

PHILOSOPHY 375: EXISTENTIALISM

Fall 2016

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

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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 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 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 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: 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.

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 last part 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).** *For each weekly conference, you will be required to come with one question on that week's reading.* Default submission method: The question should be written (along with your name) on a note card that you hand in to your TA. These note cards will be used to determine your attendance at conferences (although they are not individually graded/returned). Please note that your TA may determine a different submission method for questions (this will be explained in the first conference).

Mandatory Conference: Conferences will begin on **Thursday, September 15th**. *You should sign up for one conference on Minerva.* There are four available conference slots:

- Thursday 13:35 – 14:25
- Thursday 13:35 – 14:25
- Thursday 14:35 – 15:25
- Thursday 15:35 – 16:25

Policy on Email Communications: Your professor receives an average of fifty emails a day, so before sending an email, please read this: <http://emailcharter.org/>. 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 readings.

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 M and T, with exceptional days noted in brackets.]

September 2 [F] Introduction.
 5 No Class. Labour Day.

INTRODUCTION: THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL BACKDROP TO EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY

- 6 “What is Existentialism?” (Handout)
 Husserl, “The thesis of the natural standpoint and its suspension” (pp. 91-100)
- 8 [R] Husserl, “The thesis of the natural standpoint and its suspension” (pp. 91-100) and Husserl pp. 101-107. [Optional reading: Husserl, pp. 120-124]
 And Sartre, “Intentionality: A fundamental idea of Husserl’s phenomenology” (pp. 4-5).
- 12 Continue Husserl. Begin Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*.
 13 Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, pp. 34-64

Conferences begin Thursday, September 15th. Please SIGN UP for a conference on Minerva.

19, 20 Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, pp. 34-64

EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

- 26 Sartre, *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, “Consciousness of Something,” pp. 101-107. [Background reading: “The Question,” pp. 110-115]
- 27 Sartre, *The Philosophy of J.-P. Sartre*, “Anguish,” pp. 115-123
- October 3, 4 Sartre, *The Philosophy of J.-P. Sartre*, “Self-negation” (Bad Faith), pp. 136-166.
- 10 No Class. Thanksgiving Holiday.
 11 Sartre on “Facticity,” pp. 167-170.
- 17 Sartre, *The Philosophy of J.-P. Sartre*, “The Encounter with the Other,” pp. 188-208. And *No Exit* (To be discussed during conferences)
- *18 and 24* Lectures cancelled, as the professor will be out of town. You will meet in combined conference sections with your TA for *one* of these dates to discuss *No Exit*. TBA.
- 25 Regular class resumes: Continue Sartre, *The Philosophy of J.-P. Sartre*, “The Encounter with the Other,” pp. 188-208.
- 31 Sartre, *The Philosophy of J.-P. Sartre*, “Being and Doing,” pp. 255-281
- November 1 Sartre, *The Philosophy of J.-P. Sartre*, “Being and Doing,” pp. 255-281

ESSAY due November 7th in class or in my mailbox (Leacock 414)**EXISTENTIALISM AND FEMINISM: SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR**

- November 7 Beauvoir, "Introduction to The Second Sex" (from "One Is Not Born a Woman," pp. 6-20)
- 8 Continue Beauvoir, "Introduction to The Second Sex" (pp. 6-20) and begin "The Mother" (pp. 20-27)
- 14 Beauvoir, "The Mother" and "The Woman in Love" (pp. 20-34)

EXISTENTIALISM AND RACISM: FRANTZ FANON

- November 15 Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness" [Correct translation: "The Lived Experience of the Black"], Chapter Five of *Black Skin, White Masks* (pp. 109-140). And Fanon, selection from Chapter Six of *Black Skin, White Masks*, pp. 188-195. (See also the handout on MyCourses)
- 21, 22 Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness" (pp. 109-140)
- 28 Finish Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness" (pp. 109-140). And "By Way of Conclusion" from *Black Skin, White Masks* (pp. 223-232)

PHILOSOPHY OF THE ABSURD: ALBERT CAMUS

- 29 Camus, "An Absurd Reasoning" (pp. 11-35, 51-63)) and "The Myth of Sisyphus" (pp. 107-111)
- December 5 Continue Camus. Course wrap-up.

TAKE-HOME FINAL due date will be set by the university (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 in the last week 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.
