

Paper #1

Phil 3024: Existentialism

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Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* asks what sort of stance we should have toward life, given that it involves a significant amount of suffering. He gives us a stark choice between (a) suicide, (b) religious faith (a.k.a. “philosophical suicide”), and (c) rebellion. He then urges option (c) as the best choice.

In your paper, please discuss Camus’ preference. In this process, I would like you to touch on three matters in the following order:

- (1) Explain in detail what Camus means by “rebellion” and why he sees it as a good response to our Sisyphean existence.
- (2) Consider that according to psychological research, religion makes people happier with their lives. Thus, in a study by Diener et al.,¹ it is reported that:

Researchers find that religious people, on average, report higher subjective well-being (SWB; e.g., Hackney & Sanders, 2003; Koenig & Larson, 2001) and also have fewer psychosocial pathologies such as domestic abuse (e.g., Waite & Lehrer, 2003). In the National Opinion Research Center’s General Social Surveys of Americans between 1972 and 2008, the percentage of people reporting that they were “very happy” ranged from 26% among those never attending religious services to 48% among those attending services more than weekly. (p. 1278)

Now if religion makes us happier, why is it better to reject it in favor of “rebellion?” Camus would presumably answer that religion should not be believed, since he thinks it is largely false. Nevertheless, Nietzsche at one point raises a question about this. Even though he would agree with Camus, Nietzsche admits that—ironically—one is guilty of a kind of “piety” in adopting this stance. (I have in mind section 344 of *The Gay Science*, which can be found among the additional selections from Nietzsche, posted on the course website.) What exactly is the “piety” which Nietzsche accuses himself of?

- (3) Finally, if religion generally makes us happier, and if rejecting religion requires a kind of “piety” anyway, is Camus (and Nietzsche) right to reject religion?
 - If you agree that we should reject religion, explain why the psychological research and the piety-objection do not sway you otherwise.
 - If you *are* swayed by the psychology and/or the piety-objection, explain the *best rejoinder* that Camus or Nietzsche (or any of their sympathizers) might say in reply. Then, tell me why you are not persuaded by that rejoinder.

¹ Diener, E., Tay, L., & Myers, D.G. (2011). The religion paradox: If religion makes people happy, why are so many dropping out? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(6), 1278-1290.

Don't be disheartened if you find part (3) particularly difficult. I'm asking you to come up with your *own arguments*, which requires a bit of thought and ingenuity on your part. I'm *not* asking for a *decisive* arguments; in fact, the best philosophical papers often argue both sides of an issue, and consequently thus fail to come up with a straightforward conclusion.

In section (3), I'm primarily looking to see that you can engage the issue *on your own* philosophically. Concurrently, I'm not grading you on the answer you give, but on the *reasoning* you deploy when discussing the issue. To help you out here, I've posted on the course website some advice on writing, as well as a list of argument fallacies. (In making your arguments, make sure you don't commit any of these fallacies!)

Note: This is NOT a research paper. In fact I *discourage* the use of outside readings, as they can often cause more confusion than enlightenment. However, I *encourage* you to try out your ideas on your fellow students before you write up a final draft. But make sure that if you use someone else's idea, you give them proper credit.

Let me also emphasize that this is NOT a "book report" type paper. Rather, I'm asking you to explain certain philosophical points *for the purpose of critically evaluating them*. Accordingly, part (3) should be the *largest part* of the paper! Your own ideas should be the focus, and they should be presented as clearly and in as much detail as you would present others people's ideas.

The paper should be a *maximum* of 5 pages, double-spaced with 1" margins, using a standard font like 12 pt. Times New Roman. Also, do not add extra space between paragraphs. (One extra paragraph-break is ok before a new section, but otherwise nix it.)

This assignment is due **Friday, October 7th** (*not* Monday, October 3rd as originally stated on the syllabus). *Make sure to submit BOTH a hard copy AND an electronic version as email attachment (parentt@vt.edu)*. Also, to ensure fair grading, PLEASE IDENTIFY YOUR HARD COPY **ONLY** WITH YOUR VIRGINIA TECH ID#.