

# 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 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-forgotten Greek and Roman antiquity. Existentialism 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: Hannah Arendt's *On Violence* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. We 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 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.

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.

## 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.

Etudiants ont le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté.

Les étudiants ont le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté. Les infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite et de discipline des étudiants.

## 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.



**July 10th, Class 3:**

## **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* (Ej cr vgt 5: ðVj g Nk&gf Gzr gtlgpeg qh vj g DrcemO cp,ö r r . 89-119), Richard Philcox (Trans.). Grove Press. [31 pages]

#### Videos:

Hqrf gu, Mgp. (2019). ðJ gi grü Rj gpqo gpqrü y of Spirit, Lecture Three: B. Self-consciousness ó Rctv3.ö [ qwVwdg xkf gq, cxckrdng qprkpg: lj vr ur://{qwww.dg/MO lf RwP pXMC\_

Rj kquqr j { Vwdg. (2018). ðKvtq vq J gi gn(& Rtqi tguuk&g Rqirkleu),ö r rncug y cvej vj g hktuv13 minutes. YouTube video, available online: [[https://youtu.be/OgNt1C72B\\_4](https://youtu.be/OgNt1C72B_4)]

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

**July 18th, Class 8:**

*Perspective and embodiment*

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (2002). Selections from *Phenomenology of Perception* (Chapter 3: *On the Notion of the Subject*; Chapter 4: *On the Notion of the Object*), D. A. Landes (Trans.). Routledge. [56 pages]

Background readings:

Beauvoir, Simone de. (2014). Selections from *Philosophical Writings* (including *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*



Background readings:

Background readings:

Chernikoff, Robert. (2012). *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* (Ej cr vgt 4: öY j cvku Hggf qo ?, ö r r . 143-171). Penguin. [28 pages]

Background readings:

Arendt, Hannah. (2006). Selections from *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on The Banality of Evil* (öGr knj wgö cpf öRquætk v, ö r r . 253-299). Penguin. [47 pages].

Y qth, Uwcp. (1980). öCu{o o gtlecnltggf qo .ö *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* (Ej cr vgt 8: öVj g vj gqt { qhchqtfcpegu, ö r r . 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]