Freedom, Self, and Others in 20th-Century Existentialism

MTWR: 1:00pm-2:15pm, 716 Philosophy Hall
Instructor: Joe Hamilton (he/him)
Office Hours: Monday 4:15-6:15pm (TA office)
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Course description

The course is an advanced introduction to the thought and works of central figures in 20th-century Existentialism. Existentialism refers to a school of thought which, roughly, understands human beings to lack a predetermined essence. This central thesis, the meaning of which is itself contested by the various thinkers we read, leads to profound and surprising results in epistemology, ethics, and ontology. We will trace a route from thinkers more focused on the metaphysical implications of this thesis to more practically and ethically minded ones. The course will balance historical context, textual interpretation, and argument reconstruction. We will trace out Existentialism's relationship to and criticisms of Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, Marxism, and German Idealism. We will examine competing phenomenological accounts of our relations to others, the nature of comprehension, and the emotions. And we will draw out key points of contestation between existentialist thinkers on topics such as the possibility of a substantive universalist ethics, the nature and limits of human freedom, and the relationship between an individual and others.

Format

Four weekly seminars (MTWR: 1:00pm-2:15pm).

Prerequisites

At least one previous class in the history of philosophy, or a course covering suitably equivalent material.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the class, you will be able to:

1. understand, in historical context, some of the most important ideas and arguments of the authors covered by the course.
2. master the relevant technical vocabulary and crucial philosophical concepts used by those authors.
3. compare different philosophical approaches and views in 20th-century Existentialism.
4. read a philosophical text and explain its contents.
5. reconstruct an argument, evaluate it, and challenge/respond to it.

Course Materials

1. Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Blackwell, 1973.
2. Cumming, Robert Denoon, ed. *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*. Vintage Books, 1972 (hereafter *The Philosophy of JPS*).

3. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Translated by Bernard Frechtman. Citadel Press, 1976.
4. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. Pluto Press, 1986.

All further readings will be posted to CourseWorks.

You are welcome to purchase used copies of the books or older/newer printings, so long as the translator is the same (please do not use the Stambaugh translation of *Being and Time*). Be warned, pagination may differ in other volumes.

Grade Breakdown

20%	Participation and in-class exercises
20%	Midterm
30%	Final paper
30%	Final exam

- The participation grade consists of attendance, contribution to discussion, and the completion of the in-class exercises. Attendance at every session is required. If for some reason you cannot attend a session, you need to reach out to me beforehand.
- There will be an in-class exercise nearly every session. There will be occasional assignments to be completed before class.
- The final exam and midterm will be in-person bluebook exams.
- The final paper will include a brief 10-minute interview with me, scheduled the week of August 5th, worth 10% of the paper's grade. This will not be difficult, and will only evaluate your familiarity with the texts and the argument you develop in the paper.

General Resources

For philosophical writing:

jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html

- Jim Pryor offers a useful guide introducing philosophical writing.

rachelelizabethfraser.com

- Rachel Fraser offers a writing guide for philosophy essays, including examples of what not to do.

Some introductory materials for our texts:

archive.org/details/Philosophy_185_Fall_2007_UC_Berkeley

- Hubert Dreyfus was a philosopher at UC Berkeley, famous for his lectures on Heidegger. While the interpretative consensus has moved on somewhat from his interpretation, his course remains a great starting point for reading *Being and Time*.

Blattner, William. *Heidegger's* Being and Time: *A Reader's Guide*. London: Continuum, 2006.

- William Blattner offers a great introductory guide to the text.

Dover, Daniela, and Jonathan Gingerich. "Toward an Existentialist Metaethics: Beauvoir's Groundwork." In *Analytic Existentialism*, edited by Berislav Marušić and Mark Schroeder. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. jonathandgingerich.files.wordpress.com/2023/11/dover-gingerich-toward-an-existentialist-metaethics-beauvoirs-groundwork.pdf

- Daniela Dover and Jonathan Gingerich offer a useful introduction to Existentialism as an ethical theory.

Schedule

July 1st — **Introduction and Existentialism's Relationship to Phenomenology**
Sartre: 'Intentionality'

July 2nd — **Heidegger: The Analytic of Dasein**
Being and Time: §4, §9-13
N.B. Heidegger is difficult to read at first. We will move slowly through the text together, so please do not be discouraged if you struggle with his writing.

July 3rd — **Heidegger: Worldhood**
Being and Time: §14-18

July 4th — **No Class, Make-Up July 5th**

July 5th — **Heidegger: Dasein's Existential Constitution**
Being and Time: §25-27

July 8th — **Heidegger: Understanding and State-of-Mind**
Being and Time: §28-32

July 9th — **Heidegger: The They**
Being and Time: §35-38

July 10th — **Heidegger: Anxiety and Care**
Being and Time: §39-41

July 11th — **Heidegger: Death**
Being and Time: §46-53

July 15th — **Sartre: Self-Consciousness**
The Philosophy of JPS: 51-68, 101-110

July 16th — **Sartre: Feeling, Perception, and Imagination**
The Philosophy of JPS: 74-91

July 17th **Sartre: Bad Faith and Authenticity**
The Philosophy of JPS: 115-140, 146-167

July 18th **Sartre: Freedom**
The Philosophy of JPS: 167-185

July 22nd **Sartre: The Other**
The Philosophy of JPS: 188-204

July 23rd **Midterm in Class**

July 24th **Beauvoir: Existentialism as an Ethics**
Pyrrhus and Cineas: 'Candide's Garden,' 92-95 and 'Infinity,' 100-102
Ethics of Ambiguity: 1-35

July 25th **Beauvoir: Shapes of Agency and Authenticity**
Pyrrhus and Cineas: 'Action,' 135-139
Ethics of Ambiguity: 35-75

July 29th **Beauvoir: Ethics and Political Action**
Ethics of Ambiguity: 78-129

July 30th **Beauvoir: Ambiguity and Freedom**
Ethics of Ambiguity: 129-160

July 31st **Fanon: Black Existentialism**
Black Skin, White Masks: Introduction
Sartre: 'Existentialism Is a Humanism'

August 1st **Fanon: Critique of Sartre**
N.B. FINAL PAPER DUE.
Schedule interview session with me.
Black Skin, White Masks, Chapter 5

August 5th **Fanon: Recognition and Freedom**
Black Skin, White Masks, Chapter 7 and Conclusion

August 6th **No Readings: In-Class Film**
Memories of Underdevelopment, dir. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea

August 7th **Review Session**

August 8th **Final Exam**

Class Policies

- You must bring a copy of the assigned reading to class (preferably printed out, but digital is OK).

- Please regularly check CourseWorks and your Columbia email for any syllabus changes or additional materials.
- Please contact me via email if you cannot make my regular office hours and would like to meet.

University Policies

- Academic integrity: You are expected to submit work that is entirely your own and abide by the Columbia College Honor Code:

  I affirm that I will not plagiarize, use unauthorized materials, or give or receive illegitimate help on assignments, papers, or examinations. I will also uphold equity and honesty in the evaluation of my work and the work of others. I do so to sustain a community built around this Code of Honor.

- Please note that any use of LLMs for writing, producing notes, or brainstorming constitutes plagiarism under Columbia's plagiarism policy. I strongly advise against any use of LLMs for this course.
- You should also read carefully and familiarize yourself with the Faculty Statement on Academic Integrity, here quoted in full:

  The intellectual venture in which we are all engaged requires of faculty and students alike the highest level of personal and academic integrity. As members of an academic community, each one of us bears the responsibility to participate in scholarly discourse and research in a manner characterized by intellectual honesty and scholarly integrity. Scholarship, by its very nature, is an iterative process, with ideas and insights building one upon the other. Collaborative scholarship requires the study of other scholars' work, the free discussion of such work, and the explicit acknowledgement of those ideas in any work that inform our own. This exchange of ideas relies upon a mutual trust that sources, opinions, facts, and insights will be properly noted and carefully credited. In practical terms, this means that, as students, you must be responsible for the full citations of others' ideas in all of your research papers and projects; you must be scrupulously honest when taking your examinations; you must always submit your own work and not that of another student, scholar, or internet agent. Any breach of this intellectual responsibility is a breach of faith with the rest of our academic community. It undermines our shared intellectual culture, and it cannot be tolerated. Students failing to meet these responsibilities should anticipate being asked to leave Columbia.

- For more information on academic integrity at Columbia, students may refer to the Columbia University Undergraduate Guide to Academic Integrity: http://www.college.columbia.edu/academics/academicintegrity
- Disability services (DS): Students who have a disability or impairment that requires special accommodation should get in touch with the Office of Disability Services at http://health.columbia.edu/disability-services. All requests must go through this office, which grants special accommodations. Students should also familiarize themselves with the list of rights and responsibilities that bind students, DS, and instructors.
- Academic Support Services: Students should keep in mind that Columbia offers a variety of resources to help their academic progress. In particular, students in this seminar might find it

helpful to visit Columbia's Writing Center and to access the many writing resources freely accessible through their website.