Existentialism
Fall 2010
Term Paper Essay
Due: Monday, December 13

Write a 7-10 page essay on any topic relevant to this course. You may develop further one of the previous short essay assignments or choose one of the following topics.

1. The Death of God.
   Explain how the “death of God” brings on a “crisis of modernity” that sets the agenda for Existentialism. Discuss how the philosophy of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre all can be said to be a response to this event. Evaluate to what extent this crisis of modernity is relevant today and also to what extent any of these thinkers offer a way out of this crisis.

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

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

4. Kierkegaard’s Leap of Faith
   What are the three “spheres of existence” Kierkegaard describes in his writings? What is the essential tension at the core of human existence which, according to Kierkegaard, cannot be resolved at the ethical level and thus requires a “leap” to the religious life? What are the three forms of despair that Kierkegaard explores in Sickness unto Death that lead to the necessity for this leap? What is it about this leap made by the knight of faith, as Kierkegaard describes it in Fear and Trembling, that no ballet dancer could do? Evaluate to what extent Kierkegaard’s thinking is an adequate response to the crisis of modernity.

5. Nietzsche’s Philosophers of the Future
   Explain Nietzsche’s challenge to the traditional conception of philosophy through the notions of the philosopher as artist, as lucid dreamer, and as seafarer. Explain how this conception of a “philosophy of the future” is perhaps the reason for Nietzsche’s cheerfulness in the wake of the “death of God.” To what extent is this an adequate response to the crisis of modernity?

6. Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra
   Explain and then reflect upon the three main ideas, the overhuman, the will to power, and the eternal recurrence, which Nietzsche introduces in Thus Spoke Zarathustra.
7. **Heidegger and the Question of Being.**
Explain why Heidegger thinks that the crisis of modernity can be traced back to a question that has been forgotten since the days of the ancient pre-Socratic philosophers. What is this question—what is the **ontological difference** between being and Being that has been overlooked in the history of metaphysics according to Heidegger? Why does Heidegger pursue this question in *Being and Time* with a phenomenological analysis of *Dasein* and, in particular, of Dasein’s everyday existence? What are the main features of this analysis and what are the implications for our understanding of ourselves and for our understanding of the world? Evaluate to what extent Heidegger’s thinking, especially his conception of authentic existence, is an adequate response to the crisis of modernity.

8. **Sartre’s Existentialism**
What does Sartre mean in “The Humanism of Existentialism” by the phrase “existence precedes essence” and why is this so, for Sartre, for human beings only? In *Being and Nothingness* what is Sartre saying when he describes consciousness as a meaning-giving activity? Why does he suggest that it is human consciousness that introduces the “not” or “nothingness” into experience? Why does Sartre suggest that “we are condemned to be free”? What does he mean, in *Being and Nothingness* when he suggests that “We have the war we deserve” and that “in a certain sense I choose being born”? What does Sartre mean by “bad faith” and why is it so difficult to avoid? Given this conception of human existence, in what sense could one live an authentic existence? Evaluate to what extent Sartre’s thinking is an adequate response to the crisis of modernity.

9. **Heidegger and Sartre**
Why does Heidegger distance himself from Sartre and Sartre’s conception of Existentialism? Sartre speaks of flight from anguish where Heidegger speaks of flight from anxiety. Sartre speaks of bad faith where Heidegger speaks of inauthenticity. What is the difference between the two thinkers in their thinking concerning human existence? Evaluate to what extent each of these thinkers provides an adequate response to the crisis of modernity.

10. **Camus and the Myth of Sisyphus**
Why does Camus say that “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide”? Is he correct? What does Camus mean by “absurdity”? Why is Sisyphus “the absurd hero” for Camus, and why does he say that we must imagine Sisyphus happy? How is this notion of the “absurd hero” brought out in Camus’ novels? How does Camus’ thinking connect with any of the other Existentialist philosophers?