Existentialism revolutionized twentieth-century thought and culture. Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927) and Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943) established the movement’s contours and tenets, although Karl Jaspers and Simone de Beauvoir also made essential contributions.

Existentialism challenged Western metaphysics by rejecting the notion of “essence” as a conceptual straitjacket that restricted the notion of human possibility. Its watchword may be succinctly summarized as: *existence is prior to essence*. As an intellectual current, existentialism followed in the wake of Nietzsche’s critique of European nihilism: since traditional Western values had lost their cogency and meaning, a “transvaluation of values” was required.

Nineteenth-century developments provided the backdrop for existentialism’s emergence. Both Schelling and Kierkegaard lamented traditional philosophy’s trafficking in lifeless abstractions and lack of concern with “lived experience.” Theories of “alienation” in the work of Marx, Durkheim, and Simmel provided existentialism with a grounding in contemporary social theory and critique.

Existentialism also derived inspiration from major works of literature: Dostoevsky’s “Notes from Underground,” Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilych,” and Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* became indispensable points of reference. According to one witness, Heidegger’s constant companions while composing *Being and Time* were Dostoevsky’s novels and a recent edition of van Gogh’s letters. Sartre’s novels and plays, *Nausea* and *No Exit*, are often treated as exemplars of literary existentialism.

Finally, existentialism has often been criticized from the left for glorifying alienation and (bourgeois) decadence. During the late 1940s, the Frankfurt School philosopher and ex-Heidegger student, Herbert Marcuse, wrote a landmark critique of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. During the 1960s, Theodor Adorno accused Heidegger’s approach of smoothing over the tensions of late capitalism by offering a “pseudo-concreteness” in place of a critical social theory.

**Booklist:**
Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*
Kierkegaard, *A Kierkegaard Anthology*
Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*
Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*
Simmel, “Metropolis and Mental Life” + “The Tragedy of Culture”
Lukács, *Soul and Form*
Kafka, “Before the Law,” “An Imperial Messenger”
Heidegger, *Being and Time*
Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy*
Sartre, *Nausea*
Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*
Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism”
Adorno, “Understanding Endgame”

Books I have written you may find relevant:

- *The Politics of Being: The Political Thought of Martin Heidegger*
- *The Terms of Cultural Criticism: The Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Poststructuralism*
- *Heidegger’s Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse*
- *Labyrinths: Explorations in the Critical History of Ideas*
- Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism* (ed.)
- *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution and the Legacy of the 1960s*

Weekly Assignments:
(Readings w. asterisks will be available on Blackboard)

January 29: Introduction

February 5: “The Unhappy Consciousness”
Hegel, “The Unhappy Consciousness” * (Phenomenology of Spirit)
Pascal, *Pensées* (selection)
Kierkegaard, *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (selections)
Löwith, “European Nihilism”

February 12: Lincoln’s birthday

February 20 (NB: class meets on Tuesday): *The Critique of the Present Age*
Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*
Heidegger, The Critique of Average Everyday Being-in-the-World (*Being and Time*)

February 27: Subterranean Woe and Transcendental Homelessness
Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*
Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* (excerpt)
Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (selection)

March 5: The Individual versus Society
Lukács, *Soul and Form*, 1-18, 28-41, 152-174
Simmel, “The Tragedy of Culture,” * “Metropolis and Mental Life” *
E. Durkheim, *Suicide* (selection)
M Weber, “Bureaucracy” *

March 12: Literature and Weltschmerz
Kafka, *The Complete Stories* (selections)
Spengler, *Decline of the West* (excerpt)

March 19: Heidegger and *Existenzphilosophie*
*Being and Time*, (selection)

March 26: Political Existentialism I: Carl Schmitt
Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*

April 2: Spring Break

April 9: Political Existentialism II: The Heidegger Case
Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy* (selections)

April 16: French Existentialism I
Sartre, *The Imagination*
Sartre, *Nausea*

April 23: French Existentialism II
Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (selection)
Sartre, “Existentialism and Humanism”

April 30: Politics and Existentialism
Sartre, “Dialogue with the Maoists”
Sartre, Introduction, *The Maoists*
Sartre, “Existentialism and Politics”

May 7: Special Film Showing: “Sartre By Himself”

May 15: Final Papers Due

**Written Assignment:** Final papers are due on May 15. You are to choose a syllabus-related topic (in consultation with yours truly) and write a 12-15-page essay. The assignment is meant to be an “interpretive essay” rather than a full-blown “research paper.” By the same token, the essay should demonstrate extensive familiarity with the relevant secondary literature as well as the relevant conflict of interpretations. What matters is your capacity to discern and reconstruct the major interpretive standpoints, to evaluate the stronger and weaker arguments and positions, and to arrive at fresh conclusions that, ideally, will advance our understanding of the material.