

# Introduction to Existentialism: Identity, Race, Gender

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## I. Course Summary

Existentialism was one of the most influential philosophical and cultural movements of the 20th century. At the core of existentialism is a shared sensibility that the traditional Western philosophical canon—defined by its emphasis on abstract rational thought—had failed to provide an accurate picture of human existence. Rather than treating the issue of human existence in abstract terms, existentialists sought to understand concrete lived human existence in all of its complexity.

This course serves as an introduction to the basic problems and themes that define the existentialist movement. In particular, we will investigate and assess how *authenticity*, *freedom*, *death*, *anxiety*, *faith*, and *absurdity* characterize the human situation and the search for meaning in life. We will be especially attuned to how the basic insights of existentialist philosophy can help us achieve a deeper understanding of how race and gender deeply shape and are shaped by the human experience and our entanglements.

We begin by critically examining canonical existentialist texts by thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Next, we explore how the discoveries of the existentialist movement can fruitfully bear on issues of race and gender. To this end, we will read foundational texts on race and gender by Frantz Fanon and Simone de Beauvoir, and a number of literary texts including works by Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, Toni Morrison, Clarice Lispector, and Louise Glück. We will supplement these readings with a number of films that serve to expand the philosophical accounts of human existence put forth by existentialist authors.

## II. Course Goals and Objectives

1. Students will read important and under-appreciated philosophical texts, some of which aim to diversify a philosophical canon that has historically ignored women philosophers and philosophers of color.
2. This class will focus on concrete examples and situations. Students will be able to apply the philosophical insights of the existentialists to their own lives and to a variety of social and ethical situations.
3. We will explore how philosophy can be expressed in various formats, e.g., film, fiction, and poetry. Students will be able to identify existentialist themes across various kinds of media.

4. This class will be discussion and writing centered. Students will write papers and work on a final creative project. As a result, students will develop their argumentative and critical thinking skills, as well as their written and verbal communication skills. The final creative project allows students to develop creative thinking in addition to analytical thinking.
5. Existentialism is a deeply reflective tradition. Students will acquire crucial concepts concerning the self that will facilitate their own practices of self-reflection. Such practices aim to enrich one's life and sense of purpose.

### III. Course Materials

We will be reading the following texts:

1. Guignon and Fanon (editors), *Existentialism: Basic Writings*.
2. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).
3. Simone de Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (1944) *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), *Second Sex* (1949).
4. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990).
5. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970).
6. Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.* (1964).
7. Louise Glück, *Poems 1962-2012* (2013).
8. Additional readings will be available on Sakai.

We will be watching the following films:

1. The Sacrifice (dir. Andrei Tarkovsky, 1986)
2. The Turin Horse (dir. Bela Tarr and Agnes Hranitzky, 1957)
3. Ikiru (dir. Akira Kurasawa, 1952)
4. Cleo From 5 to 7 (dir. Agnes Varda, 1961)
5. Losing Ground (dir. Kathleen Collins, 1982)

## IV. Evaluation

1. Reading guides. *Each reading will be accompanied by a reading guide which includes a number of short answer questions. Grading is based on completion and effort. 10% of total grade.*
2. Journal. *Each week students will write a journal entry in the form of a reflection paper (1/2 page single-spaced = 1 page double-spaced) on any topic or theme of their choice. Grading is based on completion. 10% of total grade.*
3. Three papers. *Three times during the term students will submit a 3-5 page paper responding to a prompt (see calendar below for dates). Grading is based on a detailed rubric (available on Sakai). 45% of total grade = each paper is 15% of total grade.*
4. Creative project. *Students will submit a creative project on a topic of their choice. This may take the form of a traditional research paper, a piece of creative writing (e.g., poetry or prose), a podcast, or film. This project will proceed in two stages. First, the student will submit a proposal detailing and outlining the contents and format of their project (see calendar for due dates). Second, students will complete their project according to their proposal. Due by 5pm on the Friday of finals week. 25% of total grade.*

**Grade scale:** A+  $\geq$  97 > A  $\geq$  93 > A-  $\geq$  90 > B+  $\geq$  87 > B  $\geq$  83 > B-  $\geq$  80 >; etc.

## V. Calendar

Key: GP = Guignon & Pereboom (see course materials)

- WEEK 1: The Origins of Existentialism  
Introductions, syllabus, logistics, background.
- WEEK 2: Søren Kierkegaard  
**Tuesday:** Guignon & Pereboom “Introduction: The Legacy of Existentialism” (GP pp. xiii-xxxviii), Selection from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (GP pp. 19-25).  
**Thursday:** Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, “Preface” and “A Panegyric Upon Abraham” (GP pp. 26-34)
- WEEK 3: Søren Kierkegaard (Cont.)  
**Tuesday:** Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, “Problemata: Preliminary Expectation,” “Problemata I: Is There Such Thing as Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?” and “Problemata II: Is There Such Thing as an Absolute Duty Toward God?” (GP pp. 41-77).  
**Thursday:** Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, and excerpt from *The Sickness unto Death* (GP pp. 78-84).

- WEEK 4: Wrapping up Kierkegaard. Paper 1 due Thursday.  
**Tuesday:** In class: **Film #1:** The Sacrifice.  
**Thursday:** Finish discussion of the Sacrifice. Paper 1 due in class.
- WEEK 5: Friedrich Nietzsche, The Turin Horse  
**Tuesday:** Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Gay Science* (GP pp. 111-164)  
**Thursday:** Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (cont.) and *Twilight of the Idols* (GP pp. 164-181) In class: **Film #2:** The Turin Horse.
- WEEK 6: Martin Heidegger  
**Tuesday:** Introduction to Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Division 1 (GP pp. 203-246)  
**Thursday:** Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Division 2 (GP pp. 246-254)
- WEEK 7: Heidegger (cont.), Jean-Paul Sartre  
**Tuesday:** Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art* (Sakai)  
**Thursday:** Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Humanism of Existentialism* (GP pp. 290-308).
- WEEK 8: Jean-Paul Sartre, Paper 2 due Thursday  
**Tuesday:** Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (GP pp. 309-328)  
**Thursday:** Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (GP pp. 328-352), **Paper 2 due in class.**  
In class: **Film #3:** *Ikiru*
- WEEK 9: Spring Break  
**No Class**
- WEEK 10: Simone de Beauvoir  
**Tuesday:** Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (Sakai), *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Chapter 1 (in GP)  
**Thursday:** Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Chapter 2 (in GP)
- WEEK 11: Beauvoir (cont.), Judith Butler, Cleo from 5 to 7  
**Tuesday:** Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Chapter 3 (in GP), selections from *The Second Sex* (Sakai), and “Transgender: A Dialogue”: <https://aeon.co/essays/transgender-identities-a-conversation-between-two-philosophers>.  
**Thursday:** Butler, selections from *Gender Trouble* (Sakai). In Class: **Film # 4:** Cleo from 5 to 7.
- WEEK 12: Frantz Fanon  
**Tuesday** Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Chapter 1, Chapter 5.  
**Thursday** Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Chapter 7.
- WEEK 13: bell hooks, James Baldwin, Lewis Gordon, Paper 3 due Thursday  
**Tuesday:** bell hooks, selections from *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Sakai); James Baldwin, selections from *Notes of a Native Son* (Sakai).  
**Thursday:** Gordon, selections from *Existence in Black*, **Paper 3 due in class.**

- WEEK 14: Toni Morrison, **Creative Project Proposal due Thursday**  
**Tuesday:** Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*.  
**Thursday:** Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, **Creative Project Proposal due in class**.
- WEEK 15: Clarice Lispector, Losing Ground  
**Tuesday:** Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.* .  
**Thursday In Class: Film #5:** Losing Ground.
- WEEK 16: Louise Glück  
**Tuesday:** Glück, selections from *Poems 1962-2012* (Sakai).  
**Thursday:** Tie up loose ends.

## VI. Student Wellbeing

Maintaining and promoting students' social, emotion, and mental wellbeing is a priority. If you or someone you know needs help, there are a variety of counseling and wellness related resources available at the student health center. Please contact me if you would like more information regarding such services. It is important to me that students take sleep and rest seriously; they should aim for about 8 hours of sleep each night. If a student needs an extension for any assignment, please talk to me before or after class or send me an email.