



**Existentialist Metaphysics**  
FALL 2011

PHIL 235  
MWF 2:20-3:20

Professor Diane Michelfelder  
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### **Course Description**

“All living is one's own living, feeling oneself live, knowing oneself to be existing, where knowing does not imply intellectual knowledge or any special wisdom but is that surprising presence which one's life has for every one of us” (José Ortega y Gasset). For those thinkers whose work is associated with the philosophical tradition of existentialism, the understanding of human existence represents a singular gateway to the understanding of being, the general object of the study of metaphysics. But just what does it mean to exist? In this course, we will reflectively consider responses to this and other questions that play a key role within existentialist metaphysics. Typically, readings will be drawn from works by philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and José Ortega y Gasset. While there is no prerequisite for this course, some familiarity with the history of European philosophy would be helpful.

## **Learning goals**

The learning goals for this course are organized around three themes: substance, skills, and self-awareness.

With respect to substance, this course is designed to help you acquire a critical understanding of (a) the fundamental questions, concepts, perspectives, and thematic developments within the philosophical movement known as existentialism, particularly as these evolved in the work of those philosophers whose books we will be taking up in class, and (b) how existentialist metaphysics fits within the tradition of European philosophy, both as a questioning of this tradition and its continuation.

The design of this course is also intended to give you a way of developing key skills associated with philosophy in particular and the liberal arts in general. By the end of this semester, you should be: (a) better able to read and analyze philosophical writing; (b) more experienced in “doing” philosophy, including forming philosophical questions, constructing philosophical lines of thought, and contributing to philosophical discussions, and (c) more adept in analytical and argumentative writing.

Self-awareness as a philosophical learning goal has its roots in Socrates’ dictum that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” I hope this course will expand your capacities for (a) understanding the problematicity of what it is to be a human self; (b) understanding the assumptions and predispositions you bring to the consideration of philosophical questions; and (c) respecting well-reasoned philosophical positions, even when these positions may be at odds with your own.

## **Required Texts**

*Being and Nothingness*. Jean-Paul Sartre. Washington Square Press, 1993.

*Existentialism is a Humanism*. Jean-Paul Sartre. Yale University Press, 2007.

*Being and Time*. Martin Heidegger. State University of New York Press, Revised edition, July 2010. (This edition has three leaves on the front cover.)

*Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*. Thomas Baldwin, ed. Routledge, 2003

## **Academic Integrity**

In this class, we will strive to have an environment geared as best as possible toward facilitating individual learning and which models best scholarly practices. Please know

that in reviewing your work, I will adhere to the College's *Academic Integrity Policy* as published in the *Student Handbook*.

Through the gift of your attention, you not only offer yourself more opportunities to be involved in class discussion, but you also help support the integrity of the learning environment. For your own sake and that of your fellow students, kindly take your phone off the "ring" setting while in class and please refrain from texting, tweeting, googling, and the like.

## **Coursework**

For this course, you will be writing three papers, presenting one of them in class, and developing your skills as an active participant in the construction of philosophical knowledge.

For the first paper, you will be asked to present a critical analysis of a position or line of reasoning presented by Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness*. In the second paper, you will be asked to do the same, this time in relation to Heidegger's *Being and Time*. These papers should be between 5-7 pages long.

Your work on these two papers will unfold within not only within a philosophical context but also within the context of Macalester's writing requirement. The "W" requirement at Mac is spelled out as follows: "*Macalester seeks to ensure that all students receive instruction in writing that gives attention to writing as a process (writing is rewriting), and that provides students individually with feedback on the mechanics and substance of their writing.*" With this in mind, you will be expected to revise initial drafts of these papers in light of comments you receive, and resubmit them in a final form. You will have one week from when your drafts are returned to you to turn in your second, and final, version of your paper.

The third paper, due at the time of the final and also 5-7 pages long, may be on a topic from our readings in the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty; a critical, comparative paper drawing upon readings from two of the authors considered in this course; or a reaction paper to Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism*. While you will not have to submit a draft of this paper in advance, you will be expected to present it in class toward the end of the semester, and so have the opportunity to benefit from the feedback of your peers.

In general, for any given week, on Mondays I will give a lecture that will either provide context and serve as an overview for that week's reading assignment, or plunge immediately into the substance of the reading; on Wednesdays I will also give a lecture directly on the reading, and on Fridays we will have discussion. In order to better orient and organize our discussions, I will ask you to e-mail me before midnight on Thursday with a question you have about the reading. In formulating your reading reaction questions, it would be best to think of them as open-ended prompts for the purposes of stimulating class discussion, rather than requests for clarification of the reading, although

there are certainly times when these two might overlap. These will be marked as satisfactory/unsatisfactory; you will need to turn in 8 questions out of 9.

A late paper will be accepted without penalty if you have a good reason for turning it in late and you let me know in advance of the due date that you will not be turning it in on time. Unexcused late papers will be accepted up to one week after the due date, but you will lose half a grade (eg your grade will go from A- to B+) on the first day your paper is late, and every two days thereafter.

### **Coursework evaluation**

Your final grade for this class will be based on the following percentages:

First paper draft	10%
First paper final	15%
Second paper draft	15%
Second paper final	15%
Third paper	15%
Oral presentation	10%
Reading questions	10%
Class participation	10%

Please note that your class participation grade will be based on your active involvement in class discussions, and not on attendance.

### **Class Schedule**

**This schedule may change at the discretion of the instructor; any changes will be announced in class and also e-mailed**

#### **Week One**

Wednesday, 7 September	Welcome and orientation to the course
Friday, 9 September	Setting the scene for existential inquiry: what we can learn from José Ortega y Gasset's <i>Some Lessons in Metaphysics</i>

#### **Week Two**

**Reading Assignment:** *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 33-56

Monday, 12 September	Introduction to Sartre and to <i>Being and Nothingness</i> Consciousness as consciousness of
Wednesday, 14 September	Why is questioning an act of triple non-being?

Friday, 16 September First group discussion on Sartre

### Week Three

**Reading Assignment:** *Being and Nothingness*, pp.56-76, 86-116

Monday, 19 September Anguish

Wednesday, 21 September Bad faith

Philosophy Department Picnic, 4:30, south side of Old Main—everyone invited!!

Friday, 23 September Second group discussion on Sartre

### Week Four

**Reading Assignment:** *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 557-653; 680-711

Monday, 26 September Freedom and fatigue  
The paradox of freedom

Wednesday, 28 September Am I responsible for everything?

Friday, 30 September Third group discussion on Sartre  
**First Paper Due**

### Week Five

**Reading Assignment:** *Being and Time*, Sections 1-4, 9, 12-18

Monday, 3 October Introduction to Martin Heidegger and to *Being and Time*

Wednesday, 5 October Being-in-the-world and the tools of our lives

Friday, 7 October First group discussion on Heidegger

### Week Six

**Reading Assignment:** *Being and Time*, Sections 25-27, 29-31

Monday, 10 October Dasein and the “They”

Wednesday, 12 October TBA—I will be out of town at a conference

Friday, 14 October Being in a mood, and more

### Week Seven

**Reading Assignment:** *Being and Time*, Sections 35-41

Monday, 17 October Chit-chat and other structures of disclosure

Wednesday, 19 October Anguish once more  
Care

Friday, 21 October Second group discussion on Heidegger

### Week Eight

**Reading Assignment:** *Being and Time*, Sections 46-53

Monday, 24 October Being myself: authenticity and freedom toward death

Wednesday, 26 October Third group discussion on Heidegger  
**Second Paper Due**

Friday, 28 October **Fall Break—no class meeting**

### Week Nine

**Reading Assignment:** *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, pp. 62-100

Monday, 31 October Introduction to Merleau-Ponty and *The Phenomenology of Perception*

Wednesday, 2 November The body problem

Friday, 4 November First group discussion on Merleau-Ponty

### Week Ten

**Reading Assignment:** *Basic Writings*, pp. 101-145; 166-182

Monday, 7 November Body intentionality  
Perceiving and conceiving

Wednesday, 9 November Thinking about the Cartesian cogito and looking at the boulevard trees

Friday, 11 November Second group discussion on Merleau-Ponty

### Week Eleven

**Reading Assignment:** *Basic Writings*, pp. 209-233

Monday, 14 November Merleau-Ponty's critique of Sartre: back to freedom and fatigue

Wednesday, 16 November The job philosophy has to do

Thursday, 17 November                      **Philosophy Café in celebration of World Philosophy Day!  
Come for food and conversation; 4<sup>th</sup> floor Old Main starting at  
4:30 pm**

Friday, 18 November                      Third group discussion on Merleau-Ponty

### **Week Twelve**

**Reading Assignment:** *Basic Writings*, pp.247-271; 272-289

Monday, 21 November                      Bodies as beings of “two leaves”

Wednesday, 23 November                      The painter’s way of seeing  
Why do we never get away from our life?

Friday, 25 November                      **Thanksgiving Holiday—no class meeting**

### **Week Thirteen**

**Reading Assignment:** *Existentialism is a Humanism*

Monday, 28 November                      Group discussion of *Existentialism is a Humanism*

Wednesday, 30 November                      Third paper oral presentations

Friday, 2 December                      Third paper oral presentations

### **Week Fourteen**

Monday, 5 December                      Third paper oral presentations

Wednesday, 7 December                      Third paper oral presentations

Friday, 9 December                      **No class meeting—Senior Philosophy (Capstone  
Presentation) Day in the Campus Center---you are welcome to  
attend**

### **Week Fifteen**

Monday, 12 December                      End-of-semester course wrap-up

Friday, 16 December                      **Third paper due**  
Your papers may be turned in to me in my office  
during our final exam time, 1:30 to 3:30 pm

