

**Philosophy 460.2 Major Philosophers**  
**Topic for 2018 – Fall Term: Kierkegaard**

**Time:** Tuesdays/Thursdays 4:05 pm – 5:25 pm

**Place:** Leacock 109

**Maximum Enrollment:** 35

**Instructor:** Professor George di Giovanni

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**Description:**

**The Theme.**

Kierkegaard was a prolific writer. He produced three sets of works, each set in a style and with an intent of its own. This variety of writing output reflected the complexity of his personality. Kierkegaard was at heart a highly religious man who trusted in his Christian (typically Lutheran) faith to give meaning and substance to his life. This trust was reflected in his openly religious books, all published under his name and written in sermon-like style, unencumbered by philosophical preoccupations. Kierkegaard had been educated to be a pastor but never took up a position in the Danish established church of the day. But Kierkegaard was also a psychologically highly troubled man; one, moreover, instinctively given, even tempted, to philosophical speculation. This explains the other two sets of writings, all originally published anonymously. One is phenomenological in character. The works in this set describe the troubling and even painful experiences that an individual undergoes when confronted by life-altering situations, especially as they arise in the context of Christian beliefs. The other set is more traditionally philosophical in tone. Here Kierkegaard examines the conceptual problems, even paradoxes, that a philosopher runs into when trying to deal conceptually with matters that only faith can resolve, but existentially rather than speculatively. Kierkegaard is very much intent on criticizing the Lutheran theologians of the Church of his days who, in his opinion, had given their faith over to Hegelian philosophy.

**The method.**

In this course we shall not deal with Kierkegaard's openly religious works, even though religion will have to be at the forefront throughout. We shall concentrate on five works: *Either-Or*, *Repetition*, *The Concept of Dread*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Philosophical Fragments*. The first two are both philosophical and phenomenological in character; the third and fourth are phenomenological; the last definitely philosophical. The secondary literature on these works and on Kierkegaard in general is

truly massive, and written with a variety of agendas in mind. But I strongly believe that classics ought to be read first and foremost on their own, and this is what we shall do in this course. We shall read the five works together, at least as far as we can go. In my lectures I shall try to re-create for you the Romanticism and the German Idealism that were their historical background. I shall duly refer to secondary literature, but only incidentally. Since the reading is heavy and difficult, and term is short, I suggest that students concentrate their efforts on one work of their choice. But it is important that they come to lectures and follow the course in detail in order to place the work of choice in context, and also to gain a more complete view of Kierkegaard. Of course, this is only a suggestion. The more one reads, the better. The five works are on reserve. Here's the link:

<https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/courseReserves/id/14015610>

**Course assessment:**

Students are expected to contribute to class discussion and to make presentations if and when requested. However, I shall not assign a mark to this aspect of the course because it is difficult to do it according to strict objective norms. The final mark will be based on two papers of about ten pages each (double spaced) due at mid-term and at the end of term (50% of the final mark each).

**McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see <http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity>) for more information).**

**In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.**

**In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.**