

## **Existential Risk – Theocrit 9640B**

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Office: AHB 3G04

Office hours: Wed 1-3, or by appointment

Room: SH 2347

Course hours: Wed 3:30-6:30

**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 7.

**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).

**Required Texts:**

Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A. V. Miller

*Existentialism: Basic Writings*, second edition, eds. Charles Guignon and Derk Pereboom

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

Roberto Esposito, *Terms of the Political*

Stanislaw Lem, *His Master's Voice*

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

Week 1 – January 10

Nick Bostrom “Existential Risks: Analyzing Human Extinction Scenarios and Various Hazards”; Ulrich Beck, *World at Risk*, “Introduction”; Sven Ove Hansson “A Panorama of the Philosophy of Risk”; Hannah Arendt “What Is Existential Philosophy?”

Week 2 – January 17

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 24

Heidegger, *Being and Time*, excerpts in *Existentialism: Basic Writings*

Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, excerpts in *Existentialism: Basic Writings*

Week 4 – January 31

Sartre, “The Humanism of Existentialism”; Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism”

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

Week 5 – February 7

Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

Ray Brassier, excerpt from *Nihil Unbound*; “Prometheanism and Its Critics”

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

Week 6 – February 14

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

Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness”

Gerald Vizenor, excerpts from *Survivance*

Glen Sean Coulthard, ch. 5 and Conclusion, *Red Skin, White Masks*

February 21 – **winter break**

Week 7 – February 28

Claire Colebrook and Jami Weinstein, Preface and Introduction, *Posthumous Life*

Theodor Adorno, “Trying to Understand *Endgame*”

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

Week 8 – March 7

Robin Hanson, “Catastrophe, Social Collapse, and Human Extinction”

Seán Ó hÉigeartaigh, “Technological Wild Cards: Existential Risk and a Changing Humanity”

*Global Catastrophic Risks 2017*

Nick Bostrom, “Why I Want to Be a Posthuman When I Grow Up,” “Letter from Utopia”

**Due: Essay Abstract**

Week 9 – March 14 – **cancelled**

Week 10 – March 21

Vernor Vinge, “The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era”

Ray Kurzweil, excerpts from *The Singularity Is Near*

Nick Bostrom, excerpts from *Superintelligence*

Hans Jonas, “The Burden and Blessing of Mortality”

Week 11 – March 28

Roberto Esposito, *Concepts of the Political*

Week 12 – April 4

Molly Wallace, *Risk Criticism*, Introduction

Niklas Luhmann, excerpt from *Risk: A Sociological Perspective*

Alain Badiou, *Logic of Worlds*, Preface and Conclusion

Week 13 – April 11

Stanislaw Lem, *His Master's Voice*

**Due: Final Essay – April 21**