

Prompt Composition

Phil 151

ASSIGNMENT

Consider the topics and themes we are covering in this course, in particular the three core themes of nihilism, freedom, and authenticity. Construct a question or set of several related questions (no more than 3) which you think are interesting and important and to which you could write an essay length response. Take care that the question is not too broad. This needs to be suitable for a short paper. However, it also needs to be broad enough that multiple authors from the course will have a perspective on it. So your question cannot be something like "What does Kierkegaard mean by despair?"

Once you have a question, you should turn in a document with two sections:

1. Present this question(s) in the format of an essay prompt. Begin by stating the question(s) as directly and precisely as you can. Next, in a few sentences try to clarify any potential ambiguities in the question. You could also use these sentences to explicitly narrow the scope of your guiding question if you think it is too broad. Your final version of the prompt should be about a paragraph.
2. In 300-400 words, defend the claim that your prompt is worth responding to. This could involve arguing for its importance directly or relating it to other philosophical topics we want to understand. You could also relate it to media that you think could shed light on existentialist themes. If you do this, you may want to include reference to that media in your prompt itself. In general, Try to explain as best you can why this interests you. If you chose, you may appeal to personal interests or experiences in doing so, but you should do so relatively abstractly. You should not overly focus on specific and unique details in your life since part of the goal is to convince someone else.

ASSIGNMENT OUTCOMES

This assignment is worth 20% of your grade for the course. It will also form the basis for the next two assignments, so think carefully about what you want to write about. After submission, I will give you feedback and help you adjust your prompt if necessary.

EXAMPLE PROMPTS

Below are samples of prompts that would be acceptable. You cannot use any of these verbatim, though you are free to choose related questions.

1. Many existentialists are concerned to respond to psychological manifestations of nihilism that they see as widespread. Many of the same philosophers also place living authentically at the center of their practical philosophy. How should we understand Nihilism as a problem, what specific psychological forms does it take, and in what ways does living authentically constitute a response to it?
2. The agency of the individual is a central theme in existentialism. Two aspects of this agency are freedom and authenticity. Is there any conflict in pursuing both? Is there or a general answer to that question or does the answer depend on the specific sense of freedom and specific sense of authenticity that we take to be important?
3. In Alan Moore's graphic novel *Watchmen*, the character Doctor Manhattan gains godlike powers as the result of an accident during a Nuclear test. Having gained near omnipotence and omniscience (Manhattan's knowledge and powers can sometimes be interfered with), he comes to lose interest both in human activities and in humanity itself. At one point, he expresses this by saying that humanity is much less interesting than the geography he can observe on Mars. However, Doctor Manhattan changes his mind as a result of recognizing that as an individual, each human life is made possible only by a miraculously unique combination of events. Could any of the existentialists offer an explanation of why Doctor Manhattan found this persuasive?

EXAMPLE PROMPT DEFENSE

In response to example prompt 1:

In their writings, many of the Existentialists analyzed concepts like boredom, despair and anxiety. They sought the origin of these in the agent's psychology and the relationship of that psychology to the society that they were a part of. Typically, that involved seeing the psychological problems of the individual as caused or at least encouraged by their social environment. Nietzsche, for instance, thought that the demise of Christianity as the dominant cultural force in Europe— which he called the death of God— deprived individuals of any ethical direction for their lives. For centuries, Europeans had seen their lives as having significance because of how they featured into the biblical narrative. Without that, they not only could not longer see their lives as valuable, but they also did not have a standard for determining what a valuable life would be. This issue can broadly be considered the problem of nihilism.

Although the Existentialists were inspired by contemporary events, it seems plausible to think that the search for an evaluative standard is ongoing. It has been frequently suggested that many modern societies suffer from a crisis of value. Those who make this suggestion often share little in

common. For instance, some conservative Christians believe that society has ceased to understand the importance of traditional forms of institutions like the family. On the other hand, Marxists argue that the rise of industrialization has alienated workers from meaningful productive activity. Whatever its precise nature, this social crisis of value has been offered as an explanation for significant recent events such as the resurgence of both left and right leaning populism in the 2010s. If these observers are correct to think that some form of psychological dissatisfaction—one that does not seem in many cases to be directly tied to the material quality of individual lives—is widespread, then the writings of Existentialists on the problem of nihilism may help explain it to us.

More significantly, they might also help us address it. Existentialism, in various forms, claims to offer not only an analysis of the problem of nihilism but also a solution. For many authors, individual authenticity seems to play a key role in providing a new standard by which our lives could be directed. For that solution to be of any use to us, then we will need to have a more precise understanding of how exactly it plays this role. In order to avoid being misled, we will also need to consider whether authenticity can live up to its promises.