Regarding Animals: Theories of Non-Human Life

Instructor: Dr. David L. Clark

Apes too have organs that can grasp, but they do not have hands. The hand is infinitely different from all grasping organs--paws, claws, or fangs--different by an abyss of essence. Only a being that can speak, that is, think, can have hands.

--Martin Heidegger, What is Called Thinking?

Francisco de Goya, El Perro Semihundido
(The Half-Buried Dog) 1821-23, Museo del Prado
134 x 80 cm (oil on canvas)

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Website: http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~dclark/
Class-time: Tuesday, 9:00 am-12:00 pm
Office Hours: CNH 210; Tuesday, 4:00-5:00 pm

Brief course outline

Isaac Bashevis Singer once wrote that factory-farmed animals endured conditions comparable in their killing violence to those suffered by the Jews in the Nazi death-camps. Life for animals, he argues, “is an eternal Treblinka.” To say the very least, Singer’s allusion to the Holocaust is consequential and controversial (although not without precedent). To satisfy the world’s appetite for meat, are animals not only slaughtered but also murdered? Does “the Final Solution” (the systematic killing of the European Jews) share a hidden history with the industrialization of the business of raising pigs, chickens, and cows for human consumption? More broadly, is injustice irreducible to inhumanity? Do non-human animals oblige us? But who, “us”? Are animal bodies bodies that matter? This three-unit course explores the question of human understandings of and obligations towards non-human life, especially that life which is often too quickly called “the animal.” What is an “animal”? What does it mean to fall under its gaze? Are obligations towards animals exhausted by the concept of rights? Can an animal speak…or be heard? If the thought of the animal represents a challenge to ethics, it is also certainly a scandal for
epistemology. In what ways does the animal disrupt existing theories of knowledge and knowing, especially those that quarantine theory and that privilege the social, cultural, and empirical? We will explore these and related questions through a close, contextualized reading of a selection of philosophical and theoretical texts. Although this course will address a wide range of positions in animal studies, including the “analytical” traditions of animal rights and animal liberation which dominate discussions of the ethics of non-human life in North America, its primary focus will be on work that is rooted in Continental philosophy and theory (ranging from Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben to the psychoanalytically inflected writings of Alice Kuzniar). Continental philosophy and theory robustly dissents from the existing analytical traditions in animal studies, and it is the importance, history, and rationale of that dissent that will call for rigorous discussion and elaboration in our class.

Although this course involves working with some philosophical texts (in a non-philosophical context), and although it falls under the category of “critical theory” and “cultural theory,” no previous expertise in these areas is assumed or necessary. In other words, students from a broad variety of intellectual backgrounds are warmly welcomed.

**Assigned Texts**


Calarco, Matthew. _Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida_. New York: Columbia UP, 2008. [Available at Indigo or Amazon.]


Clark, David L. “On Being ‘The Last Kantian in Nazi Germany’: Dwelling with Animals after Levinas;” and “Towards a Prehistory of the Postanimal: Kant, Levinas, and the Regard of Brutes.” [To be circulated in class.]


Levinas, Emmanuel. “The Name of a Dog; or, Natural Rights.” [To be circulated in class.]


**Work and Mark Distribution; Assignment Descriptions**

**Seminar Participation and Creation (15%)**

Instead of delivering formal presentations, members of the class will be encouraged and expected to create, on an ongoing basis, a lively graduate seminar—i.e. an inquisitive and informed space of critical labour, discussion, and debate. All students will therefore be expected to contribute consistently and meaningfully to the intellectual life of the seminar, developing and volunteering questions and arguments as well as responding mindfully to queries and challenges that are put to them by their classmates and by their instructor. Students must be willing and able to:

–read and engage all assigned materials.
–attend all classes and participate in all classes.
–explore and absorb as much related critical material as possible, both seeking this material out independently and in consultation with their classmates and instructor.
–develop questions and arguments that are directly relevant to the materials at hand, and actively to introduce these points into the class discussion on a consistent basis.
–listen and respond thoughtfully to the issues raised in class, engaging the issues in ways that complicate and advance the intellectual life of the seminar.

–foster a developing scene of pedagogy, bearing in mind that a central part of our task is to teach others and to be taught.

At midterm, students will be given an informal assessment of the quality of their seminar participation work. Authors of response papers circulated in a given class should contribute to the class discussion in an especially robust way, taking particular responsibility for leading the seminar on that day.

Response Papers (2 x 15%=30%)

Each student will be responsible for two 750-word (3 pages) responses to the readings, each of which is worth 15% of your final grade, for a total of 30%. Response papers should provide a succinct summary of and engagement with some of the text’s most pressing themes, arguments, and questions. The response paper should be written in such a way to prompt and provoke discussion in class. Students who have submitted response papers for a particular class will be expected to defend and to elaborate upon their remarks.

The response papers must be completed and circulated by e-mail to all members of the course (as well as to the instructor) at least 24 hours before the start time of the relevant class, i.e., 9:00 a.m.. Under extraordinary conditions, students may be allowed to circulate their paper up to 12:00 noon on the day before the relevant class, i.e., 21 hours before start of class. Beyond that point no response paper may be submitted since it does not give the class or the instructor time carefully to consider that paper. Failing to submit a response paper according to these stipulations will result in a zero grade for that paper. If for significant and documented health reasons, and only for said reasons, a student fails to submit a response paper, a new and different response paper may be submitted for another class, but only after making special written arrangements with the instructor. Students are free to exchange response paper assignments among themselves.

The Half-Buried Dog Project (10%)

Each student is responsible for writing a short critical reflection (250-500 words) upon Goya’s The Half-Buried Dog (a copy of which is reproduced on the first page of this course outline as well as on a separate attached page). These reflections should grow directly out of the materials and discussions making up this course. They will be presented in class at the end of the term, by way of drawing the course to a close, and will then be posted on a webpage on my website devoted to Goya’s strange and evocative painting. The Goya reflection is due at least 24 hours before the relevant class, i.e., Tuesday 1 December 2009. Since this is the last class of the course, there will be no extensions. (See reproduction of the Goya image on last page of this course outline.)

Research Essay (45%)

15-20 page essay. Students are encouraged to write a research essay—i.e., an essay that fully engages extant theory and criticism and that either breaks new ground or significantly reframes existing arguments—on a topic of their own choosing. With the approval of the student, essays will subsequently be made available on my departmental website. I am happy to discuss your research essay with you at every stage, but all students are expected to consult with me about their work at least once prior to submitting the essay. Research essays are due at start of class Tuesday 1 December 2009.
## Seminar Schedule

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<th>Topic</th>
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<td>October</td>
<td>Derrida (Chapters 1 &amp; 2)</td>
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<td>November</td>
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<td>Class 7 / Student # 3, 7, 11, 15</td>
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<td>Agamben</td>
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<td>December</td>
<td>Goya</td>
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## E-mail protocol:

The Faculty of Humanities has issued the following set of instructions to students: “It is the policy of the Faculty of Humanities that all email communication sent from students to instructors (including TAs), and from students to staff, must originate from the student's own McMaster University email account. This policy protects confidentiality and confirms the identity of the student. Instructors will delete emails that do not originate from a McMaster email account.”

All e-mails must be written in full sentences (i.e. no point form, no text-messaging short form), and must contain a subject line that includes the course designation, i.e., "767." Receipt of all e-mails from me must be acknowledged.

## Class cancellations:

In the unlikely event of class cancellations, students will be notified on the Department of English and Cultural Studies website and on my website. It is your responsibility to check these sites regularly for any such announcements.

Link: [http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~english/](http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~english/) (Department of English and Cultural Studies)

Link: [http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~dclark/](http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~dclark/) (Dr. David L. Clark)

## University Statement Regarding Academic Dishonesty:

Academic dishonesty consists of misrepresentation by deception or by other fraudulent means and can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: “Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty”), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university.

It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various kinds of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, specifically Appendix 3, located at:

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:
   i) Plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one’s own or for which other credit has been obtained.
   ii) Improper collaboration in group work (Insert specific course information)
   iii) Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld. See:

http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/ac_ethics.htm

http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity.

Statement from the Office of the Associate Dean, Faculty of Humanities

The instructor and university reserve the right to modify elements of the course during the term. The university may change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances. If either type of modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. It is the responsibility of the student to check their McMaster email and course websites weekly during the term and to note any changes.
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(The Half-Buried Dog) 1821-23, Museo del Prado
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