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 predetermined essence.

Although the term “existentialism” is also sometimes used to describe a popular cultural phenomenon that arose in the middle of the 20th 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 (Sartre); bad faith (Sartre); the structure of intersubjective relations (Sartre, Beauvoir and Fanon); the nature of human freedom, responsibility and choice (Sartre, Beauvoir and Fanon); the social constitution of the self and of the sense of one’s own body (Beauvoir and Fanon); the critique of essentialism (Sartre and Beauvoir); the absurdity or groundlessness of human existence and the definition of this existence as perpetual becoming (all).

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 one 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 and in the anti-colonial and anti-racist philosophy of Frantz Fanon. (Weeks 9-13) 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:** 1. Course Pack (McGill Bookstore)  
Additional materials will be posted to MyCourses as needed. If you wish to consult an original text that is in French (Sartre, Beauvoir, Fanon), see MyCourses for the PDF.

**Assignments and Grades:** One essay (40%) and one take-home final examination (50%). The remaining 10% depends on your participation and attendance at conferences.

1. **One essay (40%):** This will take the form of a five-page essay and must be chosen from a list of topics provided by the instructor. The purpose is to give you practice in writing philosophical, that is, critical and well-reasoned essays. (Guidelines for essays will be explained in conference.)

2. **The take-home final (50%)** will include two components: I/ A short essay (5 pages) along the same lines as your first essay assignment, but with a list of topics covering the second half of the course. II/ Short-answer questions, mainly expository, aimed to test your knowledge of readings and lectures from the entire course.

3. **Attendance and active participation in weekly conferences are mandatory (worth 10% of your grade).** Attendance will be taken at conferences by a method devise by your TA (circulation of a sign-up sheet, or required questions/responses to be submitted in person). Attendance constitutes *part* of your grade. *Active engagement and participation* in conferences will make up the rest of the grade. Please ensure that your participation is thoughtful, respectful, and responsive to your fellow students and TAs.

**Mandatory Conference:**  
Conferences begin on *Monday, September 16th*. You should sign up for one conference on Minerva. There are four available conference slots (check the room on Minerva):  
- One slot on Monday 12:35 – 13:25
- Two slots on Monday 13:35 – 14:25
- One slot on Monday 14:35 – 15:25

**Policy on Email Communications:** Your professor receives an average of thirty emails a day, so before sending an email, please read this: [https://emailcharter.wordpress.com/](https://emailcharter.wordpress.com/) Make sure you are not asking a question whose response can be found in this syllabus. If you have a question that requires a long response, please come to office hours. Short and to-the-point emails will be responded to more quickly, but in all cases, please allow at least 72 hours for a response.

**Classroom Etiquette:** Please turn your phones to *silent* when in class or conference. Computers should only be used for course-related activities, such as note-taking or viewing the readings. Please ensure that those sitting behind you are not adversely affected by your screen light.

**Policy on Extensions:** No extensions will be granted without a medical note. Late work will be penalized at the rate of one letter grade per calendar day past the due date. For instance, a paper that is evaluated as a B, if one day late, will be assigned a B-, and if two days late, it will receive a C+. 
Schedule of Readings:
Readings are in the course pack, unless otherwise indicated. Page numbers refer to those of original sources. [Lectures are T and R in STBIO N2/2, except where indicated. Please note that there will be a lecture on Monday, September 9th in a different room.]

September
3 Introduction.

INTRODUCTION: THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL BACKDROP TO EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY

5 “What is Existentialism?” (MyCourses)
   Husserl, “The thesis of the natural standpoint and its suspension” (pp. 91-100)

9 [M] [Monday lecture in a different room: BURN 1B45.]
   And Sartre, “Intentionality: A fundamental idea of Husserl’s phenomenology” (pp. 4-5).

10 [TBD. Cancelled class.]

12 Continue Husserl, pp. 91-109. [Optional reading: Husserl, pp. 120-124]
   [Guest Lecture: Renxiang Liu]

Conferences begin Monday, September 16th. Please SIGN UP for a conference on Minerva.

17 Finish Husserl. Begin Sartre, Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions, pp. 34-64

19 Sartre, Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions, pp. 34-64

24, 26 Sartre, Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions, pp. 34-64

EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

October


22, 24 Sartre, The Philosophy of J.-P. Sartre, “The Encounter with the Other,” pp. 188-208. And No Exit (To be discussed during conferences)

ESSAY due October 31st by 4 PM.

EXISTENTIALISM AND FEMINISM: SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

November 5 Transition from Sartre to Beauvoir. Begin reading Beauvoir.

7 Beauvoir, “Introduction to The Second Sex” (from “One Is Not Born a Woman,” pp. 6-20)

12 Continue Beauvoir, “Introduction to The Second Sex” (pp. 6-20)
And Beauvoir, “The Mother” (pp. 20-27)

14 Beauvoir, “The Mother” and “The Woman in Love” (pp. 20-34)

EXISTENTIALISM AND RACISM: FRANTZ FANON

November 19 Fanon, “Introduction” to Black Skin, White Masks
And Fanon, selection from Chapter Six of Black Skin, White Masks, pp. 188-195. (See also the explanatory handout on MyCourses)
Begin Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness” (pp. 109-119)


28 Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness” (pp. 109-140).
[Guest Lecture: Emily Douglas]

December 4 [T] [Tuesday lecture in a different room: BURN 1B45. See Minerva.] Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness” (pp. 109-140).
And “By Way of Conclusion” from Black Skin, White Masks (pp. 223-232)

TAKE-HOME FINAL due date will be set by the university (for exam period)

Essay topics, guidelines, and take-home exam questions, as well as course handouts, will be posted on MyCourses. (Topics for the essay will be posted three weeks ahead of time. Take-home final questions will be posted on the last day of classes.)

McGILL UNIVERSITY VALUES ACADEMIC INTEGRITY. THEREFORE ALL STUDENTS MUST UNDERSTAND THE MEANING AND CONSEQUENCES OF CHEATING, PLAGIARISM AND OTHER ACADEMIC OFFENCES UNDER THE CODE OF STUDENT CONDUCT AND DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).

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.