

PHIL 3390 | Special Topics - Existentialism

Spring 2026

Dr. Harris B. Bechtol

CRN: 24942

Class Time: MW 2:00-3:15; MADLA 209

Office Hours: MTW 10:30-11:30 AM; 3:30-5:30 PM and Th 10:30-11:30 AM

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Existentialism. 3 Hours.

This course covers figures and topics from the beginnings of Existentialism in the nineteenth-century to the present. Topics can include freedom, selfhood, anxiety, despair, nothingness, meaninglessness, death, the limits of reason, authentic and inauthentic existence, borderlands, and others. Existential works from literature, psychoanalysis, religion, and philosophy can be included with focused attention on such thinkers as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Buber, Rosenzweig, Jaspers, Heidegger, Arendt, Sartre, Marcel, Camus, de Beauvoir, Weil, Bergson, Fanon, Anzaldúa, and others.

COURSE OVERVIEW

Hi, this is Dr. Harris Bechtol, but people often call me Dr. B. I am really excited to be teaching you this semester! We have a really exciting class to experience together based on my over ten years of study of and research in the history of philosophy. This course will prove to be important not only for your overall education but especially for your own personal journey in coming to understand what being human means and requires of you. This course is designed as an upper-level introduction to the field of Existentialism. We will be reading quite a bit this semester focusing on some of the most question probing works in the history of philosophy. After exploring the origins of Existentialism in a sample of works from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, students will be introduced to the breadth and depth of the field as it gets developed in the 20th century in the French philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir, the German philosophy of Hannah Arendt, and expanded into Mexican Existentialism in the works of Gloria Anzaldúa. Through these philosophers we will discuss the major existentialist themes revolving around freedom, death, anxiety, the meaning of life, authenticity, ethics, and responsibility. You will have the opportunity to discuss all of this with me and your fellow students as well as wrestle with your own thoughts about the ideas from the philosophers with writing assignments throughout the semester. Time to reawaken those ancient, philosophical questions: Who are you? What are you going to do about it?

REQUIRED TEXTS

Provided Readings in Class

RECOMMENDED TEXTS

Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails*. New York: Other Press, 2016.

Thomas R. Flynn, *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. Free eBook through TAMUSA Library: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tamsa/detail.action?docID=430845>

S.K. Keltner and Samuel J. Julian, “Existentialism.” In *Phenomenology: Responses and Developments*, edited by Leonard Lawlor. 43-66. Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2010. Free eArticle through TAMUSA Library: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tamsa/reader.action?docID=1169841&ppg=1210&c=UERG>

Gordon Marino, *The Existentialist’s Survival Guide: How to Live Authentically in an Inauthentic Age*. New York: Harper One, 2018.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. To discuss and define key themes and theories in Existentialism.
2. To apply the sensibility of existentialism to understand who we each are as human beings.
3. To assess critically and charitably the various perspectives that have developed this branch of philosophy.

COURSE WORK

The basis for your grade is as follows:

(1) Reading Quizzes	20%
(2) Journals	30%
(3) 2 Exams/2 Essays	50% (25% each)

1. Attendance/Reading Quizzes: Considering that we are reading philosophy, coming to class for lectures and discussion is paramount because often times the reading is difficult to understand. Often only through participation in class (i.e. listening, taking notes, asking questions, and talking during discussion) do the texts begin to make sense. **As an incentive to help you remember to come to class, take notes, and engage with the material, we will have an in class reading quiz at the end of every week throughout the semester. I will keep a running tally of your quiz points. You will have about 14 quizzes in order to earn this 20% of your total quiz grade. The maximum amount of points for quizzes will be 20 points. If you miss a quiz, I will only allow you to make up the quiz due to medical issues.** If you miss class, your responsibility is to acquire any information and notes that you may

have missed. Get these from your peers. Once you have acquired notes from class, I would be happy to discuss any questions that you may have about the information covered on that day.

2. Assignments:

a. JOURNALS

After each philosopher that we cover, you must submit a journal entry that answers all three of the following questions. You may write as much as you like on these, which means there is no limit to how much you can write, but each entry **must be at least 250 words**. This kind of writing is called exploratory or expressive writing that helps inspire wonder, inquiry, and curiosity in the topics of a course. Don't be afraid to ask questions and question answers from the course in this writing. For **each** assignment you must write:

- (1) What did you agree with this philosopher about and why?
- (2) What did you disagree with this philosopher about and why?
- (3) How has this section of the course changed the way you think about who you are?

Each journal answer must be answered fully according to the reading and lectures based on the following guidelines. Each entry will be worth 30 points (10 points for each of the three questions for each journal). You will submit these through the submission links on Blackboard in the Journal Folder. Here are the guidelines:

- Clearly answer all three questions.
- Any answer for an agreement or disagreement that says, "I did not agree with anything" or "I did not disagree with anything," will not count as an answer.
- Say why you agree or disagree. Any agreement or disagreement that is unclearly explained will not be counted.
- Engage with the material that we discuss in the lectures and in the readings.

Responding to something that you have Googled and we did not cover does not count.

b. EXAMS/ESSAYS

Option 1: Two in-person, handwritten essay exams. Each exam will consist of two to four questions, and you will need to answer two to three of the questions. The questions will concern major themes and ideas from the philosophers that we will be reading and discussing. You will have approximately one week to prepare outlines of your answers. You can use these outlines when you handwrite your exam in class. More instructions on these outlines will be given approximately one week before the exam.

Option 2: Two research papers with the following guidelines. **NB: You must speak to me ahead of time about your paper topic if you choose this option.**

(1) Research Project #1: A paper written for an audience interested in existentialism. The paper must be 8-12 pages and focus on a theme, topic, or figure from the first half of the course. This can be on a topic of your choosing that focuses on either one of the philosophers in the first half of the course, or it can be on two of the philosophers in the first half of the course. You can even write about one other figure not covered in the course as long as this external figure does not draw your paper too far afield of the major topic of the course. See the course schedule below for the due date.

(2) Research Project #2: A paper written for an audience interested in existentialism. The paper must be 8-12 pages and focus on a theme, topic, or figure from the first half of the course. You can include any of the figures in the course, but the main focus of the paper needs to be on at least one of the figures from the second half of the course. Again, you can write about one other figure not covered in the course as long as this external figure does not draw your paper too far afield of the major topic of the course. See the course schedule below for the due date.

GRADING

Your final grade will be determined based on the above requirements. Late assignments will not be accepted unless I tell you otherwise. Grade equivalents are as follows:

A 89.5-100
B 79.5-89.4
C 69.5-79.4
D 59.5-69.4
F 59.4-0

TENTATIVE COURSE SCHEDULE

Weeks	Sections, Themes, and Readings	Due Dates
Week 1	I. Course Introduction -Introductions -Syllabus -“How to Read Philosophy” (Blackboard)	
Weeks 2-7	II. Classical Existentialism -Kierkegaard, <i>The Concept of Anxiety</i> (selections) -Nietzsche, <i>The Genealogy of Morals</i> (selections)	SK Journal - 2/11 FN Journal - 3/2 MIDTERM 3/4

Weeks 9-13	III. Modern Existentialism -Beauvoir, <i>Ethics of Ambiguity</i> (selections) -Arendt, <i>The Human Condition</i> (selections)	SdB Journal - 4/1 HA Journal - 4/20
Weeks 14-15	IV. Later Existentialism -Anzaldúa, <i>La Luz en lo Oscuro Light in the Dark</i> (selections)	GA Journal - 5/4
Week 16		Final Exam: 5/11 2:00-3:50 PM

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE

A college philosophy class is a serious undertaking. Each one of you deserves a classroom environment that is most conducive for your learning. So make sure to use the restroom before class so that you minimize the disruptions of people leaving in the middle of class and attend the entire class each day. Additionally, cell phones must be turned off or turned to silent **and put away during class**. Come talk to me if this is an issue. The use of computers for taking notes is **not** allowed unless you have a DSS exception for the use of your computer for taking notes. You may drink an appropriate beverage in class, and if you need to eat something in class, choose something that is not disruptive. Do not begin preparing to leave class before the end of the class session. I will be keeping my eye on the clock.

ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT POLICY

Students at Texas A&M University-San Antonio are expected to adhere to the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity. Academic Dishonesty for which a student is subject to penalty includes cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, multiple submissions, misrepresentation of academic records, facilitating academic dishonesty, unfair advantage, and ethical misconduct. This includes holding other students to the same standards and reporting any incidents of alleged violation of the honesty policy to the instructor involved or, if necessary, to the appropriate academic department head. All students are responsible for being familiar with the Academic Dishonesty Policy, which may be found in the Texas A&M University-San Antonio Student Handbook. University policy prescribes serious consequences for acts of academic misconduct including, but not limited to, a grade of 'F' on the particular paper or assignment or a failing grade in the course. Also, a referral may be issued to the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities where the sanctions can vary up to possible expulsion from the University. Considering the potential consequences of academic misconduct, it is obviously in students' best interests to avoid even the appearance of such behavior. If you are ever unclear whether a

specific act might constitute academic misconduct, please contact your instructor for an assessment of the situation. All student term papers and other written assignments are subject to analysis by anti-plagiarism software.

AI STATEMENT FOR COURSE

For PHIL 3390, I assume that all work submitted by students will be generated by the students themselves from working individually or in groups. Students should not have another person/entity do the writing of any portion of an assignment for them, which includes hiring a person or a company to write assignments and/or using artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT. Use of any AI-generated content in this course qualifies as academic dishonesty and violates Texas A&M-San Antonio's standards of academic integrity.

DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES

Texas A&M University-San Antonio is committed to providing all students with reasonable access to learning opportunities and accommodations in accordance with The Americans with Disabilities Act, as amended, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. If you experience barriers to your education due to a disability or think you may have a disability, Disability Support Services is located in the Central Academic Building, Suite 210. You can also contact us via phone at (210) 784-1335, visit us <https://www.tamusa.edu/Disability-Support-Services/index.html> or email us at dss@tamusa.edu. Disabilities may include, but are not limited to, attentional, learning, mental health, sensory, physical, or chronic health conditions. All students are encouraged to discuss their disability-related needs with Disability Support Services as soon as possible.

COUNSELING RESOURCES

If you or someone you know is experiencing life stressors, emotional difficulties, or mental health concerns at Texas A&M University – San Antonio, please contact the Office of Student Counseling & Wellness Services (SC&WS) located in Modular C, Room 166 (Rear entrance) or call 210-784-1331 between the hours of 8:00AM and 5:00PM. All mental health services provided by SC&WS are free, confidential (as the law allows), and are not part of a student's academic or university record. SC&WS provides brief individual, couples, and group therapy, crisis intervention, consultation, case management, and prevention services. For more information, please visit www.tamusa.edu/studentcounseling. Any students interested in scheduling an appointment should call (210) 784-1331 Monday through Friday, 8:00AM – 5:00PM. After hours, please contact UPD at 911 or text "HOME" to 741-741 24/7/365 to connect with a trained crisis counselor. The National Suicide Prevention hotline also offers a 24/7/365 hotline at 1-800-273-8255.

COURSE EVALUATIONS

At the end of the semester, you will have the opportunity to complete an evaluation of the course and my teaching. This will be available online through Blackboard. I will inform you as to when you will be able to fill this out.