

FRENCH 481.500

In the Beginning was Biotech:
French Thought and the Problem of Life

Credits 3. 3 Lecture Hours.

Lectures: T/TH 12:45pm – 2:00pm

Room: HEB 137

Instructor: Adam R. Rosenthal

Office: Academic Building 331

Email: arrosenthal@tamu.edu

Office Hours: Thursdays, 2:15pm – 4:15pm, and by Appointment

Course Description:

In this class, students will be introduced to major themes in the history and philosophy of life. In the first part of the course, we will read selections from Aristotle's *De Anima (On the Soul)*, Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, and Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, and explore some of the major philosophical antecedents to contemporary biological theory (vitalism, mechanism, self-organization). In the second part of the course, we will discuss Darwin's evolutionary theory, Watson and Crick's discovery of the genetic code, and the impact of each for notions of sex and race, through the writings of French biologists François Jacob and Jacques Monod, and philosophers and theorists W.E.B. Du Bois, Franz Fanon, and Zakiyyah Jackson. Finally, in the third part of the course, we will see how poststructuralist thinkers, such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilbert Simondon, Catherine Malabou, Bernard Stiegler, Donna Haraway, Elizabeth Grosz, and Isabelle Stengers, problematize any simple opposition between the biological and the technological, and what this means both for the concept of "life" and notion of "the human."

Prerequisite: Junior or senior classification or approval of instructor.

Learning Outcomes:

Students in this course will develop a language through which to connect issues of technology, biology, and gender, to the processes of climate change, globalization, and modernization. By the end of the semester, students will be able to speak with nuance about topics such as postmodernism, transhumanism, and poststructuralism. Students will develop an expertise in one field of poststructuralist thought through an extended presentation. Finally, through the process of writing the midterm assignments, students will learn to think critically, evaluate and compare texts, ideas, and concepts, and refine an argument.

Textbook and Resource Material:

Course readings, including articles, book excerpts, and textbook chapters, will be available on the class Canvas site. All students must print paper copies of the readings for each day's class. In addition, each student will need to purchase the book for their presentation, as well as the following:

Required:

René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Related Writings*, trans. Desmond M. Clark (Penguin Classics, 2000), ISBN-13: 978-0140446999

Suggested:

Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. Christopher Shields (Oxford, 2016), ISBN-13: 978-0199243457

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge, 2001), ISBN-13: 978-0521348928

Grading Policies:

Your final grade for the course is based on your active participation in class, your class presentation, your book review, discussion board posts, and midterm assignments. ***

Assignments:

Class Participation & Attendance:	5%
Discussion Board Posts:	20%
Book Review:	20%
In-Class Presentation (Groups of 2):	10%
Midterm 1	15%
Midterm 2	15%
Midterm 3	15%

Due Dates:

Assessed at end of semester
Assessed at end of semester
Due one week following presentation
Variable
Tuesday, September 26 th
Thursday, October 26 th
Tuesday, November 21 st

If taking the course for **graduate credit**, please see me about course requirements

Participation and Attendance:

Students are required to attend and participate in class discussion. Additionally, each student must bring each session's required readings to that class, in paper form (whether printed from a pdf or in a book), or else they will receive no credit that day for class participation. For each class in which a student does not have the required reading, one point will be taken from their overall participation grade. No laptop computers are permitted in class.

Discussion Board Posts:

For each of our class meetings you will be responsible for completing the day's reading and submitting discussion comments for the Discussion Board on Canvas. Your discussion comment must be posted each day by class time and must be a minimum of 250 words. Once you have posted your own comment, you will be able to see the comments of others. Respond to at least one other comment, but feel free to respond to more comments and to keep the discussion going.

Group Presentation:

In small groups, you will be assigned one book about a specific topic. Your group will have one class period to present on the book. You may divide the responsibilities for the presentation as you wish,

but you will be graded as a group. You will be graded on your organization, coherence and your level of insight into the material. You must provide the class with a pdf of selections for them to read *at least one week in advance of the presentation*. Please make sure to provide time for class discussion.

Book Review:

You will each complete a paper on the book that you choose to present on for your class presentation. The paper should succinctly summarize and critically engage with the main arguments advanced in the book. The paper will be 4-5 pages long and you will be graded on the effective communication of your ideas (including correct spelling and grammar), your understanding of the topic, analysis and argument, and your demonstration of mastery of the material. The selection of books will be made in the first three weeks of the semester.

I encourage you to make use of the University Writing Center (UWC). The UWC is to help you develop and refine the communication skills vital to success in college and beyond. You can choose to work with a trained UWC peer consultant in person or via web conference or email. Consultants can help at any stage of your process, from brainstorming to reviewing the final draft. The UWC's main location is on the second floor of Evans Library; there's also a walk-in location on the second floor of West Campus Library. To schedule an appointment or view our helpful handouts and videos, visit writingcenter.tamu.edu. Or call 979-458-1455.

Midterm Exams:

There will be three mandatory essays exams, held during class time, over the course of the semester. Students must complete this assignment on the assigned days, during class. Essay exams will test students on the material discussed in class during the preceding weeks of the semester.

*Late assignment policy: 25% penalty per 24-hour period, first penalty assessed at 5PM on due date unless otherwise specified.

Grading Scale:

90-100 A 80-89 B 70-79 C 60-69 D

Attendance and Make-up Policies:

Attendance: Class attendance is mandatory. For each unexcused absence in excess of three, student's final grade will be reduced 5 full percentage points. The University views class attendance as the responsibility of the student; attendance is essential to complete the course successfully. For illness- or injury-related absences of fewer than three days, a note from a health care professional confirming date and time of visit will be required in order to count the absence as university-excused; for absences of three days or more, the note must also contain the medical professional's confirmation that absence from class was necessary (see Rule 7.1.6.1 and 7.1.6.2). University rules related to excused and unexcused absences are located on-line at <http://student-rules.tamu.edu/rule07>.

Academic Integrity: "An Aggie does not lie, cheat, or steal, or tolerate those who do." You are expected to be aware of the Aggie Honor Code and the Honor Council Rules and Procedures, stated at <http://aggiehonor.tamu.edu>.

Email Etiquette: Please read and adhere to the advice for students in emailing professors found at: <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2015/04/16/advice-students-so-they-dont-sound-silly-emails-essay>.

"MAKE-UP" POLICY:

Attendance Policies: Make-up Policy: If an absence is excused, the instructor will either provide the student an opportunity to make up any quiz, exam or other work that contributes to the final grade or provide a satisfactory alternative by a date agreed upon by the student and instructor. If the instructor has a regularly scheduled make up exam, students are expected to attend unless they have a university approved excuse. The make-up work must be completed in a timeframe not to exceed 30 calendar days from the last day of the initial absence. The student is responsible for providing satisfactory evidence to the instructor to substantiate the reason for the absence. Among the reasons absences are considered excused by the university are the following (see Student Rule 7 for details <http://studentrules.tamu.edu/rule07>). The fact that these are university-excused absences does not relieve the student of responsibility for prior notification and documentation. Failure to notify and/or document properly may result in an unexcused absence. Falsification of documentation is a violation of the Honor Code.

- 1) Participation in an activity that is required for a class and appears on the university authorized activity list at <https://stuactonline.tamu.edu/app/sponsauth/index>
- 2) Death or major illness in a student's immediate family.
- 3) Illness of a dependent family member.
- 4) Participation in legal proceedings or administrative procedures that require a student's presence.
- 5) Religious holy day. NOTE: Prior notification is NOT required.
- 6) Injury or illness that is too severe or contagious for the student to attend class. a) Injury or illness of three or more class days: Student will provide a medical confirmation note from his or her medical provider within one week of the last date of the absence (see Student Rules 7.1.6.1) b) Injury or illness of less than three class days: Student will provide one or both of these (at instructor's discretion), within one week of the last date of the absence: (i.) Texas A&M University Explanatory Statement for Absence from Class form available at <http://attendance.tamu.edu> (ii.) Confirmation of visit to a health care professional affirming date and time of visit. c) An absence for a non-acute medical service does not constitute an excused absence.
- 7) Required participation in military duties.
- 8) Mandatory admission interviews for professional or graduate school that cannot be rescheduled.
- 9) Mandatory participation as a student-athlete in NCAA-sanctioned competition.
- 10) In accordance with Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972, Texas A&M University shall treat pregnancy (childbirth, false pregnancy, termination of pregnancy and recovery therefrom)

and related conditions as a justification for an excused absence for so long a period of time as is deemed medically necessary by the student's physician. Requests for excused absence related to pregnancy should be directed to the instructor.

Other absences may be excused at the discretion of the instructor with prior notification and proper documentation. In cases where prior notification is not feasible (e.g., accident or emergency) the student must provide notification by the end of the second working day after the absence, including an explanation of why notice could not be sent prior to the class. Accommodations sought for absences due to the observance of a religious holiday can be sought either prior or after the absence, but not later than two working days after the absence.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Policy

Texas A&M University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students. If you experience barriers to your education due to a disability or think you may have a disability, please contact Disability Resources in the Student Services Building or at (979) 845-1637 or visit disability.tamu.edu. Disabilities may include, but are not limited to attentional, learning, mental health, sensory, physical, or chronic health conditions. All students are encouraged to discuss their disability related needs with Disability Resources and their instructors as soon as possible.

Title IX and Statement on Limits to Confidentiality

Texas A&M University is committed to fostering a learning environment that is safe and productive for all. University policies and federal and state laws prohibit gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, sexual exploitation, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking.

With the exception of some medical and mental health providers, all university employees (including full and part-time faculty, staff, paid graduate assistants, student workers, etc.) are Mandatory Reporters and must report to the Title IX Office if the employee experiences, observes, or becomes aware of an incident that meets the following conditions (see University Rule 08.01.01.M1):

- The incident is reasonably believed to be discrimination or harassment.
- The incident is alleged to have been committed by or against a person who, at the time of the incident, was (1) a student enrolled at the University or (2) an employee of the University.

Mandatory Reporters must file a report regardless of how the information comes to their attention – including but not limited to face-to-face conversations, a written class assignment or paper, class discussion, email, text, or social media post. Although Mandatory Reporters must file a report, in most instances, you will be able to control how the report is handled, including whether or not to pursue a formal investigation. The University's goal is to make sure you are aware of the range of options available to you and to ensure access to the resources you need.

Students wishing to discuss concerns in a confidential setting are encouraged to make an appointment with Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS).

Students can learn more about filing a report, accessing supportive resources, and navigating the Title IX investigation and resolution process on the University's Title IX webpage.

Statement on Mental Health and Wellness

Texas A&M University recognizes that mental health and wellness are critical factors that influence a student's academic success and overall wellbeing. Students are encouraged to engage in proper self-care by utilizing the resources and services available from Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS). Students who need someone to talk to can call the TAMU Helpline (979-845-2700) from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. weekdays and 24 hours on weekends. 24-hour emergency help is also available through the National Suicide Prevention Hotline (800-273-8255) or at suicidepreventionlifeline.org.

Schedule of Reading

PART ONE:

The Problem of Life: Vitalism, Mechanism, Self-Organization

Week One

Tuesday, August 22nd
Thursday, August 24th

INTRODUCTION to FRENCH THOUGHT AND LIFE
Michael Lachmann & Sara Walker, "Life ≠ Alive"
Aristotle, *De Anima*, Book I

Week Two

Tuesday, August 29th
Thursday, August 31st

Aristotle, *De Anima*, Book II
Aristotle, *De Anima*, Book III

Week Three

Tuesday, September 5th
Thursday, September 7th

René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Parts I -V
René Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, Part I; *Treatise on Man* (excerpts)

Week Four

Tuesday, September 12th
Thursday, September 14th

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 125 - 162
Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 125 - 162

Week Five

Tuesday, September 19th
Thursday, September 21st

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 233-255
(STUDENT PRESENTATION 1)
Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 257-284

Week Six

Tuesday, September 26th

Midterm 1 (Remotely During Class)

PART TWO:

The Birth of Biology & the Newton of the Blade of Grass: Evolution by Natural Selection, Genetics, DNA

Thursday, September 28th

Eva Jablonka & Marion Lamb, "The Transformations of Darwinism"

Week Seven

Tuesday, Oct. 3 rd Thursday, Oct. 5 th	Eva Jablonka & Marion Lamb, “From Genes to Characters” Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, <i>Acquiring Genomes: A Theory of the Origins of Species</i> (STUDENT PRESENTATION 2)
Week Eight Tuesday, Oct. 10 th Thursday, Oct. 12 th	NO CLASS (Fall Break) Scott Gilbert, Jan Sapp, Alfred Tauber, “A Symbiotic View of Life”
Week Nine Tuesday, October 17 th Thursday, October 19 th	Michael Levin & Daniel Dennett, “Cognition All the Way Down” Bruce Clarke & Fernando Varela Visit, Reading TBD
Week Ten Tuesday, October 24 th Thursday, October 26 th	Ed Yong, <i>An Immense World</i> (STUDENT PRESENTATION 3) Midterm 2 (Remotely During Class)
PART THREE:	Originary Bio-technologies
Week Eleven Tuesday, October 31 st Thursday, November 2 nd	Gilbert Simondon, <i>On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects</i> (STUDENT PRESENTATION 4) NO CLASS: Attend “Limits of Living” Conference
Week Twelve Tuesday, November 7 th Thursday, November 9 th	ELECTION DAY Bernard Stiegler, <i>Technics and Time, Volume 1</i> (STUDENT PRESENTATION 5)
Week Thirteen Tuesday, November 14 th Thursday, November 16 th	David Wills, <i>Dorsality</i> (STUDENT PRESENTATION 6) Elizabeth Grosz, <i>Volatile Bodies</i> (STUDENT PRESENTATION 7)
Week Fourteen Tuesday, November 21 st Thursday, November 23 rd	Midterm 3 (Remotely During Class) NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)
Week Fifteen Tuesday, November 28 th Thursday, November 30 th (Last Day of Classes)	Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Intruder” Yuk Hui, “Philosophy after Automation”