

**Fall 2023 – Carleton University**  
**PHIL 4100/5000: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory**

**Location:** Paterson Hall, floor 3A, room 36 (seminar room)

**Time:** Mondays, 11:35 am – 2:25 pm

**Course Delivery:** In-person

**Instructor:** Dr. Kyla Bruff

**Email:** [kyla.bruff@carleton.ca](mailto:kyla.bruff@carleton.ca)

**Office hours:** Mondays, 3:30pm – 5:30pm in 3A56, Paterson Hall, or online by appointment

**I. Description:**

The concept of nature in critical theory is ambiguous. For thinkers associated with this tradition, “nature” repeatedly appears simultaneously as a necessary and productive concept, but also a failed or insufficient one. This course will be based on a critical analysis of the concept of nature in the work of critical theorists directly influenced by G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx. After examining nature and dialectics in the work of the latter two philosophers, we will turn our attention to the concept of nature in the work of György Lukács, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas. The main course text will be Steven Vogel’s *Against Nature*, which will guide us in directly relating and applying insights and debates in critical theory to the ecological crisis and environmental issues. This text will be supplemented with primary text excerpts from each of the above thinkers as we proceed chronologically. The course will end with reflections on the possibility of an environmental ethics of the “built world” today as inspired by Vogel’s own work as well as the work of Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway (Simians, Cyborgs and Women)

Some of the questions we will explore together include: What is the relation between the concepts of nature and society? Can the natural be separated from the social? Are nature, reality, and Adorno’s concept of the “non-identical” the same concept? What challenges does the social character of knowledge pose to a materialist approach to nature and its activity? What is the relation of the domination of nature to class relations, social inequality, and the domination of human beings by one another? How are our interactions with nature, and our considerations of the relation between the natural and the human/the social, normative in the context of environmental ethics?

**II. Preclusions:** Additional credit for the same course under either PHIL 4100 or PHIL 5000.

**III. Prerequisite(s):**

Undergraduate students must be enrolled as a Fourth Year Undergrad with a Major, Minor or Concentration in Philosophy or Phil. Ethics PubAff (or have special permission).

Graduate students must be enrolled in the Graduate Philosophy Program (or have special permission).

#### **IV. Learning Outcomes:**

- to understand the importance of and challenges posed by the concept of nature in the critical theory tradition.
- to be able to reconstruct the historical lineage of this concept extending from the work of G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx into the tradition of critical theory.
- to identify the ways in which the concept of nature has failed (a) to be consistent across the critical theory tradition, and (b) to inspire active environmental change.
- to be able to critically discuss the concept of nature in relation to contemporary debates in environmental ethics.
- to debate confidently on the topics of the nature/culture divide and the human difference.

#### **V. Course texts:**

The required text for this course is:

**Steven Vogel, *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).**

This text can be purchased from the campus bookstore or online through Indigo or Amazon. It is important that you have a physical copy of the book for when we go through the text together in class.

Excerpts from the additional texts indicated on the course calendar will be provided to you online and do not need to be purchased.

#### **VI. Calendar descriptions:**

##### **PHIL 4005 – Special Topic**

Detailed study of a special topic in philosophy.

##### **PHIL 5600 – Special Topic in Philosophy**

A detailed study of a special topic in philosophy. Topics may vary from year to year.

## VII. Course calendar, readings, and overview:

Date	Readings
Sept. 11	<p><i>Class Introduction: What is critical theory and how has the concept of nature been approached in this tradition?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Introduction,” <i>Against Nature</i>, pp. 1-12</li> </ul>
Sept. 18	<p><i>How can we “know” nature? Finding reason in nature through the development of self-consciousness (and labour)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alfred Schmidt, <i>The Concept of Nature in Marx</i>, “Chapter One: Karl Marx and Philosophical Materialism,” section “The non-ontological character of Marxist Materialism,” pp. 19-50.</li> <li>• Hegel, <i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i> (trans. A.V. Miller):</li> <li>• §§ 31-35 (pp. 18-20): <i>the disruption of familiarity and the movement towards the mediated unity of the whole.</i></li> <li>• §§ 47, 48; 54, 55, (pp. 27-29; 33-34): <i>the method of philosophy and Science; understanding substance.</i></li> <li>• §§ 178-196 (pp. 111-119): <i>the master/slave dialectic.</i></li> <li>• §§ 279-297 (pp. 167-180): <i>Nature’s excess and irreducibility to the universal in reason.</i></li> <li>• §§ 798-808 (pp. 485-493): <i>Absolute knowing and the relation of Spirit to nature.</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Optional supplementary reading:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Reason Observing Nature,” <i>Cinzia Ferrini</i>, in <i>The Blackwell Guide to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit</i>, ed. Ken R. Westphal, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.</li> </ul>
Sept. 25	<p><i>Hegel’s concept of nature in the Encyclopedia</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hegel, “Introduction,” <i>Encyclopedia II (Philosophy of Nature)</i>, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford), pp. 1-27.</li> <li>• From <i>Encyclopedia III, Philosophy of Mind</i> (trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Nature in the context of anthropology §§388-389, pp. 29-34.</li> <li>○ Conclusion of the system, §§ 574-577, pp. 313-315.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Hegel, <i>Philosophy of Right</i> (trans. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge), § 151, p. 195.</li> </ul> <p><b>Optional supplementary reading:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hegel, <i>Encyclopedia I (Logic)</i>, § 244, the transition from logic to nature.</li> </ul>
Oct. 2	<p><i>Dialectic, nature and science in Marx and Engels:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marx, <i>Theses on Feuerbach</i>, pp. 171-174, in <i>Karl Marx: Selected Writings</i> (ed. David McLellan).</li> <li>• Short extracts (1 page) posted from “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” (Marx’s merge of naturalism and humanism) and the <i>Grundrisse</i>, posted on</li> </ul>

	<p>Brightspace (“The metabolic exchange with nature”).</p> <p>Marx, selections from <i>Capital</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The Fetishism of Commodities,” pp. 472-474.</li> <li>• “The Production of Surplus Value,” pp. 492-498.</li> <li>• “Primitive Accumulation,” “The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation,” “The Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall” and “The Trinity Formula” pp. 521-544.</li> </ul> <p>Friedrich Engels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Anti-Dühring</i>, Preface II (September 23, 1885)</li> <li>• <i>Dialectics of Nature</i>, Appendix I, pp. 322–328</li> </ul> <p><b>Optional supplementary reading:</b></p> <p>Alfred Schmidt, <i>The Concept of Nature in Marx</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chapter 1 (cont.): “Towards a Critique of Engel’s Dialectics of Nature” (pp. 51-62).</li> <li>• Chapter 2: The Mediation of Nature through Society and Society through Nature,” section “The metabolism of Man and Nature: Historical Dialectic and ‘Negative’ Ontology” (pp. 79-96).</li> </ul> <p>John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “The Expropriation of Nature,” <a href="https://monthlyreview.org/2018/03/01/the-expropriation-of-nature/#endnote-37-backlink">https://monthlyreview.org/2018/03/01/the-expropriation-of-nature/#endnote-37-backlink</a></p>
Oct. 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The Problem of Nature in Lukács,” <i>Against Nature</i>, 13-31.</li> <li>• György Lukács, <i>History and Class Consciousness</i>, Chapter 1: “What is Orthodox Marxism?” (pp. 1-27), and pp. 232-237.</li> </ul> <p><b>Optional supplementary reading:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Andrew Feenberg, <i>Lukács, Marx, and the Sources of Critical Theory</i> (Oxford), pp. 204-210.</li> </ul>
Oct. 16	<p><i>Can we separate society and nature?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Nature and Reification,” <i>Against Nature</i>, pp. 33-51.</li> <li>• Bruno Latour, <i>We Have Never Been Modern</i>, trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard), “The Import-Export System of the Two Great Divides,” pp. 97-100.</li> <li>• Donna Haraway, <i>Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature</i> (Routledge), pp. 7-20.</li> </ul> <p><b>Optional supplementary reading:</b></p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kate Soper, “Humanism and the Politics of Nature,” <i>Theoria</i> 2001: 98, pp. 55-71.</li> <li>• Sean McGrath, <i>Thinking Nature</i>, pp. 153-160.</li> </ul>
Oct. 23	<b>MIDTERM BREAK – No class</b>
Oct. 30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Horkheimer, Adorno, and the Dialectics of Enlightenment,” <i>Against Nature</i>, 51-68.</li> <li>• Adorno and Horkheimer, <i>Dialectic of Enlightenment</i>, “The Concept of Enlightenment,” pp. 18-34.</li> </ul> <p><b>Optional Supplementary reading:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homer, <i>The Odyssey</i>, Book 12, pp. 271-285.</li> </ul>
Nov. 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Adorno and Nature as the Nonidentical,” <i>Against Nature</i>, pp. 69-99.</li> <li>• Adorno, <i>Negative Dialectics</i>, trans. E.B. Ashton, pp. 3-8, 136-141, 149-153, 183-193.</li> </ul> <p><b>Optional Supplementary reading:</b> Adorno, <i>Aesthetic Theory</i>, trans. Lenhardt, pp. 80-81, 91-110, 256-267.</p>
Nov. 13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Marcuse, Habermas, and the Retreat to Nature,” <i>Against Nature</i>, 101-119.</li> <li>• Marcuse, <i>Eros and Civilization</i> (Vrin), pp. 136-143.</li> <li>• Marcuse, <i>One-Dimensional Man</i> (Beacon Press), pp. 156-169, 230-236.</li> </ul> <p><b>Optional supplementary reading:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Habermas, <i>Theory of Communicative Action</i>, vol. 1 (Beacon Press), pp 48-74.</li> <li>• William Leiss, <i>The Domination of Nature</i> (Beacon Press), pp. 207-212.</li> </ul>
Nov. 20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Marcuse, Habermas, and the Retreat to Nature,” <i>Against Nature</i>, 120-143.</li> <li>• Habermas, <i>Toward a Rational Society</i>, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Beacon Press), pp. 68-69, 87-88, 191-198.</li> </ul> <p><b>Optional supplementary reading:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Habermas, <i>Theory of Communicative Action</i>, vol. 1, pp. 377-392.</li> </ul>
Nov. 27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Towards a Communicative Theory of Nature, <i>Against Nature</i>, 145-165.</li> </ul> <p><b>Optional supplementary reading:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joel Whitebook, “The Problem of Nature in Habermas,” <i>Telos</i> 40 (1979): 41-69.</li> <li>• Habermas, <i>Theory of Communicative Action</i>, vol. 4, pp. 377-392.</li> </ul>
Dec. 4	<p><i>An Ethics of the Built World? A democracy of things?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vogel, <i>Against Nature</i>, pp. 165-173.</li> <li>• Bruno Latour, <i>We Have Never Been Modern</i>, pp. 10-12, pp. 140-145.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vogel, <i>Thinking Like a Mall</i> (MIT), Chapter 7, pp. 199-238.</li> </ul> <p><b>Optional supplementary reading:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vogel, <i>Thinking Like a Mall</i> (MIT), Chapter 1, pp. 1-32.</li> </ul>
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**VIII. Evaluation**

The evaluation for this course is as follows:

- Short expository essay (1500 words) 25%  
**Due on Oct. 5, 11:59 pm** (graded and returned Oct 17)
- Seminar presentation + handout 20%  
OR  
1500-word summary of a weekly reading from the primary text  
(to be submitted **anytime on or before Dec. 4**)
- Term paper thesis statement/first paragraph 5%  
**Due on Nov. 26, 11:59 pm**
- Term paper (take-home exam) of 3000-3500 words 35%  
(2000-2500 for undergraduates)  
**Due on December 8, 11:59 pm**
- Short oral exam on your paper 15%  
**To be scheduled during the official examination period**

For the seminar presentation, you are required to produce a handout of 10-12 points of approximately two lines each (without quotations), summarizing the main reading of the day for your classmates. You will present the reading and your handout in a presentation of approximately 20 minutes to the class. Your handout must be submitted by **the Saturday before your presentation at 11:59 pm**. I will approve the handout and make copies of it for the class. Presentation dates will be assigned on the first day of the course. Instead of a seminar presentation, you also have the option of writing a 1500 word expository summary of one of our weekly readings.

For your final assignment, please make sure all sources are cited in line with Carleton's Academic Integrity guidelines, listed here:

<https://carleton.ca/registrar/academic-integrity/>.

**Late assignments will be penalized at a rate of 2% per day for a maximum of 5 days or -10%.**

## Department of Philosophy and Carleton University Policies (Fall/Winter 2023-24)

### **Assignments:**

Please follow your professor's instructions on how assignments will be handled electronically. There will be NO hard copies placed in the essay box this coming year.

### **Evaluation:**

Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean.

### **Deferrals for Term Work:**

If students are unable to complete term work because of illness or other circumstances beyond their control, they should contact their course instructor no later than *three working days* of the due date. Normally, any deferred term work will be completed by the last day of the term. Term work cannot be deferred by the Registrar.

### **Deferrals for Final Exams:**

Students are expected to be available for the duration of a course including the examination period. Occasionally, students encounter circumstances beyond their control where they may not be able to write a final examination or submit a take-home examination. Examples of this would be a serious illness or the death of a family member. If you miss a final examination and/or fail to submit a take-home examination by the due date, you may apply for a deferral no later than *three working days* after the original due date (as per the University Regulations in [Section 4.3 of the Undergraduate Calendar](#)). Visit the [Registrar's Office](#) for further information.

### **Plagiarism:**

It is the responsibility of each student to understand the meaning of 'plagiarism' as defined in the Undergraduate or Graduate Calendars, and to avoid both committing plagiarism and aiding or abetting plagiarism by other students. ([Section 10.1 of the Undergraduate Calendar Academic Regulations](#))

### **Academic Accommodation:**

You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term:

- *Pregnancy or religious obligation:* write to your professor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details visit the [EDC](#) website.
- *Academic accommodations for students with disabilities:* The [Paul Menton Centre](#) for Students with Disabilities (PMC) provides services to students with Learning Disabilities (LD), psychiatric/mental health disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), chronic medical conditions, and impairments in mobility, hearing, and vision. If you have a disability requiring academic accommodations in this course, please contact PMC at 613-520-6608 or [pmc@carleton.ca](mailto:pmc@carleton.ca) for a formal



evaluation. If you are already registered with the PMC, contact your PMC coordinator to send your Letter of Accommodation at the beginning of the term, and no later than two weeks before the first in-class test or exam requiring accommodation. After requesting accommodation from PMC, meet with your professor to ensure accommodation arrangements are made.

- *Survivors of Sexual Violence:* As a community, Carleton University is committed to maintaining a positive learning, working and living environment where sexual violence will not be tolerated, and where survivors are supported through academic accommodations as per [Carleton's Sexual Violence Policy](#).
- *Accommodation for [Student Activities](#):* Carleton University recognizes the substantial benefits, both to the individual student and for the university, that result from a student participating in activities beyond the classroom experience. Reasonable accommodation must be provided to students who compete or perform at the national or international level. Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist.

### **Important Dates:**

Sept. 6	Classes start.
Sept. 19	Last day for registration and course changes for fall term and fall/winter (two-term) courses.
Sept. 30	Last day for entire fee adjustment when withdrawing from fall term or two-term courses. Withdrawals after this date will result in a permanent notation of WDN on the official transcript.
Oct. 9	Statutory holiday. University closed.
Oct. 23-27	Fall Break – no classes.
Nov. 24	Last day for summative tests or examinations, or formative tests or examinations totaling more than 15% of the final grade, before the official examination period.
Dec. 8	Last day of fall term classes. <i>Classes follow a Monday schedule</i> . Last day for academic withdrawal from fall term courses. Last day for handing in term work and the last day that can be specified by a course instructor as a due date for term work for a fall term course.
Dec. 10-22	Final examinations for fall term courses and mid-term examinations in two-term courses. Examinations are normally held all seven days of the week.
Dec. 22	All take-home examinations are due.
Jan. 8	Classes begin.
Jan. 19	Last day for registration and course changes in the winter term.
Jan. 31	Last day for a full fee adjustment when withdrawing from winter term courses or from the winter portion of two-term courses. Withdrawals after this date will result in a permanent notation of WDN on the official transcript.
Feb. 19	Statutory holiday. University closed.

- Feb. 19-23 Winter Break – no classes.
- Mar. 15 Last day for academic withdrawal from fall/winter and winter courses.
- Mar. 27 Last day for summative tests or examinations, or formative tests or examinations totaling more than 15% of the final grade, in winter term or fall/winter courses before the official examination period.
- Mar. 29 Statutory holiday. University closed.
- Apr. 10 Last day of two-term and winter term classes. *Classes follow a Friday schedule.* Last day for handing in term work and the last day that can be specified by a course instructor as a due date for two-term and for winter term courses.
- Apr. 11-12 No classes or examinations take place.
- Apr. 13-25 Final examinations for winter term and two-term courses. Examinations are normally held all seven days of the week.
- Apr. 25 All take-home examinations are due.

**Addresses:**

Department of Philosophy:  
[www.carleton.ca/philosophy](http://www.carleton.ca/philosophy)  
520-2110

Registrar's Office:  
[www.carleton.ca/registrar](http://www.carleton.ca/registrar)  
520-3500

Academic Advising Centre:  
[www.carleton.ca/academicadvising](http://www.carleton.ca/academicadvising)  
520-7850

Writing Services:  
<http://www.carleton.ca/csas/writing-services/>  
520-3822

MacOdrum Library  
<http://www.library.carleton.ca/>  
520-2735