

PH3A9-15 Philosophy of Nature

24/25

Department

Philosophy

Level

Undergraduate Level 3

Module leader

Andrew Cooper

Credit value

15

Module duration

10 weeks

Assessment

20% coursework, 80% exam

Study location

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

Description

Introductory description

The climate emergency invites us to rethink our understanding of nature. To what extent can we understand and control our environment? Do we have a moral obligation to protect the natural world? In what sense are we, as thinking animals, part of nature? This module introduces the concept of nature as a fundamental and ongoing matter of philosophical reflection. From the Presocratic poets to contemporary environmental philosophy, it provides a critical reconstruction of key attempts in philosophy's history to interrogate and alter our understanding of nature. Along the way we will examine the political and normative implications of how we think about nature, and critically reflect on our own presuppositions about the natural world.

Module aims

By the end of the module, students will be able to:

- *understand key phases in the philosophy of nature,
- *contextualise and analyse historical texts,
- *evaluate the political and normative implications of our thinking about nature,
- *grasp the implications of the philosophy of nature for natural science, philosophy of mind, environmental philosophy and ethics,
- *critically reflect on their own conception of the natural world.

Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

Topics often include:

Nature in the Presocratic poets

Daoism and environmental philosophy

Aristotle's physics

Medieval theories of creation, including Plotinus and Aquinas

The Scientific Revolution, including Descartes and Newton

Kant and natural science

Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection

Mind and world

The human body: race and gender

Our obligation to future generations

Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- Students will develop a critical understanding of key phases in the philosophy of nature.
- Students will acquire the capacity to contextualise and analyse historical texts.
- Students will be able to evaluate the political and normative implications of our thinking about nature.
- Students will acquire the ability to reflect on their own conception of the natural world.

Indicative reading list

Selected texts include:

Aristotle, Physics

Aquinas, Summa Theologica

Darwin, On the Origin of Species

Daston, Against Nature

Descartes, Discourse on Method

Haslanger, 'Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?'

Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment

Newton, Principia

Sellars, 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man'

Spencer, 'Are Biological Races Real?'

Svoboda, 'Environmental Philosophy as a Way of Life'

Zhuangzi, The Inner and Outer Chapters

Interdisciplinary

This module examines the philosophical foundations of natural science. It will be of interest to

students working in STEM subjects, who would like to reflect on the assumptions of their discipline, and to students in the GSD program seeking to gain a philosophical understanding of the issues underpinning the climate emergency.

International

This module challenges geographical distinctions in philosophy, such as east and west, continental and analytic, by examining literature from a variety of traditions, including the ancient Near East, China, Greek antiquity, medieval Islam and Christianity, modern Europe and contemporary Anglo-American philosophy.

Subject specific skills

Students will develop their understanding of the central questions, concepts and debates in the philosophy of nature. They will be able to situate various conceptions of nature within the philosophical tradition, and have a greater appreciation of the diversity of positions regarding the metaphysics of the natural world. Students will refine their ability to discuss in speech and writing the philosophy of nature based on close reading and critical analysis of the set texts and relevant secondary literature. Finally, they will develop the capacity to critically reflect on their own assumptions about nature.

Transferable skills

Students will develop the capacity to analyse explicit and implicit conceptions of nature that underpin natural science, philosophy of mind, environmental philosophy and ethics. They will be able to contextualise contemporary debates surrounding the climate emergency within an ongoing conversation about the place of human beings in the natural order.

Study

Study time

Type	Required
Lectures	9 sessions of 2 hours (12%)
Seminars	8 sessions of 1 hour (5%)
Private study	124 hours (83%)
Total	150 hours

Private study description

Students will prepare for lectures and seminars by detailed and critical readings of the set texts, accompanied by further reading of secondary literature.

Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

Assessment

You do not need to pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Students can register for this module without taking any assessment.

Assessment group D2

	Weighting	Study time
Critical review	20%	
Students are required to select a piece of contemporary media in which the concept of nature plays an important role. Using the skills they have gained from the module, students are required to write a critical review that examines the presuppositions that underpin the use of nature, drawing connections to at least one of the topics covered in the module. The assignment will examine (a) their ability to analyse historical texts in their context, and (b) their capacity to critically reflect on our present understanding of nature in light of historical sources.		
Online Examination	80%	
Students will answer two out of six questions.		

Feedback on assessment

Critical reviews will receive feedback via moodle. 2 hour exams will receive feedback via final grades.

[Past exam papers for PH3A9](#)

Availability

Courses

This module is Optional for:

- UPHA-V700 Undergraduate Philosophy
 - Year 2 of V700 Philosophy
 - Year 2 of V700 Philosophy