The Abyss of Freedom

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.

You do not get to philosophy by reading many and multifarious philosophical books, nor by torturing yourself with solving riddles of the universe... philosophy remains latent in every human existence and need not be first added to it from somewhere else... The ‘essence’ of Dasein lies in its existence.

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.

Over one man necessity stands in the shape of his passions, over another as the habit of hearing and obeying, over a third as a logical conscience, over a fourth as caprice and a mischievous pleasure in escapades. These four will, however, seek the freedom of their will precisely where each of them is most firmly fettered: it is as if the silkworm sought the freedom of its will in spinning. How does this happen?

To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture. The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains mastery of the cultural tool that language is. Rather more than a year ago in Lyon, I remember, in a lecture I had drawn a parallel between Negro and European poetry, and a French acquaintance told me enthusiastically, “At bottom you are a white man.” The fact that I had been able to investigate so interesting a problem through the white man’s language gave me honorary citizenship.

What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters itself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards... there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it... Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself.
Spring 2018: Existentialism  
Philosophy 3258, (31201), M 4:00-6:30 pm, Music Building 114  
Dr. Senem Saner, ssaner@csub.edu  
Office: HOB 226  
Office Hours: M 3:00-3:45, TR 2:30-3:45, & by appointment

Course Description
The phrase ‘abyss of freedom’ that I chose as a title and focus for our existentialism class comes from a much neglected but philosophically influential text by German philosopher Schelling (1775-1854), “Ages of the World”:

We say that a decisive person ... has character. And yet it is recognized that no one has chosen the character following reasoning or reflection. One did not consult oneself. Likewise, everyone assesses this character as a work of freedom, as, so to speak, an eternal (incessant, constant) deed. Consequently, [there is] a freedom in each person that is in itself ground, in itself destiny and necessity. But most people are frightened precisely by this abyssal freedom in the same way that they are frightened by the necessity to be utterly one thing or another. And where they see a flash of freedom, they turn away from it as if from an utterly injurious flash of lightning.

Existentialism faces head-on this double paradox of freedom:
- Freedom is destiny, a necessity, but it is assessed as a deed, a choice.
- While it is the most desired, it is also the root of fear and anxiety.

There is a long history to the concept of freedom... we can take it back to 4th century BCE, to Socrates’s rebellion against the city of Athens where he defends the right to live by his conscience (see Plato’s Apology). The onset of modernity, the rise of the scientific world-view, brings with it the call to "obey nature to command it" (Sartre’s allusion to Bacon’s famous insight, see Existentialism 239): we need to understand nature so that we can master it and use it for our own ends. This modern project of ‘domination of nature’ is the background of human exceptionalism: we are not just animals, random natural beings subject to nature and other masters!

With the Enlightenment (late 18th century) freedom becomes the distinguishing mark of the human and it is accepted as the foundation of human dignity. Thus emerges the idea of persons as ‘ends-in-themselves,’ expressed best in Kant’s famous categorical imperative: Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, never merely as a means to some further end, but always also as an end in itself: The political repercussions of this conception of personhood is that free beings should not be slaves, free beings should not be beholden to kings and princes, free beings should have access to social, cultural, economic, and political goods to develop their capacities.

The enlightenment ideal that freedom on earth, a “kingdom of heaven,” is achievable by the rational organization of social and political life is challenged by the real bondage and suffering of large portions of humanity. The “grand narratives” of the progress of freedom in history are countered, towards the end of the 19th century, by contrary voices, that become the founders of existentialism: Nietzsche challenges the rational basis and thus apparent justification of our values; Kierkegaard posits the absolute dichotomy between faith and reason; Dostoevsky asks whether any value judgment is possible after the death of God.

Existentialism emerged on the foundational critique of these 19th century authors; however, it appeared as a movement in the 1960’s after their critique was brought to striking relief by the devastation of the two World Wars, the inhuman and unspeakable atrocities of the civilized world, and the lack of alternative political systems, articulated and evidenced by the failings of the communist revolution. “We need a revolution, but there is no ready-made recipes to follow!” summarizes the mood that brought Sartre, De Beauvoir, Camus, and Fanon together. The phenomenological tradition (Husserl— ‘to the things themselves’, Heidegger— ‘Dasein is
the only being that asks the question about its own being’, and Merleau-Ponty—‘the world is not what I think, but what I live through’) provided the philosophical groundwork of this rich movement, which has been influential philosophically, politically, and aesthetically since the time of its inception.

**Course Objectives**
This course aims to help students develop
- an understanding of the importance and influence of existentialism.
- the skills of describing, interpreting, explaining, and evaluating the philosophical ideas expressed in existential literature, film, art, and philosophy for one’s quality of life, including social connectedness, education, environment, civic engagement, health, life satisfaction, safety, aesthetic experiences, spirituality, and/or work-life balance (Theme Q reinforcement).
- the ability to articulate philosophical ideas verbally and in writing (Writing reinforcement).
- the ability to engage in philosophical reasoning (Critical Thinking reinforcement).

**Required Texts (available at Runner Bookstore)**

**Course Requirements**

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<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
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<tr>
<td>Attendance &amp; Participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading responses (blog assignments)</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two Short Essays</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Take-home Final Exam</td>
<td>25%</td>
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**Careful and unrelenting reading of the primary texts** is necessary to pass this course. If you have trouble completing the reading assignments, come to my office and we will discuss reading strategies together. We will read selections in class together; however, that alone will not be sufficient. All philosophers have a style and a terminology of their own. Do not give up reading if you do not understand the selection at first try. Give yourself time to get acquainted with the author.

**Participation**
Your participation grade is based on your regular attendance and class participation. Class participation includes responding to questions, asking questions, and engaging in classroom discussions and group work activities.

**Blog Entries**
The blog entries are typically personal responses to the reading, in which you will choose and share a key passage from the reading, and write a 300-word essay explicating the quote and applying the ideas to your life. The blog assignments are opportunities to “make the reading yours,” understand and respond to the reading by relating the key concepts of the reading to aspect(s) of your life (or modern life in general, if you do not want to get too personal). I expect you to bring in personal or current examples, literary or visual resources to support your reflection. You may also raise some questions at the end of your entry, for class discussion or future reflection. The blog assignments will be due on Saturday nights. Before Monday’s class, you will comment on at least one entry by a class mate. If you choose to, you may also comment on your own entry after our class discussion, correcting any misunderstandings or elaborating on a specific point or question from your original entry.

The blog entries are graded on C/NC basis. To earn full credit: your entry must be posted on time, the writing must be clear and without grammatical errors, the textual references must be presented in quotes with page numbers, e.g., “the abyssal freedom is a source of anxiety...” (345), and your comments to your peers must be constructive and well-formulated. Remember, “great job,” is generic and lazy, “great job explaining x” or “good example of x” is specific and helpful.
Film Analysis Essays
You will write two essays, approximately 1000 words each, analyzing films we will view in class. Your film analysis papers will be composed of three sections: a) conceptual analysis of a key existentialist idea (despair, authenticity, boredom, transcendence, etc.), b) tracing and explicating that concept through the film (plot, character development, analysis of specific scenes, and c) personal reflection on the meaning and significance of this concept in modern life.

Take-home Final Exam
The final exam will be a take-home exam. It will include identification and short answer questions as well as a 700-word insight essay. The insight essay will respond to the following question: “If you could choose a single insight to represent what you learned in this course this semester, what would it be? Present this insight and explain it in such a way that an uninitiated reader can understand and appreciate it.”

Tentative Schedule Check Blackboard regularly for updates to the reading schedule, blog assignments, handouts, and additional reading material.

January 22 Syllabus, Introduction
January 29 Kierkegaard: Subjectivity (3-33) Blog 1 due
February 5 Dostoevsky: Negative Freedom (34-64) Blog 2 due
February 12 Nietzsche: Transvaluation of Values (67-101) Blog 3 due
February 19 Film: Being-in-the-World
February 26 Heidegger: Existential Phenomenology (117-152) Blog 4 due
March 5 Unamuno, Jaspers, Kafka: Law and Tragedy (157-172) Blog 5 due
March 12 Camus: The Absurd (184-202) Blog 6 due
Film Analysis Essay 1 due
March 19 Sartre: Existentialism as a Humanism (206-238) Blog 7 due
April 2 Sartre: Freedom and Responsibility (239-270) Blog 8 due
April 9 Film: Waking Life
April 16 Merleau-Ponty: Embodied Freedom (272-290) Blog 9 due
April 23 Simone de Beauvoir: The Second Sex (292-307) Blog 10 due
April 30 Franz Fanon and Ralph Ellison: Existentialism as a Humanism? (Blackboard) Blog 11 due
Film Analysis Essay 2 due
May 7 Film: After Life Marcel, Buber, Tillich, Nishitani: Existentialism and Theism (174-182, 319-329, 331-337, 338-342) Blog 12 due
May 14 Take-home Final Exam Due

Grading Scale
92-100 A  80-81 B-  63-65 D+
90-91 A-  78-79 C+  57-62 D
88-89 B+  77-77 C  55-56 D-
82-87 B  65-66 C-  < 55 F

Policies
Absences: It is your responsibility to acquire notes for missed class content and follow announcements regarding any changes to the schedule. I recommend that you exchange e-mails/phone numbers with a few of your classmates – to find out what you have missed, but also to discuss homework questions, and form study groups. Missed classwork cannot be made up.

Office Hours and Email: No appointment is necessary to see me during my office hours. If you cannot meet during my office hours, send me an email, a few days in advance, to set up an appointment. In all your email correspondence with me, indicate the class and the reason for your message (appointment, absence, etc.).
Make sure you properly address the recipient ("Hi Professor", etc.) and sign your email with your full name. I will not respond to emails that do not contain a proper subject line, greeting, and signature.

**Academic Integrity:** The commitment of acts of cheating, lying, and deceit in any of their diverse forms (such as the use of handing in someone else’s work, plagiarism, and copying during examinations) is dishonest. PLAGIARISM is a specific form of academic dishonesty (cheating) which consists of the misuse of published or unpublished works of another by claiming them as one’s own. **Plagiarism may consist of handing in someone else’s work**, copying or purchasing a composition, using ideas, paragraphs, sentences, phrases or words written by another, or using data and/or statistics compiled by another without given appropriate citation. Academic dishonesty in any form is grounds for unconditional failure for the course and a report to the Dean of Undergraduate Studies.

**Harassment Policy:** Written or spoken statements that can be construed as harassment will not be tolerated and will be reported to the appropriate university office for proper legal investigation and action. This includes, but is not limited to, comments based on race, ethnic origin, sex, gender, disability, or sexual orientation.

**Reasonable Accommodations Policy:** CSUB encourages qualified persons with disabilities to participate in its programs and activities. If you anticipate needing any type of accommodation in this course or have questions about physical access, please contact the professor as soon as possible.

**Waiting List Policy:** On a waiting list, you are eligible for a place in the class if you (1) come to every class and (2) turn in the work while you are there. Being on a waiting list does not guarantee you a place in the class. It simply means you are welcome to wait for an opening in the class if you so desire. If no one drops out of the course, then no students can add.