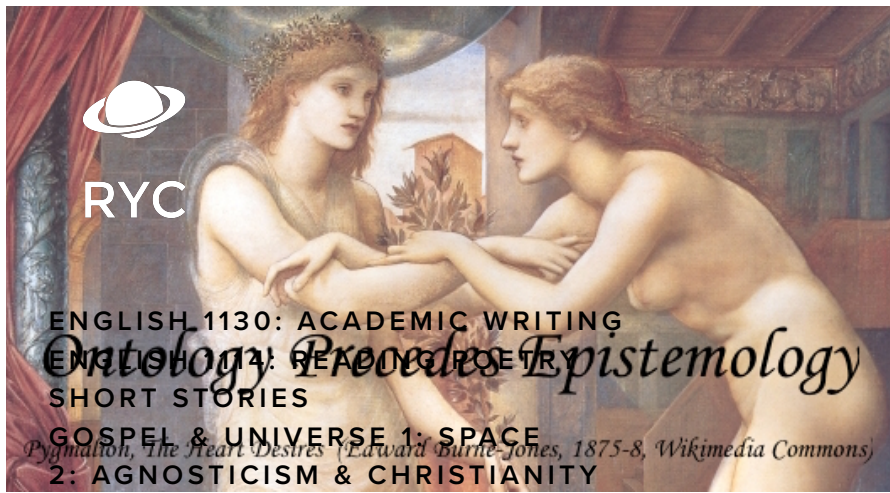




ENGLISH 1130: ACADEMIC WRITING

ENGLISH 114: READING POETRY

SHORT STORIES

GOSPEL & UNIVERSE 1: SPACE

2: AGNOSTICISM & CHRISTIANITY

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3. Flux

TWO SIDES OF THE
FENCE (/VARIOUS-
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STATES OF BEING
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THE STATUS QUO
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ONTOLOGY PRECEDES
EPISTEMOLOGY
(/ONTOLOGY-
PRECEDES-
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STARBUCKING
(/STARBUCKING/)

ALAS, POOR YORICK
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Ontology Precedes Epistemology

JEAN-PAUL REVISITED

Agnostics share the existentialist sense that we have no idea what the universe is about. Nor do we know the meaning of our own existence. Or, as Sartre says in his 1963 autobiography, *Les Mots / Words: Without more precise information, no one, starting with me, knew why I came to screw around on this earth.*

Essentialists, on the other hand, believe 1) that physical existence isn't all we've got, and 2) that there

is a meaning to your life, the key to which lies in the discovery of your soul and divinity. They believe in spiritual realities that exist beyond the individual body with its thoughts and needs, and beyond the body politic with its ideologies and laws. They believe in the higher reality of the soul, and the higher dictates of Holy Law. For the orthodox and the fundamentalist, these dictates include details of geography and history, astronomy and long stretches time. For instance, many believe that God chose the Hebrews and Jesus to deliver His Plan, which includes a code of laws and beliefs, personal redemption from sin and death, and a timeline that extends from Creation to The End of Time. For the less orthodox -- many average believers, ecumenicals, mystics, etc. -- these dictates emanate more generally from a higher Realm, which is beyond the understanding of humans and doesn't have to be specific in space and time. Many believe that God has touched humanity, but they aren't sure that God limits His actions to Hebrews, Jesus, the ten commandments, and the Rapture. Nevertheless, like fundamentalists, they believe *essence precedes existence*. The soul comes before the body, just as God comes before the universe. The physical universe is important because it's the material through which God brings to fulfilment his divine Scheme of Things.

Agnostics, if they believe anything, believe that our appreciation of existentialism and essentialism depends on the state of our awareness -- or state of being -- at any given moment. Our state of being differs according to such things as **1) where we come from** -- our human and family history, our DNA, etc., **2) our time of life** -- childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, **3) our present location** - - whether we're at work, at home, on a roller-coaster,

on a beach, etc., **4) time of day** -- morning, afternoon, or evening, **5) who we're with** -- whether we're alone or with friends, parents, co-workers, etc, **6) our present situation** -- whether we're waking, sleeping, eating, making love, arguing with our boss, etc., and **7) the hormones and chemicals that are circulating in our brains and bodies**. For instance, if we're born in Waziristan we're likely to believe in Allah and the Koran; if we're born in Killarney, we're likely to believe in Jesus, Saint Mary, and the Bible. As children, we don't actively formulate our philosophies, and when we're 90 we're doing well if we can remember our names. When we get up in the morning and haven't yet had any food or coffee, we may believe in charity and forgiveness, yet we cannot appreciate these concepts in the same way we can an hour later sipping coffee with a friend at Starbucks.

For agnostics, systems of meaning (the domain of epistemology) are determined by states of being (the domain of ontology). In other words, *ontology precedes epistemology*.

Agnostics remain open to what both existentialists and essentialists are saying. Like existentialists, they believe that we're limited by our physical bodies and yet we have the freedom to become *engagé*, that is, to become involved in the body politic and world around us.

Agnostics are also open to the essentialist idea that we aren't limited to our physical bodies (that our spirits transcend these) and that these spirits exist within a greater framework of spirits, gods, demons, etc. These spirits may even exist within the even greater framework of God. Agnostics suspect that these two states -- the existentialist's disbelief and the

essentialist's belief -- aren't mutually exclusive, and that we shift between them -- either momentarily or from one longer period of time to the next. We might feel trapped, rebellious or engagé for any given amount of time, and then feel liberated, reconciled, and connected the next. These feelings and thoughts might depend on where and how we were raised, what stage of life we're in, what our present state of mind is, whether we're hungry or sleepy, etc.

Our bodies may define and limit us, and in some ways they trap us -- in the existential machine or in the darkness of this low world, *ce bas monde*, far from the light of Heaven. Yet our bodies throb with life, thoughts, urges, inner visions, and dreams. Inspired by the outer world, these vibrations return to the outer world, having tripped through the circuits of the nervous system, the currents of the blood, and the caverns of the skull. Agnostics think of the body as synonymous with being or life. Its vibrancy is proven by the fact that as it succumbs to entropy so do our thoughts and feelings. For instance, for the last two years I've watched my father go from a coherent, happy man to an incoherent hallucinating shell of his former self. All because of the chemicals that circulate, or no longer circulate, in his body.

Made from the water, earth, and air of the outer world, our bodies are constantly drinking in this outer world -- drinking it, eating it, seeing it, hearing it, touching it. The neurons of our eyes, ears, and hands bring the outer world into the circuits and chambers of our bodies. And, simultaneously, our bodies stretch outward so that we become part of the body politic -- from talking with friends to managing the systems that provide economic and cultural meaning to our

existence. From the body to the body politic, we're porous by nature: the inner body slides into the outer, and the outer body slips into the inner.

THE TWO BODIES

Before going further, I should note that I'm using the term *body politic* as a shorthand for the political and cultural world beyond the individual human body. I use it to mean *the various communal bodies of societies and nations*, preferring it to terms like *institutions*, *nations*, *geographies*, *societies* or *humanity* because it underscores the divergent views and ideologies that abound in politics taken in the widest sense. I realize this is a peculiar use of the established term, yet it gets at the difference between the individual human body, or *corpus*, and the larger *corpus* of human history and culture. The term *body politic* also comes with some interesting historical baggage relating to *the King's two bodies* and to the *character angelus* of a 'divinely-appointed' absolute monarch. Both of these Medieval concepts echo the notion that the physical bodies of some beings are also spiritual bodies -- for instance, Vishnu becomes Rama, and the Lord becomes Jesus. These 'spiritual bodies' manifest themselves on a macro level in the order of the Medieval state and in the order of the cosmos. Yet they also manifest themselves on the micro level in more personal terms - for instance, in such things as the wafer in a communicant's hand.

Agnostics believe that people are functions of their space and time, their geography and history, their nation and culture. Their bodies, and the amalgam of thought and feeling within their bodies, are created by

the heavenly bodies, the solar system and the world, the local air, water, and earth, as well as their families' histories and the genes of their parents. Existentialists often see this as a limiting and deterministic affair, just as essentialists, who are in some ways *gnostics*, often sees this world as a prison and the body as a cage. (*Gnostics* believe that there are two basic aspects to the universe -- the physical and the spiritual -- and that our job is to find the inner spiritual truth, or *gnosis*, that lies trapped within, yet also beyond, the body).

Both existentialists and essentialists aim to escape their negative states: existentialists try to escape the *nausea* (to use Sartre's term) of seeing everything in terms of their limited selves by engaging in the world; gnostics try to open the door of the cage and transform the prison into a *city of God* (to use Saint Augustine's term). Existentialists accept the limits of the physical world and try to find their freedom within it. Essentialists on the other hand reject the physical limits -- both in terms of **space and time**.

Essentialists superimpose spiritual space over physical space. The best example of this is Augustine's *city of God*, yet it's a basic platonic and Christian notion that there's an ideal spiritual world and a realistic physical world. This might be seen as an adjunct to the third dimension of space, or as part of the space-time of a spiritual *fifth dimension*.

Essentialists also extend human time, believing that the soul exists within a long timeframe established by the infinity of God. This might be seen as an adjunct to the fourth dimension of time, or it can be seen as part of the space-time of a spiritual *fifth dimension*.

The soul joins other souls in Heaven or some other

metaphysical realm, and in some cases even the human body slides beyond this life into the next, where it's resurrected. Or, if essentialists believe in reincarnation, the soul takes another body, and the process is considerably more complicated: the soul may inhabit hundreds of new bodies, the world goes up and down in enormous cycles of hundreds of thousands of years (called *yugas*), and the universe itself may be destroyed and re-created literally ad infinitum. Yet in either case, the soul of the essentialist evaporates from this world of time and space and re-condenses in another realm. While the existentialist may see this state as lacking in free will -- since the *higher* or *greater* realm determines the *lower* -- it's a type of free will that essentialists are more than willing to forego.

The poetry and visual art of William Blake (1757-1827) expresses the essentialist position in which the body and senses limit the spiritual vision. In the first image below, Blake depicts Isaac Newton locked in the material world: he appears to be deep at the bottom of the sea, and his eyes are focused narrowly on the geometry of his mental constructions. This, versus the second image, in which the vision of the spiritual man is cast far and wide. His whole body acts as a conduit for divine energies -- a state of vision which transcends the dichotomous spirit/body division of the gnostic. Together these two images illustrate Blake's revolt against what he calls *mind-forged manacles*, his notion that Imagination (with a capital I) *is the real and eternal world of which this vegetable universe is but a faint shadow*, and his belief that *If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite*.



Blake's *Newton*. Monotype, 1805.



Blake's *Angel of the Revelation* (*Book of Revelation, Chapter 10*). Watercolour, c.1805.

For both the existentialist and the essentialist a transformative vision is involved. For the essentialist, the world becomes *other*, becomes something more than what it was. For the existentialist, the world stays the same, but the attitude towards it becomes different: ideally, the alienated self transforms its feelings of angst and absurdity into constructive engagement.

The essentialist would say that the existentialist is still trapped in the world as it was, while the existentialist would say that the essentialist is detached from the world as it is. The agnostic entertains both these views, adding to their *was* and *is* a variety of *might bes*.

Agnostics recommend a world of permeability, where one state of being (in the body) opens to another (in the body politic) and where this process reverses itself -- from the body politic back to the body, which is our natural home while we're alive. Looking at this process within a larger time-frame, our primary and ultimate position lies within the greater world -- the world of dust, trees, and ashes -- which condenses to form our

human bodies, which live out their lives (venturing out to the body politic yet always coming back to the body), after which our bodies go back to the larger universe. After this final transformation, the process, or any future movement, is unknown. All that we can see is the ashes and dust which fall back into the soil, to rise again as trees and birds, or to stay in the earth, a layer of condensed sediment locked in patterns for a billion years.

FARTHER THAN HAUTE MÉDOC

I have been, and will return to being
a bunch of red grapes
when the wine presses of the South are empty of
meaning.

In a past life of raindrops and caterpillars

I slid down the rain-drenched vine
into a jungle of green leaves and red roots.

In others I was plucked by the fingers of Sicilian
peasants,

and pressed in the stained-wood carcasses of
Provence,

steeped in the lore of languid hours.

I have travelled from slope to cellar,
from vineyards to the gullets of France.

RELATIVITY

The meaning of life, if there is such a thing, has everything -- and nothing -- to do with you.

Your self is the funnel for everything. It takes in all that you've ever known, ever been, ever imagined yourself to be, and everything that you've ever imagined the universe to be. To say therefore that the great and small mechanics of reality have nothing to do with you is a complete falsehood as concerns your experience and understanding.

Yet this understanding can also see that the self is microscopic in the larger mechanics of space (from your neighbourhood to your city, country, world, solar system, galaxy, galaxy cluster, and the outer reaches of the universe) and in the larger mechanics of time (from your 80-odd years to the Age in which you live, to life on Earth, to the lifespan of Earth, all the way to the Big Bang).

It's all meaningless. And it's all completely meaningful.

To accept this duality of relevance and irrelevance is to understand relativity itself. Not the abstract physics of Einstein, but the relativity of your very life, your very self.

For agnostics this means that it's not necessary to hold on to any fixed idea about *what you really know*. It's even less necessary to hold on to any fixed idea about the nature of God or the universe.

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