

# ESCAPE



**Instructor:** Dr. Chris Goto-Jones (he/him/his) ([chrisgotojones@uvic.ca](mailto:chrisgotojones@uvic.ca))

**Office Hours:** Mondays, Thursdays 12:30-13:20 (Zoom booking link is on brightspace)

**Class Information:** Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday 13.30-14.20 (on Zoom)

**Course Website:** Through Brightspace. <http://bright.uvic.ca>

*Readings available through the course website – all available electronically when on campus network.  
Links to academic support and other services available through course site.*

*If you notice any accessibility issues with respect to this class, please let me know. If they are within my power, I will do my best to solve them. In general, though, I would also encourage any students who might benefit from their services to register with the Centre for Accessible Learning ([www.uvic.ca/services/cal/](http://www.uvic.ca/services/cal/)), where accommodations and other support can be sought.*

## Course Description

Organized loosely around the theme of 'escape' – into or out of the self – this course is an exploration of Existentialism and Existentialist thinkers with an emphasis on figures who are less commonly located at the centre of this important philosophical tradition. Rather than focussing mainly on Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre (although they will appear, especially near the start), this course is interested in some of the way that the Existentialist tradition responded to and developed upon their work, taking it into new and vibrant directions. Hence, after a short period of introduction both to the idea of 'escape' and to the basic contours of Existentialism, the course starts in earnest with the (very challenging) work of Emmanuel Levinas, 'On Escape,' whose concern was partially to navigate a new path between Husserl and Heidegger, exploring the (possibly doomed) quest of the self to transcend (or escape) itself. This early stage in the course starts us in 1920s Germany and 1930s France, in the nascent days of modern phenomenology.

Broadening the cultural field, in the next section we'll consider Nishitani Keiji, one of the most influential and interesting philosophers of modern Japan, who was a friend of Heidegger and who contributes an innovative synthesis of Existentialism and Buddhism as Existentialism spreads into Asia in the mid-twentieth century. Nishitani asks whether there is a way to escape the self without falling into nihilism.

Thereafter, moving into the 1950s and 60s in England, in the work of Iris Murdoch, we'll explore some of the ways in which her response to the Existentialism of Sartre leads us towards notions that European Existentialism could and should be a vehicle for self-transformation – is the realization of an 'unself' the best way to escape the trials and evils of the self? Here we touch into the intersection between Existentialism and Mysticism.

And then, finally, we'll look at a contemporary phenomenologist who lives and works in the Pacific Northwest, David Abram, whose work explicitly engages with the question of a form of more-than-human Existentialism in the context of the natural world. This is where Existentialism intersects with contemporary movements such as Eco-Philosophy. Central here will be the question of whether an ecocentric standpoint enables the self to escape from the smallness of its world.

By the end of this course, you can expect to:

- Understand how the notion of 'escape' pertains to the existential dimensions of the self;
- Understand the foundational concepts of Existentialism and Phenomenology;
- Understand how those foundational concepts have been changed and developed by different representatives of (and engagements with) the field;
- Recognise how different approaches to language and communication can transform the potentials of philosophical inquiry and knowledge formation;
- Recognise how the Existentialist tradition has spread around the world and developed in creative engagement with some different philosophical traditions;
- Understand the significance of Phenomenology as a methodological partner of Existentialism;
- Demonstrate sensitivity and awareness of the ethical issues that arise from intercultural encounters, such as in the encounter between Existentialism and Buddhism.

## Course materials

Given the diversity of the material, there is no single textbook for this course. Nearly all of the readings are available electronically through UVic libraries – links will be provided in brightspace to all materials.

Additional materials, including text excerpts and alternative readings will also be provided through brightspace. Each week will include two sessions dedicated to the specified reading; the third session will be in a more 'Existentialist' format, perhaps exploring an extract from a piece of fiction in the Existential tradition, so that we not only experience Existentialism in its most analytic forms but also in some of its creative modes.

## Course Logistics

This will be a mostly *synchronous* online course. This means that the classes will be held in real-time online via **Zoom**. In a few cases, pre-recorded videos may be used. Attendance is highly recommended, since interaction and discussion are vital to learning (and teaching!). Most of the sessions will be recorded and made available for the class to review on **Brightspace**. These recordings will remain available throughout the course so that you can refer to them as needed. In some weeks we may have guest teachers from other universities, in which case I hope you will all attend those sessions out of respect for their freely-given time. If you are sick or have other good reason to miss the class, please let me know *in advance of the class* (or as soon as possible thereafter), and this may count as an excused absence.

## Academic Integrity

Everything you will be evaluated on in this course will be fully open book and untimed. All answers to assignments have to be your own written work. This means that you are not allowed to provide answers for someone else, or *vice versa* or even *versa vice*. If you are ever unsure about what constitutes a violation of academic integrity, more information is provided on the University Calendar:

<http://web.uvic.ca/calendar/undergrad/info/regulations/academic-integrity.html>

## Communication and Office Hours

Email is my preferred method of communication, as opposed to *Brightspace* messages or forum posts, especially for any official requests. If you ask me a question over email, you can expect a reply within about 1 working day. If you don't hear back from me within that time frame, feel free to try again in case your message went astray, or in case I'm just snowed under (it happens). When you do address me (over email or otherwise), please do so as Chris, because that's my name. If you feel more comfortable with titles, then please use either Professor (Prof.) Goto-Jones or Dr. Goto-Jones. No 'sir' or 'mr,' for various reasons, thanks! If you are ever nervous about sending me an email, or asking a question, feel free to include a funny anecdote, cartoon, or a picture of your pet with your request. This will not affect whether or not I will be able to help you with your request, but it will be much more fun for us all.

Finally, my pronouns are he/him. If you think I am unlikely to know the name you would prefer to be called, or the pronouns I ought to use for you (through the entry that I will see for you through your Brightspace/UVic registration), please don't hesitate to make me aware. It's helpful if you add your pronouns to your Zoom tag.

My default platform for office hours will be Zoom, Mondays and Thursdays 12:30-13:20 am, but if that does not work for you, please feel free to email me in advance to suggest an alternative time and/or platform. Office hours will require pre-booking via Calendly (link to follow). If you don't make an appointment, you are welcome to sit in the Zoom waiting room until I become free, but please keep in mind that all the slots might already be booked. All relevant links will be posted on Brightspace.

## Evaluation

You are expected to maintain high standards of respect and academic integrity throughout this course. Discussion is essential to learning in this course, and it relies upon an atmosphere of trust. Everyone present should feel safe to express their views, which also means that everyone present is responsible for ensuring that they exercise academic freedom (rather than merely freedom of speech), treating each other respectfully and supportively.

### • Continuous Assessment/Participation: 10%

In this course, your participation will be evidenced by attending and participating in classes and by submitting weekly 'reflections.' These 'reflections' will be short (approx. 150-200 word) responses to excerpts of text drawn from the weekly reading (or from a text adjacent to the reading). Usually, the prompt will be provided during or after class on Wednesday and will be due by 11.59pm on the following Tuesday. The purpose is to demonstrate thoughtfulness and reflection rather than to test your mastery of the material. These reflections are 'pass/fail.'

### • First assignment: 25% - deadline: Friday 17 February, 23:59

### • Second assignment: 25% - deadline: Friday 14 March, 23:59

The midterm assignments will be open-book format. For each midterm assignment you will receive a list of questions from which you will **answer one** with **approx. 750-1,000 words**. The first midterm will address topics from early in the course (introduction and intellectual context), and the second will address topics from the middle of the course (Laozi).

Your work will be assessed on: its relevance to the themes and materials of the course; its accurate use of sources; its coherence, sophistication and persuasiveness; the convincingness and effectiveness of your argument and writing. Personal reflection and engagement is encouraged.

### • Final assignment: 40% - deadline: Friday 14 April, 23:59

The final assignment will be open-book format. You will receive a list of potential topics in reading week. From that list, you can select one question, which you will address in a more extended and sophisticated manner than in the midterm. I will expect **approx. 1500-2000 words**. The questions will pertain to material covered during the whole course.

Your work will be assessed on: its relevance to the themes and materials of the course; its accurate use of sources; its coherence, sophistication and persuasiveness; the convincingness and effectiveness of your argument and writing. Personal reflection and engagement is encouraged.

## Grades

*Grades will be given as percentile marks.*

*Per UVic grading rubric, the percentile mark for the course will be converted to a letter grade in the following manner:*

*A+ = 90 - 100, A = 85 - 89, A- = 80 - 84, B+ = 77 - 79, B = 73 - 76, B- = 70 - 72, C+ = 65 - 69, C = 60 - 64, D = 50 - 59, F = 0 - 49.*

- *The A range means exceptional, outstanding and excellent performance.*
- *A grade in the B range means a very good, good and solid performance.*
- *A grade in the C+ or C range means satisfactory, or minimally satisfactory, performance.*
- *A grade of D or D- indicates merely passable or marginal performance.*
- *An F indicates unsatisfactory performance.*

*The full UVic grading rubric is provided in the Appendix to this syllabus. In the instance that it differs from this text, the UVic rubric takes precedence.*

## SCHEDULE

Week 1: Monday 10 Jan – Friday 13 Jan: *Introduction to existentialism and escape*

Jose Luis Reissig, 'What are we to do with our enclosures.' In Hilda Balloquin (ed.), *Dharma, Color, and Culture*. Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2004.

Viktor Frankl tbc

Selections from Adam Phillips, *Houdini's Box: On the Arts of Escape*. London: Faber & Faber, 2001

Optional background:

Stephen Crowell, 'Existentialism.' Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020

(<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>) This is a useful reference throughout the course, especially if you didn't take Phil211.

### PART ONE: The Road to 'On Escape'

This part of the course aims towards enabling us to read a short piece by Levinas, *On Escape*. Since Levinas builds on and responds to the Existentialist and Phenomenological traditions quite intricately, our road to accessing *On Escape* will start by considering an accessible introduction to some of the big issues in those twin fields. With this in mind, we're going to start with Sartre ... but we are likely to also need to talk about Heidegger ...

Week 2: Tuesday 17 Jan – Friday 20 Jan: *No Exit - Introducing Modern Existentialism and Phenomenology*

Heidegger, Sartre readings tbc

Sartre, *No Exit*. BBC/Pinter, 1964. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0v96qw83tw4>

Week 3: Tuesday 24 Jan – Friday 27 Jan: *Getting Out of Being I*

Emmanuel Levinas, 'On Escape.' Levinas, *On Escape*. Stanford University Press, 2003, pp.49-60 (ie. parts 1-3)

Week 4: Tuesday 31 Jan – Friday 3 Feb: *Getting Out of Being II*

Emmanuel Levinas, 'On Escape.' Levinas, *On Escape*. Stanford University Press, 2003, pp.60-73 (ie. parts 4-8)

### **First assignment issued**

### PART TWO: Existentialism Beyond Europe - NISHITANI Keiji

This part of the course takes us to Japan and the emergence of the so-called Kyoto School of Philosophy, which worked creatively at the intersection of Mayahana Buddhist philosophy (especially Zen), German Idealism, and Existentialism. Most important for us here is the deployment of a phenomenological method, which was seen as friendly to Buddhist thought, and

the engagement with a concept of nothingness at the heart of being. Nothing as an escape from the self. As in the previous part, we will work towards being able to read Nishitani in his own words (in week 8).

Week 5: Tuesday 7 Feb – Friday 10 Feb: The Kyoto School's Embrace of Nothingness  
Bret Davis, 'Nothing Matters.' *The Philosopher* 109:1  
(<https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/davis>)

Week 6: Tuesday 14 Feb – Friday 17 Feb: Beyond Nothingness  
Yasuo Deguchi, 'Nishitani on Emptiness and Nothingness.' In Liu & Berger (eds),  
*Nothingness in Asian Philosophy*. Routledge, 2014 (chapter 20)

*Optional:*

Fred Dallmayr, 'Nothingness and *Śūnyatā*: A Comparison of Heidegger and Nishitani.' *Philosophy East and West*, 42/1 (1992), pp.37–48. doi:10.2307/1399690

### **First assignment due – 17 February**

Week 7: READING BREAK – NO CLASSES (Tues 21 Feb- Friday 24 Feb)

Week 8: Tuesday 28 Feb – Friday 3 March: Overcoming Nihilism  
Nishitani Keiji, 'Nihilism as existence' and 'The Meaning of Nihilism for Japan.' Nishitani Keiji, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. SUNY, 1990 (chapters 1 & 9)

### **Second assignment issued**

## **PART THREE: Iris MURDOCH**

In this part, we move over to England to consider the work of Irish philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch, whose astonishing career began with her creative and acclaimed biography of Sartre (1953), written while she was a professor in Oxford. The influence of Existentialism on her mode of writing philosophy remained throughout her career, as she also became a prize-winning novelist. In her own terms, Murdoch felt that she was a moral philosopher and (neo)Platonist in search of a unitary experience of the good through a process of escaping the confines of a small self through 'unselfing.'

Week 9: Tuesday 7 March – Friday 10 March: Towards Unselfing  
(sessions on Wed and Fri this week might be pre-recorded)

Iris Murdoch, selections from 'The Sublime and the Good' tbc and 'Existentialists and Mystics.' In Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*. Penguin 1998 (part five, pp.205-234)

Week 10: Tuesday 14 March – Friday 17 March: Towards Unselfing and Mysticism

Iris Murdoch, selections from 'The Sublime and the Good' tbc and 'Existentialists and Mystics.' In Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*. Penguin 1998 (part five, pp.205-234)

### **Second assignment due – 17 March**

## Final assignment issued

### PART FOUR: David ABRAM

In the final section of this course, we move on to the contemporary American philosopher David Abram, who is best known for his creative cross-engagement with Phenomenology (mostly via the world of Maurice Merleau-Ponty) and ecological and environmental issues. In particular, Abram is interested in exploring how the method of Phenomenology works to dissolve (rather than reinforce) the boundaries of the individual self and thus opens human existence to a more magical, more-than-human way of being. Is an eco-centric standpoint an effective and helpful way to escape from the confines of the self?

Week 11: Tuesday 21 March – Friday 24 March: Existential Magic  
David Abram, 'The Ecology of Magic.' In David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous; Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. Vintage, 1997 (chapter 1)

Week 12: Tuesday 28 March – Friday 31 March: Ecological Philosophy  
David Abram, 'Philosophy on the Way to Ecology.' In David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous; Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. Vintage, 1997 (chapter 2)

Week 13: Tuesday 4 April – Wednesday 5 April: *Review of Themes and Ideas*

Term ends on 5 April, so no class on Friday this week)

### Final assignment due – 14 April

**Please note** that all assignments for this course and all materials posted to Brightspace are the intellectual property of myself and the University of Victoria. Do not circulate this material or post it to note-sharing sites without my permission. Posting course materials to note-sharing sites or otherwise circulating course materials without the permission of your instructor violates the *Policy on Academic Integrity*(<http://web.uvic.ca/calendar/FACS/UnIn/UARe/PoAcl.html>).



## APPENDIX: UVIC GRADING RUBRIC

<https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/undergrad/index.php#/policy/S1AAgoGuV?bc=true&bcCurrent=14%20-%20Grading&bcItemtype=policies>

A primary purpose of evaluation and grading is to further effective teaching and learning. Any practices which assign a predetermined percentage of students a specific grade, that is, a certain percentage get A, another percentage get B and so on, without regard to individual achievement are prohibited.

The table below shows the official grading system used by instructors in arriving at final assessments of student performance. For letter grades authorized for use in the Faculty of Law, see the entry under that faculty.

Passing Grades			
Grade	Grade Value	Point Percentage*	Description
A+	9	90 - 100	An A+, A, or A- is earned by work which is technically superior, shows mastery of the subject matter, and in the case of an A+ offers original insight and/or goes beyond course expectations. Normally achieved by a minority of students.
A	8	85 - 89	
A-	7	80 - 84	
B+	6	77 - 79	A B+, B, or B- is earned by work that indicates a good comprehension of the course material, a good command of the skills needed to work with the course material, and the student's full engagement with the course requirements and activities. A B+ represents a more complex understanding and/or application of the course material.
B	5	73 - 76	
B-	4	70 - 72	
C+	3	65 - 69	A C+ or C is earned by work that indicates an adequate comprehension of the course material and the skills needed to work with the course material and that indicates the student has met the basic requirements for completing assigned work and/or participating in class activities.
C	2	60 - 64	
D	1	50 - 59	A D is earned by work that indicates minimal command of the course materials and/or minimal participation in class activities that is worthy of course credit toward the degree.
COM	Excluded Grade	N/A	<b>Complete</b> (pass). Used only for 0-unit courses and those credit courses designated by the Senate. Such courses are identified in the course listings.
CTN	Excluded Grade	N/A	<b>Continuing</b> . Denotes the first half of a full-year course.
Failing Grades			
Grade	Grade Value	Point Percentage*	Description
E	0	0 - 49	Conditional supplemental. Supplemental examinations are not offered by all departments and the allowable percentage may vary by program (e.g. 35-49). Students will be advised whether supplemental

Failing Grades			
Grade	Grade Value	Point Percentage*	Description
			will be offered and if the percentage range varies when assessment techniques are announced at the beginning of the course.
F	0	0 - 49	F is earned by work, which after the completion of course requirements, is inadequate and unworthy of course credit towards the degree.
N	0	0 - 49	Did not write examination or complete course requirements by the end of term or session; no supplemental.
N/X	Excluded Grade	N/A	Did not complete course requirements by the end of the term; no supplemental. Used only for Co-op work terms and for courses designated by Senate. Such courses are identified in the course listings. The grade is EXCLUDED from the calculation of all grade point averages.
F/X	Excluded Grade	N/A	<b>Unsatisfactory</b> performance. Completed course requirements; no supplemental. Used only for Co-op work terms and for courses designated by Senate. Such courses are identified in the course listings. The grade is EXCLUDED from the calculation of all grade point averages.

Temporary Grades			
Grade	Grade Point Value	Percentage*	Description
INC	N/A	N/A	<b>Incomplete.</b> Used only for those credit courses designated by the Senate, to be replaced with a final grade by June 1 for Winter Session courses and by October 1 for Summer Session courses. Such courses are identified in the course listings.
DEF	N/A	N/A	<b>Deferred status</b> granted. Used only when deferred status has been granted because of illness, an accident or family affliction. See <a href="#">Deferred status</a> .
INP	N/A	N/A	<b>In Progress.</b> Used only for courses designated by Senate, to be replaced with a final grade by the end of the next Winter Session except for TIED courses (identified in the Calendar). In TIED courses the INP must be replaced with a final grade by the end of the subsequent term (including Summer Session) or, where a COOP Work Term, or other activity approved by the academic unit, intervenes, within eight months. If a student fails to complete the second course of a TIED course sequence, then the final grade will be N.
CIC	N/A	N/A	<b>Co-op Interrupted Course.</b> See <a href="#">General Regulations: Undergraduate Co-op</a> .

Grade notes			
Grade note	Grade Point Value	Percentage*	Description
AEG	N/A	N/A	<b>Aegrotat.</b> Transcript notation accompanying a letter grade, assigned where documented illness or similar affliction affected the student's performance or prevented completion of all course work.
WE	N/A	N/A	<b>Withdrawal under extenuating circumstances.</b> The WE registration status will replace a course registration or grade when approved by the Dean following a request for academic concession from a student. This registration status is excluded from the calculation of all grade point averages; it will appear on the official transcript.

\* The grading scale for the evaluation of course achievement at the University of Victoria is a percentage scale that translates to a 9 point GPA/letter grade system. The 9 point GPA system is the sole basis for the calculation of grade point averages and academic standing. Standardized percentage ranges have been established as the basis for the assignment of letter grades. The percentage grades are displayed on the official and administrative transcripts in order to provide fine grained course assessment which will be useful to students particularly in their application to graduate studies and for external scholarships and funding. Comparative grading information (average grade [mean] for the class), along with the number of students in the class, is displayed for each course section for which percentage grades are assigned.