

**PHIL 330H1 F: Contemporary Continental Philosophy: ‘Plasticity and Anarchy’**

Fall Term 2024/ University of Toronto St. George Campus (3 credits)

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<b>Instructor:</b>	Natalie Helberg (Lecturer, Department of Philosophy)
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<b>Office hours:</b>	Thursday 1:00pm-3:00pm (or by appointment) *There will be no office hours the first week of class
<b>Class schedule:</b>	Thursdays 9:00am-12:00pm in person; location: SU 444

**Course description:** The question of the relation between Catherine Malabou’s conception of ‘plasticity’ and her recent work on anarchy is our central concern. How is ‘plasticity’—a form’s ability to receive, actively impress, or annihilate form—which Malabou at times aligns with the power to surpass obstinate cultures, such as those governed by neoliberal capitalism, and at other times aligns with irrecuperable devastation, related to ‘anarchy’ as she insists it must be conceived: organization without the hierarchies implied by governance, organization without subordination of any kind? In a world in which so many deleterious structures—capitalism, our economic system; forms of political organization which pander to the interests of profiteering companies; institutions which cater to the moneyed; cultures characterized by misogyny, racism, and other forms of discrimination—seem to prove themselves again and again unamenable to anything but superficial changes, what could it mean to point to ‘plasticity,’ the power to transform form, as the key to a viable politics?

**Required texts:** Some texts for the course *must be purchased*:

Malabou, Catherine. 2008. *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* New York: Fordham UP.

Malabou, Catherine. 2010. *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*. New York: Columbia UP.

Malabou, Catherine. 2012. *The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Malabou, Catherine. 2023. *Stop Thief! Anarchism and Philosophy*. Cambridge; Hoboken: Polity.

Agamben, Giorgio. 2020. *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*. Stanford: Stanford UP.

**Electronic versions of some of our readings will be available as PDFs or via links to resources in the UofT Library on our Quercus page. Consult the reading schedule for a comprehensive list of our readings.**

**How the course will run and expectations:**

We will meet at our scheduled times in the room that has been assigned to us. Our time in class will involve a blend of lecture and discussion.

Make sure that you monitor Quercus for any announcements and keep apprised of any email communications from me. If ever an emergency constrains me to cancel class, I will notify you using Quercus.

Do your very best to complete the readings for the week in advance. We have quite a few readings and some are lengthy and difficult. You will be learning how to read the more linguistically challenging texts on our reading list during lectures (I will give you the frameworks you need for the texts to become intelligible to you) and while engaged in your own reading practice (you do have to grapple with the texts on your own, too, to start to unlock them).

Informal reading policy: I will be working with an informal ‘reading policy’ as I run the course. I want the class to be maximally enriching, and so I’ve loaded it up with interesting texts. I realize, though, that this can set students up to feel overwhelmed by the course and perhaps unable to rise to its challenges; it can set students up to feel as if they are up against the impossible, or even to feel like abject failures. These feelings are among the worst the contemporary university can foster. How, then, to strike a balance between the desire to teach generously—to give students everything it is possible, as an instructor, to give them—while also refraining from subjecting them to the abuses of finitude that the contemporary university is already so primed and prone to inflict (e.g., acting like dense texts can be processed instantly, or in no time at all, or even acting as if ‘time,’ that precious resource, is evenly distributed across the student body, when the truth is that some students have more than others)? How, too, to offer resistance to a post-literate culture? Many students struggle with reading itself and with attention. I believe in the value of the activity that is reading, so the solution to the problem of stressing students out with more reading than they can do *cannot* be that of having no required readings or even a scanty number of them. I view the class as partly an opportunity for students to develop the reading muscles whose atrophy our culture encourages. It is imperative, then, for students in the class to read, and not only read, but read as much as they can—to exercise those muscles, in other words, and transform their limits by pushing them. What I would like students in the class to do, then, is to use the texts on our reading list to cultivate a reading practice guided by the following principles.

1. View the reading list as a challenge to push your reading capacities beyond their own bounds. Everyone will come to the class with different capacities. The point is not to feel that you’re competing with your peers; the point is to gauge where you as an individual are and to try to use the class, and the work you do in it, to move past that particular

point. If, after the course ends, you've done this (your own reading limits have budged and you find yourself able to productively read more than you were able to before), then you've succeeded.

2. Make time every week to look at the readings for the following week. If we're looking at a particularly long reading the next week, then try to tackle it over the course of a few days, instead of all at once. Even when I'm not 'sitting down to read,' I enjoy keeping the things I'm reading close to me and glancing at them in the little intervals of time I'm afforded throughout the day. When I'm reading this way (intermittently glancing at a text), I find it changes the way I focus on and process the text. The smaller units of the text stand out to me more. I might only be looking at a sentence or a paragraph while I'm nibbling on some breakfast. The sentence, or the paragraph, isn't as prone to being swallowed up into the larger ocean of text it's a part of and I myself am more liable to remember it. Anyway: you're not obliged to fill every second of free time you find yourself with with our readings. Here, I'm just highlighting one technique among several that you might embrace as you develop your own reading practice.
3. Make a concerted effort to do all of the readings assigned for a given week, BUT don't think you've 'failed' (or are not meeting expectations) if you don't manage to. *Try* to tackle our mountain of texts and then observe how far you were able to go. This is a way of learning about where your limits stand now. Track how they change over time (that is, track how they change during the time of the course and after the course is over).
4. If you don't have time to get to a given text on our reading list while the course is running, consider saving it for a rainy day in the future. The course is pointing you to interesting resources. We act as if learning can transpire in 12 weeks, but often it takes far more time. Don't be afraid to let the course exceed its own bounds and spill over into your post-course life.
5. You do have to read the texts you work with to produce your written assignments carefully. If you find yourself having to make hard choices about what to read and what to save for another day, prioritize the texts you think you might want to write on.
6. Do attend lecture. If you haven't had a chance to read a given text, you can still learn about it and reflect on what you have managed to read in light of it by listening to me discourse on it while taking notes. You will want to attend lecture so that you can get a sense of how we're connecting the readings and are using them to extend course themes and preoccupations.

I will provide notes which indicate the core ideas I've discussed during a given lecture after the lecture via Quercus, as students often find them useful to have while studying the readings independently and while working on written assignments. Please also take your own notes (creating a personalized set of notes while engaged in a learning process is a special, enriching

activity!). The lectures themselves will contain more detail than typed-up lecture notes can convey and you may want to capture some of it.

**Evaluation/Assignments:**

**1) ‘Reading responses’ X 6; worth 5% each (30% of the final grade in total).** These responses of approximately **500 words each** will bear on our assigned readings. **You must submit 6 between the beginning of term and the last day of class.** You can submit these responses via Quercus on the weeks which are most convenient for you; **you are only allowed to submit one entry per week, however, and the entry you submit must be on readings we read on the week you’re submitting.** Submit no more than 6 entries in total; after you’ve submitted 6, any additional entries you submit will not be factored into your grade (though I’ll still read them with interest!).

**Instructions:** Pick a reading or a few readings assigned on a given week. Devote half of your response to recreating core ideas or arguments developed in the readings (**make sure to provide in-text citations with page numbers while paraphrasing ideas/arguments**) and half of your response to offering original philosophical reflections on these ideas; it may be productive to motivate and pose critical questions about the reading(s) you’ve explained in the portion of your entry devoted to reflection; you may also proceed to make philosophical points in other ways. You may find it interesting to bring ideas you’ve encountered in other philosophy classes or philosophical texts to bear on the readings, for instance. There are other possibilities as well.

**\*Note:** Make sure you organize your time so that you are able to **work on these entries over time.** You won’t be able to produce the most thoughtful entries if you’re completing them last-minute.

**2) First Short Paper: 2000 words; 30% of final grade.** Topics/instructions distributed Sept. 26<sup>th</sup>. **Due: Oct. 13<sup>th</sup>.** Please submit your essay as a Word document via Quercus by 11:59pm on the due date.

**3) Final Paper: 2500 words; 40% of final grade.** Topics/instructions distributed Nov. 14<sup>th</sup>. **Due during the exam period; precise deadline TBA.** Please submit your essay as a Word document via Quercus by 11:59pm on the due date.

**Assignment Submission:** All assignments should be submitted via Quercus by 11:59pm on the day they are due.

**Extensions:** Extensions may be permitted for valid reasons (emergencies, severe illnesses, etc.). Please request an extension before the day the assignment you are requesting an extension for is due. Retroactive extensions may be possible, depending on a person’s reasons for requesting

them. Getting in touch with me to explain your situation and see what accommodations are possible never hurts!

**Late Policy:** Late assignments for which an extension has not been granted will be penalized (2% of the grade will be subtracted each day after the deadline until the assignment is submitted).

**Email Policy:** If you have questions that require elaborate philosophical responses or detailed explanations, please come to my office hours or schedule a meeting with me to pose them (I won't have time to write up a treatise for you by email, but I'm happy to speak with you and help you that way—I can answer questions much more efficiently using spoken language). For practical questions: First, make sure I haven't already answered the question (e.g., on the syllabus or on Quercus), then, if I haven't, feel free to reach out. You can email me to ask for extensions or to set up meetings. Email: [natalie.helberg@utoronto.ca](mailto:natalie.helberg@utoronto.ca).

**Re-marking Policy:** When a graded assignment is returned to you, please consider the feedback provided on it carefully. If, after careful consideration of this feedback, you feel that your grade is unfair, you can reach out and request a re-evaluation. In the email you send me, you must explain your reasons for thinking the initial grade is unfair. There are three possible outcomes of a re-evaluation: the grade may remain the same, the grade may be adjusted upwards, or the initial grade may be lowered (if the original grade seems too generous upon re-evaluation).

**Attendance Policy:** Attendance is not mandatory. You will want to attend regularly nevertheless; it will be impossible to succeed with respect to the assignments for the course without attending lectures.

**Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty:**

Plagiarism (misrepresenting the work of others as one's own, or failing to cite one's sources properly) and other forms of academic dishonesty are serious offenses and will not be tolerated. Offenses of this kind run counter to the aims of education and evaluation: Skill acquisition (one becomes a better reader, writer and thinker because one does the work) and fair assessment (one's grades should reflect one's actual capacities; competition in the academic environment should be fair). In order to avoid inadvertent acts of plagiarism, students should familiarize themselves with the following resources: <http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/osai> (the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters: a complete outline of the University's policy and expectations) and <http://academicintegrity.utoronto.ca>. Reach out to me for advice on anything you find unclear.

**Accessibility:**

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. Accessibility-related concerns should be communicated to me. I will do my best to accommodate students who require

accommodations. Depending on the nature of the accommodation, students requiring accommodations may also need to contact accessibility services: [www.accessibility.utoronto.ca](http://www.accessibility.utoronto.ca)

**Reading Schedule**

\*Note: Our reading schedule isn't set in stone and we will be free to adjust it as the course progresses if we need to. Some topics may require slightly more time to cover than our reading schedule indicates, in which case we will allow them to spill over into subsequent weeks. Think of the course, of our thinking in the course, as an organism developing, rather than as a body of pre-partitioned information whose delivery is rigidly determined in advance. The metaphor of a 'developing organism' suggests that you can think of the course as a unified entity as well: the links between the readings will ramify as we move through them, so we will be calling back to past readings as the course progresses, refreshing and transforming them in the context of the newer readings.

<i>Weeks/Topics</i>	<i>Readings</i>
<p>1 <i>Sept. 5/2024</i></p> <p><i>'Plasticity' vs. Neoliberal Capitalism</i></p>	<p>Introduction to the class and first lecture.</p> <p>Start reading Malabou, Catherine. 2008. <i>What Should We Do with Our Brain?</i> New York: Fordham UP. 1-46.</p>
<p>2 <i>Sept. 12/2024</i></p> <p><i>'Plasticity' vs. Neoliberal Capitalism Continued</i></p>	<p>Finish reading Malabou, Catherine. 2008. <i>What Should We Do with Our Brain?</i> New York: Fordham UP. 46-82.</p> <p>Berlant, Lauren. 2011. "Introduction: Affect in the Present" and "Cruel Optimism." <i>Cruel Optimism</i>. Durham; London: Duke UP. 1-50 (Link available on Quercus).</p> <p>Optional: Fisher, Mark. 2009. <i>Capitalist Realism: Is there No Alternative?</i> Winchester; Washington: Zer0 Books. (Link available on Quercus).</p>
<p>3 <i>Sept. 19/2024</i></p> <p><i>'Destructive Plasticity' and Decimated Selves</i></p>	<p>Start reading Malabou, Catherine. 2012. <i>The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity</i>. Cambridge: Polity.1-38.</p> <p>Malabou, Catherine. 2012. Selections from <i>The New Wounded</i>. New York: Fordham UP. 29-56. (PDF available on Quercus). 29-56.</p>

<p>4 Sept. 26/2024</p> <p><i>'Destructive Plasticity' and Decimated Selves Continued</i></p>	<p>Finish reading Malabou, Catherine. 2012. <i>The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity</i>. Cambridge: Polity. 38-91.</p> <p>Kellogg, Catherine. 2015. "Plasticity and the Cerebral Unconscious: New Wounds, New Violence, New Politics." <i>Plastic Materialities</i>. Ed. Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller. Durham; London: Duke UP. 111-132. (Link on Quercus).</p> <p>Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 1987. "Nov. 28, 1947: How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs." <i>A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia</i>. Minneapolis; London: U of Minnesota P. 149-166.</p> <p><b>*First Short Essay questions and instructions distributed</b></p>
<p>5 Oct. 3/2024</p> <p><i>Exploding Philosophical Systems and Traditions</i></p>	<p>Malabou, Catherine. 2011. "Grammatology and Plasticity." <i>Changing Difference</i>. Cambridge: Polity. 41-66. (PDF on Quercus).</p> <p>Start reading Malabou, Catherine. 2010. <i>Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing</i>. New York: Columbia UP. 1-40.</p>
<p>6 Oct. 10/2024</p> <p><i>Exploding Philosophical Systems and Traditions Continued</i></p> <p>Oct. 13/2024</p>	<p>Finish reading Malabou, Catherine. 2010. <i>Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing</i>. New York: Columbia UP. 41-82.</p> <p>Derrida, Jacques. 1982. Selections from "The Ends of Man." <i>Margins of Philosophy</i>. Chicago: U of Chicago P. 134-6. (PDF on Quercus)</p> <p>Grove, Jairus. 2015. "Something Darkly This Way Comes: The Horror of Plasticity in an Age of Control." <i>Plastic Materialities</i>. Ed. Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller. Durham; London: Duke UP. 233-264. (Link on Quercus)</p> <p><b>*First Short Essay due on Oct. 13<sup>th</sup> by 11:59pm</b></p>
<p>7 Oct. 17/2024</p>	<p>Malabou, Catherine. 2015. "Interview with Catherine Malabou." <i>Plastic Materialities: Politics, Legality, and Metamorphosis in the Works of</i></p>

<p><i>Plasticity Beyond Biopower and Discourses</i></p>	<p>Catherine Malabou. Ed. Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller. Durham; London: Duke UP. 287-99. (Link available on Quercus)</p> <p>Malabou, Catherine. 2015. "Will Sovereignty Ever Be Deconstructed?" In <i>Plastic Materialities: Politics, Legality, and Metamorphosis in the Works of Catherine Malabou</i>, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller. Durham; London: Duke UP. 35-46. (Link available on Quercus)</p>
<p>8 Oct. 24</p> <p>Agamben: <i>One Portrait of Anarchy</i></p> <p>Oct. 31/2024</p>	<p>Agamben, Giorgio. 2020. Selections from <i>Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism</i>. Stanford: Stanford UP. *Precise selections TBA.</p> <p>Reading Week</p>
<p>9 Nov. 7/2024</p> <p>Agamben: <i>One Portrait of Anarchy</i></p>	<p>*Note: The drop date for the course is Nov. 4<sup>th</sup>.</p> <p>Agamben, Giorgio. 2020. Selections from <i>Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism</i>. Stanford: Stanford UP. *Precise selections TBA.</p>
<p>10 Nov. 14/2024</p> <p>Malabou's <i>Plasticity and Anarchy</i></p>	<p>Malabou, Catherine. 2023. Selections from <i>Stop Thief! Anarchism and Philosophy</i>. Cambridge; Hoboken: Polity. *Precise selections TBA</p> <p>*Final Essay topics and instructions distributed</p>
<p>11 Nov. 21/2024</p> <p>Malabou's <i>Plasticity and Anarchy</i></p>	<p>Malabou, Catherine. 2023. Selections from <i>Stop Thief! Anarchism and Philosophy</i>. Cambridge; Hoboken: Polity. *Precise selections TBA</p> <p>Malabou, Catherine. 2022. "Politics of Plasticity: Cooperation without Chains." <i>Unchaining Solidarity: On Mutual Aid and Anarchism with Catherine Malabou</i>. Lanham: Rowman &amp; Littlefield. (Link available on Quercus).</p>



12 <i>Nov. 28/2024</i>  <i>Malabou's Plasticity and Anarchy</i>	Last class!  Malabou, Catherine. 2023. Selections from <i>Stop Thief! Anarchism and Philosophy</i> . Cambridge; Hoboken: Polity. *Precise selections TBA  <b>Final paper due during the exam period. Precise deadline TBA.</b> .