

## Derrida

University of New Mexico, Philosophy 486/586, Spring 2025

**Course description:** In this graduate student and advanced undergraduate seminar, we will seek to understand the philosophical significance of Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), one of the most influential and controversial thinkers of the twentieth century. In order to chart a course through Derrida’s incredibly prolific and extremely difficult body of work, the seminar will be guided by my once (but no longer terribly) controversial interpretive thesis that Derrida is best understood as a post-Heideggerian thinker. Derrida recognized Heidegger as the most important philosopher of the twentieth century and so sought to *critically appropriate* Heidegger’s views. This means that Derrida develops his own views on the basis of Heidegger’s thought, as Derrida understands it (and sometimes misunderstands it, often productively), while also frequently criticizing Heidegger’s thought where (in Derrida’s evolving view) Heidegger himself failed to fully develop the radical implications of his own thinking, or fell back into metaphysical temptations he should have deconstructed more thoroughly. Indeed, Derrida usually develops Heidegger’s thought precisely *by* criticizing it (and *vice versa*), and we will seek to understand this often confusing intertwinement of critique and development (itself infamously Heideggerian; Gadamer calls it a “fusion [or smelting together] of [philosophical] horizons [*Horizontverschmelzung*]”) in terms of the deconstructive methodology Derrida develops from his reading of Heidegger. (The Derridean title of this course would thus be “Derrida on Heidegger,” where “on” means not only “*on the subject of*” but also “*on the basis of*.”)

After some very brief background on Heidegger (with whose philosophical and post-philosophical thinking some prior acquaintance needs to be presupposed), we will carefully read some of the most important texts written by Derrida directly on Heidegger, texts in which Derrida critically appropriates and develops many of his own core ideas (such as deconstruction, *différance*, writing under erasure, death, and solitude) as critical appropriations of Heidegger’s views. We will then turn to read several longer works in which Derrida develops these (post-Heideggerian) views beyond Heidegger, extending them into the domain of ontological questions—for example, how should we understand the being of “the” *animal*? Of *politics*? Of *death*?—which Heidegger himself raised but left insufficiently thought-through and so underexplored and underdeveloped, in Derrida’s view. In these ways, we will develop the hermeneutic hypothesis that Derridean deconstruction (following its hyper-Heideggerian logic) tries to think that which went “unthought” in Heidegger’s own thinking, taking Heidegger’s thought as his own “uncircumventable” (as Derrida repeatedly phrased it) point of departure, a “point” which Derrida thereby seeks to push further into the future and so move beyond (without, perhaps, ever leaving it entirely behind). We will bring the course to its end

by reading the brilliant final seminars Derrida gave while confronting the encroaching imminence of his own demise and making this an occasion once again to rethink (albeit for an apparently final time) the great existential and philosophical question of the meaning of death.

**Course requirements:** Given the rather notorious difficulty many people have reading Derrida, this seminar should not be your first exposure to continental philosophy; even students well-versed in continental thought will need to be up for the serious challenge of reading Derrida's work, a challenge that only rewards those who meet it with a great deal of their own time, energy, and thought (for reasons we will explore together). The necessary requirements for success in this class might begin to be listed as follows: the self-discipline needed to complete a significant amount of challenging reading; an open-minded willingness to struggle with texts that probably rank among the most difficult in the Western philosophical tradition (and which challenge some of the most cherished achievements of this tradition); and regular course preparation and attendance. To measure your fulfillment of these requirements, final course grades will be based (for undergraduates) on two relatively short but carefully composed and highly polished papers (which will be due on learn on the dates specified on the syllabus below) and, should they become necessary (and I hope they will not!), attendance quizzes on that week's reading; or, for graduate students, on one final research paper (10–15 pages) as well on one in-class teaching presentation, in which your goal will be to explain just ONE main point from Derrida work (taken from that week's reading) to the rest of the class as clearly as possible (teaching the class for about 10–15 minutes, then raising a question for discussion). Graduate students should think about which week's texts and topics they would like to present on, and then consult with me to coordinate the details ahead of that week's seminar. In sum, it should be clear that this is an advanced course for serious students only.

**Required Texts:** 1). Thomson, *Rethinking Death in and after Heidegger* (Cambridge UP, 2024); 2). Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (U. Chicago, 1982); 3). Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* (U. Chicago, 1981); 4). Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Vol. 2* (Chicago UP, 2011). (Recommended for further reading: Other major texts by Derrida that are largely concerned with Heidegger include *Of Spirit*; *Aporias*; *The Truth in Painting*; *The Gift of Death*; *Given Time*; *On the Name*; *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Volume II; *The Animal That Therefore I Am*; *Geschlecht III*; and *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, the last being Derrida's earliest sustained engagement with Heidegger's *Being and Time*. For the most accessible and authoritative *introduction* to Derrida's thinking, I recommend the often impressively clear and insightful interviews collected in his *Points... Interviews, 1974–1994*.) Please feel free to email me with any questions.