What Makes us Human?

An Existential Journey amidst Crisis [GOVT 3686]

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“What’s true of all the evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves,” wrote Albert Camus in *The Plague*. Now is our time to realize our humanity: find out what sets us apart, and brings us together, as humans, and live up to it.

This course is an existential odyssey into the human condition and politics. Are we truly different from animals and machines? What does it mean to “be yourself”? What’s the difference between freedom and liberty? Should we pursue happiness? Why do we yield to fear and anxiety? Is the search for meaning meaningless? Do we live in a post-truth era? What are the roles of morality in our society and politics? Why is God dead, but religion alive? Can we defeat alienation? Is love all we need? How much can, and should, we hope for? In this highly interdisciplinary course, we will address these questions, and then some more. We shall examine, one by one, a dozen themes, on both the individual/universal level and the socio-political plane.

Structure

The course spans three weeks, each consisting of four daily sessions, covering twelve themes.

- Week I: Human/nature, identity & authenticity, freedom, reflection
- Week II: Happiness, death & dread, meaning, truth & trust,
- Week II: Morality, God & religion, alienation & love, hope

Requirements & Grade

- **Watch** the online lectures. The lectures vary in length, ranging between 5 to 20 minutes; plan for about 2-3 hours a week. [monitored but ungraded; required to pass the course]
- **Complete** the online surveys and multiple answer questions. These are relatively simple, plan for about an hour a week. [monitored but ungraded; required to pass the course]
- **Participate** in class Zoommeetings. We will convene for about 1.5h in each of the twelve days (four times a week) [10% of the course’s grade; 3 justified absences allowed]
- **Read** the required material. Throughout the course, each student will be reading and presenting 2-3 chapters/articles. All required reading is available on the course’s Canvas website [10% of the grade]
- **Write** a very brief reflection (2-3 paragraphs) that connects each theme to the COVID19 crisis, drawing on at least one public source (a news piece, op-ed, video clip, etc.), and be ready to present and discuss in class. [15% of the grade]
- **Submit** a seminar paper (~5000 words) on a research question. The topic, structure and methodology should be discussed with the teacher. [65% of the grade]
* The course uses the edX course [HOPE](https://www.edx.org/course/hope-human-odyssey-political-existentialism) (Human Odyssey to Political Existentialism), which was reviewed the all-time top online course, and best political science and philosophy course, worldwide, joined by tens of thousands of learners from over 140 countries. It is fully accessible, including subtitles for all the lectures – in English, Arabic and Hebrew. Here’s a short clip featuring a couple of seconds from all HOPE talks, and you can also view the trailer, the introduction, and a brief animation on the hierarchy of basic human needs.

To learn more about the course’s learning objectives, please visit the introductory pages for each theme on edX HOPE, beginning with this one.

**Academic Integrity Statement**

For all assignments, students are required to abide by Cornell University’s Code of Academic Integrity. A copy of the code can be found at the following URL: https://cuinfo.cornell.edu/aic.cfm. Violations of the Code of Academic Integrity, especially plagiarism, may result in a failing grade in the course. Students are urged to read and complete the exercises on “Recognizing and Avoiding Plagiarism” at: http://plagiarism.arts.cornell.edu/tutorial/index.cfm.

**Inclusivity/Diversity Statement**

Cornell supports an inclusive learning environment where diversity and individual differences are understood, respected, appreciated, and recognized as a source of strength. It is expected that students in this class will respect differences and demonstrate diligence in understanding how other peoples’ perspectives, behaviors, and worldviews may be different from their own. Adapted from the University of Colorado’s College of Education and Behavioral Science found at https://www.unco.edu/education-behavioral-sciences/about-us/diversity-equity/framework.aspx.

**Disabilities Statement**

From Cornell University’s Faculty Handbook—Note to students with disabilities: If you have a disability-related need for reasonable academic adjustments in this course, provide (Instructor, TA, Course Coordinator) with an accommodation letter from Student Disability Services. Students are expected to give two weeks’ notice of the need for accommodations. If you need immediate accommodation, please arrange to meet with (Instructor, TA, Course Coordinator) within the first two class meetings.

**Get help with Cornell’s IT services**

The IT Service Desk can answer your questions about Cornell’s IT services, help you troubleshoot, report issues that you are seeing, and more. To get technical help, please follow this link: https://it.cornell.edu/support.
Themes & Reading

Introduction: Existentialism & Phenomenology


I. Human/Nature

Are we truly different, let alone better, than non-humans? Are our notions of politics distinctly human, or ought political scientists just as well study packs of wolves? What can Darwin and Maslow teach us about human nature and its resonance in society and politics?


II. Identity & Authenticity:

What is the Self, and does it emerge, or is it made? How did Freud see its layers? What are identity politics? What is the ancient and modern imperative of authenticity? How has the call for authenticity informed tribal and ethnic conflicts? Is there a way out?


III. Liberty, Freedom & Bad Faith

What separates freedom from liberty? Are we always free? Why and how do we forget our freedom? What are the roles of reasoning and responsibility in freedom? What can Sartre and Fromm teach us about the politics of freedom and bad faith? What are the implications for liberalism?


IV. Reflection

What is thinking? Does freedom require reflection? What motivates us to think? What drives us to suspend thinking? How does reflection affect nihilism and compliance? Can thinking prevent evil, personal and political? What did Arendt see as “the banality of evil”?

V. Happiness

What is happiness, and what can Aristotle and Freud teach us about the types of happiness? What makes us happy? Why and how has the “pursuit of happiness” become a socio-political goal, and have we approached its attainment? What are the key paradoxes of happiness?


VI. Dread & Death

What is the evolutionary role of fear, and how does fear differ from anxiety and angst? How do we develop our sense of death, and how does it motivate us, privately and publicly? How do death awareness, fear of murder, willingness to kill, and suicide, figure in politics?


VII. Meaning

Why, when and how do we search for meaning in, and for, our lives? What can Camus and Frankl teach us about meaning-making? How does it turn, in politics, to legitimation? What are the relations between happiness, death, and the pursuit of meaning? Why breathe, breed and bleed?


VIII. Truth & Trust

What’s between fact, fiction and fantasy? What are the key theories on the nature of truth? How does truth relate to trust? Why do politicians lie, and why do we accept this? What can Orwell and Havel teach us about the power of truth in politics? What is post-truth politics?


IX. Morality

What are the evolutionary roles of morality? What can Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Kohlberg teach us about the emergence, evolution and types of morality? How do conscience and moral dilemmas affect our private and public lives? What are the key modes of political legitimation?
X. God & Religion
Can we have freedom with(out) God, and religion? What can Weber and Jaspers teach us about the civilizational roles of religion? Who killed God and why? Has late modernization revived God? What roles have God and religion played in politics? What is civil religion?


XI. Alienation & Love
What are the modern origins, and types, of alienation? Can love ameliorate alienation? How have alienation and love figured in political thought? What can Rousseau and Orwell teach us about the political potency of love? How have politicians employed love in their rhetoric?


XII. Hope
Can we live without hope? Can we hope without freedom? Is hope utopian? What is the nexus between personal and public hope? What distinguishes ancient from modern cynicism? Can humans find hope between godlike vanity and doglike life? Do we hope too little, or too much?