

Whence hope? What can help us better our world, privately and publicly? The answer lies in our distinct humanity, which can no longer be taken for granted; it must be rediscovered, cultivated, lifted to new heights – moving on from “human being” to “human becoming.”

Academia is vital for grasping our humanity, and helping us live up to it. For generations, social scientists have debated what it means to be human: the *homo biologicus*, impelled by evolutionary imperatives; the *homo economicus*, motivated by material calculation; the *homo sociologicus*, driven by collectives; and the *homo psychologicus*, propelled by emotions. But these are all traits we share with animals or machines. What, then, sets us apart, and brings us together, as *humans*, and what are the political implications? Seeking answers, we may learn something new and valuable about ourselves, and about how politics can help bring out not just the worst, but the best, in us.

This cause drives our course: Human Odyssey to Political Existentialism (HOPE) is a journey into the human condition and its politics, turning to existentialism for guidance. Existentialism reveals that human politics is not only about “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” but also about the awareness of death, a sense of freedom and the search for meaning. Most philosophers ask, “what is the good life?” and answer: to *feel* good, or to *be* good, or to *do* good. Existentialism asks, “what is life good *for*?” and traces the answers that people, in their lived experience, give.

The existentialists do not form a “school” or share any singular outlook on religion and politics. Kierkegaard was a pious Christian; Buber an Orthodox Jew; Nietzsche and Camus were atheists. Kierkegaard despised politics; Sartre was a Marxist; de Beauvoir a feminist; Heidegger, a Nazi. This certainly makes it difficult to pinpoint existentialism, but hosting such strange bedfellows also shows its vitality, and its potential relevance to many, perhaps most, people and their politics.

HOPE is a richly interdisciplinary course: anchored in political science and philosophy, it also draws on history, sociology, psychology, and economy – synthesizing theoretical insights with empirical findings, both vintage and novel. HOPE shows that science and art can create a wonderful synergy when studying – indeed foregrounding – our humanity.

Taught by Professor Uriel Abulof at Princeton University’s LISD and at Tel Aviv University’s Politics Department, HOPE is now becoming a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on EdX platform. The McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning at Princeton University leads its development, collaborating extensively with TAU Online–Innovative Learning Center. Bringing HOPE online, we reach out to as many people as possible, worldwide, employing novel technologies in ways that enhance, not drain, our humanity, and our ability to turn from “power politics” to “purpose politics”: cultivating creative, courageous, civil choices – the gist of existential politics.

HOPE includes online talks, interviews, and student discussions; it teaches about key concepts and figures – thinkers, artists, and politicians – both ancient and modern; it introduces a host of fascinating questions to probe alone, and together, with friends and in class; it offers myriad multimedia features, including various forms of art (painting, prose and poetry, cinema, tv, and music); it invites students to choose between several edifying semester-long projects, including a personal journal and a collective newspaper. HOPE requires no previous professional knowledge, and is offered, free of charge, in English, with both Arabic and Hebrew subtitles.

At the heart of HOPE are forty-four talks spanning twelve themes:

- I. Human/Nature:** Are we truly different, let alone better, than non-humans? Are our notions of politics distinctly human, or ought political scientists just as well study packs of wolves? What can Darwin and Maslow teach us about human nature and its resonance in society and politics?
- II. Identity & Authenticity:** What is the Self, and does it emerge, or is it made? How did Freud see its layers? What are identity politics? What is the ancient and modern imperative of authenticity? How has the call for authenticity informed tribal and ethnic conflicts? Is there a way out?
- III. Freedom:** What separates freedom from liberty? Are we always free? Why and how do we forget our freedom? What are the roles of reasoning and responsibility in freedom? What can Sartre and Fromm teach us about the politics of freedom and bad faith? What are the implications for liberalism?
- IV. Reflection:** What is thinking? Does freedom require reflection? What motivates us to think? What drives us to suspend thinking? How does reflection affect nihilism and compliance? Can thinking prevent evil, personal and political? What did Arendt see as “the banality of evil”?
- V. Happiness:** What is happiness, and what can Aristotle and Freud teach us about the types of happiness? What makes us happy? Why and how has the “pursuit of happiness” become a socio-political goal, and have we approached its attainment? What are the key paradoxes of happiness?
- VI. Dread & Death:** What is the evolutionary role of fear, and how does fear differ from anxiety and angst? How do we develop our sense of death, and how does it motivate us, privately and publicly? How do death awareness, fear of murder, willingness to kill, and suicide, figure in politics?
- VII. Meaning:** Why, when and how do we search for meaning in, and for, our lives? What can Camus and Frankl teach us about meaning-making? How does it turn, in politics, to legitimation? What are the relations between happiness, death, and the pursuit of meaning? Why breathe, breed and bleed?
- VIII. Truth & Trust:** What’s between fact, fiction and fantasy? What are the key theories on the nature of truth? How does truth relate to trust? Why do politicians lie, and why do we accept this? What can Orwell and Havel teach us about the power of truth in politics? What is post-truth politics?
- IX. Morality:** What are the evolutionary roles of morality? What can Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Kohlberg teach us about the emergence, evolution and types of morality? How do conscience and moral dilemmas affect our private and public lives? What are the key modes of political legitimation?
- X. God & Religion:** Can we have freedom with(out) God, and religion? What can Weber and Jaspers teach us about the civilizational roles of religion? Who killed God and why? Has late modernization revived God? What roles have God and religion played in politics? What is civil religion?
- XI. Alienation & Love:** What are the modern origins, and types, of alienation? Can love ameliorate alienation? How have alienation and love figured in political thought? What can Rousseau and Orwell teach us about the political potency of love? How have politicians employed love in their rhetoric?
- XII. Hope:** Can we live without hope? Can we hope without freedom? Is hope utopian? What is the nexus between personal and public hope? What distinguishes ancient from modern cynicism? Can humans find hope between godlike vanity and doglike life? Do we hope too little, or too much?