PHIL 358: Existentialism
In this course we will study the central issues of existentialism, which is not so much a systematic movement in philosophy as “a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy,” as Walter Kaufmann puts it. Accordingly, existentialism gets defined in various ways, but there is a general rejection of the idea that human beings are fundamentally rational creatures who have a determinate nature or purpose. The crucial question then becomes: what does it mean to be a human self? Existentialists tend to emphasize the significance of human freedom but also the burden of such freedom. These inquiries then have implications for how we understand truth, God, the individual in relation to others, moral values, and the meaning of life. We will examine how existentialists address these issues in philosophy, literature, and works that span that traditional divide.

Course objectives:
Students will:
• demonstrate an understanding of the major questions and concepts of the existentialist tradition
• trace the differences between the positions of existentialist philosophers
• evaluate the arguments that support those positions
• articulate and justify their own positions on these questions, in discussion with other students and in thesis-driven writing.

Major readings: Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Sartre, Heidegger, Camus, Kamel Daoud, Beauvoir

Major assignments: commentary papers, midterm paper, final paper