

## **Existential Risk – Theocrit 9640**

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Office: UC 2422

Office hours: Thurs 10:30-1:00, or by appointment

Room: Stevenson-Lawson 3165

Course hours: Wed 1:30-4:30

**Description:** 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.

### **Grading**

60% final essay

15% oral presentation

25% class participation

**Essay:** The essay is a research paper of 20 pages on a topic pertaining to the course. A one-paragraph abstract will be due on March 18.

**Oral Presentation:** The presentation is a 15 minute overview of the key issues of a chosen text. The structure of presentations should be as follows: choose **three keywords** from the text and give us definitions and theorizations of these terms. You can discuss the three terms you choose in a variety of contexts, including: how these terms fit overall into our course (in dialogue with previous readings), how the text/term fits overall in the author's oeuvre, and how the text/term fits in its field. In your presentation, you can choose to focus on close reading of passages, or analysis of the important elements of the argument. Throughout the presentation, you should be raising questions for the class and outlining how you think we can get the most out of this reading.

**Statement on Academic Offences:** Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

[http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_grad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf)

**Graduate Course Health and Wellness:** As part of a successful graduate student experience at Western, we encourage students to make their health and wellness a priority. Western provides several on campus health-related services to help you achieve optimum health and engage in healthy living while pursuing your graduate degree. Information regarding health- and wellness-related services available to students may be found at <http://www.health.uwo.ca/>.

Students seeking help regarding mental health concerns are advised to speak to someone they feel comfortable confiding in, such as their faculty supervisor, their program director (graduate chair), or other relevant administrators in their unit. Campus mental health resources may be found at [http://www.health.uwo.ca/mental\\_health/resources.html](http://www.health.uwo.ca/mental_health/resources.html).

**Western University Land Acknowledgment:** Western University is situated on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Lunaapeewak and Attawandaron peoples, who have longstanding relationships to the land and region of southwestern Ontario and the City of London. The local First Nation communities of this area include Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Oneida Nation of the Thames, and Munsee Delaware Nation. In the region, there are eleven First Nation communities and a growing Indigenous urban population. Western values the significant historical and contemporary contributions of local and regional First Nations and all of the Original peoples of Turtle Island (North America).

**Required Texts:**

*Existentialism: Basic Writings*, second edition, eds. Charles Guignon and Derk Pereboom  
Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Broadview)  
Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Polity)

I will provide digital copies of essays in a dropbox folder. It is preferable to print them out and bring them to class. Computers are not ideal to use in class.

Week 1 – January 8

Nick Bostrom “Existential Risks: Analyzing Human Extinction Scenarios and Various Hazards”; Hannah Arendt “What Is Existential Philosophy?”; Judith Butler “Precarious Life, Grievable Life”

Week 2 – January 15

Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “Preface,” “Introduction,” “Self-Consciousness,” section on master/slave dialectic; Alexandre Kojève, “In Place of an Introduction,” *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*

Week 3 – January 22

Soren Kierkegaard, excerpts in *Existentialism: Basic Writings*  
Friedrich Nietzsche, excerpts in *Existentialism: Basic Writings*

Week 4 – January 29

Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, excerpts in *Existentialism: Basic Writings*  
Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, excerpts in *Existentialism: Basic Writings*

Week 5 – February 5

Jean-Paul Sartre, “The Humanism of Existentialism”  
Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism”  
Mark Wrathall, “Existential Phenomenology”

Hans Jonas, "Toward an Ontological Grounding of an Ethics for the Future"

Week 6 – February 12

Franz Fanon, excerpts, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Sylvia Winter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom"

Kathryn Yusoff, excerpts, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*

Gerald Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance"

Kyle Powys Whyte, "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises"

February 21 – **winter break**

Week 7 – February 26 – **no class**

Week 8 – March 4

Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

Derrida "The Ends of Man"; Derrida, excerpts from *The Postal Card*

Week 9 – March 11

Nick Bostrom, "Existential Risk Prevention as Global Priority"

Phil Torres, "Facing Disaster: The Great Challenges Framework"

Claire Colebrook "Lives Worth Living: Extinction, Persons, Disability"

Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "Cybernetics Is Antihumanism: Advanced Technologies and the Rebellion Against the Human Condition"

Ray Brassier, "Prometheanism and Its Critics"

Hans Jonas, "Technology and Responsibility: Reflections on the New Tasks of Ethics"

Week 10 – March 18

Nick Bostrom, "Why I Want to Be a Posthuman When I Grow Up," "In Defense of Posthuman Dignity," "Letter from Utopia"

Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "Engaging Transhumanism"

Anders Sandberg, "Transhumanism and the Meaning of Life"

David Roden, "Humanism, Transhumanism, and Posthumanism"

N. Katherine Hayles, "Wrestling with Transhumanism"

Catherine Malabou, "Artificial Intelligence: The Fourth Blow to Our Narcissism"

**Due: Essay Abstract**

Week 11 – March 25

Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti, "Feminist Posthumanities: An Introduction"

Donna Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto"

Hannah Scheidt, "The Fleshless Future: A Phenomenological Perspective on Mind Uploading"

Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen, "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?"

Laboria Cuboniks, excerpts from *Xenofeminism*; Helen Hester, "Sapience + Care"

Week 12 – April 1

Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*

Week 13 – April 8

Hans Jonas, “The Burden and Blessing of Mortality”

Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics”

**Due: Final Essay – April 15**