason is universal in the realm of ethics, but not outside it.
 - C. The ethical mode is defined by universal moral principles and consideration for the well-being of others.
 1. It is altruistic in the sense that it is other-directed rather than concerned with one's own satisfaction.
 2. The exemplar is Socrates, who died rather than compromise his virtue.
 - D. To choose the ethical life is to choose to live rationally, but one does not rationally choose the ethical life.
 - E. The ethical life has limits and frustrations, however, given the overwhelming number of injustices in the world. Thus, the urge to good also becomes self-defeating, as in compassion "burnout."

- IV. The religious mode of existence has as its basis the belief in God.
- A. Kierkegaard seems to have paid little attention to religions other than Christianity.
 - B. By Christianity, he means a somewhat constrained, “fundamentalist” version of Lutheranism.
 - C. The religious life also includes aspects of the ethical life (Judeo-Christian morality), but conflict may exist between the ethical and the religious.
 - 1. This conflict is exemplified in the story of Abraham, which presents an intolerable dilemma to someone who both believes that God’s word is ultimate and has a need to obey the moral rules.
 - 2. One of the most obvious moral rules, against killing your own children, is called into question by God’s command.
 - 3. Kierkegaard describes the necessity for continued faith in such a dilemma as a “teleological suspension of the ethical.”

Essential Reading:

Solomon, *Existentialism*, pp. 3–28.

Recommended Reading:

One of Kierkegaard’s most accessible books is *Either/Or*, 2 vols. The most systematic view of his religious conception of subjectivity is *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. For the significance of Kierkegaard’s thought in the broader context of Western thought, see MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

- 1. Kierkegaard discusses three “modes” or “styles” of existence—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Which are you? What does this mean? In what sense have you “chosen” this lifestyle? Does it make sense, according to Kierkegaard, to say that “some days I am x, other days I am y”?
- 2. According to Kierkegaard, is there a rational basis on which one can decide which of these three modes of existence to embrace, which one is right, which one is “right for you”?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

- 1. For Kant, ethics begins with the autonomous, rational individual, who dispassionately determines what duty requires and acts accordingly. For Hegel, on the other hand, ethics begins with the community, which imbues its citizens with its ethical “substance”; the citizens in turn define themselves by the community’s terms. Would Kierkegaard embrace either of these positions? If not, what would his criticism of each position be?
- 2. Kierkegaard asserts that “boredom is the root of all evil.” Which mode of existence does he believe is most susceptible to it? Explain. Is Kierkegaard suggesting that certain modes of existence run up against their own internal contradictions? What would they be, in each case?
- 3. What does Kierkegaard mean by the “teleological suspension of the ethical”? Is he suggesting that the ethical and religious modes of existence necessarily come into conflict? Consider the foundation of ethics for those who look at the world from a highly religious perspective. Could Abraham have consistently rejected God’s command in favor of his ethical precepts?

Lecture Ten

Friedrich Nietzsche on Nihilism and the Death of God

Scope: Friedrich Nietzsche waged war against “nihilism,” that which is “anti-life” or “otherworldly.” He finds this first and foremost in the Judeo-Christian tradition but also in the philosophy of Plato. Nevertheless, Nietzsche’s greatest praise was reserved for the ancient Greeks, the Greeks described by Homer and the Athenians of the Golden Age. In his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche suggested, “only as an aesthetic phenomenon can the world be justified.” Later on, he tells us “God is dead” and offers us an alternative to Jesus in the form of the Persian prophet Zarathustra, who preaches “the this-worldly.” Nietzsche also defends “perspectivism,” that is, the view that all our knowledge of the world (and of ourselves) is gleaned through one or another perspective, a particular point of view.

Outline

- I. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) is often treated as the prophet of the twentieth century, the forerunner of “postmodernism” and the end of classical philosophy.
 - A. The watchword of his philosophy is “nihilism.”
 1. This might be summarized, in his phrase, as “the highest values devaluing themselves.” Among these values are truth, religion, and morality.
 2. Nietzsche himself, however, is no nihilist.
 3. His thesis is rather that the values we hold are themselves nihilistic, self-undermining.
 - B. For Nietzsche, the ultimate value is life itself.
 1. The values he attacks are “anti-life” or “otherworldly.”
 2. He rejects the preference for some other existence—whether it is heaven or the classless society—that is better than this one. His is a philosophy of aggressive acceptance of the world and ourselves.
- II. Nietzsche’s touchstone (as for so many German scholars in the nineteenth century) was the ancient Greeks.
 - A. But the focus of Nietzsche’s admiration was not the famous Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, whom Nietzsche saw as already “decadent.”
 - B. He admired instead the warriors of Homer’s epics and the great Pre-Socratic tragedians.
 1. The philosopher he admired was Heraclitus with his “dark sayings.” He says, “How they must have suffered to have become so beautiful.”
 2. In Nietzsche’s first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, he suggested that “only as an aesthetic phenomenon can the world be justified.”
 3. His moral philosophy is filled with warrior images and virtues.
- III. In the realm of religion and morality, Nietzsche issues his harshest challenge.
 - A. He repeats the (already classic) utterance “God is dead,” an echo of Hegel and Martin Luther.
 - B. This statement suggests not so much the truth of atheism as a diagnosis on the moral state of the modern world.
 - C. Nietzsche offers us an alternative to Jesus in the form of the Persian prophet Zarathustra who, unlike Jesus, preaches “the this-worldly,” not the “other-worldly.”
 - D. The statement also refers to a certain metaphysical picture of the world.
 - E. It is a rejection of the “otherworldly.”
 1. The “otherworldly” stance of religion can be traced back to Plato. This rage for unity manifests itself in monotheism but began with the Pre-Socratics.
 2. Nietzsche claims that reason itself can be an escape from life, again as in Plato: “Christianity is Platonism for the masses.”
 3. Socrates endorsed “the tyranny of reason” and developed the vision of another, “truer” world of which this world is a mere shadow.

IV. Nietzsche endorses a view that we might call “epistemological nihilism.”

- A.** He says, for example, “there is no truth” and our greatest “truths are only errors that we cannot give up.”
- B.** In many ways, he would seem to be a classical skeptic, except that he rejects the very ground and distinctions on which most skepticism is based.
 - 1.** He rejects the distinction between the “true world” and the world of appearances as a form of the otherworldly.
 - 2.** He defends “perspectivism,” that is, the view that all our knowledge of the world (and of ourselves) is gleaned through one or another perspective, a particular point of view. Even science is just one of many points of view.
 - 3.** There is no “objectivity” as such, no “facts,” no unbiased point of view.
 - 4.** Ideally, we should try to appreciate as many perspectives as possible. Using Kierkegaard’s schema, Nietzsche adopts the aesthetic perspective.
 - 5.** Nietzsche’s view of truth is primarily pragmatic, anticipating later American philosophers.

Essential Reading:

Solomon, *Existentialism*, pp. 43–78. (For an overview, see *Continental Philosophy Since 1750*, “Nietzsche,” pp. 111–126, or *From Rationalism to Existentialism*, pp. 105–139.)

Recommended Reading:

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, and *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ* (in *The Viking Portable Nietzsche*).

Two good short introductions are Stern, *Nietzsche*, in the Modern Masters series, and Tanner, *Nietzsche*, in the Past Masters series.

See also Kaufmann, *Nietzsche—Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, and Nehamas, *Life as Literature*.

Essays on Nietzsche’s individual works can be found in Higgins and Solomon, eds., *Reading Nietzsche*.

Another general overview of Nietzsche’s philosophy is *What Nietzsche Really Said*, by Solomon and Higgins. See also the Teaching Company lecture series *For the Love of Life: The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, by Solomon and Higgins.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

- 1.** Was Nietzsche a nihilist? If not, why did he reject conventional morality and religion? What values did he believe in?
- 2.** Nietzsche proclaims, “God is dead.” What did he mean by this? Do you agree with his diagnosis?
- 3.** Why does Nietzsche so virulently attack Socrates? Of what does he accuse him? Of what does he see him as a symptom? What do you take to be Nietzsche’s overall attitude toward Socrates—contempt or, perhaps, envy?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

- 1.** Describe Nietzsche’s brand of “epistemological nihilism.” Does he believe that there is ultimately no truth of the matter and that we are simply the kind of creatures who need to believe that there is? Does he believe that there is a truth of the matter but that we simply cannot know it? Or does he believe that the whole question is simply beside the point and that we debase ourselves by searching for it?
- 2.** In what ways is Zarathustra a Christ-like figure? How does he differ from Christ? What does it mean that he continually fails to get his message across? What do you personally make of him?

Lecture Eleven

Nietzsche, the “Immoralist”

Scope: Nietzsche claims to be an “immoralist,” but in fact he probably never did a truly immoral thing in his life. Nietzsche did not attack morality as such. Rather, he attacks Judeo-Christian morality, which he considers nihilistic. He suggests that Judeo-Christian morality is actually a “slave morality,” a morality of resentment. “Master” morality, by contrast, is aristocratic and independent, but today, it often appears as “bad conscience.” To Nietzsche, this kind of morality, aristocratic or master morality, is based on personal excellence, in contrast to what he sees as the slavishness of certain aspects of Judeo-Christian morality.

Outline

- I. Nietzsche claims to be an “immoralist,” at war with morality.
 - A. In fact, Nietzsche probably never did a truly immoral thing in his life. He was generous, compassionate, and courteous, even if he does denounce such virtues in his flamboyant writings.
 - B. Nietzsche did not attack morality as such. Rather, he attacks one particular sort of morality that he considers nihilistic.
 - C. That morality is Judeo-Christian and the bourgeois morality defended by Immanuel Kant and suggested by the categorical imperative.
 - D. Universal principles, says Nietzsche, don’t take into account the vast difference between individuals.
 1. Does love extended to everyone—per the New Testament—still deserve to be called *love*?
 2. Whether Christianity or utilitarianism, such universal principles have ignored an old philosophy with great credentials, one of virtue and character. Like Aristotle, Nietzsche argues that the focus of ethics is on individual character—“what kind of a person am I?”
- II. In his book *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche suggests that there are basically two perspectives on morality, Master and Slave.
 - A. These names indicate both the origins and the temperament of these two moral positions.
 1. Both master and slave morality refer to historical positions in the ancient world of Greece and Rome.
 2. Master morality originated with the “masters” of the ancient world, the powerful aristocracies that ruled even in the periods before Greek democracy flourished.
 3. Slave morality originated with the literal slaves and servants of the ancient world, the powerless, those who were deprived, by force or because of their own infirmities, of the good life enjoyed by the aristocracy.
 4. Nietzsche sees Aristotle as belonging to a decadent culture, after the “golden age” and the Homeric period of warrior virtues.
 - B. Master morality is by temperament aristocratic and independent.
 1. It takes as the prototype of “good” the masters’ own virtues.
 2. It puts its emphasis on personal excellence (*areté*).
 - C. Slave morality is, in contrast, a temperament that is servile, reactionary, and resentful.
 1. It rejects the virtues of the masters as “evil.”
 2. It is primarily characterized by its motivation, which is defensive.
 3. It is also vengeful, bitter, and filled with self-loathing
 4. Slave morality considers “good” to be denial of desire, abstention, and self-denial in general.
 5. From this tradition, we learn that the good is self-denial. And we are left with two distinct moral types: one based on excellence; the other, on self-denial.
- III. The modern age can be characterized as the result of two thousand years of slave morality, but the master mentality never disappears.
 - A. Master morality is sublimated.
 1. It appears as “bad conscience.”
 2. This is a war within between pride and humility.

3. It is also a conflict between excellence and mediocrity.
 4. Masterly strength and virtue never truly disappear. The master morality may be driven underground or forced to sublimate itself into other outlets (e.g., the Popes in the medieval church).
- B. Nietzsche envisions an evolutionary possibility that would be the ultimate expression of master morality as “spiritualized” by way of slave morality. This possibility is called the *Übermensch*, and it is, perhaps, Nietzsche’s most famous (or notorious) creation.

Essential Reading:

Solomon, *Existentialism*, pp. 43–78.

Recommended Reading:

Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals; The Will to Power*; and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *The Viking Portable Nietzsche*.

An excellent view of Nietzsche’s ethics is presented in Hunt, *Nietzsche and the Original of Virtue*.

For a postmodernist interpretation of master and slave morality and the will to power, see Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*.

For an excellent analysis of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, see Higgins, *Nietzsche’s Zarathustra*. See also Solomon and Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said*, Chapter 5, “Nietzsche’s War on Morality.”

Introductory Question to Consider:

1. Nietzsche distinguishes between “good and bad” and “good and evil.” How does he understand the difference between “bad” and “evil”? Does “good” mean the same thing in the two pairs of terms? If not, how does it differ in each?

Advanced Question to Consider:

1. “That lambs dislike great birds of prey does not seem strange; only it gives no ground for reproaching these birds of prey for bearing off little lambs. And if the lambs say among themselves: ‘these birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey, but rather its opposite, a lamb—would he not be good?’ there is no reason to find fault with this institution of an ideal, except perhaps that the bird of prey might view it a little ironically and say: ‘we don’t dislike them at all, these good little lambs; we even love them: nothing is more tasty than a tender lamb’” (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Book I, Para. 13). What is Nietzsche’s point here? What is he saying about master and slave morality?

Lecture Twelve

Nietzsche on Freedom, Fate, and Responsibility

Scope: Nietzsche often praises fate and fatalism, which is very unusual in modern philosophy. At the same time, he encourages existential self-realization, which would seem to be opposed to fatalism. He takes his emphasis on fate from the ancient Greeks, but he is also struggling with Schopenhauer's pessimism. Nietzsche rejects pessimism and replaces it with *amor fati*—the love of fate, but insists that we can and should “give style to our character” to “become who we are.”

Outline

- I. One of the most fascinating and perplexing aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy is his seemingly contradictory defense of fate on the one hand and existential self-realization on the other.
 - A. In Nietzsche's example of the lambs and birds of prey, he suggests that our characters are inborn.
 - B. We are born with certain talents. We must “realize ourselves.” We are not without limitations.
 - C. Nietzsche repeats Pindar's admonition to “become who you are.”
- II. Nietzsche follows Schopenhauer in his heavy use of the word “Will,” but he rejects much of what Schopenhauer has to say about it.
 - A. He rejects Schopenhauer's pessimistic depiction of life as amounting to nothing.
 - B. He also rejects Schopenhauer's metaphysical understanding of the Will as a “thing in itself.”
 - C. Nevertheless, he agrees with Schopenhauer's rejection of free will.
 1. Free will depends on an “imaginary” notion of the self or subject, as advocated by Kant.
 2. Free will confuses causes and effects. For Nietzsche, consciousness is vastly overrated.
 3. We are biological creatures whose every action can (in principle) be explained naturalistically.
 4. All actions can, therefore, be explained (but not justified) by motives and intentions.
- III. Nietzsche follows the ancient Greeks in his belief in fate.
 - A. For the Greek tragedians, fate was an undeniable aspect of human life.
 - B. The notion of fate does not have to be understood as a crude and mysterious force.
 - C. Heraclitus says, “fate is character,” and this is a view that Nietzsche would wholly endorse—that we can become what we were born to be.
 - D. Nevertheless, Nietzsche insists that we can and should “give style to our character”—in other words, our character is to some extent our own doing.
 - E. Eternal recurrence—the idea of reliving one's life over and over again—can be read, in part, as an affirmation of fate.
 1. The idea of eternal repetition does not cause, but reiterates, the idea of an inevitable outcome.
 2. Eternal recurrence is, above all, an affirmation of who one is, one's character, and therefore one's destiny.
 - F. Nietzsche praises *amor fati*—the love of fate—as the most positive outlook on life.
 1. The love of fate does not preclude taking responsibility for “becoming who you are.”
 2. Fate is not blind resignation, but it is the acceptance of who you are and what you have to do with your life.
- IV. Nietzsche, unlike Kierkegaard and Sartre, has an ambivalent attitude toward the notion of responsibility.

Essential Reading:

Solomon, *Existentialism*, pp. 43–78.

Recommended Reading:

Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *The Portable Nietzsche*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. Does it make sense to deny that we have “free will”? What does this mean? Does it mean that our choices are mere illusions?
2. What does it mean to believe in fate? How is fate different from luck? From chance? What kind of “necessity” is it that makes fated events come about?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. Can you have a concept of responsibility without the presumption of freedom? Would it make sense to hold people responsible if fate determines what they do?
2. Does it make sense to say that the self is the cause of our actions? That we bring about our actions by intending them? Or is Nietzsche right that we find ourselves acting, then read back into the action the notion of prior intention?

Glossary

Absurd: For Camus, the confrontation and conflict between our rational expectations of the world (justice, satisfaction, happiness) and the “indifference” of the world.

Aesthetic (mode of existence): Kierkegaard’s conception of a life based on desire and its satisfaction.

Authenticity: Heidegger’s notion of genuine human existence.

Bad faith: Sartre’s conception of those forms of self-deception in which we deceive ourselves about ourselves, about our natures and responsibilities.

Being-for-itself: For Sartre, human consciousness.

Being-for-others: For Sartre, our painful awareness of other people and their effects on us through their judgments and “looks.”

Being-in-itself: For Sartre, the existence of things in the world.

Being-towards-death: Heidegger’s notion of human mortality and the importance of full awareness in facing death.

Dasein: Heidegger’s conception of “the being through whom being comes into question,” i.e., human existence.

Das Man: Heidegger’s conception of the inauthentic self, the self constructed by and through other people.

Ethical (mode of existence): Kierkegaard’s conception of a life based on a chosen commitment to moral principles and duty to others.

Existence (*Existenz*): For Kierkegaard, a full-blooded, freely chosen, passionately committed life; for Heidegger, that which is essentially *Dasein*. *Dasein* has no essence other than the fact that it exists, that it has possibilities and projects to undertake.

Existentialism: The philosophical movement that stresses individuality and personal responsibility, as epitomized in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre.

Facticity: For Heidegger and Sartre, the brute facts that characterize us, such as our height, our weight, our date of birth, and so on.

Fallenness: For Heidegger, a “pre-ontological” way of dealing in the world, a way in which *Dasein* fails to face up to its ontological condition

Master morality: Nietzsche’s conception of a self-confident morality of virtue and excellence.

Objective uncertainty: Kierkegaard’s attempt to capture those realms of human existence in which knowledge becomes irrelevant and personal decision becomes all-important.

Ontology: For Heidegger, the study of Being.

Phenomenology: In Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre, the study of the essential structures of consciousness, experience, or *Dasein*.

Postmodernism: Contemporary philosophy that rejects the idea of the unified self and the clarifying powers of reason.

Religious (mode of existence): Kierkegaard’s conception of a life based on a chosen devotion to God and His commandments.

Slave morality: Nietzsche’s conception of a reactive, resentful insistence on universal principles and the protection of the weak.

Subjectivity: In Kierkegaard, the realm of personal passion and commitment. In Sartre, phenomenology, the realm of consciousness.

Subjective truth: In Kierkegaard, passionate commitment.

Thrownness: For Heidegger, our “existential” condition, the state in which we find ourselves thrown into this world, that we are “abandoned.” It is the “there” in which *Dasein* finds itself.

Transcendence: For Sartre, the power of consciousness to negate and go beyond the facts of the matter.

Transcendental ego: For Husserl, the realm of consciousness.

Übermensch: Nietzsche’s dramatic image of a more than human being.

Will to power: Nietzsche’s conception of the fundamental motivation of all human behavior, including morality and philosophy.

Biographical Notes

Beauvoir, Simone de (1908–1986). French novelist, essayist, and philosopher and Jean-Paul Sartre’s lifelong companion. The author of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and many other works. Best known for her insightful commentaries on growing up female in a very male culture, living through the war years, and finally, on growing old.

Camus, Albert (1913–1960). French-Algerian (*pied noir*) essayist and philosopher, author of *The Stranger*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Plague*, and *The Fall* and many lyrical and political essays. Best known for his very personal expressions of humanism. His friendship with Sartre erupted with their disagreements over the Algerian War and the general question of violence as a legitimate political means.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor (1821–1881). Russian writer and religious thinker, author of *Notes from Underground*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Idiot*, *Crime and Punishment*, and other novels. Best known for his deep sense of anguish and doubt regarding ultimate religious matters.

Foucault, Michel (1926–1984). French philosopher and polemicist, first categorized as a structuralist, then as a post-structuralist and postmodernist. Author of such books as *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, *The Order of Things*, and *A History of Sexuality*. Best known for his emphasis on power in the world of ideas and culture.

Hegel, G. W. F. (1770–1831). German philosopher who followed Kant as a “German idealist,” author of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and several other important works. Best known for his vision of an all-encompassing historical world-spirit that it is just our luck to finally have made fully realized.

Heidegger, Martin (1889–1976). German philosopher who followed Husserl as a phenomenologist but expanded his interests to include traditional theological and metaphysical matters, author of *Being and Time* and many other works. Best known for his notion of “authenticity,” which came to dominate many existentialist concerns.

Hesse, Hermann (1877–1962). German-Swiss writer and author of *Demian*, *Steppenwolf*, *Siddharta*, and *The Glass Bead Game* (for which he won a Nobel prize). Best known for his synthesis of Western and Eastern (Buddhist) thinking.

Husserl, Edmund (1859–1938). German-Czech (Moravian) philosopher and mathematician; best known as the founder of “Phenomenology.”

Kafka, Franz (1883–1924). Bohemian (Czech) writer famous for his tales of the bizarre, for instance, “Metamorphosis,” *The Trial*, and *The Castle*.

Kant, Immanuel (1749–1804). German philosopher, “German idealist,” best known as the author of three “critiques,” “The Critique of Pure Reason,” “The Critique of Practical Reason,” and “The Critique of Judgment.” As a moral philosopher, he has long been characterized (or caricatured) as strictly rational and “rule-bound”; thus, he becomes a point of departure for such different thinkers as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre.

Kierkegaard, Søren (1813–1855). Danish religious philosopher and first “existentialist.” He is best known for his concept of an irrational “leap of faith” and his many religious works, many of them written under pseudonyms, emphasizing the importance of personal choice and commitment in becoming a Christian and in living a full life more generally. His philosophy has many important parallels with Nietzsche, despite their very different positions on the desirability of Christianity.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1844–1900). German philosopher who attacked both the Judeo-Christian tradition and contemporary culture and politics with great style and passion. Author of *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and many other works.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (1905–1980). French philosopher, essayist, and literary writer responsible for naming “existentialism” and for definitively promoting some of its central themes, notably the theme of freedom and responsibility that we have summarized as “No Excuses!” Author of *Being and Nothingness* and many other works.

Schopenhauer, Arthur (1788–1860). German philosopher who followed Kant (competing with Hegel) as a “German idealist.” Author of *The World as Will and Idea*. Best known for his grumpy cosmic pessimism but equally important for bringing together Western and Eastern (Buddhist) ideas.

Zarathustra (sixth century B.C.E.). Persian prophet, founder of Zoroastrianism, belated hero of Nietzsche's quasi-Biblical epic, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

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**No Excuses:
Existentialism
and the
Meaning of Life
Part II**

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No Excuses: Existentialism and the Meaning of Life

Scope:

Existentialism is, in my view, the most exciting and important philosophical movement of the past century and a half. Fifty years after the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre gave it its identity and one hundred and fifty years after the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard gave it its initial impetus, existentialism continues to win new enthusiasts and, in keeping with its still exciting and revolutionary message, vehement critics.

The message of existentialism, unlike that of many more obscure and academic philosophical movements, is about as simple as can be. It is that every one of us, as an individual, is responsible—responsible for what we do, responsible for who we are, responsible for the way we face and deal with the world, responsible, ultimately, for the way the world is. It is, in a very short phrase, the philosophy of “no excuses!” Life may be difficult; circumstances may be impossible. There may be obstacles, not least of which are our own personalities, characters, emotions, and limited means or intelligence. But, nevertheless, we are responsible. We cannot shift that burden onto God, or nature, or the ways of the world. If there is a God, we choose to believe. If nature made us one way, it is up to us to decide what we are to do with what nature gives us—whether to go along or fight back, to modify or transcend nature. As the delightfully priggish Kate Hepburn says to a wonderfully vulgar Humphrey Bogart in the movie *The African Queen*, “Nature is what we are put on this earth to rise above.” That is what existentialism is all about. We are responsible for ourselves.

There are no excuses.

But to say that the basic message of existentialism is quite simple and straightforward is not to say that the philosophers or the philosophies that make up the movement are simple and straightforward. The movement itself is something of a fabrication. None of the major existentialist figures, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Camus—only excepting Sartre—would recognize themselves as part of a “movement” at all. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were both ferocious individualists who vehemently rejected all movements. To belong to a philosophical movement, each of them would have said, would be to show cowardice and a lack of integrity, to be simply one of the “herd.” Heidegger was deeply offended when he was linked with Sartre as one of the existentialists, and he publicly denounced the association. Camus and Sartre once were friends, but they quarreled over politics and Camus also broke the association and publicly rejected it.

Many of the other writers and philosophers who have been associated with the movement would have been equally hesitant to embrace the title had they known of it. The main exceptions were those who have wanted or needed to derive some fame and notoriety by associating themselves with existentialism. In the 1950s in the United States, for example, Norman Mailer proudly took up the title, giving it his own definition, “hip.”

The existentialists’ writings, too, are by no means simple and straightforward. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche write beautifully but in such challenging, often disjointed, exhortations that trying to summarize or systematize their thoughts is something of a hopeless venture. Heidegger is among the most difficult writers in the entire history of philosophy, and even Sartre—a lucid literary writer when he wants to be—imitates some of the worst elements of Heidegger’s notorious style. Much of the challenge of this course of lectures, accordingly, is to free the exciting and revolutionary message of existentialism from its often formidable textual enclosures.

The course begins, after a brief introduction to the historical context and the very notion of “existentialism,” with a discussion of the twentieth-century writer and philosopher Albert Camus (1913–1960). Chronologically, Camus is already late in the game. (We will trace existentialist ideas as far back as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in the mid-nineteenth century, but we will not explore those figures—say Socrates or Saint Augustine—who with some justification might be called their predecessors.) Philosophically, it is often said that Camus is more of a literary figure, a lyrical essayist, than a philosopher. But the art of persuasive personal writing rather than dry philosophical analysis is one of the earmarks of existentialism. (Even the obscure writings of Martin Heidegger [1889–1976] are remarkable in their rhetorical and emotional efficacy.)

In this sense, Camus is exemplary in his combination of deep contemplation and often poetic writing and, because his ideas are less complex than the probing and systematic works of the other existential writers before him, he makes an ideal beginning. We will start with his most famous novel, *The Stranger*, published in the early 1940s, which combines a disturbingly “flat” descriptive style with a horrifying sequence of events, introducing us to a

character whose reactions to the world are indeed “strange.” It is our reaction to this character, however, that makes the novel so deeply philosophical. What is it that makes him so strange? The answer to that question starts us thinking about the way we think about ourselves and each other, what we take for granted and do not normally notice.

After an analysis of *The Stranger*, I want to take us through a number of Camus’s later works, beginning with a philosophical essay he wrote about the same time, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he introduces his infamous concept of “The Absurd.” Then, in Lectures Five and Six, I want to examine two later novels, *The Plague* and *The Fall* (the last novel Camus published in his lifetime, although his daughter recently published an unfinished novel he was working on at the time of his death). My aim in these first half dozen lectures will be to set a certain mood for the rest of the course, a rebellious, restless, yet thoroughly conscientious mood, which I believe Camus exemplifies both in his writings and in his life.

In Lectures Seven through Nine, I want to turn to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and his revolutionary turn. Kierkegaard was a deeply religious philosopher—a pious Christian—and his existentialist thought was devoted to the question, “What does it mean to be—or rather, what does it mean to become—a Christian?” We should thus be advised that, contrary to some popular misunderstandings, existentialism is by no means an anti-religious or unspiritual philosophy. It can and often does embrace God, as well as a host of visions of the world that we can, without apology, call “spiritual.” (We will see that Nietzsche and Heidegger both embrace such visions, although in very different ways.)

In Lectures Ten through Thirteen, I want to consider in some detail the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and his role in this rather eccentric movement. Nietzsche is perhaps best known for his bold declaration “God is dead.” He is also well known as a self-proclaimed “immoralist.” In fact, both of these phrases are misleading. Nietzsche was by no means the first person to say that God is dead (Martin Luther had said it three centuries before), and Nietzsche himself was anything but an immoral person. He attacks morality—or rather, he attacks one conception of morality—but nevertheless he defends a profound view of ethics and human nature.

In Lecture Fourteen, I want to turn briefly to three diverse but exemplary figures from the history of literature. All three display existentialist themes and temperaments in their works: Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881), the great Russian novelist; Franz Kafka (1883–1924), the brilliant Czech novelist and short story writer; and Hermann Hesse (1877–1962), a twentieth-century Swiss writer who combined a fascination with Asian philosophy with a profoundly Nietzschean interest and temperament.

In Lecture Fifteen, I would like to briefly introduce the philosophical method of a philosopher who could not be further from the existentialist temperament but yet had a profound influence on both Heidegger and Sartre. He is the German-Czech philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who invented a philosophical technique called “phenomenology.” Both Heidegger and Sartre, at least at the beginning of their careers, thought of themselves as phenomenologists. In the rest of that lecture and in Lectures Sixteen and Seventeen, I would like to consider Martin Heidegger’s very difficult but extremely insightful philosophy.

Finally, in Lectures Eighteen through Twenty-Three, I want to consider the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), and in Lecture Twenty-Four, I would like to finish with a comparison and contrast with French philosophy since his time. My suggestion will be that much of what is best in “postmodernism” is taken more or less directly from Sartre, despite the fact that he is typically attacked as the very antithesis of postmodernism. Existentialism, I want to argue, was and is not just another French intellectual fashion but a timely antidote to some of the worst self-(mis)understandings of the end of the century.

How should one approach these lectures? My advice on the lecture on *The Stranger* is a good example of how I think each lecture should be approached. Although the lectures are self-contained, it would be ideally desirable to read the “Essential Reading” (in this case, the novel) before hearing or viewing the lecture. That way, you come to the lecture ready to question and challenge with your interpretation and ideas. This will be true even for the very difficult readings from Heidegger and Sartre. It is very helpful to have contact with their style and vocabulary even if the ideas at first seem impenetrable. Initial contact is even more desirable with our other two major authors, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Both write in a strikingly personal, provocative style, and nothing will impress the reader more than an immediate, first-hand confrontation with their witty and sometimes shocking aphorisms and observations.

Of course, many if not most viewers of the lectures will not have the opportunity to read the material before every lecture. I do suggest, however, that some attempt be made to read the essential material soon after. (I hope the lectures entice one to do so.) The questions are designed to help the reader straighten out the ideas and vocabulary, make various comparisons, and most important, work out his or her own views regarding the material in the lectures. In general, the introductory questions presume only a hearing of the lectures and perhaps some of the essential reading. The advanced questions invite further reading and more extensive thought.

Existentialism is, first of all, a philosophy of life, a philosophy about who we are. The ultimate intent of the course, accordingly, is not only to inform the viewer about a very exciting philosophy but also to enrich his or her life and make all of us think about who we are in a very new and bold way. The main texts for the lectures can be found in Robert C. Solomon, ed., *Existentialism* (New York: McGraw Hill/Modern Library, 1974). Secondary texts that follow the perspective of the lectures can be found in Robert C. Solomon, *From Rationalism to Existentialism* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), and *Continental Philosophy Since 1750* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

Lecture Thirteen

Nietzsche—The *Übermensch* and the Will to Power

Scope: The *Übermensch* is Nietzsche's best-known invention, although he only appears in one book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. At the same time, Nietzsche introduces the smug and hateful "last man." Nietzsche conceives of the *Übermensch* in terms of "spiritualized" master morality but also as an evolutionary possibility and as the highest manifestation of the "will to power." Ultimately, both the *Übermensch* and the will to power represent passion and the love of life. The thought of eternal recurrence is an affirmation of life.

Outline

- I. The *Übermensch* is Nietzsche's best-known invention, in part because of George Bernard Shaw's lampoon of the notion in his play, *Man and Superman*.
 - A. In fact, the notion only appears in one of Nietzsche's books, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and then only at the beginning.
 - B. Nietzsche does speak with some frequency of "higher men," clearly within the realm of the human, however.
 - C. The *Übermensch* is portrayed by Zarathustra as a "possibility" for the future, something to which humanity can aspire. Nietzsche is clearly in Darwin's thrall in many ways. Nonetheless, he doubted Darwin's supposed premise that the best survive.
 - D. But Zarathustra simultaneously introduces the more likely evolutionary possibility of "the last man," the self-contented, self-satisfied utilitarian modern man.
 1. "We have invented happiness," says the last man ["and he blinks"].
 2. Zarathustra intends to horrify his audience with this vision, as he would inspire them with his vision of the *Übermensch*.
- II. The *Übermensch* can be conceived in terms of ancient master morality, "spiritualized" by two thousand years of humility, ready to reassert itself in more refined form.
 - A. The *Übermensch* is free of resentment and wholly independent of the "herd."
 - B. Although the *Übermensch* is conceived of as an evolutionary possibility, Nietzsche does not pursue Darwin and clearly fears that any such "improvement" of humanity is highly implausible.
 - C. Nevertheless, Nietzsche clearly distinguishes between those who aspire and are "higher" and those who merely react and resent and are, thereby, "lower."
 1. The poet Goethe is Nietzsche's most frequent example of such a higher man, clearly suggesting that the realm that concerns Nietzsche is not so much biological evolution as human spirituality and creativity.
 2. What distinguishes the higher from the lower, at least in some of Nietzsche's pronouncements, is a difference in the "will to power."
- III. "The Will to Power" is a phrase that Nietzsche employs throughout his philosophy.
 - A. "The Will to Power" is to some extent borrowed from Schopenhauer's "Will" and should be taken with a grain of salt, because Nietzsche rejects Schopenhauer's metaphysics.
 - B. By "power" Nietzsche does not mean military power or power over others, but power of creativity and imagination.
 - C. Power is best conceived as self-mastery, inner strength.
 - D. Schopenhauer took the Will to be a metaphysical force, "the thing-in-itself." Nietzsche rejects all such metaphysics and the very idea of "the thing-in-itself."
 - E. For Nietzsche, the will to power provides a serious theory of motivation. Human behavior (animal behavior, too) is motivated by the desire for power.
 1. Nietzsche is often ambiguous about whether power itself is desired or the feeling of power. (These are not the same.)

2. Nietzsche makes bold universalist claims, but the idea of power as goal and motivation is best considered as a limited empirical hypothesis, not a theory of human nature as such.
 3. The desire for power (self-mastery, self-expression) is directly opposed to the pervasive hedonic theory—that people (and animals) act to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. The utilitarians, for example, use the pleasure principle as a central tenet.
 4. But Nietzsche sees power as a profound version of what we would limply call “self-esteem.”
 5. Thus, such passions as love and pity often have ulterior and sometimes dubious motives.
- IV. The will to power might also be taken to be a celebration of the passionate life.
- A. The history of philosophy is filled with praise for tranquility and peace of mind.
 1. This is the height of slave morality, the idea of cutting attachments and losses.
 2. But Nietzsche presents us with an alternative ideal, the idea that passionate attachments (whether to ideals or art or people) are what life is all about.
 - B. The metaphor of energy pervades Nietzsche’s works.
 1. Energy (as opposed to matter) was the central term in nineteenth-century physics.
 2. The dynamics of energy provide Nietzsche with a model for human behavior that does not conform to the traditional notions of inertia and momentum in human behavior.
 3. Excitement and adventure become the keys to a good human life, not (as in many philosophers) resignation and contemplation.
 - C. Passion represents energy in human life and experience.
 1. In this, Nietzsche again resembles no one so much as Kierkegaard.
 2. Not every passion is desirable.
 3. Some passions are “life-stultifying” and stupid, such as resentment. They “drag us down.”
 4. Others are highly refined and cultivated. These are the “grand passions” that make life worthwhile.
 5. For Nietzsche, as for many other philosophers of the century, “nothing great is ever done without passion” (the phrase is from Hegel).
 6. Nietzsche ultimately rejects the dichotomy between reason and passion.
 7. The passions themselves have “their own quanta of reason.” They are themselves forms of insight.
- V. Nietzsche’s philosophy is a philosophy of passion and energy.
- A. The ultimate passion is the love of life, but not simply life as life.
 - B. It is the love of your life and what you have done and are doing with it.
 - C. The test of this love of life is what Nietzsche calls “the thought of eternal recurrence.”
 1. Simply stated, how do you feel about living your life, exactly as is, once again?
 2. Philosophy, contra Schopenhauer, is an affirmation of life.
 3. Eternal recurrence also provides an existential test, an ongoing means of scrutinizing how one is living and what one is doing with his or her life.

Essential Reading:

Solomon, *Existentialism*, pp. 43–78.

Recommended Reading:

Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *The Viking Portable Nietzsche*.

For a postmodernist interpretation of master and slave morality and the will to power, see Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*; for an excellent analysis of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, see Higgins, *Nietzsche’s Zarathustra*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. What is the will to power? To what extent do you think this phrase unavoidably refers to power over other people? In what sense does it refer to self-discipline and self-mastery?
2. Zarathustra announces the coming of the “Übermensch.” Who is he? Although Nietzsche says very little about him, what sense do you make of him? What do you make of the possibility that he is “super human”? Is Nietzsche making an evolutionary prediction? (He is writing only a few decades after Darwin.) Explain.

Advanced Question to Consider:

1. Eternal recurrence has been described as a “metaphysical doctrine”: Time is not linear but loops around such that what is happening now has happened an infinite number of times in the past and will happen an infinite number of times in the future in exactly the same way. Eternal recurrence can also be interpreted as a “psychological doctrine” (a metaphorical tool for enabling us to determine how we should will) and an “ontological doctrine” (only active, master-like willing will return; reactive, slave-like willing will not). Which of these views—if any—do you embrace? Why?

Lecture Fourteen

Three Grand Inquisitors: Dostoevsky, Kafka, Hesse

Scope: Three important figures surrounding Nietzsche are Fyodor Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka, and Hermann Hesse. Dostoevsky was a contemporary who also investigated the dark side of human reason. Kafka followed him by several decades and became a leading writer of “the Absurd.” Hesse was an admirer and advocate of Nietzsche who also became heavily influenced by Buddhist thought.

Outline

- I. Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) was Nietzsche’s contemporary, had a Kierkegaardian religious sensibility, and anticipated some of the central themes in Heidegger’s philosophy.
 - A. In his *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky introduces us to a character who is obsessed with free will, his “most advantageous advantage,” and is utterly spiteful, indecisive, and ineffective as a result. His reaction to his own liver disease is to let it get worse.
 1. The central theme is freedom or free will. Dostoevsky attacks the Enlightenment notion that freedom and happiness go hand in hand.
 2. Being spiteful isn’t a personality disorder but a philosophical position, a manifestation of free will.
 - B. In his novel *The Idiot*, by contrast, Dostoevsky introduces us to a character who is “perfectly good,” who is motivated only by the purest moral sentiments, and who becomes a disaster for all around him. This is, in one sense, a defense of Kant’s position that intention is what matters.
 - C. In his *Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky introduces the problem of nihilism by way of brother Ivan, anticipating Nietzsche a few years later.
 1. Ivan, educated in the West, has imbibed much of Enlightenment philosophy. Between his sensual older brother, Dmitri, and his younger brother, Aloysha, we see the spectrum of European philosophy.
 2. Dostoevsky poses a number of dilemmas about human life that are intended to place the movement of nihilism in higher relief.
 - D. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, he also introduces “the Grand Inquisitor,” the head of the Christian church who, when faced with Christ’s second coming, insists on executing him once again.
 - E. In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky pursues the idea that “if there is no God, then everything is permitted.”
- II. Franz Kafka (1883–1924) was a Jewish writer living in pre-communist Czechoslovakia (Bohemia).
 - A. His writings exemplify “the Absurd.”
 - B. They also raise the question of self-identity in a brilliantly original way.
 1. Gregor Samsa becomes a giant insect in “Metamorphosis.”
 2. The story emphasizes a Cartesian separation of mind and body.
 3. Our self-identity is construed by our role in society.
 - C. Kafka’s images of guilt and innocence in *The Trial* powerfully influence Albert Camus in *The Stranger*.
 1. For Kafka, human beings are guilty by virtue of their very existence.
 2. This theme is common to many of our writers—consciousness, instead of being a blessing, may be a disease. With consciousness, comes despair.
- III. Hermann Hesse (1877–1962) was a German-Swiss writer who bridged the abyss between European and Eastern (Indian) thought, particularly Buddhism.
 - A. In *Siddhartha*, Hesse retells the story of the Buddha and his enlightenment in very human terms.
 - B. Hesse was also an admirer and advocate of Nietzsche.
 1. In *Demian*, he presents a quasi-occult image of the exceptional person, a child who prefigures the *Übermensch* in being “beyond good and evil.”
 2. In *Steppenwolf*, he gives us a superior adult, who thinks of himself as half man and half wolf. Consequently, he is miserably unhappy, trapped in a Nietzschean image of himself. Like Kafka, Hesse challenges Nietzsche’s aggressiveness and optimism.

3. Ultimately, Hesse claims that one has many selves.
- C. Like Kafka, Hesse radically challenges our ordinary concept of self.
1. In *Steppenwolf*, he offers us the Eastern image of a “no self” self, the self as an onion—not a peach—with many layers but no essential core.
 2. With Hesse, one starts with Nietzsche but attains a certain passion that even Nietzsche didn’t understand.

Essential Reading:

Solomon, *Existentialism*, pp. 33-42 (Dostoevsky); 166-168 (Kafka); pp. 79-92 (Hesse).

Recommended Reading:

Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* and *The Grand Inquisitor*, trans. by Ralph E. Matlaw, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by Constance Garnett.

Kafka, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, and *The Trial*, trans. by Breon Mitchell.

Hesse, *Demian*, trans. by Michael Roloff and Michael Lebeck, and *Steppenwolf*, trans. by Basil Creighton.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. Do you believe that “if there is no God, everything is permitted”? What does this mean?
2. To what extent do you think that “Kafkaesque” descriptions of the world are true and warranted? Is life ultimately supposed to make sense?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. Can you describe the Buddhist “no self” in terms that are congenial to Western philosophy, existentialism in particular?
2. Kafka’s character Joseph K. is arrested for no reason, put on trial, and ultimately condemned to death. In what sense are we all “guilty” in some such sense?

Lecture Fifteen

Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology

Scope: Edmund Husserl was the founder of phenomenology, a philosophical method seeking certainty. His most illustrious student was Martin Heidegger, who took Husserl's method into the realm of existentialism. Heidegger called his philosophy a "fundamental ontology" and began with an examination of "*Dasein*"—our Being-in-the-World. Unlike Husserl, however, he rejects "mind" and "consciousness." But *Dasein* has an identity crisis. It wants to know "who" it is. So, too, Heidegger's own identity has proved to be very controversial.

Outline

- I. Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) was the founder of phenomenology.
 - A. Phenomenology was a new version of Cartesianism, carving out the special realm of consciousness or "subjectivity." Phenomenology is the examination of consciousness.
 - B. Phenomenology might be defined as "the study of the essential (or 'intentional') structures of experience." Intentionality means that consciousness is *about* something.
 - C. Husserl himself was a mathematician who was primarily interested in the nature of necessary truth rather than the problems of life.
 - D. Philosophy, according to Husserl, seeks certainty, as Descartes did, not empirical facts, as in natural science.
 - E. Husserl sought an "Archimedean point" from which to establish such a foundation for all knowledge. (Husserl's enduring interest is always focused on the "necessity" of mathematical truths.)
 - F. Husserl's "Archimedean point," the foundation of all knowledge, was the Transcendental Ego.
 - G. Husserl's phenomenology provided the method for the existentialist investigation of the self, first in the philosophy of Husserl's prize student, Martin Heidegger, then in the work of the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre.
- II. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was a student of Husserl's, but he was formerly a student of theology and more concerned with the deep questions of human existence than the more abstract questions that fascinated his teacher. (Heidegger later commented that the purpose of philosophy was to "invent a new God.")
 - A. Heidegger's early work is often referred to as "existentialist," although he himself rejected that affiliation. His first work, *Being and Time*, has existentialist themes.
 - B. The central question of Heidegger's philosophy was the "question of Being."
 1. This must be distinguished from more particular "ontic" queries about the nature of beings, or entities. "Ontology" (or "fundamental ontology") was his effort to understand the nature of Being as such.
 2. Being is to be understood from a phenomenological point of view.
 3. Being has clear religious overtones.
 4. We are essentially ontological creatures, which means, in Heidegger's view, that we necessarily query the world about our own existence and identity.
 5. The being that so queries the world, the being that each of us is, is what Heidegger calls "*Dasein*," or "being there."
 - C. The quest for Being first of all requires an understanding of "that being through whom the question of Being comes into being," in other words, *Dasein*.
 1. Looking at *Dasein* from a phenomenological point of view, it is first of all Being-in-the-World. Unlike Husserl and Descartes, Heidegger says our primordial experience is a unified experience of being in the world.
 2. Heidegger would not describe us in the more naturalistic terms of "human being," because from the innocence of the first-person view, the question of what we are in nature remains to be determined. He does not talk about consciousness or subjectivity.
 3. *Being and Time* is largely devoted to the phenomenological description of what it is to be a *Dasein*.

4. Although Heidegger believed that fundamental ontology was only possible as phenomenology, he rejects Husserl's emphasis on consciousness and the Transcendental Ego.
 - D. Heidegger sketches out the essential "existential" features of *Dasein*.
 - E. Because *Dasein* is essentially "ontological," it is, by its very nature, self-questioning.
 1. On the one hand, the idea that we are essentially questioning creatures is common to almost all philosophers, culminating in Descartes.
 2. On the other hand, Heidegger refuses to talk about this questioning in terms of consciousness and subjectivity, as Descartes and Husserl did.
 - F. Consequently, *Dasein* has an identity crisis. It wants to know "who" it is. What we think of as our identity is a false one.
- III. One of the most vitriolic recent controversies in philosophy involves the question, "Who was Heidegger?"
- A. Heidegger committed himself briefly to National Socialism (1933–34).
 - B. He served as Rector of Freiburg University under Hitler, was responsible for the firing of Jewish professors, and gave several well-documented pro-Nazi speeches.
 - C. Heidegger never repudiated National Socialism but only bemoaned its failure.
 - D. Reconciling his life to his philosophy is a problem. But as Nietzsche suggested, to understand a philosophy, we must understand the philosopher—only then does a full picture emerge. Heidegger denies that he is doing "ethics" in his "fundamental ontology," but it is not so obvious that his philosophical views are entirely separable from his personal and political commitments.

Essential Reading:

Selections from Heidegger's *Being and Time* in Solomon, *Existentialism*, pp. 93–123.

Chapter 11 of Solomon, *Continental Philosophy Since 1750*, pp. 152–172.

Recommended Reading:

Although still difficult, the best exposition of Husserl's phenomenological "method" is Edmund Husserl's *Paris Lectures*, in Solomon, *Phenomenology and Existentialism*. These were rewritten as *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. For the very courageous, try Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh.

Some good overviews of Heidegger are: Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*; Guignon, *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge*; Metha, *The Philosophy of Martin Heidegger*.

For an overview of Husserl, see Solomon, *Continental Philosophy Since 1750* (chapters on Husserl and Heidegger), and *From Rationalism to Existentialism*, "Martin Heidegger: Being and Being Human," pp. 184–244. For a lighter approach to Heidegger, see Solomon, *Introducing the Existentialists*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. For Heidegger, what is the difference between the "ontic" and the "ontological"? Why is it important that we (i.e., "*Dasein*") are "ontological"?
2. According to Heidegger, when is it that we begin to deliberate on the particulars of a project in which we are engaged and start to see things as "things," as "objects"? Think of yourself engaged in an everyday project. Do you agree with him? Explain.

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. How does Heidegger's approach to phenomenology differ from Husserl's "phenomenological method"? What are some of the different underlying presuppositions?
2. What does Heidegger gain by referring to "*Dasein*" ("being-there") rather than "human consciousness" or just "people," for example? Is *Dasein* an individual? The human collective? Both? Neither? Why talk in this novel way?

3. What, in general, is the relationship between a philosopher and his philosophy? Nietzsche comments (in *Beyond Good and Evil*) that every philosophy is “the personal confession and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir.” What would count as “pro-Nazi” implications in a treatise such as *Being and Time*? How explicit would such implications have to be?

Lecture Sixteen

Heidegger on the World and the Self

Scope: Although Heidegger is not interested in what is traditionally called epistemology (the theory of knowledge), he has much of interest to say about our knowing engagement with the world. From the point of view of *Dasein*, the world is no longer a mere object of knowledge but a matter of tasks to be done. Yet Heidegger questions the benefits of technology, as well as the disastrous split between the mind and the body. What is crucial is to be “ontological” and, for one’s own self, to become *authentic (eigentlich)*—to then properly approach the question of Being. Most of us, most of our lives, are authentic but inauthentic, what Heidegger calls the *das Man* self.

Outline

- I. From the point of view of *Dasein*, the world is no longer a mere object of knowledge. Philosophers think of the world and the things that make up the world as, first of all, something to be known.
 - A. But Heidegger says we are not first of all “knowers.” We are, instead, engaged in the world, faced with tasks. Kant or Wittgenstein, for example, describes the world as the totality of objects and states of affairs—but that isn’t obvious to Heidegger at all.
 - B. The world, accordingly, first appears to us as “equipment,” not as an object of knowledge. For Heidegger, the world is knowing *how*, not knowing *what*, as in the example of using a hammer in a workshop.
 - C. So, too, the appearance of “things”—even something as basic as a hammer—becomes a phenomenon to be explained, not an obvious philosophical starting point. Paying attention to the task itself (reflection) can interrupt the very process of doing it.
 - D. Heidegger questions the ultimate benefits of technology, suggesting that our view of the world as “resource” betrays both our own nature and the nature of our relationship to the world. Competition and consumerism make us diminished beings, no longer authentically engaged in the world.
- II. From the point of view of *Dasein*, it is no longer clear what the self is.
 - A. Descartes’s famous “I think, therefore I am” is a misleading paradigm of self-identity.
 1. It suggests a disastrous split between the mind (“I am a thinking thing”) and the body, which Heidegger rejects.
 2. It also suggests that self-knowledge is immediate and transparent.
 3. Heidegger tells us that the self is neither immediate nor transparent, and self-recognition is rare and special rather than philosophically routine.
 - B. This need and capacity to clarify our own mode of being, to be “ontological,” raises the questions of what it is to be genuinely one’s own self—or authentic (*eigentlich*)—and in what way can we then properly approach the question of Being.
 1. It also raises the question of what it is to be inauthentic (*uneigentlich*).
 2. Most of our lives, we are not our genuine selves, not authentic but inauthentic, what Heidegger calls the *das Man* (“one is”) self.
 - C. Heidegger develops the concept of the self as *das Man*.
 1. The ordinary self is not the self of Cartesian reflection.
 2. It is not an individual self.
 3. It is an “anonymous” self, a self defined by other people.
 4. The ordinary self is, thus, inauthentic. When we describe ourselves, we refer to the roles we play or social categories. The *das Man* self is the social, comparative self. Although it is essential to life, it is not our genuine self.
 5. This view harks back to Kierkegaard’s and Nietzsche’s attacks on the “herd mentality” of contemporary society, but Heidegger doesn’t accept the extremity of their rejection of everyday social life.
 6. Heidegger’s contrasting notion of authenticity comes to play an enormous role in existentialist literature.

- D. Heidegger encourages us to be authentic, to “take hold of ourselves.” Heidegger dramatically announces that we are “thrown” into the world, suggesting a dimension of involuntariness and fatalism. To take hold of one’s self, one doesn’t reject society but resolutely accepts one’s historicity and reasserts the self in traditions and “destiny.”

Essential Reading:

Selections from Heidegger’s *Being and Time* in Solomon, *Existentialism*, pp. 93–123.

Recommended Reading:

Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 39-48, 59-70, 77-82, 107-122; and *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*; Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I*; Solomon, *From Rationalism to Existentialism*, pp.184–244.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. How does Heidegger’s approach to phenomenology have ecological overtones? In what sense can he be construed as attacking the very idea of the earth as a “resource”?
2. What (who) is *das Man*, the *das Man* self? To what is it opposed?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. What is the nature of “existence” for Heidegger? Does this say anything more than affirm the fact that we have choices and make decisions?
2. In what sense are we “thrown” into the world? What images does this violent choice of words suggest? What does it imply about the nature of our lives?
3. “The word ‘I’ is to be understood only in the sense of a non-committal formal indicator, indicating something which may reveal itself as its ‘opposite’ in some particular phenomenal context of Being. In that case, the ‘not-I’ is by no means tantamount to an entity which essentially lacks ‘I-hood’ but is rather a definite kind of Being which the ‘I’ itself possesses, such as having lost itself” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, “The ‘Who’ of *Dasein*”). What is Heidegger telling us about the nature of “self-identity”? Contrast this notion of the “I” with Husserl’s more “Cartesian” approach.

Lecture Seventeen

Heidegger on “Authenticity”

Scope: Heideggerian authenticity requires an adequate recognition and engagement with ourselves. Heidegger distinguishes three “existential” features of *Dasein*: existence, facticity, and fallenness. He also talks about the importance of moods as ways of “tuning” into the world. Also essential to authenticity are what Heidegger calls understanding, thinking, and speech (as opposed to mere chitchat). Heidegger also suggests that the recognition of our own mortality prompts us to authenticity and “historicity.”

Outline

- I. In Nietzsche’s description of master and slave morality, he clearly prefers the former. So, too, does Heidegger, who gives us an ethics of authenticity. Heidegger encourages us to be authentic (*eigentlich*), to “take hold of ourselves” or comport ourselves toward the world in a certain way.
 - A. Among the various “existential” features of *Dasein*, Heidegger highlights three: existence, facticity, and fallenness.
 - B. Existence (*Existenz*) is that which is essentially *Dasein*.
 1. *Dasein* has no essence other than the fact that it exists. “Existence precedes essence.”
 2. *Dasein* has “possibilities.”
 3. *Existenz* is that feature of *Dasein* through which we envision our possibilities, our future. It is the capacity to make choices. (Heidegger’s later philosophy will question this existential concept of choice.)
 4. It is our necessary ability to look into the future and disclose to ourselves the three interwoven dimensions of time, the present, the past, and the future.
 5. Our moods (not to be conceived as merely transient mental states) are ways of being “tuned” into the world, in which our *existenz* is disclosed to us. Heidegger says our moods are shared. They are not “in our minds” but out there, in the world.
 - C. Facticity consists of the brute facts that characterize us, such as height, weight, date of birth, and so on.
 1. Here is where Heidegger says that we are “thrown” into a world not of our choosing.
 2. Our “historicity” is our historical situation.
 - D. Fallenness is the “pre-ontological” way in which *Dasein* fails to face up to its ontological condition and “falls back” to daily inauthenticity, *das Man*. It is the everyday core of inauthenticity, falling back into tasks. It is what we experience in our everyday lives and should be respected as such. But fallenness alone is just one dimension of human life and not yet authentic.
 - E. Heidegger goes on to distinguish various authentic and inauthentic modes of being:
 1. Understanding is opposed to curiosity.
 2. Thinking is opposed to calculation.
 3. Speech is opposed to chatter.
 - F. Heidegger marks these distinctions as the structure of conscience. We cannot help but ask questions about what we are and feel anxiety about our existence.
- II. The most dramatic suggestion in *Being and Time* is that we are all “Being-unto-death” (*Sein-zum-Tode*).
 - A. The recognition of our own mortality is that it is a necessary fact about us. But we normally don’t take this seriously. Our mortality prompts us to “take hold of ourselves” in an authentic “resolution” of our own existence.
 - B. It also forces us to appreciate our limitations and immerse ourselves in our “historicity,” our historical situation. Being-unto-death forces us to see ourselves and our lives as a single unity.
 - C. This last point is immensely problematic because of Heidegger’s own place in history.
 1. Does his philosophy make an excuse for his flirtation with the Nazis in the name of “historicity,” his historical situation?
 2. Why did he never repent for his involvement in the National Socialist cause? Facticity? Fallenness? Or bad faith?

Essential Reading:

Solomon, *Existentialism*, pp. 93–123.

Recommended Reading:

Solomon, *From Rationalism to Existentialism*, pp.184–244. For a good analysis of Heidegger’s own “historicity,” see Sluga, *Heidegger’s Crisis*. For a good defense of Heidegger, see Young, *Heidegger, Philosophy, Nazism*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. Define the following Heideggerian terms: “facticity,” “thrownness,” “existence,” and “fallenness.”
2. Who is “*das Man*?” Is it you? Or “partially” you? Explain.
3. What role does death, or more precisely, “Being-unto-death,” play in the realization of authenticity?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. Heidegger asserts that “fallenness”—which is the result of losing oneself in the idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity of “the they”—“does not express any negative evaluation, but is used to signify that *Dasein* is proximally and for the most part alongside the world of its concern.” Is it true that Heidegger doesn’t view “fallenness” normatively? If so, why should we try to live “authentically,” especially given that Heidegger tells us that fallenness brings “tranquility”?
2. What would it mean to live “authentically” in the world? Is there any way that “you” could live authentically in a world that is otherwise “fallen,” or does individual authenticity depend on living in a more “authentic” context?

Lecture Eighteen

Jean-Paul Sartre at War

Scope: Jean-Paul Sartre, together with Simone de Beauvoir, his lifelong companion, named existentialism and popularized it. Sartre's philosophy can best be summarized in the phrase "no excuses!" He despised the fact that people disclaimed responsibility for their cowardly and hypocritical roles during World War II. Sartre argues that we are "absolutely free." Whatever the situation, Sartre argues, we have choices. We are all responsible for what we do, what we are, and the way the world is.

Outline

- I. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) is the ultimate existentialist; he concentrates on the issue of responsibility. His voluminous writings amount to a huge *oeuvre*, a true testament of "engaged literature."
 - A. He named the movement and popularized it, first in France, then throughout Europe and America.
 - B. The characteristics so often identified with existentialism are his own.
 - C. Only his most faithful companion, Simone de Beauvoir, has stuck with his philosophy, while correcting him on important points and arguing all the way.
- II. It is Sartre's philosophy, condensed in his great tome, *Being and Nothingness*, that can best be summarized in the phrase "no excuses!"
 - A. His analysis of human nature was solidified during the horrible years of the German occupation. He spent time in a Nazi war prison—not a concentration camp.
 - B. Nevertheless, he borrows much of his language from Heidegger and earlier German philosophers.
 - C. Sartre's vehement denunciations were mainly aimed at his fellow Frenchmen for their cowardice, hypocrisy, and collaboration with the Germans.
 - D. What bothered Sartre was the way that everyone disclaimed responsibility for not helping the Resistance, for living their lives as normally as possible, and for collaborating with the enemy. This context prompted the question "What is human nature?" Their excuses during the war included:
 1. "What can I do about it?"—an appeal to individual impotence.
 2. "I didn't start the war, did I?"—an appeal to personal innocence.
 3. "Everyone else is doing it"—an appeal to the "herd," to the diminution of responsibility by dispersal.
 4. "I'm just looking out for myself (the same way everyone else is)"—an appeal to human nature, the instinct for self-preservation.
 5. "I couldn't help it; I had no choice"—the appeal to helplessness.
 6. "I couldn't help it; I was afraid"—the appeal to emotions (as determining behavior).
 - E. Against all such excuses, Sartre wants to argue that we are "absolutely free." We are responsible for what we do, what we are, and the way our world is.
 1. This does not mean (what is absurd) that everyone can do (succeed in) anything they choose.
 2. It does mean that there are no ultimate constraints on consciousness, on our ability to undertake (or try) to behave in the most eccentric, courageous, or perverse ways. Our choices aren't unlimited, but choices are always available. Meursault experienced a kind of freedom while in jail in *The Stranger*. Though imprisoned, he discovers freedom of thought and, in a sense, of choice about how he will die.
 3. Sartre gives the example of a mountain—is it a sacred object, an obstacle, an insurance against invasion? How we see the world is a function of our chosen project.
 4. Moreover, our motives and emotions do not determine our behavior. We determine what motives we will follow and how we see the world through our emotions.
- III. Sartre's harsh view is that everyone is responsible for his or her situation.
 - A. He famously says, "Everyone gets the war he deserves." War inspires fear, heroism, greed, opportunism. Though a war is chosen by no one, it requires one to make choices, and "the war" is the outcome of those choices.
 - B. Whatever the situation, Sartre argues, one has choices. Not all of them are conscious.

1. One makes of the situation and oneself what one can.
 2. One may adopt an attitude of defiance, or resignation, or escape.
 3. Whatever we do is to the exclusion of other alternatives. Many choices are made by default.
- C. The threats to freedom are often thought to be internal, such as the intrusion of strong emotions.
1. Emotions and motives, for Sartre, are parts of the situation.
 2. To say that something was merely said in anger is false—it may be closer to what one really feels than years of polite conversation. In a sense, anger is a choice—one decides whether to react to something or repress it.
 3. “Falling in love” is also a series of choices we make.
 4. Shyness is usually presented as a structure of the personality. But is shyness—or cowardice, for that matter—a given that determines us or a sequence of choices we exercise individually?
- D. Thus, we are all responsible for what we do, what we are, and the way the world is.

Essential Reading:

Solomon, *Existentialism*, esp. “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” pp. 196–205.

Recommended Reading:

Solomon, *From Rationalism to Existentialism*, pp. 245-324.

Sartre, *The Wall and Other Stories*, trans. by Lloyd Alexander, and *The Age of Reason* (a novel), trans. by Eric Sutton.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. In what senses can we be said to be responsible for ourselves? Is the limit of our responsibility the reach of our voluntary actions? Or can we be held responsible for things outside our control—for example, the way the world is?
2. Consider Sartre’s contention that we are “absolutely free.” What, exactly, does he mean by this? Does he mean that we can achieve whatever we want at any time? If this is not the case (and it clearly is not), how could we be “absolutely free”? Explain.
3. What would it mean to say that a person in prison has a multitude of choices? What might they be?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. Sartre maintains that “the first principle of existentialism” is that “man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.” What does he mean? Is every aspect of ourselves within our own personal control? If not, what sense can be made of Sartre’s claim?
2. If you were a Frenchman in Paris during the early 1940s, what would you have done? What factors influence your decisions? To what extent do basic questions of survival dominate your thinking?
3. If you were a German soldier in Paris during the early 1940s, what would you have done? What factors influence your decisions? To what extent do basic questions of survival dominate your thinking?

Lecture Nineteen

Sartre on Emotions and Responsibility

Scope: Sartre's early essay on emotions calls them "magical transformations of the world," rejecting the mechanistic picture of emotions presented by such psychologists as William James. Emotions are choices, strategies for coping with a difficult world. Emotions are not mere sensations or "feelings." They have "intentionality." They also have "finality" or purpose. Sartre also begins his lifelong attack on Freud. He rejects Freud's "unconscious" and "psychic determinism." He later counters Freud with his own brand of psychoanalysis.

Outline

- I. In an early essay on emotions (1938), Sartre argued that emotions are choices, "magical transformations of the world."
 - A. He wanted to get away from the mechanistic picture of emotions as brute forces or mere physiological disturbances.
 - B. He tried to defend the emotions as choices, strategies for coping with a difficult world.
 - C. They are also, accordingly, our responsibility, not mere excuses.
- II. One of his targets is the great American philosopher-psychologist William James.
 - A. James argued (though not consistently) that an emotion is merely a set of sensations caused by a physiological disturbance that is itself caused by a disturbing perception or image. The beauty of James's theory, for psychologists and philosophers, is how specific it is.
 - B. Sartre argues that emotions (and all acts of mind) must have "intentionality," direction toward the world, and cannot be mere sensations or "feelings." Emotions, then, are always about something.
 - C. James, on the other hand, suggests that some emotions are instinctual in nature—thus, perception gets short shrift.
 - D. Furthermore, Sartre argues, emotions have "finality" or purpose. There are reasons for one's emotions. An emotion is a strategy for dealing with the world.
 - E. In Aesop, the fox's perception transforms the world when he can't get the grapes he wants. The fox refuses to see himself as a failure, thus escaping from the humiliation of defeat.
 - F. In the story of the fainting woman, emotion reflects a choice to evade an intolerable situation.
 - G. Even through love and joy, one chooses to absolve one's self of responsibility.
- III. A second target is Freud.
 - A. Sartre rejects "the unconscious." But is there really a difference between this concept and Sartre's "pre-reflective" consciousness?
 - B. Sartre also rejects the very idea of "psychic determinism," the notion that human emotions, thoughts, and decisions are caused by antecedent conditions and external events.
 1. They are not to be construed as forces "within us," the Freudian "id," acting upon us against our will (and apart from our knowledge).
 2. Emotions are strategies, knowingly and willfully (but not reflectively) undertaken.
- IV. Sartre's view of the participation of the body in emotion anticipates some of the most interesting recent work in neuropsychology.
 - A. Emotions are not just bodily reactions or sensations.
 - B. Nevertheless, Sartre develops his own brand of psychoanalysis, "existential" psychoanalysis.
 - C. The essential difference with Freud becomes not so much the existence of the unconscious but the rejection of the supposedly mechanistic, impersonal workings of the mind. Where Freud says, "I can't," Sartre insists on "I refuse."

Essential Reading:

Sartre, *The Emotions: Sketch of a Theory*.

Recommended Reading:

Soll, "Sartre's Rejection of the Freudian Unconscious," in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed., Paul A. Schilpp; Solomon, "Sartre on the Emotions," in Schilpp, *ibid.*; Solomon, *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life*; Fell, *Emotion in the Thought of Sartre*. For various readings on the nature of emotion (including William James's classic "What Is an Emotion?"), see Cheshire Calhoun, ed., *What Is an Emotion?*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. What does Sartre mean when he refers to emotions as "magical transformations of the world"? What leads us to "magically transform" the world in one particular way as opposed to another?
2. What does Sartre mean by the term "intentionality"? What role does "intentionality" play in Sartre's theory of the emotions? How does it enable Sartre to respond to the skeptic?
3. Why is Sartre intent upon rejecting Freud's notion of "the unconscious"?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. According to the American philosopher William James, an emotion is nothing more than a sensation that is caused by a physiological manifestation (which, in turn, is caused by a perception). Sartre has several major problems with this view. What are they?
2. Consider Sartre's introduction of "that face which appears at the pane" at the end of *The Emotions*. In response to this face, Sartre tells us: "the behavior which gives emotion its meaning is no longer ours; it is the expression of the face, the movements of the body of the other person which come to form a synthetic whole with the disturbance of our organism." What do you make of this description? Can it be reconciled with Sartre's position throughout the book that our emotions are voluntary and, therefore, ultimately our own responsibility?
3. By calling emotions "magical" transformations of the world, is Sartre negatively evaluating them? Are they always some form of "sour grapes"—some evasion or distortion of the world by consciousness because of its inability to change the world to meet its ends? If so, do you agree with Sartre? Are all (or some) emotions necessarily evasions?

Lecture Twenty

Sartre's Phenomenology

Scope: Sartre borrows heavily from Husserl's phenomenology. Sartre tells us that consciousness *is* freedom. Consciousness is also "nothingness." Because consciousness is intentional, it is always about something other than itself and outside the nexus of causal relations. Consciousness has the power of "negation," and we are always able to "distance" ourselves from objects of consciousness, including our own mental states (e.g., emotions). Sartre's phenomenology of human nature replaces traditional philosophical arguments.

Outline

- I. The starting point of Sartre's mature work, *Being and Nothingness*, is the phenomenology of consciousness. In separating consciousness and the world, Sartre is a Cartesian.
 - A. Freedom and responsibility have their source in consciousness.
 1. Sartre tells us that consciousness is freedom.
 2. Responsibility is the (necessary) awareness of being the incontestable author of an event or situation.
 - B. Sartre tells us that "consciousness is nothingness."
 1. Consciousness is not a thing (an object of consciousness).
 2. Introspection cannot make an object of consciousness.
 3. Consciousness is always "behind" the things of our awareness; it is the activity that discloses them.
 4. Consciousness is intentionality. It is always about something other than itself.
 - C. Consciousness is therefore outside the nexus of causal relations.
 1. If consciousness could be caused, the deterministic thesis would be true and the result would be the loss of responsibility. Consciousness is freedom from external determination.
 2. This does not mean that Sartre denies the scientific view of the mind as explicable (at least in part) in terms of neurophysiology.
 3. Sartre adopts a "two standpoints" view, much like his illustrious predecessor Immanuel Kant. From the first-person phenomenological perspective, we cannot see ourselves as anything other than free. But from a naturalistic (scientific) standpoint, we can view ourselves as creatures that can be explained by biology and the other natural sciences.
 - D. Sartre uses the word "spontaneity" to carve out a middle range between deliberate agency and mindless habit.
 - E. Consciousness has the power of "negation."
 1. We are not simply passive receivers. We have expectations, which can be thwarted. We impose values on our world. We can say "no!" to the situations in which we find ourselves. Or, we see things in terms of what we can do with them. When we perceive through negation, we construe the world in terms of what's *not* there.
 2. We are always able to "distance" ourselves, "step back" and adopt an attitude toward objects of consciousness, even with pain. Whether or not we do it deliberately, we do something like this all the time.
- II. By way of negation, we can distance ourselves from our mental states.
 - A. In pain, we not only suffer. We also ask, "What does this mean? Do I deserve this? Can I take this? Should I cry out or complain?"
 - B. So, too, in anger, real wisdom can be found in the simple motherly advice to "count to ten." We can reconsider our anger, its cause, its warrant, its expression. We can ignore anger, or overcome it, or give into it.
 - C. We say that we "fall" in love, but we also encourage it, provoke it, decide whether to follow through on our impulses or not. However strong the attraction, one can always ask, "What am I to do about this?"
 - D. Finally, cowardice, like courage, is not simply a vice or virtue one is born with. A person decides, through his or her actions, to be a coward or to be courageous. This was of particular concern to Sartre as he observed his compatriots during the war.

- III. Sartre's phenomenology of human nature is intended to take the place of traditional philosophical argument.
- A. Arguments derive conclusions from premises.
 - 1. But often the premises themselves are more controversial than the conclusions.
 - 2. Since Plato, the linearity of logical argument too easily eclipses the multidimensionality of experience.
 - B. Phenomenology presents us with experiences so "essential" that they prove the point beyond any possible argument. Three examples follow.
 - C. First, nausea is an experience of the pervasiveness of Being.
 - 1. This is the thesis described in Sartre's novel *Nausea*. His character, Roquentin, finds existence intrusive.
 - 2. The novel shows being (by way of the being of particular entities) to be utterly undeniable, whatever arguments skeptical philosophers may produce.
 - D. Second, anguish is an experience of our own freedom.
 - 1. Anguish is different from fear. (The latter concerns what might happen to us; the former, what we might do.)
 - 2. In a dangerous situation, we realize that nothing stands between us and our own willful self-destruction.
 - E. Third, shame is an experience of the existence of other people.
 - 1. We do not primarily know of the existence of others by way of perceiving them.
 - 2. We know of the existence of other people primarily because of our experience of their perceiving us.

Essential Reading:

Solomon, *Existentialism*, pp. 194–205; *Continental Philosophy Since 1750* (chapter on Sartre); *From Rationalism to Existentialism*, Chapter 7, "Sartre and French Existentialism," pp. 245–324.

Recommended Reading:

For the curious and very industrious, Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, and *Nausea*. See also Barnes, *Sartre*. For a lighter approach to Sartre, see Solomon, *Introducing the Existentialists*; Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*; Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*; Anderson, *Sartre's Two Ethics*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. What is "nausea" as Sartre uses the word (in *Nausea*)? What does the experience of "nausea" signify for Sartre? (How would you compare it with Camus's experience of "the Absurd"?)
2. Why does Sartre single out "anguish"? What does Sartre mean when he categorically states that "man is in anguish"? Consider one of Sartre's more compelling examples, the person who walks dangerously close to the edge of a precipice. How does this situation highlight the fact that "man is in anguish"?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. In "Existentialism as a Humanism," Sartre stresses the "atheistic" nature of his brand of existentialism. Yet Sartre and Kierkegaard do not sound dissimilar when speaking on such matters as choice, commitment, and anguish. In what ways does the belief in God cause Kierkegaard's brand of existentialism to differ from Sartre's?
2. In *Nausea*, what do Roquentin's rather grotesque descriptions of his own body (his limp hand, the saliva in his mouth) signify about the role of the body in experience?
3. Compare Sartre's Roquentin with Camus's Meursault (*The Stranger*) and Clamence (*The Fall*). Although Meursault and Clamence seem in many ways to be polar extremes, it would seem that Roquentin, depending on his perspective at any given moment, has certain experiences or attitudes in common with each. Explain this if you can.

Lecture Twenty-One

Sartre on “Bad Faith”

Scope: Sartre, following Heidegger, claims to have an ontology, a theory about the basic make-up of the world. It contains three elements: being-for-itself, the being of consciousness; being-in-itself, the existence of things; and being-for-others, one’s essential relationships with other people. What he ultimately seeks is a theory of the self. He thus distinguishes between “facticity” (facts true of us) and “transcendence” (our need to make choices and interpret the world). Sartre tells us that the desire to be both in-itself and for-itself is the desire to be God and that confusing facticity and transcendence is “bad faith.”

Outline

- I. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre elaborates his “phenomenological Ontology,” a phrase borrowed from Heidegger.
 - A. It is phenomenological because it steadfastly holds to the subject matter of experience and the first-person standpoint.
 - B. This leads to conclusions at odds with science and “objective” thinking, although Sartre does not reject science.
 - C. It is an ontology because Sartre, following Heidegger, insists that the content of experience is and must be the content of our reality.
- II. The key to the Cartesian structure of *Being and Nothingness* is the basic distinction between being-for-itself and being-in-itself.
 - A. Being-for-itself (*pour-soi*) is the being of consciousness.
 - B. Being-in-itself (*en-soi*) is the existence of things.
 - C. Later in the book, Sartre will introduce a third basic category, being-for-others, as in his examples of shame and embarrassment.
- III. Sartre distinguishes between consciousness and the self.
 - A. In an early essay, “The Transcendence of the Ego,” Sartre argued that consciousness is not the self.
 1. The self is “out there in the world, like the consciousness of another.”
 2. The self, he goes on to argue, is a product, an accumulation of actions, habits, achievements, and failures. Sometimes other people know us better than we do.
 - B. Sartre also distinguishes self-conscious reflection from ordinary “prereflective” consciousness.
 1. He distinguishes between consciousness and self-consciousness.
 2. Running for a bus, I am not conscious of myself but only of the “bus to be overtaken.” Consciousness doesn’t contain the “I,” the self.
- IV. Human existence is both being-in-itself and being-for-itself.
 - A. As embodied in a particular place at a particular time in particular circumstances, we have what Sartre (following Heidegger) calls “facticity,” or facts that are true about us.
 - B. As consciousness, we have what Sartre calls “transcendence” (Heidegger’s “existence”).
 1. The term “transcendence” means “outside of” but serves several very different uses for Sartre.
 2. It refers, first of all, to our transcendence of the “facts.” Desires or plans reach beyond facts.
 3. It also refers to our transcendence of the present into the future.
 4. We are to be described by our personalities and our plans—“I am what I am not.”
 - C. The desire to be both in-itself and for-itself is the desire to be God. The very notion of God, for Sartre, is a contradiction.

- V. When we talk about possibilities, we are limited by our facticity. Facticity and transcendence limit each other. Confusing facticity and transcendence is what Sartre calls “bad faith,” a kind of self-deception.
- A. In his discussion of bad faith, Sartre provides us with four of his most often quoted examples: the waiter in the cafe, a young woman on a first date, the frigid wife, and the hesitant homosexual. One’s self turns out to be negotiable—our freedom makes the facts about us vulnerable.
 - B. In all of these examples, Sartre attempts to take on Freud—“I refuse to” versus “I cannot”—but the examples, at least all but the last of them, have serious problems.
 - C. We falsify ourselves by subscribing exclusively to facticity—or transcendence. Either alone leads to bad faith, but bad faith is inescapable.
 - D. Sartre raises serious questions about what should count as an “ethics.”
 1. Sartre does not in fact reject morality.
 2. He establishes an ethics of what is more commonly called “integrity.”

Essential Reading:

Solomon, *Existentialism*, pp. 194-247.

Recommended Reading:

Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*; Fell, *Heidegger and Sartre: An Essay on Being and Place*; Natanson, *Critique of Jean-Paul Sartre’s Ontology*; Danto, *Sartre*; Fingarette, *Self-Deception*; Jeanson, *Sartre and the Problem of Morality*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. What is the difference between “being-in-itself” and “being-for-itself”? Pay special attention to the question of personal self-identity (“one is what one is” or “one is what one is not”). In what sense(s) is personal identity a function of time (past-present-future)?
2. Describe an incident or circumstance (perhaps continuing) in which you were or are in “bad faith.” What sorts of steps did (could) you take to get out of bad faith? In what sense was (is) this impossible?
3. Consider Meursault, Clamence, Rieux, and Roquentin. Are any or all of these characters in “bad faith”? Explain.

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. Why does Sartre describe *Being and Nothingness* as a “phenomenological ontology”? Does this “synthesis” create a tension in the work? Explain.
2. “I think, therefore I am,” declared Descartes. Why does Sartre attack this famous slogan? Why does he take such pains to separate the self from the fact of consciousness? What’s wrong with the idea that the self is “in” consciousness?
3. According to Sartre, “the essential structure of sincerity does not differ from that of bad faith...” What does he mean by this? Is all sincerity in bad faith or simply the objective of being sincere?
4. In terms of the “double property of the human being, who is at once a facticity and transcendence,” compare Sartre’s “flirtatious woman” and “the waiter.” Have they both entered bad faith by the same route? If not, what is the difference between them?
5. Sartre contends that “man fundamentally is the desire to be God.” What does he mean by this? (Put your answer in terms of the two human properties of “facticity” and “transcendence.”) In connection with the last question—is it only God that can avoid “bad faith”? Does “bad faith” smack of the “doctrine of original sin”? Explain.

Lecture Twenty-Two

Sartre's Being-for-Others and *No Exit*

Scope: Being-for-others is presented in contrast to traditional skeptical problems concerning our knowledge of the existence of other people. Many philosophers have argued that we know of the existence of other people through an obvious kind of inference. Sartre insists that our knowledge of other people comes first of all from being *looked at* by them, for example, when we are embarrassed or ashamed. Accordingly, our relations with others are essentially confrontations and conflict. In *No Exit*, one of his characters notes, "Hell is other people."

Outline

- I. Nearly halfway through *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre introduces his third ontological category, being-for-others. Though last in his formulation, it is equal to the others in importance. "Being-for-others" has a more paranoid ring than Heidegger's "being with others."
 - A. In Cartesian philosophy, with its primary emphasis on consciousness, skeptical problems arise concerning our knowledge of the "external" world and our knowledge of the existence of other people.
 - B. Many philosophers have argued that we know of the existence of other people through an obvious kind of inference.
 1. The inference is from our knowledge of our own minds and behavior and our observation of others' behavior to the contents of others' minds.
 2. Sartre rejects this approach.
 3. It wrongly assumes that we have a way of verifying the analogy between our minds and behavior and others' minds and behavior.
 4. It wrongly supposes that we can know ourselves independently of the recognition of other people
 5. This last thesis Sartre borrows directly from Hegel, from whom he also borrows substantial portions of his view of being-for-others.
- II. Sartre insists that our primary knowledge of other people comes not from observing them but rather from being looked at by them.
 - A. Thus, shame is our conduit into the interpersonal world. He takes the case of writer Jean Genet. Caught in the act of stealing, Genet's decision to accept the label "thief" will determine his future existence.
 - B. As in Camus, our experience with other people is not happy. We are all, in essence, always on trial.
 1. What other people think of us is a powerful determinant of who we are.
 2. We are necessarily influenced by the way other people see us—and the way we see ourselves.
 3. Being-for-others is being objectified according to their judgments. Bad faith is seeing ourselves only as others do—or only as we do.
 - C. Sartre, like Camus, seriously considers the prevalence of guilt as a necessary outcome of human awareness and being-for-others. For Sartre, however, the notion of responsibility takes priority over the more pathological notion of guilt, a secular notion of original sin.
 - D. Sartre goes on to argue that our relations with others are essentially confrontations and relations of conflict.
 1. In his dramatic play *No Exit*, one of his characters sums it up: "Hell is other people."
 2. One character is dogged by the question of whether he is a coward or a hero. Another is an upper-class murderer; still another is a lesbian. Relations between people are essentially struggles for self-definition, struggles for authenticity.
 3. My conception of myself is largely the result of others' views of me.
 4. Others' views of themselves are largely the result of my (and others') views of them.
 5. Consequently, we are perpetually engaged in a kind of tense negotiation over how we will judge one another. Being-for-others is, thus, a critical part of our being.

Essential Reading:

Sartre, *No Exit*.

Recommended Reading:

Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 471-559.

Schroeder, *Sartre and His Predecessors*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. What does it suggest to you that Sartre introduces being-for-itself and being-in-itself so far in advance of any explicit mention of being-for-others? Do you think that he views the third category as on a par with the other two?
2. How does shame establish beyond doubt the existence of other people for us?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. In what way is the struggle for authenticity a struggle against other people? How do you see Sartre here playing out once again the arguments of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger against “the herd”?
2. Is it possible, in your view, to have genuinely authentic relations with other people? Or is Sartre right that the very nature of human consciousness means that all such relationships are conflicted?
3. Is Garcin (in *No Exit*) a coward? Explain.

Lecture Twenty-Three

Sartre on Sex and Love

Scope: Sartre's analysis of being-for-others entails troublesome consequences for love and other intimate human relationships. Love, even friendship, is essentially a struggle for self-definition, a struggle for authenticity. In contrast to the unqualified praise for love throughout the Western tradition, love for Sartre becomes a seductive strategy to win the other over, and when this fails, the result is sadism, masochism, and hatred. Sexual desire is also conflict, the desire to turn the other into a "sex object." The aim of sex is power, not pleasure.

Outline

- I. Sartre's analysis of human relationships as conflict suggests troublesome consequences for the understanding of one of our most tender human emotions, love.
 - A. Love, as in all relationships between people, is essentially a struggle for self-definition, a struggle for authenticity.
 - B. Even friendship, which people often think of as a weak or casual form of love, is essentially a struggle for self-definition. We pick people who will reinforce our own conception of ourselves.
 1. Friendship, however, is rarely exclusive, and friends do not (usually) make exclusive claims on each other.
 2. Thus, the overall determination of self-identity in the hands of any single friend will usually be considerably less than that determination in the hands of a lover.
 3. When one has multiple lovers (as Sartre was prone to do), the overall determination of self-identity in the hands of any single lover may also be considerably less than the determination of self-identity in the hands of a single, exclusive lover.
 - C. Love becomes a seductive strategy to win the other over.
 1. Because love is a strategy with an objective, not simply a "feeling," it can succeed or fail.
 2. When it fails, it readily leads to sadism, masochism, and hatred.
- II. Sexual desire becomes the desire to turn the other into a "sex object."
 - A. Reducing the other person to his or her body and bodily responses is manipulating or eliminating his or her capacity for judgment.
 - B. Reducing the other person to a vehicle for one's own pleasure is also a way of manipulating or eliminating his or her capacity for judgment.
 - C. The aim of sex, contra Freud and most people, is not pleasure.
 1. Pleasure is only a vehicle and can even get in the way of sex's strategy of control and manipulation.
 2. The aim of sex, in Nietzschean terms, is power.
 - D. Sartre turns the twists and turns of romance into a diabolical play of wills.
 1. Hegel's "master and slave" paradigm plays a central role in his analysis. The submissive one becomes dominant as the master becomes dependent.
 2. Hegel argued that all such relationships are unstable.
- III. Harsh as it seems, Sartre has done an important service in forcing us to open our eyes to the complexity and difficulties of our interpersonal lives.
 - A. For most of Western history, the complexities of love have been buried under an avalanche of romantic foggery.
 - B. The contrast with Aristophanes, the dramatic spokesman in Plato's *Symposium*, is instructive here.
 1. Aristophanes offers us the classic parable of a single soul, split in two by the gods, each half desperately trying to find its perfect fit, its other half.
 2. Sartre, by contrast, insists that there is no such unity, no such "fit." The people we meet have been brought up differently. Even for those who are "made for each other," there is a good deal of

- adjustment and compromise. Relationships are never fully stable; they are, to use a word Sartre borrows, “metastable.”
3. But Sartre maintained a romantic relationship with Simone de Beauvoir for fifty years, an apparent counter-example to his own harsh philosophy of relationships.
 4. Sartre did claim to find a true “being-with-others” in politics, not romance, “on the barricades,” his primary pursuit for the last thirty years of his life.

Essential Reading:

Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Part III, and *Notebook for an Ethics*.

Recommended Reading:

Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Chapter 4A (on the master-slave dialectic); Anderson, *Sartre’s Two Ethics*; de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*; Solomon, *About Love*; Barnes, *An Existentialist Ethics*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. “Hell is other people,” writes Sartre in *No Exit*. What does he mean? Why does he believe this (in his philosophy, as well as in this play)? Do you think this is true? Why or why not?
2. Can you think of a genuine instance of “being-with-others (as opposed to being-for-others)”? What would this be like? Would such an instance pose an objection to Sartre? Could Sartre allow that such a relation is possible? Explain.

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. Although “being-in-itself” and “being-for-itself” are introduced quite early in *Being and Nothingness*, “being-for-others” is not introduced until Part III (p. 303). Does this mean that being-in-itself and being-for-itself are in some sense ontologically prior to being-for-others—that being-for-others is somehow derivative? If so, what could Sartre mean when he states, “it is not true that I first am and then later seek to make an object of the Other or to assimilate him; but...I am—at the very root of my being—the project of assimilating and making an object of the Other”?
2. What is the relationship between being-for-itself and being-for-others? In the final analysis, who is responsible for my emotional outlook? What does this mean in practical terms?

Lecture Twenty-Four

From Existentialism to Postmodernism

Scope: Sartre's existentialism is often said to have been eclipsed by postmodernism. In fact, most of the postmodern philosophers were profoundly influenced and inspired by Sartre. Differences are exaggerated, such as Sartre's strong orientation toward subjectivity and his emphasis on the self and consciousness. Some postmodernists also reject rationality, objectivity, truth, and knowledge. Mainly, I argue, what gets lost in postmodernism is precisely what is most important and uncompromising in Sartre, that sense of public engagement and responsibility.

Outline

- I. Has existentialism gone out of fashion? I don't think so.
 - A. Existentialism is more than a simple movement or period in history.
 - B. As Sartre said, to try and define it is to freeze it—thus my own reticence about specifically defining the movement.
 - C. Although the movement began in Europe, its real home now is in America. American ideas of self-improvement and mobility share much with existentialism.
- II. Existentialism seems to have been eclipsed by two generations of philosophers since Sartre.
 - A. Sartre was attacked by Levi-Strauss, a "structuralist" anthropologist, for his anthropocentrism and neglect of other cultures.
 - B. Then he was rejected by a new generation of French philosophers under the banner of "postmodernism" (also "poststructuralism").
 1. Key figures include Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Roland Barthes.
 2. Barthes and Foucault put forward the idea of the "death of the author," which denies Sartre's notion of Cartesian subjectivity.
 3. In Deleuze, the impersonal play of forces also attempts to replace all subjectivity.
 4. Although all these philosophers were profoundly influenced and inspired by Sartre, there has been almost a conspiracy of silence regarding Sartre's work.
- III. First and foremost, Sartre's strong orientation toward subjectivity (and with this, most of phenomenology, as well) has been rejected.
 - A. The self, even "consciousness," as Sartre understood it, has been rejected.
 - B. The postmodernists also reject rationality, objectivity, truth, and knowledge, as these concepts are traditionally understood.
 - C. These claims are problematic, but they are also derivative of Sartre's own theories, including the rejection of ultimate rational guidelines.
- IV. In addition, Sartre's "Enlightenment project," his ideal of a "purifying reflection," and his politics of freedom have been rejected. In Sartre, there is a raging sense of rationality.
 - A. Returning to the harsher views of Nietzsche, Foucault and Deleuze stress power and impersonal force as the determinant of truth and values.
 - B. Derrida rejects Sartre's overly unified notion of self. The self is marginalized, fragmented, in Derrida.
 - C. Nevertheless, there are serious questions about the locus of both political responsibility and morals in the postmodern reaction.
 - D. The liberating project of Freud's psychoanalysis may be analogous in some ways to the "purifying reflection" of Sartre. But the emphasis on personal responsibility is a welcome rejoinder to the current cultural paradigm of victimization.

- V. I would like to suggest that the existentialist view has much to recommend it, not just as an interesting movement in twentieth-century philosophy but as an authentic way of life, much needed as this terrible but remarkable century comes to a close.

Essential Reading:

Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*; Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida in Solomon, *Continental Philosophy Since 1750*, pp. 194–202.

Recommended Reading:

Dreyfus and Rabinow, *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*; Sallis, *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*; Kumaf, *A Derrida Reader*; Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism?*; Miller, *Michel Foucault*.

Introductory Questions to Consider:

1. What is postmodernism? What is modernism? In what sense is Sartre's existentialism, in particular, a "modern" philosophy? In what sense is Nietzsche, by contrast, "postmodern"?
2. To what extent is knowledge a matter of power, as Foucault suggests? What does it mean to say, "the subject is socially constructed," through power relations?
3. To what extent is there "nothing aside from the text," as Derrida has famously argued? In what sense are the world and ordinary life a text?

Advanced Questions to Consider:

1. In what ways does Sartre anticipate the postmodernists? In what ways does he advocate the elimination of "the subject" from philosophy?
2. What could come after "postmodernism," i.e., what is post-postmodernism? Is the Enlightenment dead and gone, or is postmodernism possibly just another phase of Enlightenment (modernist) thinking?

Glossary

Absurd: For Camus, the confrontation and conflict between our rational expectations of the world (justice, satisfaction, happiness) and the “indifference” of the world.

Aesthetic (mode of existence): Kierkegaard’s conception of a life based on desire and its satisfaction.

Authenticity: Heidegger’s notion of genuine human existence.

Bad faith: Sartre’s conception of those forms of self-deception in which we deceive ourselves about ourselves, about our natures and responsibilities.

Being-for-itself: For Sartre, human consciousness.

Being-for-others: For Sartre, our painful awareness of other people and their effects on us through their judgments and “looks.”

Being-in-itself: For Sartre, the existence of things in the world.

Being-towards-death: Heidegger’s notion of human mortality and the importance of full awareness in facing death.

Dasein: Heidegger’s conception of “the being through whom being comes into question,” i.e., human existence.

Das Man: Heidegger’s conception of the inauthentic self, the self constructed by and through other people.

Ethical (mode of existence): Kierkegaard’s conception of a life based on a chosen commitment to moral principles and duty to others.

Existence (*Existenz*): For Kierkegaard, a full-blooded, freely chosen, passionately committed life; for Heidegger, that which is essentially *Dasein*. *Dasein* has no essence other than the fact that it exists, that it has possibilities and projects to undertake.

Existentialism: The philosophical movement that stresses individuality and personal responsibility, as epitomized in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre.

Facticity: For Heidegger and Sartre, the brute facts that characterize us, such as our height, our weight, our date of birth, and so on.

Fallenness: For Heidegger, a “pre-ontological” way of dealing in the world, a way in which *Dasein* fails to face up to its ontological condition

Master morality: Nietzsche’s conception of a self-confident morality of virtue and excellence.

Objective uncertainty: Kierkegaard’s attempt to capture those realms of human existence in which knowledge becomes irrelevant and personal decision becomes all-important.

Ontology: For Heidegger, the study of Being.

Phenomenology: In Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre, the study of the essential structures of consciousness, experience, or *Dasein*.

Postmodernism: Contemporary philosophy that rejects the idea of the unified self and the clarifying powers of reason.

Religious (mode of existence): Kierkegaard’s conception of a life based on a chosen devotion to God and His commandments.

Slave morality: Nietzsche’s conception of a reactive, resentful insistence on universal principles and the protection of the weak.

Subjectivity: In Kierkegaard, the realm of personal passion and commitment. In Sartre, phenomenology, the realm of consciousness.

Subjective truth: In Kierkegaard, passionate commitment.

Thrownness: For Heidegger, our “existential” condition, the state in which we find ourselves thrown into this world, that we are “abandoned.” It is the “there” in which *Dasein* finds itself.

Transcendence: For Sartre, the power of consciousness to negate and go beyond the facts of the matter.

Transcendental ego: For Husserl, the realm of consciousness.

Übermensch: Nietzsche’s dramatic image of a more than human being.

Will to power: Nietzsche’s conception of the fundamental motivation of all human behavior, including morality and philosophy.

Biographical Notes

Beauvoir, Simone de (1908–1986). French novelist, essayist, and philosopher and Jean-Paul Sartre’s lifelong companion. The author of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and many other works. Best known for her insightful commentaries on growing up female in a very male culture, living through the war years, and finally, on growing old.

Camus, Albert (1913–1960). French-Algerian (*pied noir*) essayist and philosopher, author of *The Stranger*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Plague*, and *The Fall* and many lyrical and political essays. Best known for his very personal expressions of humanism. His friendship with Sartre erupted with their disagreements over the Algerian War and the general question of violence as a legitimate political means.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor (1821–1881). Russian writer and religious thinker, author of *Notes from Underground*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Idiot*, *Crime and Punishment*, and other novels. Best known for his deep sense of anguish and doubt regarding ultimate religious matters.

Foucault, Michel (1926–1984). French philosopher and polemicist, first categorized as a structuralist, then as a post-structuralist and postmodernist. Author of such books as *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, *The Order of Things*, and *A History of Sexuality*. Best known for his emphasis on power in the world of ideas and culture.

Hegel, G. W. F. (1770–1831). German philosopher who followed Kant as a “German idealist,” author of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and several other important works. Best known for his vision of an all-encompassing historical world-spirit that it is just our luck to finally have made fully realized.

Heidegger, Martin (1889–1976). German philosopher who followed Husserl as a phenomenologist but expanded his interests to include traditional theological and metaphysical matters, author of *Being and Time* and many other works. Best known for his notion of “authenticity,” which came to dominate many existentialist concerns.

Hesse, Hermann (1877–1962). German-Swiss writer and author of *Demian*, *Steppenwolf*, *Siddharta*, and *The Glass Bead Game* (for which he won a Nobel prize). Best known for his synthesis of Western and Eastern (Buddhist) thinking.

Husserl, Edmund (1859–1938). German-Czech (Moravian) philosopher and mathematician; best known as the founder of “Phenomenology.”

Kafka, Franz (1883–1924). Bohemian (Czech) writer famous for his tales of the bizarre, for instance, “Metamorphosis,” *The Trial*, and *The Castle*.

Kant, Immanuel (1749–1804). German philosopher, “German idealist,” best known as the author of three “critiques,” “The Critique of Pure Reason,” “The Critique of Practical Reason,” and “The Critique of Judgment.” As a moral philosopher, he has long been characterized (or caricatured) as strictly rational and “rule-bound”; thus, he becomes a point of departure for such different thinkers as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre.

Kierkegaard, Søren (1813–1855). Danish religious philosopher and first “existentialist.” He is best known for his concept of an irrational “leap of faith” and his many religious works, many of them written under pseudonyms, emphasizing the importance of personal choice and commitment in becoming a Christian and in living a full life more generally. His philosophy has many important parallels with Nietzsche, despite their very different positions on the desirability of Christianity.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1844–1900). German philosopher who attacked both the Judeo-Christian tradition and contemporary culture and politics with great style and passion. Author of *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and many other works.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (1905–1980). French philosopher, essayist, and literary writer responsible for naming “existentialism” and for definitively promoting some of its central themes, notably the theme of freedom and responsibility that we have summarized as “No Excuses!” Author of *Being and Nothingness* and many other works.

Schopenhauer, Arthur (1788–1860). German philosopher who followed Kant (competing with Hegel) as a “German idealist.” Author of *The World as Will and Idea*. Best known for his grumpy cosmic pessimism but equally important for bringing together Western and Eastern (Buddhist) ideas.

Zarathustra (sixth century B.C.E.). Persian prophet, founder of Zoroastrianism, belated hero of Nietzsche's quasi-Biblical epic, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

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