

# PHIL 375 Existentialism

McGill University, Department of Philosophy, Summer 2019  
Course outline and syllabus

**Lecturer:** Maxwell J. D. Ramstead

**Lecturer email:** maxwell [dot] ramstead [at] mcgill [dot] ca

**Lectures:** Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 11:05-13:25, RPHYS 114

**Office hours:** Monday and Thursday, 14:00-15:00, LEA934

**Teaching assistant:** Renxiang Liu

**Teaching assistant email:** renxiang [dot] liu [at] mcgill [dot] ca

## Course description

This summer course is a four-week exploration of themes in existential philosophy and existentialism. We are reading ‘existentialist philosophy’ broadly, to encompass classical and contemporary philosophical reflections on human existence and lived experience, the absurd, meaning, freedom, responsibility, finitude, and death. Existentialism in the narrow sense is a historically bounded philosophical movement, starting in the late 1800s with the work of thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, who were struggling against the then-dominant Hegelian and Kantian (‘systematic’) philosophies. Existentialism in this sense culminated in the work of French and German philosophers in the early to mid-20th century, especially Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus (although, admittedly, none of these thinkers would have readily accepted the label).

The first week introduces students to existential philosophy. The course will begin with two texts by contemporary philosophers engaging with existentialist themes: “The meanings of lives” by Susan Wolf and “The absurd” by Thomas Nagel. The readings for the remainder of the week will cover the history and emergence of the existentialist movement. We will read and discuss works by Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger and discuss their break with the philosophical traditions that dominated the 19th century.

The second week will explore varieties of existence and lived experience from different perspectives and standpoints. We will explore themes related to existence as a person of colour through the work of Frantz Fanon. We will then explore themes related to existence as a woman via Simone de Beauvoir and Iris Marion Young. We will examine queer and trans perspectives on existence with de Beauvoir and Henry Rubin.

The third week will explore dialogues between existentialism (in the narrow sense) and closely related philosophical and scientific movements: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and the neurosciences. We will begin by discussing the relations between the phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in relation to existentialism, before turning to the relations between existentialism and philosophies of interpretation (aka

hermeneutics). We will then consider two projects that aim to ‘naturalize’ these philosophical agendas: neuro-phenomenology and neuro-existentialism.

The last full week of class will return to explore contemporary themes in existential philosophy. We will discuss responsibility, the law, god and atheism, and concepts of freedom and evil with readings from prominent philosophers of existence, such as Hannah Arendt, Albert Camus, Susan Wolf, and Galen Strawson.

## **Assignment and grades**

Evaluations for the course will consist of two short essays and assignment questions. All assignments will be submitted through MyCourses.

### **1. One short midterm essay (40%)**

This will be a short 5 page essay (12 pt., double-spaced) that will consist in a response to a short prompt. The first essay is due at the start of the third week of class (Monday, July 22nd at 23:59) on MyCourses.

### **2. One short final essay (45%)**

This will be a slightly longer 7 page essay that will also consist in a response to a short prompt. The second essay is due on the last day of class (Monday, August 5th at 23:59) on MyCourses.

### **3. Assignment questions (10%)**

Students will be required to submit one short question on the main readings for every class. Each valid question (that is, each question relevant to the readings) is worth 1% of this grade rubric. Students must therefore submit at least ten questions for full points in this rubric. Assignment questions are due the day before the corresponding lecture at 23:59 on MyCourses. Late assignment questions will be given zero marks.

### **4. Participation (5%)**

Students are expected to participate in discussions, either in small groups or on the class scale. Students are expected to report the results of their small group discussions to the whole class at least once during the semester for full points in this rubric.

## **McGill statements**

McGill University requires that the following statements appear on all course outlines:

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.

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

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 des procédures disciplinaires.

## **Policy on extensions**

No extensions will be granted without official documentation to justify the extension (e.g., a medical note or a letter from the Office of Students with Disabilities). The penalty for late submission is one letter grade per day (rounded up). For example, if submitted 12 hours past the deadline, a paper that would have received a B+ will be assigned a B. Assignment questions cannot be submitted late and will be given zero marks if submitted after the deadline.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am deeply grateful for the help of many friendly scholars who have helped me compile this syllabus. This syllabus was developed thanks to the expertise of Renxiang Liu, Corinne Lajoie, Mila Ghorayeb, Iain Macdonald, Ariane Poisson, Emily R. Douglas, Muhammad Velji, Azadeh Radbooei, Kevin Ryan, Louis Chartrand, Caroline Copeman, Julia Griffiths, John Grey, Cameron Tonkinwise, and Eyal Aviv.

## Readings schedule

All readings will be available electronically on MyCourses.

Readings labelled 'Readings' are required for the lecture.

Readings labelled 'Suggested readings' are not mandatory, but help set the tone for the lecture.

Readings labelled 'Background readings' are not mandatory, but will be very helpful for those students wishing to deepen their understanding of the issue at stake in the lecture. These readings also will be very helpful for writing the assignment essays.

### First week, July 8th to July 11th 2019:

*Introduction to existential philosophy and existentialism*

#### July 8th, Class 1:

*Introduction to PHIL 375 Existentialism. Tutorial on logic and philosophical writing*

Suggested readings:

Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1989). "No exit," in *No Exit, and Three other Plays* (pp. 1-46). Vintage International. [47 pages]

Review of course outline and syllabus.

Review of basic notions in philosophy and logic:

What is an argument? What is a premise and what is a conclusion? How does one identify the argument in a text? What is active reading and how can one annotate texts efficiently?

Followed by a short introduction to writing an essay:

What you should assume about your reader? Why is it not enough to 'get everything right'? How does one save space for more important things? What is the proper way to use quotes?

#### July 9th, Class 2:

*Meaning and the absurd*

Content warning: suicide

Readings:

Wolf, Susan. (2015). "The meaning of lives." In *The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love* (pp. 89-106). Oxford University Press. [18 pages]

Camus, Albert. (1975). Selections from *The Myth of Sisyphus* ("The Myth of Sisyphus," pp. 107-111), J. O'Brien (Trans). Penguin. [5 pages]

Nagel, Thomas. (2004). "The absurd." In *Life, Death, and Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions* (pp. 31-42), D. Benatar (Ed.). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. [12 pages]

### July 10th, Class 3:

*Searching for concepts to think existence: The singular individual, faith, and the death of God*

#### Readings:

- Nietzsche, Friedrich. (2006). "Truth and Lies in an extra-moral sense." In *The Nietzsche Reader* (pp. 114-123), K. A. Pearson and D. Large (Editors). Wiley-Blackwell. [10 pages]
- Kierkegaard, Søren. (2001). Selections from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, "The Subjective Truth, Inwardness; Truth is Subjectivity." In *Existentialism: Basic Writings* (pp. 85-92), C. Guigon and D. Pereboom (Eds). Hackett. [8 pages]
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. (2006). Selections from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "Zarathustra's Prologue." In *The Nietzsche Reader* (pp. 254-261), K. A. Pearson and D. Large (Eds). Wiley-Blackwell. [8 pages]
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. (2001). Selections from *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "Introduction." In *Existentialism: Basic Writings* (pp. 19-25), C. Guigon and D. Pereboom (Eds). Hackett. [6 pages]

#### Background readings:

- Guigon, Charles and Pereboom, Derk. (2001). "Kierkegaard: Introduction." In *Existentialism: Basic Writings* (pp. 1-17), C. Guigon and D. Pereboom (Eds). Hackett. [17 pages]
- Guigon, Charles and Pereboom, Derk. (2001). "Nietzsche: Introduction." In *Existentialism: Basic Writings* (pp. 93-118), C. Guigon and D. Pereboom (Eds). Hackett. [26 pages]

### July 11th, Class 4:

*Towards a philosophy of existence: Heidegger's analytic of Dasein*

Guest lecture by Renxiang Liu (Ph.D. candidate, Philosophy, McGill University)

#### Readings:

- Stein, Edith. (2007). "Martin Heidegger's Existential Philosophy." *Maynooth Philosophical Papers* 4: 55-83 (especially "B. Evaluation," pp. 69-83), M. Lebech (Trans.). [29 pages].
- Heidegger, Martin. (1962). Selections from *Being and Time* (§§9-10, and §40, pp. 65-75; 228-235), J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Trans.). Harper & Row. [19 pages]

#### Background readings:

- Guigon, Charles and Pereboom, Derk. (2001). "Heidegger: Introduction." In *Existentialism: Basic Writings* (pp. 183-210), C. Guigon and D. Pereboom (Eds). Hackett. [28 pages]
- Heidegger, Martin. (1962). Selections from *Being and Time* (§§1-8, pp. 21-64), J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Trans.). Harper & Row. [44 pages]

## **Second week, July 15th to July 18th 2019:**

*Standpoint and perspective*

### **July 15th, Class 5:**

*On Black existence: Racialized perspectives on existence and existential philosophy*

Guest lecture by Muhammad Velji (Ph.D. candidate, Philosophy, McGill University)

N.B. Please send your question to: muhammad [dot] velji [at] mail [dot] mcgill [dot] ca

Readings:

Fanon, Frantz. Selections from *Black Skin, White Masks* (Chapter 5: “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” pp. 89-119), Richard Philcox (Trans.). Grove Press. [31 pages]

Videos:

Foldes, Ken. (2019). “Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, Lecture Three: B. Self-consciousness – Part 3.” YouTube video, available online: [<https://youtu.be/KMJdPuNnVKA>]

Philosophy Tube. (2018). “Intro to Hegel (& Progressive Politics),” please watch the first 13 minutes. YouTube video, available online: [[https://youtu.be/OgNt1C72B\\_4](https://youtu.be/OgNt1C72B_4)]

### **July 16th, Class 6:**

*On feminist existentialism and existence as a woman*

Guest lecture by Emily R. Douglas (Ph.D. candidate, Philosophy, McGill University)

Readings:

Beauvoir, Simone de. (2010). Selections from *The Second Sex* (“Introduction,” pp. 3-17), C. Borde and S. Malovany-Chevallier (Trans.). Vintage Books. [15 pages]

Young, Iris M. (1990). “Throwing Like a Girl.” In *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (pp. 27-45, please read everything except section III). Oxford University Press. [19 pages]

### **July 17th, Class 7:**

*On queer and trans existence*

Guest lecture by Emily R. Douglas (Ph.D. candidate, Philosophy, McGill University)

Readings:

Beauvoir, Simone de. (2010). Selections from *The Second Sex* (“The Lesbian,” pp. 417-436), C. Borde and S. Malovany-Chevallier (Trans.). Vintage Books. [20 pages]

Rubin, Henry S. (1998). “Phenomenology as method in trans studies.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4(2): 263-281. [18 pages]

## July 18th, Class 8:

### *Perspective and embodiment*

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (2002). Selections from *Phenomenology of Perception* (Chapter 3: “The Spatiality of one’s own body and motricity”; Chapter 4: “The synthesis of one’s own body”; pp. 100-155), D. A. Landes (Trans.). Routledge. [56 pages]

Background readings:

Husserl, Edmund. (1989). Selections from *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy. Second Book: Studies in Phenomenological Constitution* (Chapter 3: “The constitution of psychic reality through the body,” pp. 151-169), R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Trans.). Kluwer. [19 pages]

Noë, Alva. (2004). Selections from *Action in Perception*. (Chapter 1: “The enactive approach to perception: An introduction,” pp. 1-34). MIT Press. [34 pages]

## Third week, July 22nd to July 25th 2019:

### *Existentialism in dialogue with phenomenology, hermeneutics, and the neurosciences*

## July 22nd, Class 9:

### *Existentialism and phenomenology: Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty*

Guest lecture by Renxiang Liu (Ph.D. candidate, Philosophy, McGill University)

Readings:

Husserl, Edmund. (1970). Selections from *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (§14 “Precursory characterization of objectivism and transcendentalism. The struggle between these two ideas as the sense of modern spiritual history,” pp. 68-70), D. Carr (Trans.). Northwestern University Press. [3 pages]

Heidegger, Martin. (1985). Selections from *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena* (“The principle of phenomenology” and “Result of the critical reflection: the neglect of the question of being as such and of the being of the intentional is grounded in the fallenness of Dasein itself,” pp. 75-80; 128-131), T. Kiesel (Trans.). Indiana University Press. [10 pages]

Heidegger, Martin. (1962). Selections from *Being and Time* (On the distinction between the existentiell and the existential, and a footnote critique of Kierkegaard attending only to the existentiell; pp. 33; 494), J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Trans.). Harper & Row. [2 pages]

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (2012). Selections from *Phenomenology of Perception* (“Phenomenal field and transcendental philosophy,” pp. 60-65), D. A. Landes (Trans.). Routledge. [6 pages]

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1964). Selections from *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (“The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences,” pp. 12-27), J. M. Edie (Trans.). Northwestern University Press. [16 pages]

Background readings:

Beauvoir, Simone de. (2014). Selections from *Philosophical Writings* ("A Review of *The Phenomenology of Perception* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty," pp. 151-164), M. A. Simons, M. Timmermann, and M. B. Mader (Eds.). University of Illinois Press. [14 pages]

### **July 23rd, Class 10:**

*Existence, interpretation, and narrative*

Readings:

Strawson, Galen. (2004). "Against narrativity." *Ratio*, 17(4), 428-452. [25 pages]

Background readings:

Taylor, Charles. (1985). "Self-interpreting animals." In *Philosophical Papers* (pp. 45-76). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [32 pages]

Taylor, Charles. (1989). Selections from *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (pp. 47-52). Harvard University Press. [6 pages]

### **July 24th, Class 11:**

*On the possibility of a neuro-phenomenology: Science of lived experience or neurohype?*

Readings:

De Preester, Helena. (2002). "Naturalizing Husserlian phenomenology: An introduction." *Psychoanalytische Perspectieven*, 20(4), 633-647. [15 pages]

Background readings:

Ramstead, Maxwell J. D. (2015). "Naturalizing what? Varieties of naturalism and transcendental phenomenology." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 14(4): 929-971. [43 pages]

Nagel, Thomas. (1974). "What is it like to be a bat?" *The Philosophical Review*, 83(4), 435-450. [16 pages]

### **July 25th, Class 12:**

*On the possibility of a neuro-existentialism*

Readings:

Caruso, Gregg D., and Flanagan, Owen. (2018). "Neuroexistentialism: Third-Wave Existentialism." In *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience* (pp. 1-21), G. Caruso and O. Flanagan (Eds.). Oxford University Press. [21 pages]

Gabriel, Markus. (2018). Review of *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience*. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*. Available online: [<https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/neuroexistentialism-meaning-morals-and-purpose-in-the-age-of-neuroscience/>]

Background readings:

- Churchland, Patricia. (2018). "The impact of social neuroscience on moral philosophy." In *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience* (pp. 25-37), G. Caruso and O. Flanagan (Eds.). Oxford University Press. [13 pages]
- Prinz, Jesse. (2018). "Moral sedimentation." In *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience* (pp. 87-107), G. Caruso and O. Flanagan (Eds.). Oxford University Press. [19 pages]

## **Fourth week, July 29th to August 1st 2019:**

*Existentialism, determinism, and free will*

### **July 29th, Class 13:**

*Normativity and reactive attitudes*

Content warning: description of violent homicide

Readings:

- Strawson, Galen. (1994). "The impossibility of moral responsibility." *Philosophical Studies*, 75(1), 5-24. [20 pages]
- Strawson, Peter. (2008). "Freedom and resentment." In *Freedom and resentment and other essays* (pp. 1-28). Routledge. [28 pages]

### **July 30th, Class 14:**

*Responsibility, determinism, and the law*

Guest lecture by Patrick Garon Sayegh (Ph.D. candidate, Law, University of Toronto)

Readings:

- Watson, Gary. (2016). "Responsibility and the limits of evil: Variations on a Strawsonian theme." In *Free Will and Reactive Attitudes* (pp. 127-154), P. Russell and M. McKenna (Eds.). Routledge. [28 pages]
- Nagel, Thomas. (1979). "Moral luck." In *The Philosophy of Free Will: Essential Readings from the Contemporary Debates* (pp. 24-38), Paul Russell and Oisín Deery (Eds.). Oxford University Press. [15 pages]

### **July 31st, Class 15:**

*The absurd, metaphysics, and religion*

Content warning: suicide

Readings:

- Camus, Albert. (1975). Selections from *The Myth of Sisyphus* (pp. 10-63), J. O'Brien (Trans). Penguin. [53 pages]

Background readings:

Aronson, Ronald. (2012). "Camus the Unbeliever: Living without God." In *Situating Existentialism: Key Texts in Context* (pp. 256-276), J. Judaken and R. Bernasconi (Eds.). Columbia University Press, 2012. [21 pages]

### **August 1st, Class 16:**

*Freedom and the banality of evil*

Readings:

Arendt, Hannah. (2006). Selections from *Between Past and Future* (Chapter 4: "What is Freedom?," pp. 143-171). Penguin. [28 pages]

Background readings:

Arendt, Hannah. (2006). Selections from *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on The Banality of Evil* ("Epilogue" and "Postscript," pp. 253-299). Penguin. [47 pages].

Wolf, Susan. (1980). "Asymmetrical freedom." *The Journal of Philosophy*, 77(3), 151-166. [16 pages]

### **Final class, August 5th 2019:**

*Conclusion and future directions*

Suggested readings:

Gibson, James J. (2015). Selections from *The Ecological Approach To Visual Perception* (Chapter 8: "The theory of affordances," pp. 119-135). Psychology Press. [17 pages]

Veissière, Samuel, P. L., Constant, Axel, Ramstead, Maxwell J. D., Friston, Karl J., & Kirmayer, Laurence J. (2019). Thinking Through Other Minds: A Variational Approach to Cognition and Culture. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 1-97. [97 pages]