

PHIL 375 Existentialism – Fall 2022

Instructor: Dallas Jokic (dallas.jokic@mcgill.ca)

Course Description:

Existentialism is a philosophical approach which draws on Nietzschean perspectivism and modern phenomenology to understand the nature of reality, meaning, consciousness, freedom, and responsibility. Far from only concerning themselves with abstract intellectual problems, existentialists wrestle with what it means to live a good, free, and authentic life in times of crisis and transformation. In the early-mid 20th century, existentialism became widely popular among a broad audience in a way that few philosophical traditions have since the Stoicism of the ancient world. While existentialism is often understood as a philosophy of radical freedom, its connection to social and political action and disempowerment is more complicated and fraught than it might appear at first glance. Far from being an individualized project of self-help, existentialism reckons with pressing questions of what constitutes freedom and meaning in a world that often seems lacking in both.

This course will primarily focus on the work of four thinkers who wrote within (or were in some way associated with) the existentialist tradition. We will begin by reading the work of Albert Camus to get familiar with the concepts of “the absurd” and rebellion. Next, we will move on to the work of Jean-Paul Sartre for an influential existentialist approach to questions of consciousness, freedom, bad faith, and responsibility. We will then turn to the work of Simone De Beauvoir to better understand the limits on freedom, the possible failures of intersubjectivity (especially along lines of gender), and the particularities of existentialist ethics. Finally, we will engage the radical philosophy of Frantz Fanon, who examines how race and colonialism challenge mainstream existentialist accounts of freedom and relationality, and offers an analysis of how revolutionary change might respond to the world colonialism has created. Throughout, we will consider how all of these thinkers responded to events happening in the world at the time of their writing, and reflect critically on how they might speak to our own historical moment.

Prerequisites:

This course has a prerequisite of one prior course in philosophy, which is waived for students who have taken courses in philosophy at CEGEP, IB, or equivalent. No past knowledge of the course material is expected. This will be a reading and writing intensive course.

Assignments:

1. *Midterm Essay (40%)* - 5 page paper critically engaging the work of Sartre and/or Camus. Prompts will be provided by the instructor alongside more detailed instructions.
2. *Take Home Final (50%)* – Longer final exam involving both short-answer and essay questions.
3. *Participation (10%)* – Based on attendance of and participation in conferences.

Note: This is a draft and may change at the discretion of the instructor.