

Syllabus of the course:

**WESTERN EXISTENTIAL TRADITION AND MAHAYANA BUDDHISM:
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ONTOLOGICAL NEGATIVITY**

Утверждена
Академическим советом ООП
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Pre-requisites:

General knowledge of history of philosophy and religions; working knowledge of English.

Course type: Elective

Abstract:

The course concerns the comparison of two traditions: existential philosophy (its non-theistic current), phenomenology and post-structuralism (Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Lacan etc.), on the one hand, and Mahayana Buddhism (darśanas / schools of *mādhyamaka* and *yogacāra*), on another. The course investigates the concept of a “subjectless consciousness” and deconstruction of a classical subject in Western philosophy of the XX-th XXI-th century (especially in structuralism and post-structuralism). It also investigates the “non-dual” consciousness (*jñāna*), “understanding wisdom” (*prajñāpāramitā*) and an extra-subjective “consciousness treasury” (*ālayavijñāna*) in Māhāyana Buddhism (darśanas of *mādhyamaka-sūnyavāda* and *yogacāra-vijñānavāda*). It also explores a clarification to what degree the Western concepts of “subjectless consciousness“, «extra-subject consciousness”, “structural apriori”, “rhizome” etc. may be correlated with the concepts of Māhāyana Buddhist philosophy.

We pretend to examine examines ontological strategies of Western existential philosophy and the Buddhist school (darśana) of *mādhyamaka*. We can discover similar phenomenological strategies together with extreme differences in anthropology and the value purposes (personalism and deconstruction of classic European subject in the existential philosophy and radical impersonalism of Buddhism). We suppose that Heidegger, Sartre and Buddhism have comparable theories of consciousness. The *mādhyamaka*’s “*sūnyata*” (emptiness) is comparable with Heidegger’s and Sartre’s “Nothingness” (though they are not absolutely similar) and we can discover primacy of negativity in both cases. We also try to substantiate that the position of *mādhyamaka* was a radical nihilism and not scepticism contrary to the opinion of a number of modern buddologists. And what is also important for us is the problem of the “unhappy consciousness” (be it the Buddhist “*duḥkha*” or “*Sorge*” of Heidegger, or Sartre’s “*Nausea*”) and different attitudes of thinkers.

One of the most complicated themes of philosophy of consciousness is mentioned in the course – the problem of intentionality of consciousnesses and its possibility (or impossibility) to be the universal anthropological characteristic. On an example of creativity of the J.- P. Sartre and some Vedhist and Buddhist texts two philosophical positions towards the intentionality are compared: Western as revealing and describing consciousness as intentional and Indian "disposal" of consciousness from intentionality, that was its soteriological purpose.

We do not set the task to investigate the complete history of comparative philosophy which, in essence, coincides with the history of philosophy itself because the self-determination of this or that thinker or philosophical school happens in dialogue and polemic to other schools (we can remember Plato's "dialogues" or discussions of Shraman’s epoch in India). However we have to substantiate the significance of this “narrow” investigations in the whole horizon and landscape of intercultural, intertraditional and intertextual dialogue.

So, philosophical comparativistics is the area of historic-philosophical and philosophical researches, the comparative studying of philosophical traditions of the “West” and the “East”, the “North” and the “South” including studying of philosophical schools, doctrines, systems, the categorical devices and

separate concepts. The comparative philosophy is also a comparison of philosophical cultures and traditions of all main civilizations of the world and, as at most, as an ideal of comparison of all philosophical representations of all civilizations

The searches of adequate to the studied subject research strategy in many respects are closed with general cultural studies tasks. Such approach allocates a special sphere of research — philosophical comparativistics, and also those researches which set as the purpose of identification of the certain general characteristics inherent in many independently arisen philosophical cultures.

The comparative philosophy opens philosophy in spheres of civilization, culture, mentality and conceptuality, rationally proves the polyphony of the world philosophy, reveals the general and special in philosophical cultures, develops the international projects promoting mutual understanding between people.

Learning Objectives:

1. to examine the core tenets of Mahayana Buddhism and existentialism and help students effectively analyse and apply them;
2. to introduce students to comparative philosophy;
3. to equip students with main categories and theoretical framework for cross-cultural ontological research.

Learning Outcomes

Students who complete this course will be able to:

- read and understand the works of Western existentialism and Māhāyana Buddhism;
- apply various theoretical approaches to comparative philosophical studies;
- use the vocabulary of Heidegger's philosophy, existentialism and Māhāyana Buddhism and apply it in different critical perspectives.

Course Plan

Topic 1. The existential philosophy: religious and non-theistic.

History of existential philosophy, its sources and main representatives. The concepts “existentialism”, “existential philosophy”, “religious” and “non-theistic” existential philosophy; their correlation and validity. Concepts “existential” and “existentialistic”. The stamps and cliches which have developed in Russian history of philosophy.

Topic 2. Heidegger's Being (Dasein) as the detection of a horizon of authenticity of human existence.

The departure of philosophy from ontological problematic in the 2 half of the XIX century and return to it in the beginning of the XX-th. Being as Consciousness in its historicity. Time and temporality (Heidegger, Sartre, Bergson). “Being-to-Death” as the detection of authenticity of human existence (the novel of Leo Tolstoy “Death of Ivan Ilyich). The question of Being and possibility of ultimate questioning.

Topic 3. “Sorge” and “Angst” as a strategy of negativity

The phenomenon of “Sorge”. Negativity as the most important aspect of being of a person in the world. With specificity of his being a person is obliged just to negation. The concepts of “Nothingness” (Nichtigkeit) and “dread” (Angst) in Heidegger's metaphysics. A person is a special way of Being (Dasein) which is constituted by negativity, according to Heidegger.

Topic 4. Sartre's doctrine of consciousness: “Being-for-itself” and intentionality

Sartre's transfer of a classic (i. e. accepted in the Western philosophy) dualistic relation of being and thinking, nature and spirit, matter and consciousness, object and subject, world and human being, external and internal, signified and signifying, unreasonable and reasonable, natural and artificial, real and virtual to a plane of two "regions" of Being: “Being-in-itself” (*l'être en-soi*) and “Being-for-itself” (*l'être pour-soi*). Intentionality of consciousness. “The transcendence of Ego”

Topic 5. Freedom and negativity in Sartre

Nothingness, negation, freedom and choice in Sartre's metaphysics. “The shadow of God” in Sartre.

Topic 6. Ontological foundations of Mahayana Buddhism

General ontological foundations of Mahayana Buddhism. Non-theism of Buddhism and its consequences. The doctrines of anatmavada and pratitya-samutpada. Phenomenalism. The unapplicability of the concept “samsara” to Buddhism.

Topic 7. The doctrine of dukkha and soteriological project.

The concept of dukkha in Buddhism: empirical and ontological aspects. The radical difference of Judeo-Christian concept “suffering” and Buddhist “dukkha”.

The differences of soteriological projects of “salvation” and “release”. Dukkha as an ontological “groundlessness” of the person, “inequality” to himself, a basic dissatisfaction with any form of empirical existence. Correlation of Buddhist “dukkha”, Heidegger’s “Sorge” and Sartre’s “Being-for-itself”.

Topic 8. The doctrine of shunya in Nagarjuna and strategy of negativity

Nagarjuna’s concept of “sunya” as the ontological strategy of negativity. The idea of the "annihilating" function of consciousness in Nagarjuna and it’s correlation with Sartre and Heidegger. Understanding the human consciousness as unequal to itself, non-self-sufficient, groundless and in this sense suffering, "unhappy". The aspiration to finding by a person of a certain true knowledge of himself and being.

Reading List

Required:

1. Heidegger Martin. *Being and Time*. Transl. from German by Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.
2. Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. Transl. And comm. By L. Garfield. N.Y., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
3. Sartre Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Transl. from French by Hazel E. Barnes. A New Directions Paperbook, 1970.

Optional:

1. Heidegger Martin. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. New Heaven & London: Yale University Press, 2000.
2. Nāgārjuna. *The Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra*. Transl. By Lok To. N.Y. – S.F. – Toronto, 2000.
3. Sartre Jean-Paul. *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existential Theory of Consciousness*. Transl. F. Williams and R. Kirkpatrick. New York: Noonday Press, 1957.

Grading System

The final grade of a student (G_{final}) is formed of a cumulative grade ($G_{\text{cumulative}}$) and the grade for examination (written test) (G_{exam}), calculated in the following proportion:

$$G_{\text{final}} = 0,5 * G_{\text{cumulative}} + 0,5 * G_{\text{exam}}$$

Cumulative grade ($G_{\text{cumulative}}$) is formed of the grade for the performance during the seminars (G_{seminars}) and the collective presentation in class ($G_{\text{presentation}}$). These grades have the following weight in the overall cumulative grade:

$$G_{\text{cumulative}} = 0,6 * G_{\text{seminars}} + 0,4 * G_{\text{presentation}}$$

Guidelines for Knowledge Assessment

Class attendance and active participation: Preparation for and participation in class discussion are essential parts of this course. Students are expected to come to class ready to discuss the assigned texts and contribute productively to class discussions. Regular attendance of the course is also important for the overall grade of a student. The students' commentaries should be logical, well-structured, well-argued, should demonstrate good knowledge of the assigned text as well as the main theories and concepts of the course.

Presentations in class: Each student will have to participate in one collective presentation in class. Each presentation is focused on the work with one specialised text on the history or theory of culture. The mark for the collective presentation consists of the following:

1. the quality of addressing the main issues of the text (2 points);
2. the clarity of the presentation's structure and accuracy in the use of visual material (2 points);
3. the quality of the group work: coordination during the presentation and the level of its organisation (2 points);
4. the quality of the questions posed to the text (2 points);
5. the accuracy of the answers given by the presenting group to the questions of the audience (2 points).

Final Exam: a written test (40 min), consisting of several closed and one open question. The answer to the open question should demonstrate the knowledge of the lecture material, be well-structured, well-argued and clearly written.

Methods of instruction

Organisation of seminars:

The first seminar is focused on the discussion of scholarly texts on theoretical issues, dealing with the concepts of culture. Starting from the second seminar and up to the end of the course the class work is organised according to the following scheme.

Before a seminar:

- the whole group reads **one text** for the seminar ("basic" text), which provides the general context to a particular problem.
- each seminar **one presentation** is made together by 2 or 3 students. The presentation is centred on another text, which is related to the basic one everybody reads, but is focused on a more specific problem. The group reads one basic text, and the presenters read two texts, their own and the basic text for everyone.

The main task of the presenters is to describe the key ideas and problems discussed in their text.

They will need to make a Power Point presentation to make their arguments clear. If the text concerns art history and involves the demonstration of artworks, each illustration must be provided with the name of the author of this artwork, title, year of production, technique, its present location.

The presenters will also have to prepare **four** questions to the audience on the basic text and **four** questions on the text they are presenting.

During a seminar:

1. Before the presentation the group divides into four mini-groups.
2. Then follows the presentation (15 min)
3. After the presentation the audience can ask short "questions of understanding".
4. Then the presenters formulate **two** questions to each of the four groups, **one** concerning the text they were talking about, and another **one** concerning the basic text everybody read for the seminar.
5. The mini-groups discuss the questions between them.
6. The general discussion begins. The presenters are responsible for leading this discussion; they assess the quality of answers and make a conclusion after the discussion.

All presenters are given the dates on which they are making their presentations well in advance. If no one of the presenters appears in class on their date, their group gets **zero mark** for this task; their work is not accepted afterwards. All presenters in one group get the same mark, so the collective work should be well-organised and the presentation itself well-coordinated.

The organisation of the work on each seminar around two texts, one of which is read by everyone, is aimed to stimulate the participation of the whole group of students in the classroom discussion.

Special equipment and software support (if required)

Laptop and projector. Power Point or similar software.