

PHIL 3350 Topics in Continental Philosophy: Life, Emergence, and Evolution

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Course Overview

Evolution is “a **staggeringly improbable series of events**, sensible enough in retrospect and subject to rigorous explanation, but utterly unpredictable and quite unrepeatable. Wind back the tape of life... and **the chance becomes vanishingly small that anything like human intelligence** would grace the replay” (Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life*).

“**The 200-year mistake**, from roughly 1760 to roughly 1960, was to think that human races were biological facts, like salamanders, rather than **anthropological facts**, like mother-in-law avoidance” (Jonathan Marks, “The Nature/Culture of Genetic Facts”).

“Even ... reflection on how scientific research domains are ultimately constituted from within the lifeworld provides no reprieve from the unanswered question as to **how the human mind can understand itself as the product of natural evolution**” (Jürgen Habermas, “The Language Game of Responsible Agency”).

In this course, we will examine the resonances between continental philosophy and current evolutionary theory. We will identify and explore philosophical problems that emerge out of sustained reflection on evolution (historical and contemporary), and we will scrutinize the many and varied ideological versions of evolution that continue to saturate our cultural scripts. We’ll be reading continental philosophers who proffer rigorous methodological insights into the nature of evolution, as well as anthropologists and evolutionary theorists who raise essentially philosophical questions about evolution.

Our questions will be *conceptual* (what is the nature of change through time? How should we understand the nature of emergence and newness? Does evolutionary theory undermine humanist assumptions about life?), and they will also be *methodological* (if we want to understand the nature of causation, how we can evade the reductionist dangers of determinism? Do open-ended research questions in evolutionary science map on to open-ended questions in continental philosophy? What relationship should continental philosophy cultivate with the natural sciences? What are the methodological challenges posed by epigenetics?).

We’ll focus in on emerging fields within continental philosophy like post-humanist studies, new materialisms and animal studies, while also paying attention to post-genomic and evolutionary research (especially epigenetics) more broadly. While the key figures in our course will be Darwin, Nietzsche, Bergson, Deleuze and Grosz, each student is

encouraged to expand the scope of our shared reading list to themes like scientific racism and eugenics, biopolitics and genomic medicine, creationism and religious responses to evolution, queer temporality.

Course Texts

These are the books for this course; they can be found at the Mount Royal University bookstore or on reserve at the library.

1. Charles Darwin, *The Annotated Origin: A Facsimile of The First Edition of On the Origin of Species* (Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2011)
2. Ruth Padel, *Darwin: A Life in Poems* (Knopf, 2012)
3. Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life* (Zone Books, 2005)
4. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (Zone Books, 1990)
5. Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Duke UP, 2004)
6. *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, Ed. Keith Ansell Pearson & John Mullarkey (Continuum, 2002)

There are also suggested books that might be of interest for your research in this course:

Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism and Modernity* (Columbia UP, 2011)

Alexandre Lefebvre & Melanie White, Ed. *Bergson, Politics, and Religion* (Duke UP, 2012)

Margaret Lock & Vinh-Kim Nguyen, *An Anthropology of Biomedicine* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010)

Jonathan Marks, *Why I am Not a Scientist* (U of California P, 2009)

Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Inc, 1978)

Keith Ansell-Pearson and Alan D. Schrift, *The New Century: Bergsonism, Phenomenology, and Responses to Modern Science* (Acumen, 2010)

Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (Indiana UP, 2009)

Mary Beth Mader, *Sleights of Reason: Norm, Bisexuality, Development* (SUNY P, 2011)

Lenny Moss, *What Genes Can't Do* (MIT P, 2004)

Vanessa Lemm, *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy: Culture, Politics, and the Animality of the Human Being* (Fordham UP, 2009)

Valerie Rohy, *Anachronism and its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality* (SUNY P, 2010)

E. L. McCallum & Mikko Tukhanen, *Queer Times, Queer Becomings* (SUNY P, 2011)

Course Policies and Assignments

Participation

As a seminar, this course will require active participation in class discussion—which of course presupposes that you do the readings carefully and come prepared to engage in debates and analysis of the issues at hand. Participation means listening attentively to the contributions of others, advancing your own questions or insights, and, overall, adding significantly to the collaborative work of the seminar. Being a part of this class means finding ways to engage dialogically with each other about the material.

Evolution as Ideology: Individual Presentations

One reason to explore the theme of evolution in a continental philosophy seminar is that ideological versions or scripts about evolution continue to saturate our society. During the semester, each student will share an example (it could be an image, a cartoon, an advertisement, an editorial, a blog post, a scientific study, an excerpt from a video, etc) of evolutionary theory gone awry. It'll be helpful for the sake of our class conversations if you can think about some of the dangers posed by this example (inflaming prejudices, for example). I will be giving you many examples of evolution-as-ideology so that you'll have ideas of where to start searching for your example. As we go through the term, it'll be important to find *new* examples of ideology so that, by the end of the semester, we will have discussed a wide-range of problematic versions of evolutionary thought.

On the day of your presentation, make sure to hand in a brief outline of your example so that there will be a hard-copy record of the image or text that you selected.

Three Reading Responses

Since *reading* is essentially the main task of this course—along with seminar discussions—it seems right that at various points in the semester you will hand in thoughtful reading responses about the assigned readings.

The reading responses should be *two* pages in length, and they are due in class on the day of the assigned readings (put the word count on the top of the first page! You should aim for around 600 words). Remember that our course focuses on evolution, life and emergence. A close reading is more productive when it is animated by an overarching and pressing question. Your question could be as simple as “what does evolution mean in the context of this reading?” Perhaps you have already landed on a pressing question of your own, and so that question can be used to illuminate crucial claims or problems in the reading. A reading response is a rigorous, subjective engagement with the assigned reading: illuminating crucial ideas, elaborating important concepts, adjudicating and weighing in on questions. Ultimately, this is a chance for you to render transparent (laying it out clearly in your own writing) what you think might be most significant about the reading.

The hope here is that you will be ready to help guide the seminar discussion on the day that you're handing in a reading response. As well, since this is an advanced course in philosophy, your responses will likely open up research questions and possible new lines of inquiry. It would be great, for example, if one of your two-page responses led directly into your research project.

Group Facilitation

At one point in the term, each of you will collaboratively facilitate the lesson. It's entirely up to your group how to approach the facilitation for that day. It should involve some kind of sustained

engagement with the assigned readings for the day, but you can decide how to frame the discussion, what guiding questions to bring up, and whether you want to include any additional materials (videos; excerpts from other texts, etc). You can use handouts or powerpoints/prezi or any other method by which to stimulate dialogue and model pedagogical engagement. The most important part of the facilitation will involve deciding what elements of the assigned texts seem most worthy of reflection and analysis (political questions, ethical issues, scientific quandaries, philosophical debates).

Research Project

Since this is an advanced course in continental philosophy, it necessarily involves independent research, and so each student will work on a research project (due at the end of exam week). The research project needs to engage the themes of this course (evolution, emergence, life) and needs to incorporate methods and sources from continental philosophy, but other than those criteria, the shape of the project can take many different forms. The research librarian will be happy to work with you on finding sources that are relevant to continental philosophy. The final draft of the research project should be around 15 pages in length (times new roman; 12 point font; double-spaced), and the bibliography should have a minimum of 12 sources (balancing primary texts in philosophy with contemporary scholarship on whatever debate or issue you are tracking in your project).

You are welcome to study one of the philosophers from our course (Nietzsche; Bergson; Deleuze; Grosz) or study thinkers who have been deeply influenced by these thinkers. You might also look at contemporary phenomena that have direct implications for evolutionary theory and genetics: phenomena like the Cancer Genome Atlas; the US Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies (BRAIN) Initiative; the European Human Brain Project. There are pressing sociopolitical issues as well as debates within emerging scholarly fields that we will be exploring throughout the semester, any one of which might inspire a research project (scientific racism and eugenics; debates surrounding creationism and intelligent design; animal rights and animal studies; post-humanist studies; queer and critical disability studies; new materialisms; neuroscience and its relations to philosophy; evolution and philosophy of mind).

Course Overview

Participation: 15%

Ideology presentation: 10%

Three 2-page responses: 15% each

Group Facilitation: 10%

Research Project: 20%

Reading Schedule

Jan 13	Introduction to course
Jan 20	<ul style="list-style-type: none">⊗ Darwin, ch. 4 “Natural Selection,” in <i>On the Origin of Species</i>;⊗ Ruth Padel, <i>Darwin: A Life in Poems</i> (103-141)⊗ Margaret Lock, “The lure of the epigenome” (Blackboard)

- Jan 27
- ✿ Elizabeth Grosz, “Introduction,” ch. 1 “Darwinian Matters” & ch 2. “Biological Difference” in *The Nick of Time*
 - ✿ Jonathan Marks, “Race: Past, Present, and Future” (Blackboard)
- Feb 3
- ✿ Deleuze, ch. 1 “Immanence: A Life” & ch. 3 “Nietzsche”, in *Pure Immanence*
- Special Group Presentation**
- Feb 10
- ✿ Ladelle McWhorter, ch. 5 “Managing Evolution: Race Betterment, Race Purification, and the American Eugenics Movement” & ch. 7 “(Counter) Remembering Racism: An Insurrection of Subjugated Knowledges” in *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (ebook in MRU library)
- Group One Facilitation**
- Feb 17
- Holiday!
- Feb 24
- ✿ Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” (link on Blackboard)
 - ✿ Vanessa Lemm, Introduction and ch. 6 “Animality, Language and Truth,” in *Nietzsche’s Animal Philosophy: Culture, Politics and the Animality of the Human Being* (ebook in MRU library)
- March 3
- ✿ Grosz, ch. 4 “Nietzsche’s Darwin”, ch. 5 “History and the Untimely,” ch. 6 “The Eternal Return and the Overman”, *The Nick of Time*
- Group Two Facilitation**
- March 10
- ✿ Bergson, excerpts from *Creative Evolution* in *Bergson: Key Writings* (pp171-201)
 - ✿ Deleuze, ch. 5 “*Élan Vital* as Movement of Differentiation” & “Afterword”, in *Bergsonism*
- March 17
- ✿ Bergson, excerpts from *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* in *Bergson: Key Writings* (295-341)
- March 24
- ✿ Elizabeth Grosz, ch. 7 “Bergsonian Difference,” & ch. 8 “The Philosophy of Life” and “Conclusion,” *The Nick of Time*
- Group Three Facilitation**
- March 31
- Film
- April 7
- Last class: discussions of research papers