

ELON UNIVERSITY

Spring 2018

# ***HOW SHOULD WE LIVE?***

## **EXISTENTIALISM EDITION**

Dr. Ryan J. Johnson

T/Th: 10:30-12:10pm or 12:10-2:05pm

Spence 201



Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*

### **Course Content**

Being *and* existence – two concepts that seem nearly synonymous. In this class, however, they are opposites: being *v.* existence or being *as opposed to* existence. We have just considered some ways in which they are different, and we can now add some more details. Let's compare: Being is universal, existence singular. Being is mediated, existence immediate. Being is shared, existence unique. Being is the broadest category, existence the narrowest category. Being is the most general, existence the most specific. Being says "all", existence "this." Most importantly for us, *being is about "the we"; existence is about "living."* In order to consider how we should live, we must first recognize that the *we* and *a life* are opposed, an opposition that creates an intolerable tension. Rather than try to resolve this tension, however, we situate our class investigation directly on this tension. In a sense, the class is the articulation of this tension between being and existence, between the *we* and *a life*. This is why we say that being is about thinking, existence action. Being is only thinkable, existence only actionable. In short, existence cannot be thought; it must be done. Put differently, being is something we think, existence something I do. Being can only be thought because it is *so* general. As the most general concept, it never appears in our world, for being cannot exist. It cannot exist because it never *is*. It never *is* because something *is* always *somewhere*, *somewhen*, *somehow*. Something that *is*, that *exists*, is always in a particular place (a *where*), at a particular time (a *when*), a particular effect of a particular

cause (a *how*). Existence is always situated; being never is. Since being never is some place, time, or effect, it is, in a way, the furthest from our lives. Closest to our lives is existence.

To see what I mean, consider the etymology of the English word ‘*existence*.’ It comes from the Latin *existentia*, and from the verb *existere*, which means “to step out, to come forth,” and is a combination of the prefix *ex* + *sistere*. *Ex* means “out of, forth, from, and *sistere* means “to be placed,” as when you put your keys in a place or when an army is placed in battle. Further back, *sistere* comes from the Proto-Indo-European root *sta*, meaning “to stand,” as when one stands trial in a court in order for charges to be brought against her. To exist thus means “to stand out.” We could understand this in the sense of “standing out” from the utter sameness of being. Think of the feeling of being lost in a crowd. Have you ever been in a place where you feel completely disoriented, without any sense of direction or any way to figure out which way to go, but then a familiar face stands out from the crowd and the world suddenly becomes meaningful again? For a silly example, think when you find Waldo in one of those *Where’s Waldo?* books. Or we can understand this sense of “standing out” as standing *outside*, alone and *apart from*, rather than a *part of*, the crowd. Existence is break with the whole. My point is this: *We can only encounter existence*, in a distinct place and time in the world, in a definite historical situation. This class is designed to provoke various existential encounters over the course of the semester. Our class aim is to highlight those times when the weight of existence stops you in your normal mode of being in the world, when the silent scream coming from the meaningless void on which our lives rest ripples through our understanding of how we do and how we should live, when the unthinkable force of existence whips through you like a the chill of a ghost. Existence is ghastly, after all.

Here is the challenge of existentialism: existence is unthinkable. Whenever we try to think *this, here, now*, we end up not with what *is* but with what *is not*. Existence slips away the more we try to think it. So, we much approach it through living. Since we cannot *think* existence, existentialism is not a doctrine, which means it is also not a theory, a dogma, or a school of philosophy. Existentialism is thus a way of acting or living in the world. Less a philosophical system, more a philosophical orientation. Existentialism is oriented by a series of unanswerable questions: How can we be free in a deterministic world? Are we really free if we are condemned to be free? Is meaning possible in a senseless world? Is there sense in the absurdity of existence? If there is no god or transcendent origin, is it possible to live well? Can we feel connected in a meaningless cosmos? Above all, existentialism is oriented by our class question: How should we live?

## Texts

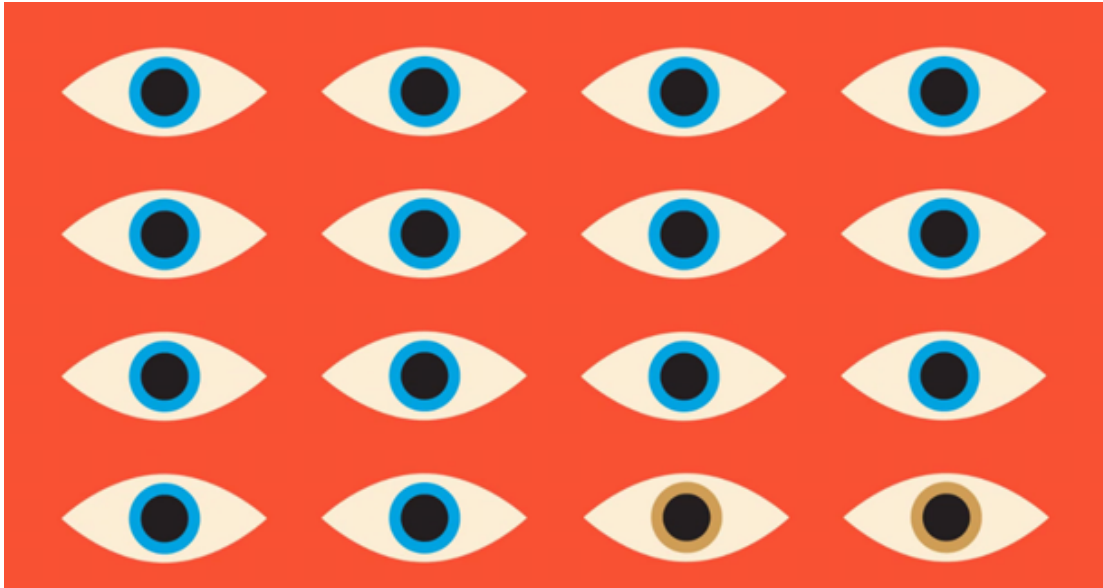
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on The Prejudices of Morality* (Cambridge UP, 1997)

Benjamin Fondane, *Existential Monday: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Bruce Baugh (NYRB Classics, 2016)

Eastern Existentialism TBD

Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Fretchman (Open Road, 2015)

Lewis Gordon, *Existentialia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (Routledge, 2000)



Peter Mendelsund's cover image for Kafka's *The Trial*

## Verifications of Learning

### *Existential Ruminations*

You should do a new rumination for each class day that we discuss a new reading. Let's make sure this is clear: if you are asked to read something for Tuesday, then you should do the reading and the journal entry before class. These entries will structure class discussions, so you must bring hard copies to each class. Each entry should be a minimum of 302 words, and should follow this format:

- (1) *Select a passage*
  - a. While reading our texts, try to remain sensitive to those passage in the readings that *speak to you*, that *grab you*, that *provoke a movement in your*. Mark these passages in the text (with a highlighter, pen or pencil, etc.) Please write directly onto the page of the text. After finishing the whole reading, you should copy down the most thought-provoking passage into your journal, including a citation from the text. Please note the page number.
- (2) *Ruminate on the passage*
  - a. Then "ruminate" on this passage. Etymologically, to 'ruminate' means "to chew the cud." Cud is a portion of food that returns from the chewers stomach to the mouth in order to be chewed a second time. Like chewing on a cud, I ask you to "chew" on a passage until it becomes soft enough for you to mold it into various sophisticated concepts and ideas. Write down this process of "chewing on" the passage that struck you. Follow the movements of your thoughts as they changed and slowly became part of your body (just as chewing and eating turns things that are not-you into you).
- (3) *Existential question*
  - a. Each rumination must conclude with one penetrating existential question that arises directly from your reading of the text. One question could have more parts, though it need not. The goal is for us to formulate a semester's worth of questions about our existence in the world. These questions are important for our in-class discussions.

EXCUSED JOURNALS: you are *excused from doing three* journal entries. College is tricky. We all have lives that pull us in a millions directions at unexpected times. I get this. I thus say this now: you can just skip three journal entries. No questions asked. (200 points or 20% of grade)

### 3 Concept Analyses (3-page papers)

Over the course of the semester you will submit three essays in which you analyze three concepts that arise during our readings. The three concepts you choose will be the concepts that you think are the most important in existentialism. These can be very close analyses or grand syntheses across texts and media, but the focus should be incredibly sharp and focused. To start, select one concept; seriously, only *one*! This single existentialist concept will remain your focus in your analysis. The goal is to show me how deeply, firmly, and creatively you grasp this one concept. I want you to impress me with your thinking. Show me that you not only understand *what* the concept means for one of these existentialist thinkers, but also *why* they think it, *why* it is a convincing or important concept. Again, do not just repeat what they say. Dig into the concept, test it out, take out a hammer and smack it to let it ring out. Consider what is contained in the concept, that is, the other concepts composing this one concept, and consider what is implied by this concept. You can turn them in at anytime, though the first one must be submitted before March 8<sup>th</sup>, the second before April 17<sup>th</sup>, and the third before May 8<sup>th</sup>. You can engage any or all of the texts we cover, though you must engage three different ones over the course of the semester. (200 points per project, totaling 600 point or 60% of grade)

### Final Exam: Existentialist Café

TBD (75 points)

### Walking Existentialism

Most college classes share one basic assumption: *learning is done while sitting down*. In almost every class, the actual bodily comportment of student's is predetermined. This seems like a great oversight, especially when we recall that teaching, in ancient Greek and Roman worlds, often occurred while walking. So, at some point this semester, Ryan J. or Ryan K. will walk with pairs of you. After you choose a walking partner, three of you (or us) will set a date and time when we will walk. The goal: to set thinking to the rhythm of walking. During our walks, we will discuss the class, and you will offer *self-evaluations*. The grade for this part of the exam will be determined by how much thought and effort you will have put into your performance during the exam, as well as the degree of consistent consideration of the overarching class. (25 points)

### Participation and attendance

I will be very clear: *in order to pass this class, you must participate regularly, enthusiastically, and respectfully*. Philosophy demands continuous engagement, and this is why I put so much emphasis on participation and attendance. Earnest and direct engagement with this class is essential. If you are not participating, you are not doing philosophy. Also, *you must bring the correct book to every class*. For every day you do not bring the book, in the edition listed on this syllabus, you will be deducted points. You *must* have the paper edition of the text. No computers or e-readers permitted. Real, paper books are wonderful. Enjoy them! Also, they are cheap. Buy them early and always bring them to class. While I will not take attendance every day, excessive absences will result in a lowering of a student's grade. Missing class means missing class discussions, and discussions are essential to the cultivation of community. You should also be on time to class. Tardiness is rude to us all, and is therefore unacceptable. While unexpected things do happen, if you are late to class regularly, you will be deducted participation points. Then there is the question of phones and texting. I know my thoughts on this, but I want to hear yours. I ask you: *What is the appropriate phone-use policy?* Finally, if you miss a graded assignment due to a legitimate reason, you *must* have an official document (Dr.'s note, funeral program, AAA receipt, call from Obama, etc.) justifying this absence. Without such a document, you will *not* be permitted to make-up the missed assignment. (100 points or 10% of grade)

**Grade distribution and calculation table:** The total possible points for this class is *1000 points*.

<i>Assignment</i>	<i>Possible Points</i>	<i>Your points</i>
Project I	200	
Project II	200	
Project III	200	
Journal	150	
Existential Walk	50	
Existential Café	100	
Participation	100	
<i>Total</i>	<i>1000</i>	

*Grade Scale :* A = 92% to 100%    A- = 90% to 91%  
 B+ = 88% to 89%    B = 82% to 87%    B- = 80% to 81%  
 C+ = 78% to 79%    C = 72% to 77%    C- = 70% to 71%  
 D+ = 68% to 69%    D = 60% to 67%

*Take your professor to lunch!* You are invited to take your professor to lunch (at Colonnades, Lakeside, or McEwan) for free (it is an Elon program). Anytime you want to join you and friends for lunch, let me know. I would love to engage in the practice of eating with you and learn more about each of you.

## Class Schedule

Jan. 30      What is Existentialism?

*Classical:* Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*

Feb. 1      pp. 1-28 (theory)  
 Feb. 6      pp. 38-55 (theory)  
 Feb. 8      pp. 59-94 (theory)  
 Feb. 13     pp. 97-129 & *Exercise:*  
 Feb. 15     pp. 133-155 (theory)  
 Feb. 20     pp. 155-177 & *Practice:*

*Modern:* Benjamin Fondane, *Existential Monday*

Feb. 22     “Existential Monday and the Sunday of History” (theory)  
 Feb. 27     “Preface for the Present Moment” (theory)  
 Mar. 1      *Exercise:* Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows  
 Mar. 6      “Man Before History, or, The Sound and the Fury” (theory)  
 Mar. 8      “Boredom” & *Practice:* Annotated Transcripts

*Eastern:* TBA

Mar. 13     (theory)  
 Mar. 15     *Exercise:* Silent debate  
 Mar. 20 & 22    SPRING BREAK  
 Mar. 27     (theory) Ryan J. absent  
 Mar. 29     (theory) Ryan J. absent

*Feminist:* Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

Apr. 3      “Ambiguity and Freedom (theory)  
 Apr. 5      “Personal Freedom and Others” (theory)  
 Apr. 10     “The Aesthetic Attitude” & *Exercise:*  
 Apr. 12     “Freedom and Liberation” & “The Antinomies of Action” (theory)  
 Apr. 17     “The Present and the Future,” “Ambiguity” & *Practice:*

*Africana:* Lewis Gordon, *Existential Africana*

Apr. 19     “Africana Philosophy of Existence” (theory)  
 Apr. 24     “A Problem of Biography in Africana Thought” (theory)  
 Apr. 26     “Frederick Douglass as an Existentialist: (theory)  
 May 1      “What does it mean to be a Problem?” & *Exercise:* 3 Portraits  
 May 3      “Mixed Race in Light of Whiteness and Shadows of Blackness” (theory)



#### University Policies and Resources

##### Elon Honor Code

Elon's honor pledge calls for a commitment to Elon's shared values of Honesty, Integrity, Respect and Responsibility. To be clear about what constitutes violations of these values; students should be familiar with code of conduct policies in the student handbook, including violations outlined at <http://www.elon.edu/e-web/students/handbook/violations/default.xhtml>. Students with questions about the specific interpretation of these values and violations as they relate to this course should contact me immediately. Violations in academic-related areas will be documented in an incident report which will be maintained in the Office of Student Conduct, and may result in a lowering of the course grade and/or failure of the course with an Honor Code F. (In fact, my policy is that any violation of the honor code results in an immediate grade of "F" for the course, RJ.) Violations specifically covered by academic honor code policies include: plagiarism, cheating, lying, stealing and the facilitation of another's dishonesty. Multiple violations will normally result in a student's temporary suspension from the University.

##### Elon Disabilities Services

If you are a student with a documented disability who will require accommodations in this course, please register with Disabilities Services in the Duke Building, Room 108 (278-6500), for assistance in developing a plan to address your academic needs. For more information about Disabilities Services, please visit the website [http://www.elon.edu/e-web/academics/support/disabilities\\_services.xhtml](http://www.elon.edu/e-web/academics/support/disabilities_services.xhtml).

##### Elon Writing Center

Elon's Writing Center in the Center for Writing Excellence is staffed by trained peer-consultants who can help you with all of your writing projects (for any class or major and for any extracurricular, personal, or professional purposes), so take advantage of this excellent academic resource and include a visit to our Writing Center as part of your own writing process. In one-on-one, 45 minute sessions, our consultants will work with you on any kind of writing (such as research or analysis papers, PowerPoint or poster presentations, resumes, or job applications) at any stage of the writing process (such as understanding an assignment; brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing; developing a research question or starting your research; or writing in-text citations and bibliographies/works cited). We have two multimedia production studios so you can create and work with a consultant on your multimedia and visual texts (such as PowerPoint or Prezi presentations, videos, or websites). Visit our presentation practice room where you can easily record and critique yourself giving a presentation and get feedback from a consultant on your accompanying visuals. The main Writing Center, located in Belk Library, is open extensive hours: M-Th: 10am-10pm; Fri: 10am-4pm; Sun: 2pm-10pm. The Writing Center also staffs satellite



Writing Centers in CREDE and in the Business School. If you have questions, please contact The Writing Center Director, Dr. Paula Rosinski at [prosinski@elon.edu](mailto:prosinski@elon.edu) or X5842. (<http://www.elon.edu/writingcenter>)

### *Religious Holidays Policies*

In supporting religious diversity, Elon has a policy and procedures for students who wish to observe religious holidays that are in conflict with the academic calendar, allowing students an excused absence. Students who wish to observe a holiday during the semester must complete the online Religious Observance Notification Form (RONF), available at the following website within the first two weeks of the semester. [http://www.elon.edu/e-web/students/religious\\_life/ReligiousHolidays.xhtml](http://www.elon.edu/e-web/students/religious_life/ReligiousHolidays.xhtml). This policy does not apply during the final examination period. Students are required to make prior arrangements with the instructor for completion of any work missed during the absence. Once the completed RONF is received, the Truitt Center will confirm the excused absence with notification to the instructor and the appropriate academic dean, along with a copy to the student. Students may contact the Truitt Center staff with any questions (336-278-7729).

### *Student Options Related to Enrollment in Your Course*

Enrollment: Students should confirm their enrollment in this course through their On-Track account. Students who do not appear on the course roll or do not show the correct course/section listed on On-Track should consult with their instructor immediately.

#### Policies on Dropping or Withdrawing from this Course

- Students may drop a course during the designated drop/add period through their On-Track account. A course that is dropped during the designated drop/add period will not appear on the student's transcript or grade report.
- After the designated drop/add period, students may withdraw from a course without penalty through the first half of the semester, following dates published in the academic calendar. Withdrawing from a course during this period will result in a mark of "W" that will appear on the student's academic transcript. Students may withdraw by using the online process located at <http://www.elon.edu/e-web/administration/registrar/DropAddClassesOnline.xhtml>

NOTE: Students should not assume that they will be officially withdrawn from a course based on their failing to attend class or their notifying a faculty member of their intent to withdraw. The student has the responsibility for following the official process of withdrawing from a class. Students who do not properly withdraw from a course will receive a grade of F.

- Students may not withdraw from a course after the published deadline. Any exception to this policy is the responsibility of the appropriate academic dean's office. When granted, withdrawal from a course after this time will result in a grade of "W" or "F" depending on the student's grade at the time. For additional information on university course policies, students should consult their Academic Catalog: <http://www.elon.edu/e-web/academics/catalog/>