

**Syllabus**  
**The Origins of Existentialism: The Problem of Nihilism**

In the wake of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century there took place radical changes in the ways of thinking about human beings and their place in the universe. The Enlightenment thinkers criticized religion as superstition, and as a result the Church suffered a great loss of authority in society. The rise of the natural sciences precipitated this development by presenting a new secular world-view. However, the new view of the sciences seemed to present a picture of human life as profoundly insignificant in the universe. This seemingly cold picture made people ask what the meaning of life could be in the vastness of time and space. The result of this was the idea of nihilism that suggested that human life was ultimately meaningless—a view that a strict scientific view seemed to demand.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century several philosophers, novelists, poets, playwrights and religious thinkers tried to address this issue. The problem was how to understand human existence as meaningful without reverting to superstition or, put differently, how to reconcile the idea of meaning in human life with the scientific world-view. This set of issues laid the foundation for the movement that would become known as existentialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In this course we will examine different responses to the trend of nihilism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We will treat, among others, the following questions: Are there any absolute values or truths? Are humans immortal? What is the connection between immortality and meaning? What is the proper disposition towards death? What is the meaning of human existence? Is life worth living? Is there a transcendent meaning in the universe? How did this set of issues influence later existentialism? The course is interdisciplinary and contains readings that are relevant for philosophy, literature and religion.

**Instructor: Jon Stewart**

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**Office Hours**

By appointment.

**Course Requirements and Evaluation**

The course assessment will consist of the following:

30% Short term paper

60% Long term paper

7% Class participation

3% Attendance

All of the written work must be completed in order to pass the class.

**Participation**

The course consists primarily of readings and in-class discussion. The readings build on one another, and so it is imperative to keep up with them. The class discussion will be dedicated to coming to a better understanding of the texts. For this reason attendance is mandatory. The number of allowed absences will be noted in accordance with BISLA's rules. If you have several absences, this must be cleared with the Undergraduate Studies Coordinator, Dr. Dagmar Kusá.

## Computer and Cell Phone Policy

You may use your computers and tablets in class to take notes or to read the text, but during the class period it is not permitted to use WiFi or to access the internet. Please turn off your cell phones during class. No surfing or texting during class is permitted.

## Texts

*The Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003.

Schiller [1795]: “The Vailed Image at Sais,” in *The Poems and Ballads of Schiller*, trans. by Sir. Edward Bulwer Lytton, Bart., New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell and Co. 1880, pp. 88-91.

Jean Paul [1796-97]: *Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces; Or, The Wedded Life, Death, and Marriage of Firmian Stanislaus Siebenkæs*, trans. by Alexander Ewing, London: George Bell and Sons 1897.

Jean Paul [1797], *The Campaner Thal and Other Writings*, Boston: Ticknor and Fields 1864.

Schopenhauer [1819], *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. by E.F.J. Payne, New York: Dover 1969.

Schopenhauer [1844], *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, trans. by E.F.J. Payne, New York: Dover 1969.

Schopenhauer [1851], *Parerga and Paralipomena*, vol. 2, trans. by E.F.J. Payne, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1974.

Møller [1837], *Poul Martin Møller’s “Thoughts on the Possibility of Proofs of Human Immortality” and Other Texts*, ed. and trans. by Jon Stewart and Finn Gredal Jensen, Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum 2021 (*Texts from Golden Age Denmark*, vol. 8).

Kierkegaard [1843], *Either/Or*, Part 1, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1987.

Kierkegaard [1845], *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993.

Kropotkin [1899], *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, vols. 1-2, London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1899.

Turgenev [1862], *Fathers and Sons*, trans. by Constance Garnett, New York: Random House 1950.

Nietzsche [1901], *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage 1967.

## Course Schedule

Date	Topic	Reading
Feb 19	Ecclesiastes 1:1-18 Schiller, “The Vailed Image at Sais” Jean Paul, “The Dead Christ Proclaims that there is no God” from <i>Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces</i>	pp. 646-647 pp. 88-91 pp. 259-265
Feb 26	Jean Paul, <i>The Campaner Thal</i> , Introduction, 501 <sup>st</sup> and 503 <sup>rd</sup> Stations	pp. 3-16, pp. 25-31
Mar 5	Jean Paul, <i>The Campaner Thal</i> , 506 <sup>th</sup> and 507 <sup>th</sup> Stations	pp. 40-69
Mar 12	Schopenhauer, <i>The World as Will and Representation</i> , vol. 1, § 56-59	pp. 307-326
Mar 19	Schopenhauer, <i>The World as Will and Representation</i> , vol. 2, Chapter 46	pp. 573-588
Mar 26	Schopenhauer, <i>Parerga and Paralipomena</i> , vol. 2, § 134-145	pp. 267-286
Apr 2	<b>no class: reading week</b>	
Apr 9	Schopenhauer, <i>Parerga and Paralipomena</i> , vol. 2, § 146-156a <b>First term paper due</b>	pp. 286-305

Apr 16	Møller, "Thoughts on the Possibility of Proofs of Human Immortality," I, VI	pp. 63-66, pp. 104-122
Apr 23	Kierkegaard, "Diapsalmata," <i>Either/Or</i> , Part 1	pp. 19-43
Apr 30	Kierkegaard, "At a Graveside," <i>Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions</i>	pp. 71-90, pp. 96-102
May 7	Kropotkin, <i>Memoirs of a Revolutionist</i> , vol. 2, XII Turgenev, <i>Fathers and Sons</i> , IV-VI	pp. 83-91 pp. 14-30
May 14	Turgenev, <i>Fathers and Sons</i> , IX-X	pp. 45-63
May 21	Nietzsche, <i>The Will to Power</i> , § 1-22	pp. 7-17
May 28	Nietzsche, <i>The Will to Power</i> , § 570-586 <b>Second term paper due</b>	pp. 307-322