Existential Risk

To be alive is to be at risk. Hegel argued that only by risking one’s life, finding a way to live through risk and make it bearable, does one become a self-conscious subject. Today, at the outset of the Anthropocene, risk is now pervasive at species levels. Rising extinction rates are rewriting philosophies of life and views about the longer and larger meaning of being. You are perhaps aware that Cambridge University hosts a Centre for the Study of Existential Risk, which has brought together physicists, conservation biologists, and analytic philosophers. Their aim is to study the large-scale risks facing human civilization. But what is existential risk, if all beings must by definition risk their existence at every moment?

This class will consider how philosophical ontologies and theories of life come to terms with existential risk. We will read some major works of existential philosophy, including Hegel, Heidegger, Sartre, and Badiou. We will also look at some political theory based on existential struggle, including Hobbes, Schmitt, Kojève, and Judith Butler. We will then turn to more contemporary philosophies and theories of species-level crises. We will focus on three main topics for discussion: extinction, scientism and metaphysical groundlessness, and supercomputing. On extinction, we will read work by Georges Bataille and Claire Colebrook. We will also read Roberto Esposito’s argument for redefining biopolitical theory of life and death around an immunitary paradigm. On scientism and metaphysics in crisis, we will read Quentin Meillassoux and some responses to his work. On supercomputing, we will read Nick Bostrom and look further at essays published by the Cambridge Centre. Finally, we will finish the semester reading Stanislaw Lem’s His Master’s Voice, which brings all three themes into convergence in a plot about trying to unscramble the first message received from an alien civilization.

Week 1
Intro; Nick Bostrom and Will Rees articles

Week 2
Hegel Phenomenology of Spirit, excerpts; Heidegger Being and Time, excerpts

Week 3
Sartre, “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” Being and Nothingness, excerpts; Heidegger “Letter on Humanism”

Week 4
Badiou Being and Event, excerpts

Week 5
Hobbes, Leviathan, excerpts; Schmitt The Concept of the Political

Week 6
Kojève *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*; Judith Butler, essays

Week 7

Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, excerpts; Georges Bataille *The Cradle of Humanity*; Claire Colebrook, essays

Week 8

Roberto Esposito *Immunitas*

Week 9

Quentin Meillassoux *After Finitude*

Week 10

Essays on science and scientism: Hannah Arendt, Hans Jonas, Ray Brassier

Week 11

Nick Bostrom *Superintelligence*

Week 12

Stanislaw Lem *His Master’s Voice*