

## Death, Freedom and the Search for Meaning:

### Introduction to Political Existentialism

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As you set out for Ithaka  
Hope your road is a long one,  
Full of adventure, full of understanding...  
C. P. Cavafy, *Ithaka*

What sets us apart, and brings us together, as humans – and what are the socio-political implications? Seeking understanding, this course is an odyssey onto the human condition and its politics, honing together a new theoretical-empirical lens: political existentialism. As a philosophy, existentialism examines mortal man's search for meaning in a meaningless universe. Most philosophers ask, "what is the good life?" and answer: to *feel* good, or to *be* good, or to *do* good. Existentialism asks, "what is life good *for*?" and is still searching for answers. A host of fascinating quandaries emerge from this quest: Are we truly different than animals and machines? What does it mean to "be yourself"? What's the difference between freedom and liberty? Should we pursue happiness? Why do we yield to fear and anxiety? What are the roles of reflection, truth and morality in our society and politics? Is God dead, but religion alive? Can we defeat alienation? Is love all we need? How much can, and should, we hope for?

In this highly interdisciplinary course we will address these, and then some more. We shall examine, one by one, a dozen themes, on both the individual/universal level and the socio-political plane: Human/nature, identity & authenticity, freedom, reflection, happiness, death & dread, meaning, morality, truth & trust, God & religion, alienation & love, and finally – hope.

#### ***Structure: Flipped Classroom & edX HOPE***

This graduate seminar is run as a flipped classroom: lectures are given online, while the weekly meeting is dedicated to group discussion and research workshop. Students will enroll in the edX online course HOPE (Human Odyssey to Political Existentialism), where they will watch, before each class, the pertinent lectures. HOPE was recently reviewed [all-time top online course](#), and best political science and philosophy course, worldwide, joined by thousands of learners from over 100 countries. It is fully accessible, including subtitles for all the lectures – in English, Arabic and Hebrew. Here's [a short clip](#) featuring a couple of seconds from all HOPE talks, and you can also view [the trailer](#), [the introduction](#), and [a brief animation](#) on the hierarchy of basic human needs. To enroll and view the full list of the forty-four lectures, see <https://tinyurl.com/hope44>.

#### ***Assignments***

**Participation:** The seminar requires continuous, active participation. Students are expected to come prepared to all classes, having watched the online lectures and read the required material, ready to engage with fellow

students on the weekly theme(s). In each meeting we will go, together, through some of the key questions and tasks, as presented in this syllabus and on edX HOPE.

**Reading:** Existentialism is (all?) about freedom as choice. And so, we have two types of required reading. One, quite typical: Before each class you will read one item (typically the length of an article) assigned to all students. The second reading is up to you: Before each class you will be choosing another piece on the pertinent topic, likely – but not necessarily – from the extended syllabus. It could also be a work of art. You will write a brief, one-page, reflection on that chosen reading, possibly integrating insights from the all-class reading. You will submit the reflection electronically, uploaded via Canvas, at least 24 hours before the class.

**Group Discussion:** depending on class size, one or two students will be choosing/chosen to lead a dedicated group discussion starting with the third meeting, until the penultimate session. The “discussion directors” will draw not only on their own reading, but also on their careful, critical, reading of the students’ reflections for the class.

**Seminar Paper:** Each student will write a seminar paper (~3000 words) submitted May 20 (TBD). The possible topics are endless. There is one simple guideline: explore a distinctively human feature and its socio-political role. It should concern a real-world phenomenon (contemporary or historical) by tapping into the lived experiences of the people you study – through the analyses of discourse, polls, behavior, and culture, including art. Beyond this, there are of course many important elements to writing a fine paper, but two are key: a good research question and feedback. In our course we will try to cultivate both, together.

A great research question is intelligible, interesting, important, innovative and inspiring (henceforth 5i). It should be *intelligible* not only to you, and your classmates, or even like-minded people, but to most, if not all, intelligent people. Many of the latter should deem it *interesting*, that is, presenting a real puzzle that is worth pursuing. A good research question does not have a readily available answer. It should also be *important* – going to the heart of a matter that matters; and that importance should be first and foremost to our understanding of the world, and then, to the scholarship. An *innovative* question raises a quandary that we didn’t know existed, or hardly paid attention to, sometimes casting fresh light on a familiar reality. Finally, a great research question is *inspiring*: it sparks the curiosity of others to pursue related puzzles, jointly contributing to a better understanding of the world – and to making it better.

No paper can be as good as it should if it grows in complete solitude. There is little mystery about it, but we often forget this simple fact: the more people review our work, and the more we pay attention to their words, the better our work become. Fortunately, a seminar group is exactly the setting that can help us embrace the critics of, and by, others, without being too embarrassed about it. We will create our own peer-review process, with one draft of the paper submitted to two fellow students, to receive their feedback before submitting the final version.

## ***Course Grade Breakdown***

Participation & Reflections: 25% + Discussion Direction: 15% +  
Peer-review Draft: 10% + Seminar paper: 50% = 100%  
(Maybe we'll think of a bonus too...)

## ***Overture***

Why breathe? Why breed? Why bleed? What's the point of living, and of making life? What's worth killing, and dying, for? Today's academia and media rarely ask these difficult, existential, questions, explaining people through past-bases causes, not future-driven reasons. We have, in the social sciences, many images of humans: the *homo biologicus*, impelled by evolutionary imperatives; *homo economicus*, motivated by material cost-benefit calculation; *homo sociologicus*, driven by identities; and *homo psychologicus*, propelled by emotions. But these are all traits we share with both animals and machines. What, then, sets us apart, and brings us together, as *humans* – wherein stands the *homo sapiens*? If we wish to live up to our titular “wisdom” (*sapience*), the time may be ripe for a new science to emerge, investigating that which is uniquely human. *Sapienology*, we might call it, and append it with *Sapienism*: a plea to recall, and live up to, our humanity, taking it as far and as free as it can possibly be.

In search of this hope, we embark on a journey, an odyssey into the human condition and its political implications. In the perilous roads ahead, we shall turn to existentialism for guidance – both philosophically and politically. With each of the dozen themes, we will discuss both the universal human condition – and its social political dimension. Both, we shall discover, can be elusive. Can we truly find distinctively human features, and trace their effects? Can we truly understand politics beyond the pursuit of power? If we're successful, we will learn something new about ourselves, and about how politics can help bring out not just the worst, but the best, in us. In the process we will offer a richer understanding of politics. We shall see, for example, that human politics is not only about “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” but about the awareness of death, a sense of choice, the search for meaning – the hallmarks of existentialism.

In philosophy, existentialism has been a black sheep. Historically, existentialism ascended after WWII, but then quickly subsided. If existentialism is a philosophy at all, it's mainly because it takes seriously the literal meaning of the term: “philosophy” – the love of wisdom. Political science too doesn't quite know what to make of existentialism, and has rarely paid any attention to it. After all, existentialism is not a coherent doctrine, its “ism” is a misfit, and it's certainly not an ideology. It's a wide and colorful quilt. The existentialists do not form a “school” or share any particular outlook on religion and politics. Kierkegaard was a pious Christian; Buber an Orthodox Jew; Nietzsche and Camus were atheists. Kierkegaard despised politics; Sartre was a Marxist; de Beauvoir a feminist; Camus, a humanitarian; Heidegger, a Nazi.

This certainly makes it hard to pin down existentialism, but its capacity to make such strange bedfellows also shows its vitality, and its potential relevance to many, perhaps most, people and their politics. Existentialism is not necessarily Western, and can speak to both Greenpeace activists and ISIS sympathizers.

And one thing more, one thing that makes existentialism both more alluring – and terrifying. Existentialism is dangerous. It isn't caught in the confines of a thought experiment; it is not merely about knowing what *is* or what *ought* to be, nor even about feeling it, through either our emotions or our bodies. It is all and more – it is about “phenomenology”: the actual lived experience, with all its many fears and feats. Existentialism instructs what it means to live humanly not through a manual but by tapping, deeply, into the lived experiences of others, and of ourselves. Camus, for one, once said that he “preached by example.” Here art becomes pivotal – an indispensable portal to that lived experience.

## **Reading & References**

(all-class requirement in \*)

### **Themed Bibliography**

#### **I. Human/Nature**

Are we truly different, let alone better, than non-humans? Are our notions of politics distinctly human, or ought political scientists just as well study packs of wolves? What can Darwin and Maslow teach us about human nature and its resonance in society and politics?

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Baumeister, Roy F. (2005) *The Cultural Animal: Human Nature, Meaning, and Social Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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Cacioppo, John T., and William Patrick (2008) *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*. 1st. ed. New York: Norton.

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Coward, Harold G. (2008) *The Perfectibility of Human Nature in Eastern and Western Thought*. Suny Series in Religious Studies. Albany: State University of New York Press.

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- Stevenson, Leslie Forster (1987) *Seven Theories of Human Nature*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, Edward O. (2004) *On Human Nature*. 25th anniversary ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

## **II. Identity & Authenticity:**

What is the Self, and does it emerge, or is it made? How did Freud see its layers? What are identity politics? What is the ancient and modern imperative of authenticity? How has the call for authenticity informed tribal and ethnic conflicts? Is there a way out?

- Abdelal, Rawi, Yoshiko M. Herrera, Alastair Iain Johnston, and Rose Mcdermott, eds. (2009). *Measuring Identity: A Guide for Social Scientists*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Appiah, Anthony (2005) *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ashmore, Richard D., Lee J. Jussim, and David Wilder, eds. (2001). *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
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### III. Freedom

What separates freedom from liberty? Are we always free? Why and how do we forget our freedom? What are the roles of reasoning and responsibility in freedom? What can Sartre and Fromm teach us about the politics of freedom and bad faith? What are the implications for liberalism?

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#### **IV. Reflection**

What is thinking? Does freedom require reflection? What motivates us to think? What drives us to suspend thinking? How does reflection affect nihilism and compliance? Can thinking prevent evil, personal and political? What did Arendt see as “the banality of evil”?

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Jaynes, Julian. 1990. *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

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Wilson, Timothy D., David A. Reinhard, Erin C. Westgate, Daniel T. Gilbert, Nicole Ellerbeck, Cheryl Hahn, Casey L. Brown, and Adi Shaked. 2014. "Just Think: The Challenges of the Disengaged Mind." 345 (6192):75-77.

#### **V. Happiness**

What is happiness, and what can Aristotle and Freud teach us about the types of happiness? What makes us happy? Why and how has the “pursuit of happiness” become a socio-political goal, and have we approached its attainment? What are the key paradoxes of happiness?

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## VI. Dread & Death

What is the evolutionary role of fear, and how does fear differ from anxiety and angst? How do we develop our sense of death, and how does it motivate us, privately and publicly? How do death awareness, fear of murder, willingness to kill, and suicide, figure in politics?

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## **VII. Meaning**

Why, when and how do we search for meaning in, and for, our lives? What can Camus and Frankl teach us about meaning-making? How does it turn, in politics, to legitimation? What are the relations between happiness, death, and the pursuit of meaning? Why breathe, breed and bleed?

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### **VIII. Truth & Trust**

What's between fact, fiction and fantasy? What are the key theories on the nature of truth? How does truth relate to trust? Why do politicians lie, and why do we accept this? What can Orwell and Havel teach us about the power of truth in politics? What is post-truth politics?

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## **IX. Morality**

What are the evolutionary roles of morality? What can Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Kohlberg teach us about the emergence, evolution and types of morality? How do conscience and moral dilemmas affect our private and public lives? What are the key modes of political legitimation?

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## **X. God & Religion**

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## **XI. Alienation & Love**

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## **XII. Hope**

Can we live without hope? Can we hope without freedom? Is hope utopian? What is the nexus between personal and public hope? What distinguishes ancient from modern cynicism? Can humans find hope between godlike vanity and doglike life? Do we hope too little, or too much?

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