

PHIL 375 – Existentialism.

Summer 2022: July 7th – August 3rd
Mon-Tue-Wed-Thur: 11:05 am-1:25 pm
Location: ARTS W-20

Instructor: Thomas Minguy

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Office Hours: Wed 2 pm- 4 pm.

Course Description

This course is an introduction to existentialism. As such, it seeks to explore a variety of approaches and key problems pertaining to existentialism as a philosophical practice. As a guiding thread, I propose to focus on how existentialism problematizes the question of *judgment* in its reconceptualization of *responsibility*. The main authors we will study are *Jean-Paul Sartre*, *Albert Camus*, and *Frantz Fanon*.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that arose in the 20th century, even though some 19th century authors (e.g. Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche) can be retrospectively considered as precursors of the movement. Quickly, existentialism claims, as Sartre famously said, that human existence is radically free. We are not solely determined by material, social, and biological processes, nor are we pre-determined by an ideal essence that precedes the fact of existence. Since, however, we are radically free, we are necessarily *responsible* for our actions and evaluations. As Sartre says, we are *condemned* to be free – and such freedom is difficult to bear. Together, those fundamental characteristics of existentialism defines it as a philosophy focused on *freedom* in its relationship to *our values*.

Another dimension of existentialism is its relation to *art*. As a philosophical movement, it had an important influence on some artists (e.g. Jean-Luc Godard, Jack Kerouac, Richard Wright), but it just so happens that existentialist writers were also authors of some work of literature. Beyond heavily technical formulation, existentialism is also expressed in artistic endeavors.

The course will seek to explore those two dimensions by first building a conceptual basis, that we will then explore through artistic works. *There are no prerequisites for this course*, but it will be a *reading intensive program* with some technical vocabulary. This is a 300-Level course, and I thus recommend some familiarity with philosophical literature.

Course Format

The course will be held in person as per the schedule indicated at the beginning of the syllabus. Each week will address a specific author, except for the first week, dedicated at laying down the conceptual basis we will need for this course. The proposed schedule is as follows:

Week 1 (July 7th, 11th-14th): History, Methods, and Concepts of Existentialism

Week 2 (July 18th-21st): Jean-Paul Sartre

Week 3 (July 25th-28th): Albert Camus

Week 4 (August 1st-3rd): Frantz Fanon

This course is reading intensive. Each week (except the first one) will have two main texts assigned: (a) theoretical passages from the weekly author, (b) either a play (Sartre and Fanon) or a short novel (Camus) that we will discuss on the last session of the week.

The classes will consist in discussing together the assigned readings. There will be a small introductory lecture (45 minutes/1 hour) each session, followed by a group exploration of the concepts/themes/problems at hand. *I see this class as an occasion to explore existentialism together.* Since I also want to approach existentialism through its relationship with art, we will also at times look at some works (films, paintings, poems, etc.) that might resonate with the themes of the week.

Required Material

For this course, you will have to buy the following books, available via the McGill Bookstore:

Albert Camus, *Modern Classics the Outsider*, UK ed. edition (London: Penguin Classic, 2013).

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Sarah Richmond (Washington Square Press, 2021).¹

Other readings will be posted on MyCourses. They include:

Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, Reissue edition (New York: Vintage, 1992).

¹ Note that an electronic version is also available on McGill Library's website:

<https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1012566271>

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, Revised edition (New York : Berkeley, Calif.: Grove Press, 2008).

---. "The Drowning Eye", in *Alienation and Freedom*, trans. Steven Corcoran, Illustrated édition (London Oxford New York New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

Jean-Paul Sartre, "No Exit", in *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, Third Printing edition (New York: Vintage, 1989).

This list of other readings might change a bit. Since I will be posting them on MyCourses, this should not occasion any trouble for you.

All of those works being originally in French, you can buy the French versions, and I will also make the French excerpts available on MyCourses. Knowledge of French is not expected, nor will it be considered an advantage.

Course Requirements

a. *Readings*

As already voiced a few times, *this course is reading intensive*. I consider philosophy to be on the one hand the reading of philosophical texts, and on the other, the discussion of those texts. *Readings should be done prior to class*, since we will discuss them then. We will spend 3 sessions a week discussing *theoretical* passages, and the final session will be dedicated to the work of literature. You will thus have the whole week to read the latter. I will warn you: those are heavily technical at times, so be sure to give yourself enough time to approach and grasp them.

b. *Participation (5%)*

As previously mentioned, philosophy is not only the *reading* of texts, but also the *discussion* of those texts. Hence, I expect everyone to participate in the in-class, but also on the online discussions we will have in the context of this course. Participation will thus be graded according to how much you interact in class, but also with your peers on the discussion section on MyCourses. Hence, while participation in class is strongly encouraged, contribution to online discussions is also considered a valid form of participation.

c. *Weekly Question (15%)*

You will be asked to submit a question every week on MyCourses, for a total of **4 questions**. Questions should be submitted by **8pm every Wednesday**, that is, prior to the Thursday class (Montréal time).

Questions can address either the work of literature or the theoretical passages.

Questions should be *philosophical*. By that I mean that a question cannot be “What does Sartre mean by consciousness?”. It should not beg for a definition. Instead, it should articulate a *problem* that requires some *context* to be approached. What you want is to develop some ideas that appear to you as problematic. For instance, you might want to compare different passages from an author that seems to be at odds with one another. You might also want to frame a certain theory as problematic according to specific cases that you have in mind. Alternatively, you might also want to put the work of literature in discussion with the theoretical passages we discussed. See this assignment as a way for you to practice your articulation of philosophical questions, and to fuel the discussion we have in class. This is something that will come in handy in the bigger assignments.

d. *Short Paper (30%): Due Date, July 22nd, 11:59 pm*

You will have to write a short paper of roughly **700-800 words**. The purpose of the short paper is to assess your understanding of the conceptual grounds of existentialism. *We will cover the necessary content in the first week of the semester*. More information will be given in class. This paper should prepare you for the final paper, and so you should pay close attention to the feedback provided.

e. *Final Paper (50%): Due date, August 5th, 11:59 pm*

The final paper will consist of roughly **1600-2000 words**. I will provide a few questions that you will answer in an essay. *Questions will concern the relation between the theoretical passages and the works of literature*. You are expected to apply the feedback you received with the short paper

Grading Criteria

Every written assignment (i.e. Weekly Question, Short Paper, and Final Paper) will be graded according to the following criteria. *We will cover these in class through an information session on how to write philosophical essay*. You can also refer to the “How to Write” handout uploaded on MyCourses.

They can be summarized as follows in the meanwhile:

a. *Clarity*

Is your argument cogent? Can the reader easily understand the argument? Can they easily identify the main thesis, the arguments sustaining it, and the potential

objections? Can the reader get through the essay easily, without having to go back to previous sentences? Is the terminology explained? Is the language (syntax, grammar) easy to read?

b. Organization

Is every sentence pertinent to the argument at hand? Are some paragraphs digressions? Can the reader easily follow the argumentative process, understanding the premises, conclusions, and everything in between?

c. Relevance

Are you answering the question? Does your essay address the material covered in the course?

d. Accuracy and Rigor

Is your interpretation in line with the text analyzed? Are you correctly addressing the topic of your essay? Is your argument *philosophical*, meaning that it is rigorous enough to convince the reader?

e. Creativity

Are you making this essay *yours*? Is your argument a repetition of what we said in class, or is it adding anything new? Is your essay thought-provoking? Does it lead to new questions, new problems? Are you doing more than merely explaining a text, and actually offering an original interpretation?

Course Policies

Late Submission

Late submissions without extensions will be penalized at a rate of 5% per 24h.

Extensions can be granted provided that there is a medical note justifying it, whether it concerns the student or a family member, and should be discussed with the instructor. The note can be provided after the deadline. A schedule for the submission will be arranged between the student and the instructor.

Mask Policy

As of May 24th 2022, masks are no longer mandatory on McGill University campus. They are, however, recommended. Following McGill's policy and Québec Government recommendations, *masks will not be mandatory in the classroom*. You are, however, perfectly allowed to wear one.

Remote Learning

The course is entirely in-person.

As per McGill University's policies regarding remote learning, *instructors are under no obligation to provide remote accommodations*. Students might want to refer to this FAQ concerning updated COVID-19 policies: <https://www.mcgill.ca/coronavirus/faqs>

COVID-19 specific accommodations can be arranged through a form available on Minerva, and, as per the FAQ: "If a student needs short-term online academic accommodations related to COVID-19, instructors will work with their Faculty and the Office of the Dean of Students to consider different accommodation options. No guarantees of accommodation options will be available."

If materially possible, I might record the lectures, but will not record in-class discussions. Those recordings will supplement in case you have to miss a class, but will not replace the content covered in the whole session.

Academic Integrity and Student Rights

McGill University values academic integrity. All students must, therefore, 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.

Student well-being is a priority for the University. All of our health and wellness resources have been integrated into a single Student Wellness Hub, your one-stop shop for everything related to your physical and mental health. If you need to access services or get more information, visit the Virtual Hub at www.mcgill.ca/wellness-hub or drop by the Brown Student Services Building (downtown) or Centennial Centre (Macdonald Campus). Within your faculty, you can also connect with your Local Wellness Advisor (to make an appointment, visit www.mcgill.ca/lwa).

Some of the course content might change if the circumstances make it so.