

PHIL 375: EXISTENTIALISM (Summer 2018)

Instructor: David Collins

E-mail: david.collins3@mcgill.ca

Lectures: M, T, W, R 11:05–13:25, BURN1B23

Office Hours: W, R, F 14:00-15:30, LEA923

Course Description

This course will focus on several key thinkers who were part of, or contributed to, the philosophical and cultural movement known as existentialism. We will begin with a brief ‘preview’ of one of the main representatives of 20th century French existentialism—Albert Camus—to get a feeling for some of the concerns that typify existentialist thought, before turning to two 19th century precursors to 20th century existentialism—Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche—and a 20th century influence on French existentialism—Martin Heidegger—before returning to French existentialism with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Gabriel Marcel, the latter of whom has been overlooked in recent decades but whose thought is startlingly relevant to our contemporary situation. To give coherence to the course we will focus on a number of themes and concerns shared by these thinkers, such as: the status of meaning and truth in a ‘disenchanted’, ‘absurd’ or ‘ambiguous’ world; the position of the individual within mass society; what counts as an ‘authentic’ life; the nature of human freedom and responsibility; and whether (and how) there can be values and ethics without objective foundations.

Because of our condensed summer schedule and the kind of philosophy course this is, you should expect to read often, sometimes *a lot*, and sometimes from fairly difficult texts, throughout the four weeks of this course, as well as writing regularly. Regular attendance is also important; missing one day is equivalent to missing a full week of regular term. Students who miss more than one class may be asked to provide documentation, e.g. a doctor’s note for illness. (‘Existential angst’ is not an illness...)

Required Readings

Charles Guignon and Derk Pereboom, eds., *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, 2nd edition, Hackett [GP].

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. B. Frechtman, Philosophical Library [EA].

Gabriel Marcel, *Man against Mass Society*, trans. G.F. Fraser, St. Augustine’s Press [MaMS].

Most of our readings will come from the above books, all available fairly inexpensively from The Word bookstore (469 Milton St., east of University). These readings will be supplemented by excerpts from works by Camus, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, as well as essays by de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt, and Iris Murdoch, which will be available through MyCourses [MC]. In order not to require every student in the course to use MyCourses if they would prefer not to, if you would like ‘hard copies’ of the supplemental readings rather than working with the electronic versions, please speak to me.

Evaluation

Participation.....	15%
Reading Questions.....	20%
Essay.....	30%
Exam.....	35%

Your participation and engagement in the course will count for **15%** of your grade. Regular attendance in lectures is expected (see the policy on absence below). As well as lectures, most classes will include time for discussions that will be useful for clarifying and exploring ideas from the lectures and readings. Note that in full class discussions, participation can include actively listening to contributions of others, though all students are expected to share their ideas with their peers in pairs or small groups.

20% of your grade will come from you submitting a brief (250 words *max.*), specific, well-formulated question relating to the readings for *ten* classes of your choice (not including Lectures 1 and 7). The wording of the question (i) must make clear the context or ‘background’ of the question, i.e. what part of which reading the question is related to, and how or why the question ‘arises’ (e.g. explaining what seems unclear and why, what other ideas you might be comparing an idea in the reading to, what standards/expectations you might be measuring it against, etc.), and (ii) should *either* suggest a possible approach to trying to answer it, *or* say why answering this question is important. [E.g. just writing “What does Sartre mean when he says ...?” would not be a sufficiently developed question, but “What exactly does Sartre mean when he says ... on p. x of ...? This could mean ‘A’ or ‘B’, where ‘A’ would fit what he says about ... on p. y, but where ‘B’ would fit what he says about ... on p. z. If he means ‘A’, it would clarify his position on ..., but if he means ‘B’, it might contradict his position on ...” would be excellent.] It would be good to aim for around 2-3 sentences, but if you’re able to be concise, questions can be as short as one sentence as long as they include what is specified above. Questions are to be submitted in ‘hard copy’ at the *beginning* of the lecture on the readings to which they relate.

Questions that show you’ve done the readings, reflected on them, and made a sincere effort to do what is specified above will earn 1.5 marks. Well-formulated questions showing serious engagement with and reflection on readings will earn 2 marks. Questions submitted on time but which aren’t clear or well-developed (but are still genuine attempts) will earn up to 1 mark (depending on how genuine the attempt seems). Note that you may submit more than ten questions if you choose, in which case 20% of your final grade will be comprised of the highest ten marks. Written feedback on your questions won’t be provided, just the mark, but you can see me in office hours if you’d like to know how to do better.

30% of your grade will come from an essay (1200-1500 words in length, i.e. roughly 4-5 typed, double-spaced pages in Times New Roman 12 point), which will be due in ‘hard copy’ no later than 11:00 on Monday, July 23th, *before* Lecture 9. There will be a choice of two questions/topics, which will be distributed and posted at the end of Lecture 4 along with some more detailed instructions about the expectations, grading scheme, etc. I will aim to grade and return the essays by Monday, July 30th.

The remaining **35%** of your grade will come from an exam, to be written on Monday, Aug. 6th (time and place TBA). The questions will cover all the authors we will have read throughout the course, but emphasis will be placed on questions relating to Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Marcel (possibly in comparison with one or more thinkers read in the first half of the course). You will have a choice of questions to answer, with the questions you will have to choose from being distributed and posted at the end of the final lecture on Aug. 2nd so that you can think about your answers in advance. You may bring two 8.5x11 sheets of paper into the exam (single-sided if typed; double-sided if handwritten), so you can prepare and bring *outlines* of your answers; however, these must be turned in with your exam, and you are forbidden to have written your answers *in full* in advance and merely copied them during the exam. Apart from these two sheets, the exam is closed-book (except for dictionaries, if required).

Policy on Lateness & Absence

Because our schedule is so condensed, I will have to follow a strict late policy for the essay, with a penalty for lateness of -10% per calendar day. (Please note just how strict this is so that you're afraid enough to make sure it doesn't apply to you!) That said, I'm happy to give extensions for legitimate reasons, *provided you ask me more than 24 hours in advance*. Essays submitted late due to an unforeseeable reason (illness, accident, etc.) for which you couldn't get an extension in advance must be accompanied by a doctor's note or similar form of documentation. Daily reading questions cannot be submitted late (i.e. after the lecture on the readings to which they relate). Also, apart from one 'free pass', each class for which you are absent without a valid, documented reason you inform me of (in advance, if possible) will result in a loss of -2% to your participation grade.

Policy on Electronic Devices

You should refrain from using electronic devices, including laptops, during class time, if only because the use of such devices is proven to be a distraction to your fellow students (though numerous studies are also repeatedly showing disadvantages to the 'user' of taking notes on a laptop vs. by hand). Those with legitimate reasons for using a laptop to take notes may do so with my approval, and with the promise to use them only for note-taking. Mobile phones should never be used during class time, including for text messaging, except at breaks. For clarification or questions about this policy, feel free to see me during office hours; please also consult McGill's policy regarding the use of computing and communication devices in class (www.mcgill.ca/tls/teaching/policies).

Accessibility

I hope to make this course accessible for students who may need some form of accommodation in order to engage fully with the course. If you are in need of an accommodation, please let me know as soon as possible so I can endeavour to accommodate your needs. Where the need warrants, students should contact the Office for Students with Disabilities beforehand (disabilities.students@mcgill.ca).

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.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Lecture and Reading Schedule

Week 1 (July 9th–12th)

1: Introduction – The Search for Meaning in a Disenchanted World

Kierkegaard – Anxiety and Despair

Readings: GP – Introduction: xiii-xxxviii

MC – excerpts from The Myth of Sisyphus (Camus)

MC – excerpts from Kierkegaard's Journals

2: Kierkegaard – The Self, Despair, and What to Do About It

Readings: GP – excerpts from The Sickness Unto Death: 78-84

MC – excerpts from Either/Or: 'The Rotation Method'

3: Kierkegaard – Aesthetic, Ethical, and Religious Spheres of Life

Readings: MC – excerpts from Either/Or: 'The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage'

GP – excerpts from Fear and Trembling: 26-77

4: Kierkegaard – The Limits of Reason and Truth as Subjectivity

Nietzsche – Anti-Foundationalism and Truth as Metaphor

Readings: GP – excerpts from Concluding Unscientific Postscript: 85-92

GP – excerpts from The Gay Science: 134-37 (§§110-112), 160-61 (§355)

GP – excerpts from Twilight of the Idols: 172-81

MC – 'On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense'

Week 2 (July 16th–19th)

5: Nietzsche – The Death of God and the Revaluation of Values

Readings: GP – excerpts from The Gay Science: 138-60 (§§116-354), 167-70 (§§377-382)

MC – excerpts from Beyond Good and Evil

6: Nietzsche – Anti-Nihilism, the Will to Power, and the 'Übermensch'

Readings: MC – excerpts from On the Genealogy of Morals

MC – Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Book I

7: Film Screening/Discussion, or: Kierkegaard and Nietzsche Walk Into an Empty Church...

Screening: The Seventh Seal (dir. Ingmar Bergman)

8: Heidegger – ‘Dasein’ as Being-in-the-World

Readings: GP – excerpts from Being and Time: 211-36

Week 3 (July 23rd–26th)

Essay due by 11:00 am on Monday, July 23rd

9: Heidegger – ‘Das Man’, Authenticity, and Being-towards-Death

Readings: GP – excerpts from Being and Time: 236-54

10: Sartre – Facticity, Transcendence, and Nothingness

Readings: GP – excerpts from Being and Nothingness: 309-28

MC – ‘French Existentialism’ (Arendt)

11: Sartre – Bad Faith and Being-For-Others

Readings: GP – excerpts from Being and Nothingness: 328-55

12: Sartre – Freedom and Responsibility

Readings: GP – The Humanism of Existentialism: 290-308

MC – ‘Existentialism and Popular Wisdom’ (de Beauvoir)

Week 4 (July 30th–Aug. 2nd)

13: De Beauvoir – The Possibility of an Existentialist Ethics

Readings: EA – Part I

MC – ‘De Beauvoir’s The Ethics of Ambiguity’ (Murdoch)

14: De Beauvoir – An Ethics of Freedom

Readings: EA – Part II; Part III.5; Conclusion

15: Marcel – Mass Society and Fanaticism

Readings: MaMS – Part Two: Chapters I, II, III

16: Marcel – The Universal against the Masses

Readings: MaMS – Part Two: Chapters IV, V; Conclusion

Exam on Monday, Aug. 6th