

## PHILOSOPHY 375: EXISTENTIALISM

Fall 2015

Monday and Tuesday 13:35 – 14:25, and one mandatory conference

Professor Alia Al-Saji

Office: 932 Leacock

Email: [alia.al-saji@mcgill.ca](mailto:alia.al-saji@mcgill.ca)

Office hours: Tuesdays 14:30-16:30

Teaching Assistants: Alice Everly and Maiya Jordan

### **Course Description:**

The topic of this course is existential philosophy. Existentialism is the general name given to a philosophical movement that arose in Europe in the 1930s and included several thinkers principally in France, but also in Germany. Although not all of these thinkers always accepted the label “existentialist”, they all sought in their philosophies to reconceptualize the nature of human existence. More precisely, they are joined in the belief that human existence cannot be defined by a pre-determined essence.

Although the term “existentialism” is also sometimes used to describe a popular cultural phenomenon that arose in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this course will be concerned with the *philosophical* sense of existentialism. In particular, existential philosophers (e.g. Sartre and Beauvoir) distinguished sharply between their writings and the existentialist fashion of the times, which they saw as seeking to profit from the popularity of their writings by repeating key terms (such as “anguish” or “bad faith”) but emptied of their philosophical sense. Existentialism is thus not simply a matter of personal reflection or a style of life, but a philosophical approach to human existence that presents a certain number of concepts or themes.

The existential themes discussed in this course are: the intentional nature of consciousness (Husserl and Sartre); the function and nature of emotion (Sartre); what anxiety reveals about human existence in general (Sartre and Camus); bad faith (Sartre); the structure of intersubjective relations (Sartre, Beauvoir and Fanon); the nature of human freedom, responsibility and choice (Sartre, Beauvoir and Camus); the social constitution of the self and of the sense of one’s own body (Beauvoir and Fanon); the critique of essentialism (Sartre, Beauvoir and Camus); the absurdity or groundlessness of human existence and the definition of this existence as perpetual becoming (all thinkers); and the significance of this absurdity for the question of suicide (Camus).

This course is organized according to three aims: (i) To acquaint students with the immediate philosophical background of existentialism, seen in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. The intentional theory of consciousness, developed by Husserl and appropriated by Sartre in his description of human emotion, will provide the basis for understanding the other existential concepts in the course. (Weeks 1-3) (ii) To acquaint students with the major themes of existential philosophy, in its principal French strand. This will be done by means of a close study of the most systematically developed version of French existentialism, the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. (Weeks 4-8) (iii) To present students with a sense of the diversity of existential positions. To this end, we will study contrasting approaches to existentialism—seen in the feminist philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir, the anti-colonialist and anti-racist philosophy of Frantz Fanon, and the philosophy of the absurd developed by Albert Camus. (Weeks 8-13) The general purpose of the course is therefore *not* to present a survey of all so-called existentialisms, but to allow students to arrive at an understanding of what constitutes existential philosophy by means of a study of some of its most important expressions.

**Prerequisites and Expectations:**

This course has as a prerequisite one prior course in philosophy at the introductory level. This prerequisite is waived for students who have taken philosophy courses at CEGEP. No prior knowledge of existentialism is required. Students should, however, be prepared to read complex texts and to learn how to read, write and discuss philosophy. Note also that this course will present close readings and textual analysis of parts of the texts assigned. Students should thus expect a treatment of philosophical concepts, not of the circumstances or biographies of authors.

**Texts:** Available at McGill Bookstore:

1. Course Pack
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, trans. Philip Maret (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 34-64.

**Mandatory Conference:**

Conferences will begin on September 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup>. You should sign up for one conference on Minerva. There are four available conference slots:

- Thursday 13:35 – 14:25 (Alice Everly)
- Thursday 16:05 – 16:55 (Alice Everly)
- Friday 14:35 – 15:25 (Maiya Jordan)
- Friday 15:35 – 16:25 (Maiya Jordan)

Room assignments will be listed on Minerva.

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*In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.*

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

According to Senate regulations, instructors are not permitted to make special arrangements for final exams. Please consult the Calendar, section 4.7.2.1, General University Information & Regulations at [www.mcgill.ca](http://www.mcgill.ca)

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