

ENVS 2990C: How to Think about Animals (3 credits)

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Course Description and Learning Outcomes:

This course considers species interaction from various angles – sociological, philosophical, scientific, and artistic. Topics include: Do animals have agency independent from that which we extend to them? Are they rational? Do they possess emotions? Should we eat them? To what extent is the animal kingdom hierarchical, or egalitarian? What is the evolutionary origin and function of aggression and display? How did humans domesticate animals and why? Why do animals play such a large role in religion and feature so prominently in literature and art?

By the end of this course, you will have gained new factual knowledge about animals, a new vocabulary to discuss them, and new abilities to write cogently and think critically about relationships amongst species.

My own interest stems from the fact that I have written a book on this topic from my perspective as a Classicist and practitioner of environmental humanities: *How to Care about Animals: An Ancient Guide to Creatures Great and Small* (Princeton University Press, 2023). We will use this book (an anthology of passages translated from classical literature with introductions) as a base text, but we will treat the issue more broadly. I am also personally invested in animals and their welfare: My wife and I operate Works & Days Farm in Shoreham, which we built from scratch as an experiment in sustainable living. We raise sheep and Scottish Highland cattle, produce eggs, cut flowers, tend large gardens, manage a maple sugarbush, and dote on two lovely donkeys named Turks and Caicos. (For more information visit www.worksanddaysfarm.com.)

Course Requirements and Grading: I want you to succeed in this course. The workload essentially consists of conscientious, intelligent reading, reflection, and discussion. You have one discussion post to complete in Blackboard per week, always due on Monday at noon (to allow you the week and weekend to complete and absorb the readings/viewings). Expect to write the equivalent of one word-processed page per post. (And I suggest you compose and save your responses outside of Brightspace so that you have ready access to them later for your “taking stock” essay, and in case something goes wrong. However, you **MUST** copy and paste your posts into the text box in Brightspace – no attachments or links to Google Drive or Dropbox, please.)

Each prompt is designed to be a meaningful experience to help you learn something. I have devised a grading scheme meant to signal to you how I think you're doing with the material. Each discussion post is worth 9 points. A 9 out of 9 means I'm especially impressed with your engagement and the quality of your observations. An 8 out of 9 is the grade you can expect for doing a very solid, conscientious job. (Most grades, I suspect, will fall in the 8 range.) A 7 out of 9 indicates something fell short or was somehow lacking. I won't give any grade lower than a 7 if you submit the assignment on time, so you're guaranteed a good mark if you do all the work.

A word about AI and ChatGPT: Don't cheat yourself by using an algorithmic machine to think and write for you. That's not why you're here and it's certainly not going to help you in the long run. I can't prevent it, I won't police it, you can fool me if you want, I don't care, but you'll be the loser in the end, I promise you. Don't get me wrong, saying so presumes nothing about your personal integrity and honesty. On the contrary, I genuinely care about your intellectual and personal development. Moreover, I am an aspirational grader, always keen to praise and reward good, conscientious work, so you shouldn't feel any grade pressure in this course that might tempt you to cheat yourself.

Your discussion posts will comprise 40% of your overall grade and inform our in-class discussions, which will be largely student-driven, punctuated occasionally by mini-lectures and spontaneous excursions from me. Participation in in-class discussion = 20%. One small group presentation (see further below) = 20%, and one final "taking stock" essay = 20%. In the spirit of collegiality conducive to a seminar, attendance for all class sessions is expected.

A note about films: I view them as texts on par with the written word. They may entertain, but they're not primarily about entertainment. They're an expression of ideas and emotions and contain arguments and so need to be weighed as deliberately and carefully as literature and expository prose, using many of the same analytical techniques.

Small group presentations: I will divide you into groups of 3 or 4. In sort of a "bring-your-pet-to-school" exercise each group will choose an animal, present its scientific attributes (morphology, taxonomy, habitat, and function) and discuss aspects of its interaction with/representation in human culture. Each group will give an oral presentation on this research and submit a 10-page, annotated bibliographic write-up of the project.

“Taking stock” essay: This is essentially a retrospective, no longer than 5 pages, in which you assess what you’ve learned from the course. What arguments or topics stuck out and stick with you? (I will provide a more specific prompt mid-semester.)

Books to Buy (available for purchase at the UVM Bookstore, but you can use any edition of Grandin or Singer):

M. D. Usher, *How to Care about Animals: An Ancient Guide to Creatures Great and Small* (forthcoming from Princeton University Press in 2023)

Temple Grandin, *Animals Make Us Human: Creating the Best Life for Animals* (2010)

Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (1975)

Articles/Book Chapters/Selections (PDFs provided in Brightspace):

John Berger, “Why Look at Animals?” from *About Looking* (Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 3-28

Thomas Nagel, “What’s It Like to Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83.4 (1974), pp. 435-450

Jakob von Uexküll, “A Stroll through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picturebook of Invisible Worlds.” *Semiotica* 89.4 (1992 [1934]), pp. 319-391

Petr Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* [1902], selections

Other, TBA

Films:

Grizzly Man (Lions Gate, 2005), a film about the tragic fate of naïve wildlife preservationist Timothy Treadwell in Alaska’s Katmai National Park. Directed by Werner Herzog. Runtime: 103 minutes.

My Octopus Teacher (Netflix, 2020) depicts a relationship forged between filmmaker Craig Foster and an octopus in a South African kelp forest. Directed by Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed. Runtime: 85 minutes.

Plague Dogs (Nepenthe Films, 1982), an animated film from the director of *Watership Down*, based on the book by Richard Adams, about two dogs fending for themselves after escaping from a research laboratory in the Lake District, UK. Directed by Martin Rosen. Runtime: 103 minutes.

Winged Migration (BAC Films, 2001); we will watch a documentary about the making of this film about bird migration (the directors successfully imprinted wild birds to humans). Original film directed by Jacques Perrin, Jacques Cluzaud, and Michel Debats. Runtime: 97 minutes.

Babe (Universal Pictures, 1995), a fun, yet touching exploration of animal sentience, based on the book by Dick King-Smith. Directed by Chris Noonan. Runtime: 92 minutes.

The Jungle Book (Disney, 1967). This animated classic, based on Rudyard Kipling's book from 1894, portrays the coming of age of Mowgli, a feral child raised by wolves in an Indian jungle. Directed by Wolfgang Reitherman. Runtime: 78 minutes.

SCHEDULE (classes on Wednesdays 4:05-7:05):

Week 1 (8/230): INTRODUCTIONS

Week 2 (9/6): Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" Nagel, "What's It Like to Be a Bat?"

Week 3 (9/13): Usher, "Introduction" and Chapters 1-10, film: *My Octopus Teacher*

Week 4 (9/20): Usher, Chapters 11 and 12; film: *Babe*

Week 5 (9/27): Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Chapter 1 (All Animals are Equal) and Chapter 5 (Man's Dominion: A Short History of Speciesism); film: *Grizzly Man*

Week 6 (10/4): Grandin, *Animals Make Us Human*: Everyone to read Chapter 1 (What Do Animals Need?) and the Afterword (Why Do I Still Work for the Industry?); individual chapters to be divided up among reading groups;

Week 7 (10/11): Von Uexküll, "A Stroll through the Worlds of Animals"; film: *Winged Migration*

Week 8 (10/18): Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Chapter 2 (Tools for Research); film: *Plague Dogs*

Week 9 (10/25): Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, Introduction, Chapter 1 (through p. 31), and Conclusion; film: *The Jungle Book*

Week 10 (11/1): Groups 1 and 2 Presentations

Week 11 (11/3): Groups 3 and 4 Presentations

Week 12 (11/15): Groups 5 and 6 Presentations

Week 13: THANKSGIVING WEEK

Week 14 (11/29): Groups 7 and 8 Presentations

Week 15 (12/6): Groups 9 and 10 Presentations

FINAL "TAKING STOCK" ASSIGNMENT DUE, **December 15** at noon.