Existentialism--Paper Topics
Summer I, 2011

Below are some suggestions for paper topics. If you like, you may choose another topic, but if so, it should directly concern the issues we have talked about in this class. Papers should be 5-10 pages in length, typed, double-spaced. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation are all important, as well as having something interesting to say. Papers are due no later than 5 pm, Friday, 6/30. (I have a very limited time to grade papers, as I am leaving town on 7/2. I’m not usually a stickler for arbitrary dates, but this time it affects my personal life, and so there will be no exceptions to this deadline.)

Your goal in this paper is to explain and defend some thesis that you are making about the issues we have discussed in this class. That is, I don’t want you to simply tell me, for example, that you disagree with Sartre because he is an atheist and you’re not. If you disagree with Sartre (or someone else), tell me why Sartre thinks the way he does, and then explain to me where his reasoning and arguments go wrong. The mere fact that you disagree with someone does not constitute a sufficient reason to conclude that that person is mistaken. Tell me what the author has missed, what mistakes he has made, and how those mistakes lead him to the wrong conclusion.

Keep in mind that your intended audience for this paper is not really me, as the instructor of this class, but instead someone who is not already familiar with the material. That is, you cannot presuppose that your reader already understand the issues being discussed. It is your job to explain anything and everything (related to your thesis) that the average reader will not already understand.

Finally, make sure that you have a clear and explicit thesis statement somewhere near the very beginning of your paper. This thesis statement is the claim that you are defending. It is the conclusion you will reach at the end of the paper. But don’t wait till the end of the paper to tell the reader what you are trying to accomplish. If you tell them upfront, they will be better able to follow the reasoning you use to get there.

And don’t forget to have fun! Choose a topic that interests you. If it doesn’t interest you, it almost certainly will not interest the reader either.

(I have posted online a more explicit set of instructions for writing thesis defense papers. You should definitely read them (well, I guess, you should definitely read them only if you are concerned about your grade!). You can find the online at:

http://homepages.wmich.edu/~baldner/thesisdefensepapers.pdf)

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The following are suggested paper topics: you are free to choose a different topic, as long as it is something we have covered in this course. In each of these topics, I suggest a
number of different specific questions concerning a main theme. I am not asking that you literally answer each specific question (*please don’t* do this), but that you use these questions to stimulate your own thinking.

What does Camus mean by the claim that life is absurd? What does he think should be our response to this absurdity? Why does he think that Sisyphus is a hero? Do you agree or disagree? Defend your answer.

Why does Kierkegaard think he is a Christian? What are the views he expresses that he associates with Christianity? Can one accept the main thrust of his ideas while not being a Christian?

Talk about what *The Passion of the Christ* taught you about what Kierkegaard had to say, or the other way, i.e., how reading Kierkegaard helped you to get more out of watching *The Passion of the Christ*.

Discuss Kierkegaard’s understanding of faith as opposed to knowledge, or talk about what he means by say that life ought to be understood as a persistent striving.

Use Kierkegaard’s discussion of the story of Abraham and Isaac to explain what he calls the three movements to faith. How, if at all, can you apply this to your own life? Is having the kind of faith (Kierkegaard says) Abraham has really such a good thing? Why or why not?

Explain Nietzsche’s distinction between master morality and slave morality. Is he saying that one of these moralities is “better” than the other? If so, how is this consistent with his claim that there are no objective values? If not, then what is he really trying to say?

Discuss Nietzsche’s account of ‘will to power.’ What do you really think he meant by saying that “everything is will to power?” Does this really help us *explain* anything? Put on your thinking caps here. There is so much in the text. Find something there that you can create an interesting thesis about.

Just like the above question for Kierkegaard, consider the how seeing *The Fight Club* helped you to understand some of what Nietzsche had to say, or vice versa.

What does Sartre mean by the claim that existence precedes essence? According to Sartre, what follows from this? That is, what does it tell us about human beings and the nature of free choices? What does this tell us about human freedom? Do you agree? Disagree? Why or why not?

Finally, if you’re really feeling ambitious, discuss what you understand of Sartre’s account of consciousness, with particular attention to what he has to say about the relationship of positional consciousness to non-positional consciousness. (Of course, be sure to explain what these terms mean.) What is his criticism of the standard (Cartesian)
account of self-consciousness? What do you think about all this? Remember, he is describing your consciousness. Has he?

Remember, all those questions in each topic are suggestion to get you thinking. Don’t just answer the questions as though they were questions on an essay test. Your job is to be the teacher, not to show the teacher how smart a student you are!