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 seminar 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 seminar 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 seminar 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 seminar, and in the limited time we have, 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 seminar 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 seminar is open to all Princeton students and faculty.
It runs weekly, Tuesdays 6pm, at 012 Bendheim Hall. For details, see lisd.princeton.edu.
Attending the first meeting (February 3) does not require registration.
However, since space is limited, early registration for the whole seminar will be given priority (please RSVP to matheney@princeton.edu).
Co-sponsored by the Department of Near Eastern Studies
Themes & Basic Reading

I. Meaning
Ecclesiastes (Koheleth), The Bible
Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus (1942)

II. Death
J.D. Salinger, A Perfect Day for Bananafish (1948)
Stephen King, All That You Love Will Be Carried Away (2001)

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

IV. Individuality
Miguel De Cervantes, The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha (1605)
Paul Auster, City of Glass (1985).

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

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

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

VIII. Freedom
Fyodor Dostoevsky, “Grand Inquisitor” from Brothers Karamazov (1880)

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

X. Truth & Efficacy
George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949)
Vaclav Havel, The Power of the Powerless (1978)
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)
Andrei Tarkovsky, *Stalker* (1979)
Werner Herzog, *Into the Abyss* (2011)
Marco Belloccio, *Dormant Beauty* (2014)
Bibliography

Textbooks & Anthologies

Thinkers

*Meaning*


*Existential Sociology*


*Existential Psychology*


**Mortality**


**Morality**


Autonomy and Authenticity


Art


Political Existentialism


Nationalism


*Cases (Zionism and beyond)*


