

HUMA 5900-L1 (1246) Comparative Philosophy

Topic: Being and Nothingness in Intercultural Perspective

Fall Semester 2020 (Sept. 8 to Dec. 1, 2020): Tues. 3:00PM-5:50PM

Prof. Eric S. Nelson

Class will be conducted online

Office: 2370 (meetings will be conducted online)

Office Hours: Mondays and Tuesdays: 12:45-14:45 and by appointment

Course Description

Philosophy is often considered to be primarily a Western discourse; yet philosophical questions, reflections, and arguments have occurred throughout myriad discourses and forms of life. One variety of questions posed in distinctive milieus concerns being and nothingness: How can nothing become something? What does it signify to be or not to be? Should we pursue the way of being or not-being? Why is there something rather than nothing? In this course, we will examine interpretive strategies and methods of comparative and intercultural philosophy by looking at ancient and modern responses to questions of being and nothingness in a few East Asian, European, and South Asian discourses. We will also explore related experiences, concepts, and issues such as emptiness, logical negation, existential negativity, apophatic and negative language, and “Western” and “Eastern” nihilism.

Outline of Course Schedule and Topics

I. Language and Nothingness: Early Sources

1. Sept. 8: (1) Introduction to the course and its questions; (2) The priority of being: Parmenides on the way of being and non-being and Plato on “what is not” (*The Sophist*, 237-239b); (3) a note on Genesis 1.2.
2. Sept. 15: The language and politics of nothingness in the *Laozi* and the *Hanfeizi*
3. Sept. 22: The language of nothingness and negativity in the *Zhuangzi* and the *Liezi*
4. Sept. 29: The language of nothingness and negativity in Wang Bi on the *Laozi* and the *Yijing*
5. Oct. 6: Nāgārjuna and the emptiness of emptiness

6. Oct. 13: Three Tibetan Interpretations of emptiness and Madhyamaka Buddhism: Mipam Namgyel, Khedrupje, and Tsongkhapa

II. Being and Nothingness: Intercultural Approaches and Questions

7. Oct. 20: Why is there something rather than nothing? How is nothingness part of the constitution of things? Leibniz on nothingness, God, the zero, and the *Yijing*

8. Oct. 27: Hegel on negativity, nothingness, Buddhism, and Daoism (from *Science of Logic, Lectures on Philosophy of Religion*)

* Oct. 29: Library lecture from 12:00 to 1:30pm on Daoism and Environmental Philosophy

9. Nov. 3: Schopenhauer and Nietzsche on negativity, nothingness, and Buddhism

10. Nov. 10: A debate about language and nothingness: Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?”; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* (6.4 - 7); and Rudolf Carnap, “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language”

III. Nihilism and “Eastern” and “Western” Nothingness?

11. Nov. 17: The *Daodejing* and the emptiness of the thing in Heidegger, “The Thing”

* Turn in short proposal of your research paper

12. Nov. 24: Existential Nothingness: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (chapter one) and Keiji Nishitani on Sartrean and existential nothingness (From *Religion and Nothingness* and *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*)

13. Dec. 1: Shin’ichi Hisamatsu, “The Characteristics of Oriental Nothingness” and Keiji Nishitani on nihilism and Western and Buddhist nothingness

Dec. 22: Final Research Paper Due on Canvas before 10pm

Course Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

1	Develop a well-informed and critical understanding of questions of being and nothingness in comparative and intercultural philosophy.
2	Learn to critically, comparatively, and interculturally analyze the forms of experience, interpretation, and argumentation articulated in philosophical sources.
3	Learn to explain the roles and significance of basic philosophical questions in human life from diverse perspectives.

Planned Assessment Tasks

1. At least **three reflections** and weekly participation in online group discussion: 25%

* All students are expected to post in the canvas discussion board at least three (one each third of the course) reflections responding to and reflecting on an issue from one or two of the designated readings. All students should engage in discussion of the response-reflections on canvas.

2. **Attendance and participation** in online classes and discussions: 25%

3. **Proposal due on Nov. 17 and Final Paper due on Dec 22:** 50%

Paper Proposals should consist of a proposed title and two paragraph description of your research project.

Paper length: BA, MA, MPhil Students: 12-15 pages; PhD students: 15-25 pages. Papers should be 12 point, double spaced, and normal margins.

PLAGIARISM: The discovery of cheating will result in automatically failing the course.

Course Readings

We will read selections from a number of texts. See canvas for further details.