

Western University  
Centre for Theory and Criticism  
**THEOCRIT 9149B: Ecological Conversion: from Critique to Creation**

**MEETINGS:** Thursdays 1:30 P.M. – 4:30 P.M., Stevenson Hall 3165

**Instructor:** Dr. Russell Duvernoy, PhD

**Contact:** [rduverno@uwo.ca](mailto:rduverno@uwo.ca)

**Office Hours:** Mondays from 2:30 to 4:30 PM or by appointment. (Office is Faculty Building 304, King's University College).

**Course Description:** Pierre Hadot has claimed that “the idea of conversion represents [a] notion constitutive for Western consciousness” such that, ultimately, “all education is conversion.” Given that a critical dynamic of our times is widespread sense of the need for deep, paradigmatic change, this course explores potentials and risks of “ecological conversion” as a figure for such transitional change. Though “ecological conversion” is most familiarly associated with Pope Francis, the course approaches conversion as a philosophical figure that exceeds any particular denominational or religious context. We will consider how to theorize what conversion is, as well as thinking what the content of a specifically ecological conversion might mean or look like. This requires attending to dynamics of paradigmatic change at existential/personal, systemic, and material/environmental levels while remaining reflective about tensions between critical diagnosis and creative response.

We begin discussing the relationship between philosophy and conversion as such with both ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ philosophical perspectives considered (William James, Pierre Hadot, Tanabe Hajime, Guattari). We then consider ontological conditions of conversion, focusing on relationships between affective patterns and individuating processes at both personal and social levels. Here, we draw on a variety of thinkers (Vine Deloria, Jr., Karen Barad, Silvan Tomkins, Rosi Braidotti, Alfred North Whitehead) with particular attention given to the work of Gilbert Simondon. After this ontological excursion, we focus conversion and social critique in the particular context of decolonizing relations between North American settler society and Indigenous peoples, drawing on the work of both critical Indigenous scholars (Kyle Whyte, Aaron Mills, Heidi Stark) and philosophers of race (Charles Mills, Lewis Gordon). Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the role of memory and time in theorizing conversion as deep transformation (Bergson, Glissant, Stengers, Nishitani, Nishida).

The course follows a deliberately pluralist methodology placing differing perspectives and traditions into dialogue, including ‘eastern’ philosophy (Kyoto school), Indigenous, and contemporary continental. Though it emphasizes philosophical texts, the course is interdisciplinary in spirit and should appeal to students with interests in ecology, social transformation, eco-criticism, history of ideas, speculative philosophy, and philosophies of religion and critical theory broadly construed.

**Learning Objectives:**

1. To consider and thematize complex criteria for theorizing transformative ecological change in an effective and ethical way.

2. To better understand the historical and conceptual relationship between conversion as a transformative modality and philosophy.
3. To consider ontological conditions of conversion at both existential and social levels, with particular attention paid to the role of affect.
4. To reflect on and experiment with responsible and engaged speculative thought in the context of deep ecological dysfunction and legacies of injustice.

**Expectations, Procedures, and Methods of Evaluation:** The course will be run in a graduate seminar style. Students are expected to complete all class readings closely and carefully before the class session in which they are discussed and should be prepared for rigorous discussion of prominent themes and questions. Class sessions will be in a dialogical lecture style with ample space for discussion.

Assignments and methods of evaluation are as follows:

**Two Brief Synopses (30%):** Students will complete two brief synopses of assigned readings of their choice. This synopsis will serve as the introduction to the material for that week's class session. Further details on OWL.

**Participation and Attendance (10%):** Students are expected to attend and actively participate in all class sessions unless there is an unavoidable conflict communicated before the session in question.

**Final Paper and Conference Workshop Presentation including Proposal: (60%: 20% conference, 5% Proposal, 35% paper):** Students will write a significant research paper (20-5 pages) on a topic of their choice. This includes both a written proposal and a workshop style presentation during the April Finals period. Further details on OWL.

**Course Materials:** We are reading significant portions of the three following texts which are not available electronically through the library system. All additional readings will be made available electronically, whether through links to a library e-copy or pdf on OWL.

Simondon, Gilbert. (2020). *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*. University of Minnesota Press. (ISBN 978-0-8166-8002-3).

Tomkins, Silvan. (1995). *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*. Duke University Press. (ISBN 9-780822-316947).

Tanabe, Hajime. (2016). *Philosophy as Metanoetics*. Chisokudō Press. (ISBN 9-781537-712567).

**Statement on Academic Offences:** Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

[http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_grad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf)

**Syllabus:** This schedule may change during the semester to reflect course progress and student interests. Any changes will be announced in class and made on OWL.

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### **Conversion Contexts and Conditions**

**Week One: Th Jan 12:** Introductions, Conversion and Ecology

**Readings:** selections from *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis  
*The Three Ecologies* by Felix Guattari

**Week Two: Th Jan 19:** Conversion and ('western') Philosophy

**Readings:** "Conversion", "Spiritual Exercises", "The Sage and the World" Pierre Hadot / "Conversion, Lecture IX", "Conversion, Lecture X" William James (from *Varieties of Religious Experience*)

**Week Three: Th Jan 26:** Conversion and ('eastern') Philosophy

**Readings:** "Preface", "The Philosophical Meaning of Metanoetics", "Absolute Critique: The Logic of Metanoetics" Tanabe Hajime, from *Philosophy as Metanoetics*

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### **Ontological Conditions of Conversion**

**Week Four: Th Feb. 2:** Affect and Individuation

**Readings:** selections from "The Individuation of Living Beings" Gilbert Simondon from *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*;  
"Simondon and the Preindividual" by Elisabeth Grosz (from *The Incorporeal*)

**Week Five: Th Feb 9:** Affect and Ethics

**Readings:** "What are Affects?" "Script Theory and Nuclear Scripts" Silvan Tomkins (from *Shame and Its Sisters*)  
"Powers of Affirmation", "Sustainable Ethics and the Body in Pain" "Forensic Futures" Rosi Braidotti (from *Nomadic Theory*)

**Week Six: Th Feb 16:** Ontologies of Nature

**Readings:** Vine Deloria Jr., from *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*: "A Planet in Transition", "Transforming Reality", "A Divided Vision"  
Alfred North Whitehead, from *The Concept of Nature, Modes of Thought*: "Nature and Thought", "Theories of the Bifurcation of Nature" "Nature Lifeless", "Nature Alive"  
Karen Barad, from *Meeting the Universe Halfway*: "Diffractions: Differences, Contingencies and Entanglements that Matter", "The Ontology of Knowing, the Intra-activity of Becoming, and the Ethics of Mattering"

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### **Feb 18-26 Reading Week**

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### **Conversion and Social critique**

**Week Seven: Th Mar 2:** Conversion, decoloniality and critiques of settler/white normalcy

**Readings:** Kyle Whyte: "Time as Kinship", "Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice", "Against Crisis Epistemology"

Lewis Gordon, from *Freedom, Justice, and Decolonization: "Re-Imagining Liberations"*, "Towards the Decolonization of Normative Life"

**Week Eight: Th Mar 9: Case Study: from Contract to Relation**

**Readings:** selections from Charles S. Mills, *The Racial Contract*  
 "What is a Treaty? On Contract and Mutual Aid" by Aaron Mills / Waabishki Ma'iingan  
 "Changing the Treaty Question" by Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark  
 Thomas Hobbes, selections from *Leviathan*

**Week Nine: Th Mar 16: Conversion and Society: Transindividuality and 'the' Human**

**Readings:** Gilbert Simondon, "Technical Mentality", "Collective Individuation and the Foundations of the Transindividual"  
 Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations"

**Conversion, Creation, and Time**

**Week Ten: Th Mar 23: Time and Memory**

**Readings:** Henri Bergson, selections from *Matter and Memory*  
 Alia Al-Saji, "Decolonizing Bergson: The Temporal Schema of the Open and the Closed"  
 Edouard Glissant, from *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, "Creolizations in the Caribbean and the Americas", "Culture and Identity", "The Chaos-World"

**Week Eleven: Th Mar 30: Time and History**

**Readings:** Jacob Taubes, from *Occidental Eschatology*, "On the Nature of Eschatology"  
 Dipesh Chakrabarty, from *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, "Four theses"  
 Keiji Nishitani, from *Religion and Nothingness*, "Śūnyatā and Time" "Śūnyatā and History"  
**Final Paper Proposals Due by Friday Mar. 31<sup>st</sup>.**

**Week Twelve: Th April 6: Faith, Trust, Creation**

Lewis Gordon, "Disaster, Ruin, and Permanent Catastrophe"  
 Isabelle Stengers, "Artifices"  
 Kitaro Nishida, "God and the World", "Knowledge and Love"

**Final Exam Period April 13 – 30**

**Student Workshop Conference Presentation Week of April 11-14<sup>th</sup> precise date TBA.**

**Student Final Research Papers Due during Finals at Date TBA**