

1000-E26;The Making of the Modern Self: Existential Philosophy S

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Fall Semester 2026

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Course Content:

This course traces the development of the conception of authentic existence in the works of thinkers from the Existentialist tradition such as Simone de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Copenhagen's own Søren Kierkegaard. Among other things, we will focus on human experiences of anxiety, despair and self-deception as well as freedom and recognition. Moreover, we will observe how ethical thinking has moved from the language of duty to that of personal answerability, and how the search for meaningful personal existence has increasingly become the responsibility of the individual. The unique vocabulary of these authors appears not only in works of philosophy, theology, and psychology, but also literature and theatre, which

illustrates that we understand ourselves via the stories we tell, and that these narratives are necessarily told in dialogue with “the Other,” our fellow human beings.

Learning objectives

To be able to:

- Account for the key concepts of the existential philosophers presented in the course, and reflect on the manner in which these concepts are at stake in our contemporary way thinking about and understanding ourselves.
- Based on the assigned texts, identify and consider the different ways in which ethics relates to selfhood, freedom and responsibility.
- Reflect independently and critically on the claims and arguments in the syllabus texts that we have explored.

Course Instructor:

Cæcilie Varslev-Pedersen, PhD, Teaching Associate Professor of Ethics and Philosophy of Religion, University of Copenhagen. Email: cvp@teol.ku.dk

Class Meetings:

Thursdays 12:15-14:30, room 7C.1.05 (NB. First day of class will be August 20).

Language of instruction and discussion:

English. (Final papers, however, may also be written in Danish, Swedish, or Norwegian).

Credit:

15 ECTS credits

Expectations of the students:

The students are expected to have prepared themselves carefully for each class, that is, to have done the required reading and to think about issues, problems, and questions to be discussed in class. Moreover, the students are expected to engage in the discussions as well as the group work.

Requirements for DIS-students:

For undergraduate students (bachelor students):

Active attendance (at least attendance in 75% of the sessions; attendance will be recorded for each session). The syllabus volume and content are determined by the instructor, and two papers of each 4-5 pages are to be submitted to the instructor. In addition, a final major assignment, which has a size of 19,200-24,000 characters, is due at the end of the course.

Requirements for KU-students (both Danish students and exchange students):

For undergraduate students (bachelor students):

Active attendance (at least attendance in 75% of the sessions; attendance will be recorded for each session). A final major assignment of 24.000-28.800 characters is due at the end of the course. The assignments is assessed by the instructor and graded on the 7-point scale.

For graduate students (kandidat/master students):

Active attendance (at least attendance in 75% of the sessions; attendance will be recorded for each session). A final paper of 36.000-48-000 characters is due at the end of the course. The assignments is assessed by the instructor and graded on the 7-point scale.

Course Evaluation for DIS students:

https://absalon.instructure.com/courses/%24CANVAS COURSE REFERENCE%24/file_ref/gc091475ddcwrap=1 Final paper: 45%

First short paper: 20%

https://absalon.instructure.com/courses/%24CANVAS COURSE REFERENCE%24/file_ref/gc091475ddcwrap=1

Second short paper: 20%

Attendance and participation: 15%

Course Evaluation for KU-students (both Danish students and Exchange students):

Final paper: 100%

Plagiarism Policy:

In accordance with UCPH rules for academic integrity, there is no tolerance towards cheating and plagiarism. The submission of any paper, which is not your own work, will result in an automatic fail and may have severe consequences for your future studies

Recording Policy:

Recording of the classes is prohibited without the consent of all parties involved (i.e., all students and the professor).

Readings:

Completion of reading assignments is required and is a prerequisite for participating in class discussions. You also need to consider the discussion questions for each week's readings.

For students who read Danish: Kierkegaards samlede værker, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (SKS), is available online at www.sks.dk  (<http://www.sks.dk/>). I have provided references to SKS for the Kierkegaard readings (e.g., Danish: SKS 4, 148-151) in the reading plan. (Note: To see page breaks, tick the middle box, next to SKS, on the top left-hand side of the screen).

Course texts:

https://absalon.instructure.com/courses/%24CANVAS COURSE REFERENCE%24/file_ref/gc091475ddcwrap=1

These books should be purchased (For KU students) They should be available in Academic Books on campus very soon, but you may have to get The Concept of Anxiety, which we are reading in session II, from elsewhere if it hasn't yet arrived:

1) Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) ISBN 0-8065-0160-X
https://absalon.instructure.com/courses/%24CANVAS COURSE REFERENCE%24/file_ref/gc091475ddcwrap=1

2) Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) ISBN 978-1-63149-004-0
https://absalon.instructure.com/courses/%24CANVAS COURSE REFERENCE%24/file_ref/gc091475ddcwrap=1

3) Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit* (1944) ISBN 978-0-67972-516-9
https://absalon.instructure.com/courses/%24CANVAS COURSE REFERENCE%24/file_ref/gc091475ddcwrap=1

Primary texts on Absalon (under [Moduls](#)
<https://absalon.instructure.com/courses/92799/modules/572500>):

Hannah Arendt, selections from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963)
https://absalon.instructure.com/courses/%24CANVAS COURSE REFERENCE%24/file_ref/gc091475ddc

[wrap=1](#)).

Hannah Arendt, "What is Existential Philosophy" (1946) & "French Existentialism" (1946) from *Essays in Understanding*

Jean-Paul Sartre, selections from *Being and Nothingness* (1943)

Background material (optional and additional reading)

Arne Grøn, *The Concept of Anxiety in Søren Kierkegaard*, Mercer University Press, 2008.

David Detmer, *Sartre Explained*, Chicago: Open Court, 2008. [Sartre Explained : From Bad Faith to Authenticity: EBSCOhost](https://web-p-ebshost-com.ep.fjernadgang.kb.dk/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=8ea35448-8e5f-457d-a29f-291148aeb418%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRI#AN=479366&db=nlebk)  (<https://web-p-ebshost-com.ep.fjernadgang.kb.dk/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=8ea35448-8e5f-457d-a29f-291148aeb418%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRI#AN=479366&db=nlebk>)

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1945) ISBN 978-0-300-11546-8

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▼ SESSION 1: Introduction: Rediscovering Existential Philosophy



Required reading



Arendt, "What is Existential Philosophy" & "French Existentialism" (pp. 163-193)



	Arendt, Thinking Moral Considerations 1984 (read: pp. 31-32).pdf			
	Reading Questions.pdf			
Optional reading				
	What Remains The Language Remains A Conversation with Arendt.pdf			
	Zahavi, Phenomenology of Self.pdf			
	Peter Seeberg, The Patient (1968).pdf			
Power Point				
	Session 1 - Rediscovering existential philosophy ES 2024.pptx			
	Session 1 - Rediscovering existential philosophy E26.pptx			

	▼ SESSION 2: Kierkegaard: Anxiety in Eden and Freedom's Possibility			
	Kierkegaard Concept of Anxiety, pp. 50-63, for Session II.pdf			
Required reading				

Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety, chapter 1, sections 5-6,
pp. 50-63 (Danish: SKS 4, 347-356)



Sickness unto Death, § A.pdf



Arne Grøn, "The Human Synthesis" from Thinking with
Kierkegaard (pp. 37-43)



Reading Questions



Optional reading



Anxiety as the Origin of Freedom and Responsibility -
Obsieger.pdf



Power Point



MMS Session 2 - Kierkegaard and anxiety ES 2025.pptx



MMS Session 2 - Kierkegaard and Anxiety Fall 2026.pptx



▼ SESSION 3: Kierkegaard: Anxiety for Evil and Anxiety for Goodness



Required reading



Concept of Anxiety 134-156.pdf



Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety, pp. 134-156 (Danish: SKS 4, 413-430)



Reading Questions-2



Optional reading



Brian Söderquist, "Kierkegaard and Existentialism".pdf



Supplementary readings



Power Point



MMS Session 3 ES 2025.pptx



First short paper (hand out)



MMS Session 3 Fall 2026.pptx



▼ SESSION 4: Kierkegaard: Ethics of Vision



Required reading



Kierkegaard, "Our Duty to Love the People We See" from Works of Love (pp. 154-174)



	Reading Questions-5			
Optional reading				
	Arne Grøn, "Ethics of Vision" from Thinking with Kierkegaard (pp. 405-417)			
Power Point				
	Sesssion 4 - Kierkegaard Ethics of Vision ES 2025.pptx			

	▼ SESSION 5: Sartre: Anguish (i.e., “anxiety”)	✓ ▼	+
Required reading		✓	
	Sartre, Being and Nothingness (pp. 53-57, 59-69)	✓	
	David Detmer, “Anguish” from Sartre Explained (pp. 71-75)	✓	
	Reading Questions-3	✓	S
Optional reading		✓	
	David Detmer, "Phenomenology" from Sartre Explained (pp. 17-34)	✓	S

Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism.

		✓	⋮
Power Point		✓	⋮
 Session 5 - Sartre Anguish ES 2025.pptx		S	⋮

▼ SESSION 6: Sartre: Bad Faith	✓ ▼	+ ⋮
Sartre, Being and Nothingness (pp. 70-72, 78-85)	✓	⋮
David Detmer, "Bad Faith" from Sartre Explained (pp. 75-89)	✓	⋮
Reading Questions-4	✓	S ⋮
Optional reading	✓	⋮
Bad Faith in Sartres Waiter Example - Phillips1981.pdf	✓	S ⋮
Brian Söderquist, "Kierkegaard and Existentialism".pdf	✓	S ⋮
Power Point	✓	⋮
MMS Session 6 ES 2025.pptx	⊘	S ⋮



▼ SESSION 7: Sartre: The Look of the Other



Required reading



Sartre, Being and Nothingness (pp. 276-289)



Søren Overgaard, "The Look," from Key Concepts (pp.106-116)



Reading Questions-7



Optional reading



Brian Söderquist, "Is Hell the Other" (pp.501-525)



Power Point



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▼ SESSION 8: Sartre: The Other is Hell



Required reading



Sartre, No Exit



	Reading Questions-8			
Optional reading				
	David Detmer, "No Exit" from Sartre Explained (pp. 143-157)			
	Sartre, "Interview on No Exit"			
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	 SESSION 9: De Beauvoir: Tragic Ambiguity	 		
				
Required reading				
Sartre, Being and Nothingness (pp. 62-63) (recap)				
Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, chap. 1 "Ambiguity and Freedom" (pp. 5-35)				
	Reading Questions-9			
Optional reading				
Beauvoir's Place in Philosophical Thought - Andrew.pdf				



Power Point



MS Session 9 ES 2025.pptx



▼ SESSION 10: Beauvoir: Personal Freedom and Responsibility



Required reading



Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, chap. 2, "Personal Freedom and Others" (pp. 37-78) and chap. 3, section 2, "Freedom and Liberation" (pp. 84-90).



Reading Questions-10



Optional reading



Mussett, "Simone de Beauvoirs Ethics" (pp. 63-70)



Power Point



MS Session 10 ES 2025.pptx



▼ SESSION 11: Arendt: A Serious Man Following Orders		✓ ▼
		+ ⋮
Required reading		✓ ⋮
📎 Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem (pp. 21-35, 48-55, 135-138, 276-279)		✓ ⋮
📄 Reading Questions-11		✓ S ⋮
Optional reading		✓ ⋮
📎 Arendt, "Some-Questions-of-Moral-Philosophy"		✓ S ⋮
📎 Rossatti, "Kierkegaard, Hannah Arendt and the Advent of the "Hollow Men" or towards a Kierkegaardian Reading of Eichmann in Jerusalem" (pp. 301-328)		✓ ⋮
Power Point		✓ ⋮
📎 MS Session 11 ES 2025.pptx		⊘ S ⋮

⋮ ▼ Final paper		✓ ▼
		+ ⋮
📄 Final paper 11. Dec 2025 0 point		⊘ S ⋮

▼ Content and ressources for your course		✓▼ + ⋮
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