

Existentialism

PHIL 4500 Fall 2025 • T–Th 2:00 to 3:20 • HKRY 252

Professor Kalmanson (here's [how to pronounce it](#)) • leah.kalmanson@unt.edu • Office hours and location provided in Canvas

Teaching Assistant: Hayden Ridongs • HaydenRidings@my.unt.edu • Office hours and location provided in Canvas

Who am I? What's my purpose? What does it all mean?? In this class, we'll explore your existential questions through philosophy and film. Together we'll investigate questions about personal identity, fate and human freedom, moral relativism and universal truth, and finding fulfillment in life.

Texts

- Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity* (required)
- Kalmanson, *Cross-Cultural Existentialism* (required)
- Additional handouts provided via Canvas

Goals

- Think broadly about questions of meaning in life through films and readings.
- Develop fluency in the fields of existentialism and phenomenology in the context of European intellectual history.
- Critically investigate issues in existential philosophy through engagement with global philosophical sources.

Outcomes

Students who come to see education as an opportunity for self-cultivation may find renewed energy to invest in their own college experience.

- Enhanced capacity to engage personally and critically on questions of meaning and value in human experience.
- Increased ability to express philosophical ideas in conversation and in writing.
- Increased ability to explore philosophical content across different disciplines via creative mediums, such as film and comics.
- Prepared to read advanced contemporary work in philosophy, critical theory, and related fields.
- Critically prepared to navigate the contemporary global world with a longer view of history.

All class goals, assignments, and policies are designed to enhance your learning experience in this course. You are expected to engage the class material with active interest, thoughtful attention, and critical reflectiveness. If you are having trouble engaging in this course, you should meet with me.

Grades

Letter grades are assigned as follows: F = 54.99% or below, D = 55–69.99%, C = 70–79.99%, B = 80–89.99%, A = 90–100%. All assignments are worth 100 points. They are distributed into weighted categories in the gradebook as follows:

Reading Quizzes / 40% The homework readings are the backbone of the course—they are the foundation for everything else that we learn. Frequent reading quizzes help to ensure that you complete the readings *before* class. **All quizzes are posted at least a week before the due date and are due in Canvas before class starts.**

(Quizzes are open book and open note, you can work on them together, and you can redo them repeatedly until you get 100%. Think of them more like reading guides—the point is just to learn the material.)

Movie Reviews / 20% These **short but formal essays** aim to help you apply and expand your understandings of the readings via an engagement with films.

Participation and Attendance / 10% I will give you occasional in-class and/or post-class review, reflection, and engagement activities. These may include discussion boards, journaling assignments, short presentations, and other creative forms of engagement (like drawing). Your attendance grade is included in the participation category.

Exams / 20% You will take two **in-class essay exams** that addresses your capacity to summarize, explain, analyze, compare and contrast, or otherwise engage the terms, themes, questions, and arguments we encounter in the readings. **Note: If you have at least a 90% attendance grade at the end of the semester, you may skip the final exam.**

Final Project / 10% You will complete a final project that will involve **creating a short film, video essay, or otherwise creatively produced recorded presentation.**

Attendance Policies

Your presence is valued and your absence is noted. Missing class may hinder your ability to receive full credit for quizzes and participation activities. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to find out what we covered and to stay informed about upcoming assignments.

- **Your attendance grade is recorded as a percentage of classes attended and averaged into your participation score, along with other participation activities.**
- **There are no excused absences. However, you may make up absences by attending other events in the Philosophy and Religion Department, when available.**

- **If you have at least a 90% attendance grade at the end of the semester, you may skip the final exam.**

(Note, there are no excused absences, because you can miss three classes and still have a 90% attendance grade at the end of the semester, and this counts for only a portion of your participation score. You would need to miss a lot of class before this policy would affect your course grade.)

Preparation Policies

You are responsible for attending all class sessions and coming to class prepared, having read (or watched) the assigned material, taken time to reflect on it, completed assigned study questions (if any), and in general having gathered your thoughts for class discussion. You are responsible for being an active, not a passive, reader. This means paying attention to what you are reading, looking up vocabulary that you don't know, and taking notes as you read, especially when you have questions. You are asked to invest your time in this class—not because I am making you, or because I am giving you a grade, but because you are here in college to do valuable and meaningful things.

Participation Policies

Together, we foster a culture of openness and understanding in the classroom. It is our responsibility, together, to make sure that everyone feels comfortable speaking in class, raising questions, and having conversations. All students are expected to come to class prepared, having read the assigned readings and having reflected on topics for class discussion. Your participation will be assessed by short in-class or post-class engagement activities (see above). Your participation will be also assessed by the attention that you pay to your peers. When your peers are speaking, you are expected to listen, be engaged, and respond where relevant. **I reserve the right to lower your course grade by up to one full letter grade, if your lack of participation in class becomes a persistent problem.**

Late Assignment Policies

Quizzes, discussions, and other assignments: Even if you need to miss class, you can still plan ahead to complete your reading quizzes and other assignments on time. Canvas automatically deducts 5% per day for each day an assignment is late until the deductions equal 70% of the assignment's point value. You can continue to make up late assignments for 70% credit thereafter. **There are no exceptions to this policy.**

(Note, there are no exceptions to this policy, because you can *routinely* be *one* or *two* days late and still be making 95% and 90% on your assignments and maintaining an A-average for the course. You would have to be three+ days late on numerous occasions before this policy would affect your course grade.)

Exams: If you need to reschedule an exam, let me know in advance. I will work with you to ahead of time to accommodate your schedule, but I will not hold a make-up exam if you miss the test without warning.

Extra Credit Policies

There is no guarantee of extra credit in this class. You may make up absences by attending other events in the Philosophy and Religion Department, when available. This can help improve your participation score and/or maintain your eligibility to skip the final exam.

Integrity Policies

Plagiarism and cheating will not be tolerated and will result in an automatic zero. Students who plagiarize or otherwise violate UNT's policies on academic integrity may also, at my discretion, be referred to the administration for disciplinary action. Students are responsible for reading, understanding, and knowing UNT's Academic Integrity Policy that can be found at: <https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-003>. As stated there: "According to UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity, academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University."

Technology Policies

Do not EVER use your computer, cell phone, or tablet in class for social media, texting, or any other communications not relevant to class activities. You may use these to take notes, or view class readings, or to utilize software or technologies that meet your learning needs.

I reserve the right to lower your course grade by one full letter grade, if you persistently violate the classroom technology policy.

There are no approved uses of any AI, such as ChatGPT, or any other software or tool used to generate written content on your behalf or to check or revise content you have written.

Any assignment completed with the help of AI will be treated as a case of plagiarism and be subject to the integrity policies above.

Accommodations

I am committed to making it possible for all student in this class to achieve their learning goals, whatever these may be. Please share with me any information that will help me do this, including any circumstances for which you may need specific accommodations. Per the UNT Office of Disability Access: "The University of North Texas makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking reasonable accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide you with a reasonable accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to

begin a private discussion regarding your specific needs in a course. You may request reasonable accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of reasonable accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of reasonable accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. Students are strongly encouraged to deliver letters of reasonable accommodation during faculty office hours or by appointment. Faculty members have the authority to ask students to discuss such letters during their designated office hours to protect the privacy of the student. For additional information, refer to the Office of Disability Access website at <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access>. You may also contact ODA by phone at (940) 565-4323.”

Emergency Notification & Procedures

UNT uses a system called Eagle Alert to quickly notify students with critical information in the event of an emergency (i.e., severe weather, campus closing, and health and public safety emergencies like chemical spills, fires, or violence). In the event of a university closure, please refer to Canvas for contingency plans for covering course materials.

In the event of an emergency, the UNT Office of Emergency Management and Safety Services has a [table for a variety of situations](#), including active shooter, inclement weather, medical emergencies, etc. You may wish to bookmark above site, as well as the [Campus Safety and Emergency Preparedness webpage](#) with a list of contacts for a variety of emergency situations.

Schedule

The schedule below is subject to change. Please listen in class regarding schedule changes.

Course schedule

Week	Date	Topics & Activities	Homework Readings, Quizzes, & Movie Reviews
Week 1	8/19	Welcome to class!	
	8/21	Existential fiction	Selections from N.K. Jemisin
Week 2	8/26	Existential fiction	Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being
	8/28	What does it all mean?	Wolf and Kahn

Week 3	9/2	Existentialism and phenomenology	Bakewell, Ch. 1, p. 1-10 and 16-20, and Ch. 2, p. 6-12
	9/4	Phenomenology as method	Descartes, Meditations (excerpts)
Week 4	9/9	Religion and existentialism	Selections from Kierkegaard
	9/11	Atheism and existentialism	Selections from Nietzsche
Week 5	9/16	Movie: Losing Ground (Kathleen Collins)	
	9/18	Movie discussion	Movie Review 1
Week 6	9/23		Beauvoir, I
	9/25		Beauvoir, II
Week 7	9/30	Movie: Vagabond (Agnès Varda)	
	10/2	Vagabond, continued	
Week 8	10/7	Movie discussion	Movie Review 2
	10/9		Beauvoir, III and Conclusion
Week 9	10/14	Critical theory and postmodernism	hooks, "Postmodern Blackness"
	10/16	New trends in critical theory	Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter (excerpts)
Week 10	10/21	Midterm Exam	
	10/23	Movie: I Heart Huckabees (David O. Russell)	Parkes, "Thinking Images"

Week 11	10/28	Huckabees, continued	
	10/30	Movie discussion	Movie Review 3
Week 12	11/4	Final projects: Getting started	
	11/6	Existentialism and Asian philosophies	Kalmanson, Intro + Ch. 1
Week 13	11/11	Movie: Ship of Theseus (Anand Gandhi)	
	11/13	Ship of Theseus, continued	
Week 14	11/18	Movie discussion	Movie Review 4
	11/20		Kalmanson, Ch. 2
Week 15		Break	
Week 16	12/2		Kalmanson, Ch. 3
	12/4		Kalmanson, Ch. 4 + Conclusion
Week 17	12/8		Final projects due by midnight
	12/11		Final Exam, 1:30-3:30