How can the human individual cope with the terrifying fact of freedom, a freedom we cannot escape despite all of society’s, philosophy’s, and one’s own efforts to curb it, control it, channel it, or cancel it? Many humans experience their freedom as a lack, an absence, and what they lack is a self, for there is no solidity to being human: the human self is just this lack of self—we are always incomplete, always not-yet-there. Freedom is thus experienced as a form of sickness, a peculiarly metaphysical disease that prevents us from being healthy by preventing us from simply being. But the real disease, the existentialists tell us, is precisely the attempt to escape our freedom. Being fully human requires embracing freedom and a conscious construction of oneself as a free being. Existentialism is the search for an authentic mode of human existence, a life lived in the recognition and acceptance of our freedom and its situation. The thought that we are each ultimately responsible for ourselves and thereby for our world is terrifying only within an ideology that devalues humanity.

There have been many visions of an authentic mode of existence. We will explore existentialism in the 19th century thinkers, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, in the philosophical, political, and literary works of 20th century France: Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Franz Fanon, and in selected other Western writers.

Existentialism has always been an intensely literary tradition: we will do a lot of writing.