

PHIL311 (Spring 2025)

*Existentialist Thinkers & Thought*

# ESCAPE



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

**Office Hours:** Monday 12-13:00 and Thursday 13.00-14.00 (online by appointment)

(book via Calendly: <https://calendly.com/chrisgotojones/office-hours>)

**Class Information:** Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday 13.30-14.20 (MacLaurin, D101)

**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.*

## 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.

### **Course Logistics**

This course will be in-person. Attendance is highly recommended; interaction and discussion are vital to learning (and teaching!). If you are sick or have other good reason to miss the class (life happens!), 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>

Professionalism is expected from all students enrolled in courses in the Faculty of Humanities. As part of professionalism, students, faculty and staff are expected to be familiar with University policies, including the [Tri-Faculty's Standards for Professional Behaviour](#).

### **Communication and Office Hours**

Email is my preferred method of communication, as opposed to Brightspace messages or forum posts. 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). Please be aware that if you email on Friday night, the first working day will be ... Monday.

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, please don't hesitate to make me aware. It's helpful if you add your pronouns to your email footer.

My default platform for office hours will be Zoom, Mondays and Thursdays 12:30-13:20 am (TBC), 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. It's much better to make an appointment. 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. Each time you come to class and participate you will receive 1 point, up to a maximum of 30 by the end of the semester (ie. 10 weeks of classes). Since there are 13 weeks, you have some leeway!

- Reflective assignments: 40%

Because a goal of this course is to reflect upon and understand how our ideas about being and escape impact our lives, 2 of the assignments will be 'reflective.' Each will be worth 20% of your final grade. A 'reflective assignment' encourages you to explore your own responses to the material covered in these sections and how (if at all) this material may have altered your outlook. They are less formal than a regular academic essay, but no less important. For each reflection, you will receive a choice of 3 prompts; you will respond to 1 with about 750 words. Your work will be assessed on both your understanding of the material covered (you must represent it accurately) as well as your ability to relate that to your existing views on the topics concerned.

- Final analytic assignment: 50%

The final assignment will be open-book format. You will receive a list of potential topics in week 12. From that list, you will select one question, which you will address in sophisticated, academic manner. You should expect that the final assignment will be more conventionally 'academic' than the reflection assignments. I will expect approx. 1,500-2,000 words. The questions will encompass topics from the whole course; your answers will benefit from making use of knowledge and context from the course overall.

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.

## **Grades**

Per [UVic grading rubric](#), grades will be given as percentile marks. I am encouraged to remind you that UVic does not endorse grading a curve, but nevertheless the rubric states that grades over 80 (ie. A-, A, A+) are 'normally achieved by a minority of students.'

## **Late work and extensions**

I am happy to allow each of you 4 days of extra time for your assignments. That is 4 days in total for the semester. You can use these days howsoever is helpful for you: all for one assignment, some for each, or whatever. This period of grace is granted without any need for explanation or justification. These are days are not divisible into hours. Should you need further extensions, you will need to apply for them formally. Work that is submitted beyond these limits will be penalized 5% per day until submission. In the instance that work is submitted too late to be graded, it will not be marked.

## SCHEDULE

### **Week 1:       *Introduction to existentialism and escape* (Jan 7,8,10)**

*No need to read in advance – we'll look together in class.*

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

Selections from Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*. 1946. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006. tba.

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

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:       *No Exit - Introducing Modern Existentialism and Phenomenology* (Jan 14,15,17)**

Selections from Heidegger and Sartre, to be supplied in class.

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

### **Week 3:       *Getting Out of Being I* (Jan 21,22,24)**

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

### **Week 4:       *Getting Out of Being II* (Jan 28,29,31)**

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

**FIRST REFLECTIVE ASSIGNMENT ISSUED 31 Jan, DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION 7 Feb**

### **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: The Kyoto School's Embrace of Nothingness (Feb 4,5,7)**

Bret Davis, 'Nothing Matters.' *The Philosopher* 109:1  
(<https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/davis>)

**Week 6: Beyond Nothingness (Feb 11,12,13)**

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

**Week 7: READING BREAK – NO CLASSES (Feb 18,19,21))**

**Week 8: Overcoming Nihilism (Feb 25,26,28)**

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 REFLECTIVE ASSIGNMENT ISSUED 28 Feb, DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION 7 MARCH**

**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: Towards Unselfing (Mar 4,5,7)**

(headsup – there's a chance this content will need to be asynchronous)

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: Towards Unselfing and Mysticism (Mar 11,12,14)**

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)

## 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:       Existential Magic (March 18,19,21)**  
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)

**FINAL ASSIGNMENT ISSUED 21 March, DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION 11 APRIL**

**Week 12:       Ecological Philosophy (March 25,26,28)**  
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:       LAST WEEK – review, catch-up, and requests (Apr 1, 2, 4)**

**DEADLINE FOR FINAL COMPLETION OF COURSE 11 APRIL**

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### Other Resources:

#### Student Resources

- a. [UVic Learn Anywhere](#). UVic Learn Anywhere is the primary learning resource for students that offers many learning workshops and resources to help students with academics and learning strategies.
- b. [Library resources](#). Information for students wishing to use the UVic library.
- c. [Student wellness resources](#)
- d. [Ombudsperson](#) A resource to help resolve disputes or complaints.
- e. Indigenous student services ([ISS](#))
- f. Centre for Academic Communication ([CAC](#))
- g. Math & Stats Assistance Centre ([MSAC](#))
- h. Learning Strategies Program ([LSP](#))
- i. [Other student groups and resources](#)
- j. [Academic Concession Regulations](#)
- k. [Academic Concession and Accommodation](#)
- l. Academic accommodation & access for students with disabilities – [Policy AC1205](#)

## University statements and policies

- a. University Calendar - Section "[Information for all students](#)"
- b. [Creating a respectful, inclusive and productive learning environment](#)
- c. [Accommodation of Religious Observance](#)
- d. [Student Conduct](#)
- e. [Non-academic Student Misconduct](#)
- f. [Accessibility](#)
- g. [Diversity / EDI](#)
- h. [Equity statement](#)
- i. [Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response](#)
- j. Discrimination and Harassment [Policy](#)