

PHIL 3142

EXISTENTIALISM AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Class Number 46535

Section TR3

Tues, Thurs

3:40 – 4:55pm

Instructor: Moris Stern

Email: moris.stern@gmail.com

We will take the 20TH Century philosophy of Phenomenology and Existentialism to do all of the following: to analyze, systematically reconstruct, diagnose, critically question and empower the late modern person, in view of that person's individualistic self-conception. The late modern self understands itself to be subjectivity first, and, objectivity, if at all, second. In the more popular terms - the self is an individual first and everything else second. Existence is divided into the subjective and the objective, and the self identifies with the subjective first. To loosely paraphrase Sartre, modern human being chooses and makes himself to be what he is and empowers himself by in-depth understanding of this and owning up to it.

Here are some of the questions the philosophy of Phenomenology and Existentialism raises and that will be of interest to us in our class.

What does existence thus divided (subjective and objective) and systematized (subjective is superior to objective) look like? Is this division and hierarchization of existence inevitable? Are we, late moderns, always already engaged in it – even when we prioritize objectivity (by subjectively endowing objectivity with importance, as it were)? What are the unique challenges that this position raises for our relationship to ourselves, others, nature, God, death, love, sex, our daily activities, etc.? How does one emerge strengthened and empowered as a result of facing these challenges? Is there an attempt by such a one-sided subjectivity to balance itself out by objectivity – and what form do such attempts take? Can they be excessive?

We will start with short selections from Descartes and Kant to establish the 16th-18th Century roots of the view that subjectivity, or consciousness, in its purity and independence of objectivity of the world, takes precedence in knowledge and ethics. We will then proceed to the 19th Century existentialists, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Kierkegaard works out the possibilities and the hierarchy of the aesthetic, ethical and religious life, in the mode of the primacy of subjectivity. Nietzsche thinks about subjectivity by means of the idea of the greatness of the individual as the creator of values. Finally, we will deal with two 20th Century Existentialists, who are also phenomenologists – Heidegger and Sartre. Heidegger finds subjectivity to be deeply problematic and uses phenomenology (philosophy that aims to describe experience on its own terms, before theoretical reflection) to give an account of a dimension of experience and life that is more fundamental than the theoretically laden subject/object divided aspect of experience. Sartre, on the other hand, returns to and radicalizes the Cartesian and Kantian subjectivity and freedom even further by paradoxically arguing that any identity one chooses for oneself is both necessary and is a burdensome objectivity on the freedom of subjectivity.