

PHILOSOPHY 211

Introduction to Existentialism

FALL 2026
Class Time: TWF 1:30-2:20
COR A129
CRN: 12746 [1.5 Units]

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Office Hours: Mon and Wed 2:00-3:00
or by appointment

I acknowledge with respect the Lək'wəḡən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the University of Victoria stands, and the Lək'wəḡən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples (including the Tsartlip, Pauquachin, Tsawout, Tseycum and Malahat nations) in whose territories and waters the university operates and whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

Course Description:

We don't just exist; we know that we "exist" – and we also know that we will die someday. How does this affect how we experience ourselves and our world? Does what we are imply anything about what we ought to be? This course will be an introduction to the ideas and literature of Existentialism through the texts of its major thinkers and literary figures. We will discuss how what we now call "Existentialism" emerges from out of and in opposition to abstract philosophical theory and begins instead with the particular existing individual. We will then explore how Existentialism works out the implications of that claim.

Readings will include selections from the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, Franz Fanon and Ralph Ellison, along with some relevant short fiction.

Intended Learning Outcomes:

This course will provide you with:

- an introduction to selected examples from the philosophy and literature that we call "Existentialism";
- a familiarity with key ideas and assumptions that govern this way of thinking;
- an opportunity to improve your ability to read, analyze and critique difficult texts;
- a chance to hone your skills at reading more critically and expressing your ideas more effectively in written and spoken form – indispensable assets for all walks of life, from the living room to the boardroom; and
- a forum and the freedom to examine your own existence.

Texts

In the Bookstore:

Kauffman, Walter: *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*
Nietzsche, Friedrich: *The Gay Science*

In the Library, or on Brightspace:

Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity* (excerpts)
René Descartes, *Meditations* (Meditations 1&2)
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (prologue)
Franz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (Chpt. 5)
Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible* (excerpts)
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Prologue & Speech 1)
Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (excerpts)

Course Format and Expectations

This course is in-person only and will not be recorded. Students are expected to come to class having read the assigned readings with care, and ready to discuss (and occasionally write on) the material. Students who miss a class are responsible for any material covered therein, as well as for finding out what announcements, if any, were made. This course is reading- and writing-intensive. Skimming AI summaries will not suffice; in-depth familiarity with the texts will be expected.

Assignments

Five In-Class Writing Exercises worth 4% each:	20%
Two Short Essays worth 25% each:	50%
Final Term paper:	<u>30%</u>
	100%

Assessment:

The standard [University grading scheme](#) will be used. Please consult the University's "Description" of what the grading scale means. This is also given in a link on the "General Information" module of the Brightspace course site.

Minimum Conditions for Passing This Course

In order to pass this course, you must complete at least three of the In-Class Writing Exercises, one of the Short Essays, and the Final Paper, with a final a grade point average of 50% or greater.

Failure to complete three In-Class Writing Exercises, one Short Essay and the Final Paper will result in a grade of "N" regardless of the cumulative percentage on other elements of the course. N is a failing grade and factors into GPA as a value of 0.

Description of Assignments

- **Five In-class Writing Exercises [4% each]:**

You are expected to read and to come to class prepared. Spaced throughout the course, there will be in-class short-answer writing exercises on questions relating to the readings. Possible questions will be given in advance. These exercises are intended to help you review the course material and support class discussion.

- **Two Short Essays (750-1000 words) [worth 25% each]:**

There will be two short essays required for this course, to be completed outside of class. These will be exegetical essays, intended to improve skills of critical reading and concise composition, and to prepare you for your final essay. Paper topics will be posted at least one week before the due date, but you are always free to write on a topic of your own choice, so long as you speak with me *before the due date*. ***Any paper suspected of having been generated artificially will be referred to the department chair.***

- **Final Paper [1500-2000 words] [worth 30%]:**

There will be one substantial paper due at the end of the semester, giving you an opportunity to deepen your engagement with the ideas of the course and to explore a more synthetic topic. I will provide a list of possible topics, but again, you are free to choose one of your own, so long as you speak with me *in advance*. This paper should deal with at least two of the thinkers covered in the course and include at least two secondary sources (material not covered in the course). Papers will be evaluated on your understanding of the material, the quality of your thought and the clarity and presentation of your discussion (including spelling, punctuation and grammar). ***Again, any paper suspected of having been generated artificially will be referred to the department chair.***

Policy on Late Assignments

Late assignments unaccompanied by a legitimate excuse will be penalized at the rate of 5% per day or portion thereof, to a maximum of 30%. Exceptions to this penalty will only be considered in cases where an alternate deadline was ***arranged ahead of time*** or lateness was caused by an unexpected or unavoidable circumstance, as described in the University's [policies regarding academic concessions](#). If you are unable to meet a deadline because of conflicting responsibilities or unexpected or unavoidable circumstances *you must contact me as soon as you are aware of the circumstances or conflict*.

Additional Course Policies

Academic Integrity and Professional Conduct

Chat GPT and similar technologies are not permitted for this course. Plagiarism and other forms of cheating will not be tolerated. It is each student's responsibility to know the University's regulations in this regard. The Policy on Academic Integrity is published in [the University Calendar](#). You can also consult the [Libraries' plagiarism guide](#) or the [Tri-Faculty Standards for Professional Behavior for Students](#), which draws together a number of existing UVic policies in one place for ease of reference. 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 Standards.

Intellectual Property & Materials on the LMS Website

All assignments for this course and all materials posted to the LMS website are the intellectual property of the instructor and the University of Victoria. Do not circulate this material or post it to note-sharing sites without the instructor's permission. Posting course materials to note-sharing sites or otherwise circulating course materials without the permission of the instructor violates the Policy on Academic Integrity (link above). Any evidence that you are circulating materials without permission will be referred to the Chair of the Philosophy Department for investigation.

Academic Supports

The University has a number of academic support services that may help you in this course, including the [Centre for Academic Communication](#), the [Library's Research Support page](#), and the [Library's "Ask Us" service](#). Information about academic supports can also be found through the [University's Learn Anywhere site](#).

Academic Accommodations

The University of Victoria is committed to creating a learning experience that is as accessible as possible. If you anticipate or experience any barriers to learning in this course, please feel welcome to discuss your concerns with me. If you believe you will require academic accommodations to address barriers to your education in this course and you have not already registered with the [Centre for Accessible Learning](#), please [do so](#). The Centre for Accessible Learning is the office designated to make arrangements for accommodations. You can find information about academic accommodations through the Centre for Accessible Learning's website.

Some Important Administrative Dates

- September 22nd : last day for 100% reduction of fees.
- September 25th : last day to for adding first-term courses.
- October 13th: last day for 50% reduction of tuition fees. 100% of tuition fees will be assessed for courses dropped after this date.
- October 31st: last day for withdrawing from second-term courses without penalty of failure.

Other Resources

Student Resources

- a. [UVic Learn Anywhere](#). UVic Learn Anywhere is the primary learning resource for students. It 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. Indigenous [student services](#)
- d. [Centre for Academic Communication](#)
- e. [Learning Strategist Program](#)
- f. [Academic Concession Regulations](#)
- g. [Academic Concessions and Accommodations](#)
- h. Academic accommodation & access for students with disabilities – [Policy AC1205](#)
- i. [Student wellness](#) resources.
- j. [Ombudsperson](#). A resource to help resolve disputes or complaints.
- k. Other [student groups and resources](#).

University Statements and Policies

- a. University Calendar – [“Information for all students”](#)
- b. [Creating a respectful, inclusive and productive learning environment](#)
- c. [Accommodation of Religious Observance](#)
- d. [Student Conduct and Non-Academic Student Misconduct](#)
- e. [Accessibility](#)
- f. [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#)
- g. [Equity and Human Rights](#)
- h. [Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response](#)
- i. Discrimination and Harassment [Policy](#)

Schedule of Classes

WEEK ONE: **Beginnings**

- September** 9 Introductions
 11 A Thinking Thing
 Read: Descartes, *Meditations*, Meditation 1 & 2

WEEK TWO: **A New Voice**

- 15 A Voice from Underground
 Read: Dostoevsky, "Notes from the Underground"
 (in Kaufmann, pp. 52-82)
 16 A Voice from Underground (cont)
 18* Discussion and **In-Class Writing #1**

WEEK THREE: **Sören Kierkegaard - Ethics of the Singular**

- 22 *That* Individual
 Read: Kierkegaard Sections 1 and 4 in Kaufmann,
 Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, (pgs. 85-87, 94-101)
 23 Only One
 Read: Section 7 in Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (pgs. 110-120)
 25 Truth is Subjectivity
 Read: Section 7 in Kaufmann (cont)

WEEK FOUR: **Messages**

- 29* Discussion and **In-Class Writing #2**
 30 University Closed

- October** 2* Story Break
 Read: Kafka, "The Imperial Message" in Kaufmann, pgs. 144-145

WEEK FIVE: Friedrich Nietzsche – A Joyous Science

October	6	Zarathustra Read: <i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i> Prologue and Speech 1
	7	Sickness and Health Read: <i>The Gay Science</i> , Preface
	9**	Will to Truth Read: Nietzsche, <i>The Gay Science</i> , Sects. Sects 1-4

WEEK SIX: Nietzsche – A Re-evaluation of Values

13	Shadows of God	
	Read: Nietzsche, <i>The Gay Science</i> , Sects. 108-110	
14	The Death of God	
	Read: <i>The Gay Science</i> , Sects. 124-125	
16	A Sort of Ethics	** 1st Short Essay Due**
	Read: <i>The Gay Science</i> , Sect. 283, 290, 34	

WEEK SEVEN: Martin Heidegger's Dasein

20 Angst as Revelation
Read: Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" Kaufmann, 242-257

21 The Encounter with the Nothing
Read: Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" (cont)

23* Discussion and **In-Class Writing #3**

WEEK EIGHT: Jean-Paul Sartre: “Existentialism”

27 Freedom and Responsibility
Read: Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in Kaufmann,
Existentialism, pgs. 345-369

28 Anguish, Abandonment & Despair
Read: Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," (cont)

30 The Meaning of the End
Read: "The Wall" in Kaufmann, pgs. 281-299

WEEK NINE: Sartre: Hell is Other People

November	3	The Being of Others (Park) Read: Sartre, <i>Being and Nothingness</i> , 252-259	
	4	The Being of Others (Keyhole) Read: Sartre, <i>Being and Nothingness</i> , 259-264 (bottom)	
	6**	Discussion	**Second Short Essay Due**

WEEK TEN: Existential Changes

November 9-11 ****Reading Break****

13 Existential Identities
 Watch: Chloe Zhao, *The Rider* (2017)

WEEK ELEVEN: Simone de Beauvoir - Existential Ethics

17 Ambiguity & Freedom
 Read: Simone de Beauvoir, "Ambiguity and Freedom,"
 from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

18 Ambiguity & Freedom (cont)
 Read: Simone de Beauvoir, "Ambiguity and Freedom"

20* Discussion and **In-Class Writing #4**

WEEK TWELVE: Fanon & Ellison: The Visible Invisible

24 Outside-In
 Read: Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (excerpt)

25 Visible/Invisible
 Read: Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Prologue

27* Invisible Man Continued
 Read: Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Prologue

WEEK THIRTEEN: Other Worlds

December 1 Social Ontology
 Read: Charles Mills, "Non-Cartesian Sums"

2* Discussion and **In-Class Writing #5**

4 Why Sisyphus?
 Read: Camus, "Sisyphus" in Kaufmann, 375-378

**** December 14th - FINAL PAPERS DUE ****