

PHIL375: Existentialism

Term: Summer 2023

Course schedule: MTWR 1:35–3:55pm

Location: LEA 110

Instructor: Jean-François Rioux

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Office hours: MTWR 4:00–5:00 in LEA 940 (on appointment)

Course description:

Paul Ricœur once wrote that “existentialism, as a common philosophy, does not exist” (*Lectures 2*, p. 30). And indeed, what constitutes existentialism—its fundamental ideas, its methods, its problems, its members—is in large part difficult to determine. Even Jean-Paul Sartre, who famously gave a conference called *Existentialism is a Humanism*, rejects belonging to this intellectual movement. In 1975, Sartre shares his thoughts on existentialist readings of his work: “no one calls me an ‘existentialist’ anymore, except in handbooks, where it does not mean anything anymore” (*Situations X*, p. 192). But is existentialism truly meaningless? Is there any way to inject new life into it?

In this course, I suggest introducing ourselves to the thinker that is associated with existentialism the most: Jean-Paul Sartre. We will study his key ideas (e.g., anxiety, situation, bad faith), their philosophical origin (e.g., Descartes, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger), as well as the media in which they were developed (e.g., a conference [*Existentialism is a Humanism*], a play [*Dirty Hands*]). Most importantly, we will put emphasis on the ontological and phenomenological ground of these ideas by reading parts of *Being and Nothingness* (especially “The Origin of Nothingness,” “Bad Faith” and “Freedom”). Finally, we will consider arguments from Paul Ricœur’s *Freedom and Nature*, which can be interpreted as an implicit critique to Sartre’s philosophy. Necessity, consent and hesitation will all have a role to play in what Ricœur calls “an only human freedom” (p. 482).

Here is a set of philosophical questions that we will try to answer along our path:

- On what ground do human beings make decisions?
- How do human beings try to forget their freedom?

- What is the relationship between freedom and necessity?

Course pre-requisites:

Existentialism is a 300-course. This course has a prerequisite of one prior course in philosophy. This prerequisite is waived for students who have taken courses in philosophy at CEGEP, IB, or equivalent.

Instructional method:

This course will be held in person and will require your active participation. Most sessions will consist of a presentation by the instructor as well as learning activities in smaller groups.

This course will be reading intensive. The assigned materials should be read before attending the relevant lectures. Please bring your own paper copies of the required course materials to the relevant lectures.

The lectures will not be recorded. Please do not record the lectures without my explicit consent.

Please turn off your cellphones while in class. Even small vibrations can distract you, your peers and the instructors. If you use a computer, do so without distracting anyone.

All of you can benefit from reviewing this brief writing guide: <https://bit.ly/3JSna79>.

Required course materials from The Word bookstore (cash only):

- Ricœur, Paul (2007). *Freedom and Nature*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press.

Required course materials from the internet:

- Sartre Jean-Paul (2018). [*Being and Nothingness*](#), London, Routledge.
- Sartre Jean-Paul (2007). [*Existentialism is a Humanism*](#), New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul (1989). [*No Exit, and Three Other Plays*](#), New York, Vintage International.

*If you can read French, I invite you to read the original (French) versions.

Schedule (subject to change at the instructor's discretion):

Day	Date	Description	Book	Section
1	07-06	Introduction		
2	07-10	Sartre's plays	"Dirty Hands" (in <i>No Exit</i>)	
3	07-11	The 1945 conference	<i>Existentialism is a Humanism</i>	
4	07-12	Nothingness and anxiety 1	<i>Being and Nothingness</i>	Part 1 Chapter 1.V
5	07-13	Nothingness and anxiety 2	<i>Being and Nothingness</i>	Part 1 Chapter 1.V
6	07-17	Bad Faith	<i>Being and Nothingness</i>	Part 1 Chapter 2
7	07-18	Freedom 1	<i>Being and Nothingness</i>	Part 4 Chapter 1
8	07-19	Freedom 2	<i>Being and Nothingness</i>	Part 4 Chapter 1
9	07-20	Exam		
10	07-24	Motivation	<i>Freedom and Nature</i>	Part 1 Chapter 1
11	07-25	Need and pleasure	<i>Freedom and Nature</i>	Part 1 Chapter 2
12	07-26	From Hesitation to choice	<i>Freedom and Nature</i>	Part 1 Chapter 3
13	07-27	Experienced necessity	<i>Freedom and Nature</i>	Part 3 Chapter 2
14	07-31	Consent	<i>Freedom and Nature</i>	Part 3 Chapter 3 and Conclusion
15	08-01	Final Exam		
16	08-02	Oral presentations	<i>Being and Nothingness</i>	Part 3 Chapter 1
17	08-03	Oral presentations	<i>Being and Nothingness</i>	Part 3 Chapter 2
	08-07	Final paper		

Assessments:

- [Questions \(10%\)](#)

At the beginning of each lecture, you will have the possibility of submitting a question about the readings. The question has to be philosophical. By the end of the course, you should have sent me up to 12 (but no fewer than 10) questions. Grading criteria: relevance and clarity.

- Exam 1 (30%)

The first exam will evaluate your understanding of Sartre's philosophy. You will have two hours and a half to respond to two or three questions (TBD).

The exam will take place in class and you will have access to your books and your notes. Grading criteria: accuracy, clarity and organization.

- Exam 2 (30%)

The second exam will evaluate your understanding of Ricœur's philosophy. You will have two hours and a half to respond to two or three questions (TBD). The exam will take place in class and you will have access to your books and your notes. Grading criteria: accuracy, clarity and organization.

- Oral presentation (10%)

You will have to choose between two themes of Sartre's philosophy: the Other or the body. During one of the two dedicated lectures, you will be asked to discuss the theme you chose in smaller groups. At the end of your paper (see below), you will have to explain how this discussion has impacted your understanding of your theme. Grading criteria: accuracy, clarity, organization, originality and critical thinking.

- Paper (20%)

You will have to give a clear account of a theme of Sartre's philosophy: the Other or the body. Grading criteria: accuracy, clarity, organization, originality and critical thinking.

Language of submission:

"In accord with McGill University's [Charter of Student Rights](#), students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives." (Approved by Senate on 21 January 2009)

« Conformément à [la Charte des droits de l'étudiant](#) de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté, sauf dans le cas des cours dont l'un des objets est la maîtrise d'une langue. » (Énoncé approuvé par le Sénat le 21 janvier 2009)

Academic integrity:

"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.](#)” (Approved by Senate on 29 January 2003) (See McGill’s [guide to academic honesty](#) for more information.)

« L'Université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon [le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et procédures disciplinaires](#). » (Énoncé approuvé par le Sénat le 29 janvier 2003) (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le [guide pour l'honnêteté académique de McGill](#).)