Reading Nietzsche in Jerusalem: Existentialism & Nationalism
LISD Workshop, Spring 2015
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If I am not for myself, who is for me?
And being for my own self, what am I?
And if not now, when?
Hillel the Elder, *Pirke Avot* I.14

What sets us apart, and bring us together, as humans? Is there meaning to our life, and death? Are we free? Once leading our quest for wisdom, such questions are rarely asked in contemporary academia. This LISD workshop seeks to bring existentialism back to the fore, and examines how it shapes modern politics, taking Zionism as a comparable case.

Our challenge is threefold. First, we aim to grasp existentialism, an age-old movement that probes the mortal human’s search for meaning in a meaningless universe. Ascending in the wake of World War II, existentialism then descended in both media and academia, its key features deemed disturbing. A philosophy of concrete lived experience, existentialism flies in the face of dispassionate scholarship. Heralding personal, authentic choice, existentialism modeled itself a lighthouse, not an ivory tower. Stressing meaning-seeking agency—rather than material rationality, unconscious emotions, social identities, and innate biology—existentialism defies the presumptions of many economists, psychologists, sociologists and socio-biologists. Disagreements among leading existentialists precluded the construction of a clear-cut and coherent “ism.” Finally, many saw the existential call to fuse philosophy and art as too audacious. Against the backdrop of such concerns, our workshop seeks to hone the lens of existentialism into a microscope that can examine the details of individual life, a telescope to observe social dynamics and a kaleidoscope to enrich our innermost insights.

Second, we aim to probe the relevance of existentialism to politics. While existentialism figures very little in political science, the concerns of existentialism are also its key assets in the study of politics. Attentive to changes in our socio-political world, existentialism reveals human as mortal and moral agents, free to choose their political path. That existentialism writ-large became the common ground for such a diverse group of thinkers as Arendt, Buber, Camus, Dostoevsky, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Sartre, both attests to its vitality and to its potential relevance to many, perhaps most, people and their politics. Unlike many contemporary philosophies, it is not necessarily western or liberal. It can speak to both Greenpeace supporters and ISIS activists. Finally, existentialist art, especially literature, makes it more accessible to social actors beyond the confines of seminars in philosophy. It directly addresses—and challenges—this world.
Third, in charting the merits and limitations of “political existentialism,” our workshop seeks to examine its relevance to nationalism and to the case of Zionism in comparative perspective. If nationalism is but one existential project, how does it relate to others? Since existentialism underscores the individual’s sense of morality and quest for moral meaning, can the same be said of nations? Can the nation construct and construe a “public conscience” to guide its politics? The case of Zionism is especially illuminating, with numerous inroads, both personal and ideational. Ecclesiastes (Koheleth), the first known existentialist, is Jewish (supposedly King Solomon). Key existentialists such as Nietzsche and Camus have exerted a vast influence on Zionists, early and late; some, such as Kafka and Buber, were attracted to Zionism; others, Arendt for example, opposed it. Existentialist insights can likewise teach us much about Zionism: its emergence, immersion in existential fears, search for a moral ground, and ongoing debate with its existential alternatives (e.g. Diaspora).

This is an ambitious workshop, and in the limited time we have—twelve meeting, ninety minutes each—we cannot attain complete answers. But we can try to better understand existentialism, its politics, and its resonance with nationalism and Zionism. To this end, the list below presents twelve themes around which we shall conduct our weekly meetings, each with two key readings, both fiction and philosophy. All items are accessible in the library, or online, and I will also send you brief excerpts before each meeting. We shall also watch a few films (or segments thereof) from the following list. The syllabus concludes with a bibliography for additional reading. On Zionism and comparable cases, we will also draw on my forthcoming book, *The Mortality and Morality of Nations* (Cambridge University Press).

Much depends on you, the workshop participants. Think of works of art and philosophy that have helped you become who you are today. Feel free to suggest them as reading material and share your thoughts about them. The outline and reading below are just anchors, not set in stone, and are ultimately open to our own, free, choice.

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The workshop is open to all Princeton students and faculty. It will run weekly, Tuesdays 6:00-7:30, at 012 Bendheim Hall. Light refreshment will be provided. For details, see [lisd.princeton.edu](http://lisd.princeton.edu).

Attending the first meeting (February 3) does not require registration. However, since space is limited, early registration for the whole workshop will be given priority (please RSVP to [matheney@princeton.edu](mailto:matheney@princeton.edu)).

Co-sponsored by the Department of Sociology & the Program in Near Eastern Studies.
Themes & Basic Reading

I. Meaning
   *Ecclesiastes (Koheleth), The Bible*
   Thomas Mann, *Disillusionment* (1896)

II. Death and the Absurd
    J.D. Salinger, *A Perfect Day for Bananafish* (1948)
    Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942)

III. Freedom
    Fyodor Dostoevsky, “Grand Inquisitor” from *Brothers Karamazov* (1880)
    Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943)

IV. God
    Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness Unto Death* (1843)
    Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)

V. Authenticity
    Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1891)
    Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927)

VI. Love
    George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)
    Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (1956)

VII. Reflection
    Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (1942)
    Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963)

VIII. Autonomy
    Henry David Thoreau, *Resistance to Civil Government* (1849)
    Franz Kafka, “Before the Law” from *The Trial* (1915); and *In the Penal Colony* (1919)

IX. Morality
    Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886); *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887)
    Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger* (1900)

X. Truth
    Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953)
XI. Responsibility
Plato, Socrates’s *Dialogue with Crito* (399 BC)
Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946)

XII. Solidarity
Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (1923)
Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (1951)

Films

Agnès Varda, *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962)
Milos Forman, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975)
Werner Herzog, *Into the Abyss* (2011)
Marco Bellochio, *Dormant Beauty* (2014)
Bibliography

Textbooks & Anthologies


Thinkers


Friedman, Maurice (2011) "Buber, Heschel, and Heidegger: Two Jewish Existentialists Confront a Great German Existentialist." Journal of Humanistic Psychology 51 (1):129-134.


**Meaning**


**Mortality**


*Religion*


*Existential Sociology*


*Love and Other Passions*


*Morality*


*Autonomy and Authenticity*


*Art*


Miguel De Cervantes, *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* (1605)

*Political Existentialism*


*Nationalism*


*Cases (Zionism and beyond)*


