

Boredom and Repetition

MAPH 36600, PHIL 24102/34102

University of Chicago
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TR 9:00–10:20
Social Sciences 106

Nicholas (Nic) Koziolk
nkoziolk@uchicago.edu
Office Hours: W 9–11 or by appointment
Office: Stuart 226

Course Description

Human life is filled with repetition. Most obviously, we need to eat, drink, and sleep, to urinate and defecate, at regular intervals, and for our entire lives. Recent advances in technology, and changes to the organization—especially the division—of labor in the modern economy have only added new kinds of repetition, particularly in what we now call our “working lives.” These changes have arguably only intensified a necessary feature of human life—indeed, of living as such. But this intensification has arguably also given rise to something new: an experience of profound *boredom*—an experience, though, not of having nothing to do (as when a child complains of being bored), but of having, rather, *to do* (anymore, again) at all. This course is an investigation of the relation between repetition and the experience of (this peculiar kind of) boredom. Our aim will be to understand the nature of boredom and its connection, if any, with the phenomenon of repetition. We will approach our topic partly through the work of existentialist philosophers—Camus, Heidegger, and Nietzsche, in particular—and partly through literature—the work of David Foster Wallace and Samuel Beckett, in particular. All of these figures are sensitive, in different ways, to a kind of disgust with life that repetition can engender, a disgust that sometimes, though (interestingly) not always, manifests as, or results from, boredom. But many, if not all, of them are also interested in the other side of repetition, the opposite, as it were, of boredom and disgust with life: that is, in an overcoming of boredom, a new relation to the material conditions of human life, that we can achieve through repetitious activities (think, for example, of music, exercise, and religious ritual). Our topic, then, is, in a sense, the most basic problem of being human—a problem that has, perhaps, acquired new significance in the modern era, but that has always been with us: namely, the need to come to terms with the fact that, as living beings, we need constantly—repeatedly—to renew ourselves, to maintain ourselves, in order to go on living.

Requirements

Texts

The following texts are required, and will be available for purchase at the Seminary Co-op.

- Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, translated by Justin O'Brien, (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).
- Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, translated by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
- David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*, (New York: Hamish Hamilton, 2011).
- Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, (New York: Grove Press, 1953).
- Samuel Beckett, *Endgame & Act Without Words I*, (New York: Grove Press, 1957).

Participation

Class discussion will be a central component of our work together this quarter. Good discussions are the fruit of careful reading: if you put in the work to read and digest the material (which might require re-reading), our discussions will be rewarding. If you fail to do such work, our discussions will likely be disappointing. So everyone should come to class ready with questions, concerns, objections, and new ideas. The harder we all work on our own outside of class, the more we'll all learn together in class. Because participation in class is so important, attendance at all classes is required, and will be a factor in determining your final grade.

Google Doc paragraphs

Each week, you will make one short contribution to a class Google Doc. (This is a substitute for Chalk posts, to make it easier to read and, especially, to print everyone's contributions.) Half of you will write a paragraph on Tuesday's readings; the other half of you will write a paragraph on Thursday's readings; halfway through the quarter, we'll switch days. In each paragraph, you should identify a moment in the day's reading that you think is especially important to understanding the text in question, quote it (so that we don't all have to search all of the passages out), and then explain why you think that passage is especially important. The point of the exercise is to provide us all with a number of different ways of entering into the text and beginning a discussion; and to give us all a sense of what everyone in the class found worth emphasizing in the day's reading. Paragraphs need to be submitted by **5:00pm** the evening before each class meeting, so that everyone has time to read all of the posts before class at 9:00am the next day. I encourage you to print the relevant portion of the Google Doc before each class, so that you can consult it during our discussion.

Journal

You will also be expected to keep a journal. You should be working on the journal throughout the quarter, though you won't submit it until the end of tenth week. The point of the journal is to give you space to explore your reactions to the readings, and to class discussion, in an open-ended way—to follow up on ideas and connections and thoughts that occur to you as you read, as we discuss the readings in class, and as you go about your daily life. You will be expected to produce an average of *at least* one page per week, meaning that your journal should be *at least* ten pages long by the end of the quarter. I encourage you, however, not to leave the journal until the end of the quarter, but to be writing throughout, since the exercise will be much more effective that way. As an additional incentive to start writing early, I will, at a couple of randomly selected points during the quarter, ask you to submit your journals so that I can see how much you've written. I will not provide feedback on your journals, but I will browse them for evidence that you put sufficient effort into them, and general seriousness of your writing in your journal will determine that portion of your grade (see "Assessment Policies," below).

Papers

Finally, you will write three papers, each about 4–5 pages in length. Topics will be distributed at least a week in advance of the deadline. Due dates are to be determined, but will be roughly at the end of third week, the end of seventh week, and the middle of eleventh week.

A note about the readings

As you will be able to see from our schedule of readings, we will be moving quite quickly through the two assigned novels (Wallace's *The Pale King* and Beckett's *Watt*) as well as the longer play (Beckett's *Endgame*). I encourage you, therefore, to begin reading these texts before we get to them, so that you don't have quite so much reading to do during those weeks. I also expect that reading the novels concurrently with the assigned philosophical texts will help to generate interesting resonances and draw out important connections. That said, both of the novels do read fairly quickly, and I hope that the amount of reading assigned for each class will not prove overwhelming. If it does prove overwhelming, however, please let me know; our schedule can always be adjusted (readings can be cut or truncated) as the course progresses.

Assessment Policies

Your papers will be assessed according to the criteria laid out at the end of this syllabus.

The overall breakdown of your course grade will be as follows:

First Paper: 20
Second Paper: 25
Third Paper: 30
Journal: 10
Participation: 15

Letter grades will be determined as follows: 97–100 is an A+, 93–96 is an A, 90–92 is an A–, 87–89 is a B+, and so on.

Accommodations

The University of Chicago is committed to ensuring the full participation of all students in its programs. If you have a documented disability (or think you may have a disability) and, as a result, need a reasonable accommodation to participate in class, complete course requirements, or benefit from the University's programs or services, you are encouraged to contact Student Disability Services as soon as possible. To receive reasonable accommodation, you must be appropriately registered with Student Disability Services. Please contact the office at 773-834-4469/TTY 773-795-1186 or gmoorehead@uchicago.edu, or visit the website at disabilities.uchicago.edu. Student Disability Services is located in Room 233 in the Administration Building located at 5801 S. Ellis Avenue.

If you require any accommodations for this course, please—as soon as possible—provide me with a copy of your Accommodation Determination Letter (provided to you by the Student Disability Services office) so that we can discuss how to implement your accommodations.

Schedule

With the exception of the required texts mentioned above, all readings will be made available on the course Chalk site.

Introduction

- January 5:** Introduction
- January 7:** Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, pp. 316–352
Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” pp. 1–10 (1–8)

What is boredom? Contemporary analyses

- January 12:** Wendell O’Brien, “Boredom”
“The Myth of Sisyphus,” pp. 10–28 (8–21)
- January 14:** Cheshire Calhoun, “Living with Boredom”
“The Myth of Sisyphus,” pp. 28–50 (21–37)

Another approach

- January 19:** Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, pp. 59–77
“The Myth of Sisyphus,” pp. 51–65 (38–48)

Boredom lived

- January 21:** David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 1–129
“The Myth of Sisyphus,” pp. 66–69 (49–51)
- January 26:** *The Pale King*, pp. 130–255
“The Myth of Sisyphus,” pp. 69–77 (51–57)
- January 28:** *The Pale King*, pp. 256–407
“The Myth of Sisyphus,” pp. 77–84 (57–62)
- February 2:** *The Pale King*, pp. 408–547
“The Myth of Sisyphus,” pp. 84–92 (62–68)

What is boredom? Heidegger on boredom

- February 4:** Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, pp. 78–105
Optional: Katherine Withy, “The Strategic Unity of Heidegger’s *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*”

February 9: *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, pp. 106–131

February 11: *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, pp. 132–159

February 16: *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, pp. 160–184

Repetition I

February 18: Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 3–121
“The Myth of Sisyphus,” pp. 93–104 (69–77)

February 23: *Watt*, pp. 123–214
“The Myth of Sisyphus,” pp. 104–112 (77–83)

Life

February 25: Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*
“The Myth of Sisyphus,” pp. 113–118 (83–87)

February 29: Film screening:
Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles
6:00–9:30pm

March 1: Discussion of the film

Repetition II

March 3: Samuel Beckett, *Act Without Words II*
Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §341, §§343–346

Wrapping up

March 8: “The Myth of Sisyphus,” pp. 119–138 (88–102)

Assessment Criteria

100–90

Papers in this range not only demonstrate an excellent grasp of the texts, arguments, and positions they discuss; they also add to or develop ideas and arguments found in course texts or covered in class. Importantly, they do not merely summarize texts, lectures, or class discussions, but do at least one of the following things: (i) present an original criticism of a text or argument, (ii) develop a thought or argument in a way that goes beyond the text, lecture, or class discussion in an interesting way, or (iii) give an interpretation of a text that advances our understanding of it in some philosophically significant respect. They are also clearly and elegantly written, and possess a definite and explicitly marked structure that guides the reader through the argument, discussion, or interpretation.

89–83

Papers in this range demonstrate a solid grasp of the texts, arguments, and positions they discuss. They summarize the texts or present the arguments or positions with clarity and ease. They also go beyond mere summary by engaging in one of the tasks undertaken by papers in the range above, though they do not show the kind of originality on display in papers in that range. They are relatively clearly and elegantly written, with a discernible structure that is usually explicitly marked.

82–77

Papers in this range either (i) fail to demonstrate a solid understanding of the texts, arguments, or positions they discuss; (ii) involve significant moments of unclarity in writing, argument, or interpretation; (iii) fail to have either a clear thesis or a readily discernible argumentative structure; or (iv) do no more than summarize the text, lecture, or class discussion.

76–70

Papers in this range either (i) exhibit significant deficits in comprehension of the texts, arguments, and positions under discussion, or (ii) are both unclearly written and lacking in readily discernible argumentative structure.

Below 70

Papers in this range (i) exhibit significant deficits in comprehension of the texts, arguments, and positions under discussion, (ii) are unclearly written, and (iii) lack readily discernible argumentative structure.