

**The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre:
Self-Consciousness and Freedom**

2021-2021
Semester 2

Course Summary: Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy remains the most important systematic articulation of existentialism, a leading philosophical movement of the 20th century that has recently received renewed attention in Anglo-American analytic philosophy. The aim of the course is to study Sartre's existentialism and its importance for contemporary thought. Our focus will be his seminal work *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Through a close reading of this text, we will study Sartre's accounts of consciousness, freedom, anguish, and bad faith, as well as his view of our relations to other people. The aim of the course is to articulate a systematic and philosophically viable conception of existentialism, as well as make connections to current philosophical thought. In concluding, we will consider a critical perspective on Sartre with an articulation of a Platonist alternative to existentialism, Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970).

Course Organiser:

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Course Structure: There are weekly pre-recorded lectures and other online content equivalent to 1 hour of an in-person seminar, as well as a weekly one-hour online or possibly in-person tutorial. The pre-recorded materials, available through Learn, will provide some explanation and analysis of the readings for each week. The tutorials afford the opportunity for philosophical discussion and engagement. Philosophical learning is very much a matter of engaging and thinking together with others, rather than the achievement of a state of possessing information. This is why it is extremely important that you read through the assigned texts and view the pre-recorded materials in advance so as to be prepared to actively take part in discussion.

Tutorial Times and Locations, as well as office hours, will be announced on the Learn page of the course.

Assessment of undergraduate students

There are three pieces of assessment for this course:

- Mid-term essay (approx. 1500 words) (40%):
Due Thursday 25th February, by 12pm
- Final essay (approx. 2500 words) (55%):
Due Thursday 15th April, by 12pm
- Participation (5%)

The Mid-term essay will require an explanation of a central idea from Sartre. The Final essay will afford an opportunity for a broader critical engagement with Sartre's philosophy. Questions and guidance for each essay will be posted at least 4 weeks before the deadline on Learn. The assessment of participation will be based on presence and engagement in tutorial.

Assessment of postgraduate students

There are two pieces of assessment for this course:

- Essay plan (15%):
Due Thursday 25th March, by 12pm
- Final essay (approx. 3000 words) (85%):
Due Tuesday 20th April, by 12pm

Students also have the opportunity to submit a formative essay on Turnitin. The essay cannot be draft of summative essay but it can be on the same topic. Due date: Thursday 4th March by 12pm (mid-day, UK time)

Marking Schemes

For Philosophy-specific marking guidelines go here:

[Grade-related marking guidelines for Philosophy](#)

For the University's general marking scheme go here:

[Common Marking Scheme](#)

Main Texts

These are the main texts that we will be studying. Please purchase or borrow copies of these books at your convenience. (They should be available at the campus bookstore.)

- Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*

A new English translation by Sarah Richmond was published by Routledge in 2018 and supersedes Hazel Barnes's translation from 1957. Please use Richmond's translation. A pdf of the old translation is available online. However, lectures and discussion will make reference to the new translation.

- Sartre's *Nausea*

You are welcome to use any translation that is available to you.

- Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good*

All other readings will be made available on the Learn page.

Learning Resources

You should regularly check your university email and check for announcements on the course *Learn* page. Sometimes, there will also be announcements and discussion on MS Teams.

The course *Learn* page will provide information concerning:

- General information and announcement about the course
- Lecture notes and slides
- Tutorial arrangements
- Information about assessment arrangements

University of Edinburgh Library

The library's hard-copy and online resources can be searched online via *DiscoverEd*.

Schedule of Readings

Week 1: *Nausea*

As an introduction to Sartre's philosophy, we will read *Nausea*, Sartre's first novel, which anticipates and dramatizes many of the major themes of *Being and Nothingness*.

Reading: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*

Week 2: Non-Thetic Self-Consciousness

In the Introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, we find an account of a central notion for Sartre's philosophy: the notion of non-thetic self-consciousness. Non-thetic self-consciousness is the consciousness we have of ourselves, when we are fully immersed in the conscious experience of the world. For Sartre, this is a form of self-consciousness, albeit one in which the self does not figure as an *object*. This week, we will examine this notion and consider its import for contemporary accounts of the 'transparency' of the mind.

Reading: *Being and Nothingness*, Introduction
Matthew Boyle, "Transparency and Reflection"

Week 3: Freedom as Consciousness

The centrepiece of Sartre's existentialism is his identification of freedom with consciousness: the reality of consciousness is nothing other than freedom. This week, we will consider Sartre's argument for this identification.

Reading: *Being and Nothingness*, Part One, Chapter One: "The Origin of Negation," §II and §V (pp. 37-44, pp.57-86)

Week 4: Bad Faith

In a well-known discussion, Sartre puts forward a phenomenological account of various ways in which we can misconstrue our freedom, and, in so doing, succumb to bad faith. This week, we will study Sartre's account of the various kinds of bad faith.

Reading: *Being and Nothingness*, Part One, Chapter Two: "Bad Faith," §1 and §2 (pp. 87-113)

Week 5: Evidence and Agency

This week, we will consider a contemporary account of bad faith, as presented in my book *Evidence and Agency: Norms of Belief for Promising and Resolving*. The book addresses the question of how, as agents, we should take evidence into account when thinking about our future actions. It defends a view that is inspired by Sartre: It argues that when matters are up to us, it is incumbent upon us to settle the question of what we will do by considering our practical reasons, rather than by making an evidence-based prediction about our future behaviour.

Reading: Marušić, *Evidence and Agency*, [selections on Learn].

Week 6: Interpersonal Self-Consciousness

Sartre thinks that we know another consciousness as immediately as we know our own and that the other's consciousness importantly shapes our self-consciousness. This week, we will study Sartre's account of interpersonal self-consciousness – what he calls "The Look."

Reading: *Being and Nothingness*, Part Three, Chapter One: "The Existence of Others," §I and §V (pp. 307-309, pp. 347-408)

Week 7: The Body

Sartre extends his account of non-thetic self-consciousness from mind to body: He suggests that bodily consciousness is, first and foremost, non-thetic as well. This week, we will study Sartre's account of bodily self-consciousness, as well as a contemporary articulation of Sartre's view.

Reading: *Being and Nothingness*, Part Three, Chapter Two: “The Body as Being-for-Itself: Facticity,” §I (pp. 409-453)
Matthew Boyle, “Sartre on Bodily Transparency”

Week 8: Freedom, Part I

The central notion of Sartre’s existentialism is freedom. This week, we will take a break from *Being and Nothingness* and consider existentialist freedom in a contemporary context.

Reading: Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*
Chang, “Hard Choices”

Week 9: Freedom, Part II

This week, we return to Sartre’s account of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*. For Sartre, our freedom is always *in situation*, and we misconstrue it if we disregard factual aspects of our being—our facticity. Yet can freedom and facticity be reconciled? How are we to understand limitations on freedom? This week, we will consider whether, at the heart of Sartre’s system, there lies incoherence.

Reading: Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Part Four, Chapter One: “Being and Doing: Freedom,” §I (pp. 569-628)

Week 10: Murdoch’s Critique

Iris Murdoch presents a gripping yet polemical critique of Sartrean existentialism and sketches a Platonist view as an alternative. This week, we will consider the merits of Murdoch’s critique and study her alternative view.

Reading: Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, lectures I & II

Week 11: Murdoch’s Existentialism?

Despite Murdoch’s very critical attitude towards existentialism, some elements of her view resonate with Sartre’s account of non-thetic self-consciousness. Is Murdoch perhaps more of an existentialist than she lets on? To what extent are her views reconcilable with Sartre’s after all?

Reading: Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, lecture III
Moran, “Iris Murdoch and Existentialism”

Learning Outcomes

On completion of this course, you will be able to:

1. Demonstrate core skills in philosophy, including interpreting and critically engaging with philosophical texts, evaluating arguments and

theories, and developing your own ideas in response to the issues discussed.

2. Articulate and defend your own views regarding the topics and theories covered by the module.
3. Compare and contrast the concepts and theoretical frameworks covered by the course with those used in other areas of philosophy.
4. Demonstrate understanding of Sartre's and Murdoch's philosophical views.