

**GRADUATE SEMINAR DESCRIPTIONS
2025-2026**

AUTUMN QUARTER

PHL 557: Topics in Continental Philosophy [CE]
Bergson: From Time and Free Will to the Two Sources

Frédéric Seyler
Mondays, 3:00-6:15

The publication of the first critical edition of Bergson's works at Presses Universitaires de France marks an important step for the renewal of Bergson studies. This year's seminar will take advantage of this critical edition, in particular with regard to two major books: *Time and Free Will* (*Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, 1889) and *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (*Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, 1932), that is, Bergson's first book and his last, thus encompassing the beginning of his philosophy as well as its mature form.

While *Time and Free Will* develops a concept of "authenticity" based upon the distinction between a deep-seated self and a superficial self, it seems to imply an ethics that goes beyond, and even sometimes opposes, conventional norms and their habitual enacting. More than 40 years later, the *Two Sources* renew this critique by opposing moral obligation and "static religion", on the one hand, to moral progress and "dynamic religion" on the other. However, and as we will have to study in detail (through the analysis of both the English translation and the critical edition in French), the concept of authenticity seems to have evolved: anchored in the deep-seated self or in personality as a whole in *Time and Free Will*, it is—in the *Two Sources*—thought of in terms of divine life and its manifestation through the actions of the mystic.

Graduate student papers will have the opportunity to enrich this study by combining it with other angles on Bergson's philosophy, for instance its reception by Deleuze.

PHL 415: Aristotle I [H-I]
Metaphysics and Politics

Sean Kirkland
Tuesdays, 3:00-6:15

In this seminar, we will begin by tracing the emergence of Aristotelian "substance metaphysics" in selections from the *Categories*, *Physics*, and *Metaphysics*, and we will focus both on the definition of οὐσία and Aristotle's claim that it is the fundamental category of being, on which all other categories of being depend. This will take up the first half of the quarter. We will then turn in the second half to selections from the *Ethics* and *Politics*, with a specific eye to those moments in Aristotle's study of human life (specifically human as φύσει ζῶον πολιτικόν) where his thinking confronts phenomena in which a mode of being and a mode of temporality appear, which pose serious challenges to the primacy of the category of substance.

PHL 411: Plato II [H-I]
Just Talking: Plato and the Problem of Rhetoric

Michael Naas
Wednesdays, 3:00-6:15

This seminar will focus on one of Plato's greatest public "frenemies" throughout the dialogues: rhetoric (ῥητορική), understood as the art of public speaking or oratory, whether in the law courts, before the legislature, or in private gatherings. We will thus look at Plato's criticisms of rhetoric, his confrontations with it, and his eventual appropriation of it for philosophy. After a first session in which we look at several briefer mentions of rhetoric in the dialogues (in, for example, *Apology*, *Republic*, *Menexenus*, *Euthydemus*, *Sophist*, *Theaetetus*, *Laws*, and, especially, *Phaedrus*), we will turn to the *Gorgias*, which is at once a full-scale attack on rhetoric and rhetoricians and Plato's most vigorous attempt to reform rhetoric and put it in the service of philosophy. Along the way, we will consider the way in which Socrates in this dialogue is able to defeat—or at least silence—at once Gorgias and Callicles, two of the greatest rhetoricians or teachers of rhetoric in the Platonic dialogues. Finally, at the end of the seminar, we will use Jean-François Lyotard's *Just Gaming* to show how the *Gorgias* stages a confrontation or agōn between two

discursive genres, rhetoric and philosophy, while masterfully stacking the deck, through a combination of persuasion and reason, that is, using both rhetoric and philosophy, in favor of the latter.

NOTE: There is no prerequisite for this seminar (beyond an interest in the topic). It is only for administrative reasons that the seminar is titled Plato II.

PHL 550: Heidegger I [CE]
What Is Called Thinking?

Will McNeill
Thursdays, 3:00-6:15

This two-quarter sequence is devoted to a close study of Heidegger's 1951-52 lecture course *What Is Called Thinking?* We shall read Part One of the course in autumn quarter and Part Two in winter. Part One of the course unfolds into a dialogue with Nietzsche, whose thought Heidegger interprets as the consummation of Western philosophy. Part Two engages in a dialogue with Parmenides, whose thought marks the first beginning of Western philosophy. The lecture course as a whole follows the central, thought-provoking claim that *we are still not thinking*—this despite all interest in philosophy, and despite the fact that our era becomes ever more thought-provoking as the project of Western science and technology proceeds. It turns out that the question *What is Called Thinking?*—which (in German) also means: *What Calls for Thinking?*—is by no means as straightforward as it might appear. Above all, Heidegger insists, to ask this question in the appropriate way does not mean “thinking about thinking.” It calls for a different kind of thinking and thoughtfulness. Thinking, Heidegger suggests, is a craft, and his lecture course presents itself as an apprenticeship in the art or craft of thinking. In reading this challenging book we shall see how Heidegger develops this question in multiple yet interrelated ways, ways that offer insight not only into Heidegger's own later thinking, but also into the history of philosophy as such and its complicity with science and technicity. In autumn quarter we shall study this lecture course alongside other texts that inform it, including excerpts from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and from Heidegger's *Nietzsche* lectures, and other essays of Heidegger's, including “The Age of the World Picture” and “The Question Concerning Technology.”

WINTER QUARTER

PHL 629: Seminar on Contemporary Problems [NP] The Concept of Fetishism

Rafael Vizcaino
Mondays, 3:00-6:15

This seminar will explore the concept of fetishism, perhaps the chief metaphor for alienation and mystification in European philosophy. Rooted in a certain (Eurocentric) anthropology of African religious practices, the concept of fetishism has been famously deployed within psychoanalysis and Marxism. We will focus on the Marxist formulation of this metaphor (“commodity fetishism”), as well as how it has been re-interpreted in liberationist/decolonial attempts to develop an “anti-fetishist method.” We will start by studying Marx’s well-known section on the topic in *Capital* and Dussel’s *The Theological Metaphors of Marx*. We will then shift to contemporary assessments of the concept within cultural anthropology and anthropology-influenced philosophy, such as Lorand Matory and Bruno Latour. We will end with some contemporary redeployments of this notion and attempts to develop a post-metaphysical anti-fetishist method.

PHL 590: Trends in Contemporary French Philosophy (Deleuze I) [CE] *Difference and Repetition*

Kevin Thompson
Tuesdays, 3:00-6:15

This seminar is a close reading of Gilles Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* [1968]. It explores this work’s central ideas and arguments and examines, in particular, its proposal for an “ontology of pure difference” and a new “image of thought”.

PHL 657: Topics in Social and Political Thought [NP] Institution and Passivity in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty

Smaranda Aldea
Wednesdays, 3:00-6:15

The course carefully examines *passivity* and *institution* – two central concepts in current debates in critical and political phenomenology – and tracks their import for the development of Merleau-Ponty’s and Husserl’s understanding of phenomenology as method of radical reflection. We begin with Husserl’s early/mid-1920s lectures on passive synthesis (sections) coupled with his analyses of *Leiblichkeit* (lived bodiliness), style, and practical possibility constitution in *Ideas II* as well as his work on typification in *Experience and Judgment*. We then turn to Merleau-Ponty’s analyses of pre-givenness and of passivity-in-institution in his 1954-55 courses *The Problem of Passivity* and *Institution in Personal and Public History*. To explore to what extent Merleau-Ponty departs from Husserl’s understanding of *Stiftung* (institution/establishment), we focus on the latter’s *Origin of Geometry* and on key sections of the *Crisis*, stressing Husserl’s generative method of historical-intentional reflection (*Besinnung*) – a method whose aim is to clarify the sedimented socio-cultural and normative dimensions of *Sinnstiftungen* (sense-institutions) understood as conditions for all *Sinnbildung* (sense-making). This will mark a shift to meta-phenomenological questions, namely, to questions surrounding the very possibility of transcendental phenomenology as critique of the present, especially given its commitments to presuppositionlessness (*Voraussetzungslosigkeit*) and to transcendental necessity supra-historically construed. Here, Husserl’s introduction to *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (1929) and his 1930 *Nachwort* to *Ideas I* will prove crucial. So will Merleau-Ponty’s incisive Preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception* as well as his archeological approach to the intertwining (*Verflechtung/entrelacement*) of self-other, world, and language in his *The Possibility of Philosophy Today* (1958-59) and *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology/On Husserl’s ‘Origin of Geometry’* (1959-60) courses, in chapters 1 and 4 of *The Visible and the Invisible* (including key working notes), and in his essays ‘The Philosopher and His Shadow’ (1960) and ‘Eye and Mind’ (1961). The course does not presuppose in-depth familiarity with phenomenology.

PHL 550: Heidegger I [CE]
What Is Called Thinking?

Will McNeill
Thursdays, 3:00-6:15

See the description for the Autumn Quarter version of this seminar.

SPRING QUARTER

PHL 500: Special Topics in the History of Philosophy Cosmogony and Sexual Difference

Tuhin Bhattacharjee
Tuesdays, 3:00-6:15

In this “comparative” class on ancient philosophy and myth, we will closely read cosmogonic accounts from around the world, with particular focus on ancient Greece, India, and Mesopotamia. How is sexual difference mobilized and dramatized in these myths? How do these myths grapple with the incomprehensibility of origins and the ambivalent response of fear and fascination that it generates? How might psychoanalytic approaches help illuminate or occlude the gendered dynamics at work in these texts? We will study the violent births of the gods in Hesiod’s Theogony, the elusive, errant, and untimely discourse of the receptacle/chōra in Plato’s Timaeus, the self-consciously enigmatic hymns from the Sanskrit R̥gveda, the creative self-sacrifice and sexual differentiation of Puruṣa in the Upaniṣads, as well as ancient near eastern cosmology as found in the Babylonian Enūma Eliš. To help orient our investigation, we will draw on recent thinkers including Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, John Sallis, Emanuela Bianchi, Stephanie Jamison, and Zairong Xiang. The aim will not simply be to read ancient, non-Western texts as “objects” of modern Western theory but instead to ask how “theory” itself is complicated and reanimated by this encounter.

Philosophy 400: Special Topics in Traditional Philosophers [H-II] Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre

Elizabeth Millán Brusslan
Wednesdays, 3:00-6:15

The Wissenschaftslehre is a pivotal text for the post-Kantian period and for understanding the stakes of German Idealism. In Athenäum Fragment Nr. 216, Friedrich Schlegel claims that, “The French Revolution, Fichte’s philosophy, and Goethe’s Meister are the greatest tendencies of the age” (KFSA 2, 198).¹ One can understand Schlegel’s reference to Fichte’s philosophy as a celebration of the ways in which it had revolutionized the field of philosophy. Fichte’s work presented new philosophical challenges to the reader and a new way to do philosophy. In our investigation of Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre, we shall explore it as a revolutionary text, leading its readers on a path to their Bildung. Fichte’s revolutionary philosophy was, in part, the result of his unique Bildung, rooted in his working-class background, and we will also consider that background. The Wissenschaftslehre, presented in no fewer than 17 versions /installments/performances throughout Fichte’s life underwent a kind of Bildung as well, even while its underlying meaning stayed the same. When reading Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre, the reader is struck by Fichte’s insistence that we must perform his philosophy, just as he is performing it for us in his writing.

I am still working out the precise set of texts, but they will be taken from these collections:

1. J.G. Fichte, *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre and Related Writings (1794-95)*, translated and edited by Daniel Breazeale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
2. J.G. Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*, translated and edited by Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).
3. J.G. Fichte, *Foundation of Transcendental Philosophy. (Wissenschaftslehre) nova methodo (1796/99)*, translated and edited by Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).
4. Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, translated and edited by Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

Recommended:

Daniel Breazeale, *Thinking through the Wissenschaftslehre. Themes from Fichte’s Early Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

PHL 522: Social and Political Philosophy (Deleuze II) [NP]
The Logic of Sense

Peg Birmingham
Thursdays, 3:00-6:15

This course will engage in a very close reading of Deleuze's *Logic of Sense*. The book consists of 34 "series" and we will cover approximately 3-4 series in each seminar. Published in 1969, a year after the publication of *Difference and Repetition* (1968), one of the questions we will take up is its relation to *Difference and Repetition*, a question we will not be able to address fully until we have finished our reading of the book. (We will be in good shape to take this up as Professor Thompson is teaching *Difference and Repetition* in winter quarter.) Deleuze's engagement in *Logic of Sense* with structuralism, Husserlian phenomenology, and Freudian psychoanalysis, as well as with the possibility of political liberation, will also occupy us. *The Logic of Sense* is a notoriously difficult book at the center of which is the problematic of the generation of sense from nonsense. Fortunately, Deleuze relies on Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* to help sort things out. We too will have *Alice in Wonderland* next to us as we read *Logic of Sense*.