PHIL 9010 - 01
Fall 2026
Wednesdays 3:10–5:30pm
Classroom: Furman 106

Dr. Matthew Congdon
matthew.congdon@vanderbilt.edu
Office Hours: by appointment
Office: Furman 015

Genealogies of Morals

Course Description

This class will explore variations on the method of genealogy in philosophy, particularly concerning the existence and historical development of values. We will read classical texts by Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, and Bernard Williams, as well as small selection of contemporary contributions by Miranda Fricker, Matthieu Queloz, Amia Srinivasan, and Frieder Vogelmann. The goal of the class will be to gain an appreciation of the varieties of genealogical method that have been proposed in a range of areas of philosophy, particularly ethics, epistemology, and social critique.

Course Texts

The following texts have been ordered to the Vanderbilt Bookstore. Please obtain a physical copy of each:

1. Friedrich Nietzsche. 1967. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. Vintage Books.
2. Michel Foucault. 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. Pantheon Books.
3. Bernard Williams. 2025. *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*. Princeton University Press.

Course Assignments

Reading Notes

One of your principal week-to-week commitments this semester will be in the form of response posts. Seven times during the semester you are required to write a short response to one of that week's assigned readings. You can post more than the required seven times for extra credit (see Specification Grading policy, below). You can post anytime during the week, but the week "closes" at 5 p.m. on Fridays. The structure for the Reading Notes each week is as follows:

- In three to four sentences, sum up a central point or idea that the author is trying to communicate, and how the text is structured so as to communicate it (as if you were writing a brief abstract of the text on behalf of the author).
- In two to three sentences: what was the most illuminating, helpful, or insightful part of the reading and why?
- In two to three sentences: what is one pressing question you have about the reading?

Final Paper

Your capstone project in this class will be a thesis-driven research paper on genealogy that engages primarily with one of the three books assigned in this class but also incorporates secondary literature.

One of the aims of this class is to encourage the idea that writing is an iterative process in which revising is essential. To accomplish this goal, rather than having a single final paper due at the end of the semester, you will be required to engage in an extended paper-writing process with the following three components:

1. *Initial Submission*. An initial version of your paper is due on **Nov. 18**. Note that this is *not* a "rough draft," but a proper paper (i.e., it should be proofread, include full citations, have a beginning, middle, and end, etc.). This version of your paper will be returned with comments by **Dec. 2**. The recommended length for this version of your paper is 2,500 to 3,000 words.
2. *Lightning Talk*. During one of our final two sessions, you will give a brief, five-minute spiel presenting your main thesis and argument to the class. A more detailed description of this assignment will be shared later in the semester.
3. *Revised Submission*. A revised version of your paper that takes into account my initial feedback is due on **Dec. 16**. Major revisions/additions should be indicated by either bold text or colored highlighting. The length of your paper can grow as part of the revisions process, but keep in mind that many conferences (like the APA) have a word limit of 3,000 words, so it may be useful for you to practice crafting a paper of that length.

Specification Grading

This course aims to inspire deep engagement with readings, assignments, and discussions without over-emphasizing grades. As a result, your work on major assignments will be evaluated as "meets expectations" or "does not yet meet expectations." Assignments will not receive letter grades (A/B/C/etc.), although you will receive a final letter grade at the end of the semester (see the table below).

The wording of the categories "meets expectations" and "does not yet meet expectations" is intentional. This course aims to cultivate a learning environment in which you feel comfortable taking risks and see learning as an incremental process. Expectations will be high because you are capable of meeting high expectations with appropriate support and effort.

Do not take "does not yet meet expectations" as a sign of failure. It's not equivalent to an "F"! It means that there is potential for you to take instructor feedback and revise your work, thereby meeting expectations at a school like Vanderbilt. Indeed, this is the point of all your classes—not to be perfect from the beginning but to engage in, even struggle with, the work of the course and to improve along the way.

By the end of the semester, you will have earned a final letter grade, which will be based on the following factors:

	A	**B**	**C**	**D**
Reading Notes	7 meet expectations	6 meet expectations	5 meet expectations	4 meet expectations
3 Final Paper Components *	3 meet expectations	2 meet expectations	1 meets expectations	None meet expectations
Participation	Meets expectations by the end of the semester	Does not meet expectations by the end of the semester	Does not meet expectations by the end of the semester	Does not meet expectations by the end of the semester

* Three Final Assignment Components = Final Paper Initial Submission, Final Paper Lightning Talk, Final Paper Revised Submission. All three assignments must be submitted/completed in order to receive a passing grade.

Additional Notes on Specification Grading Policy

1. Each grade bundle (the columns on the table above) is jointly required to receive a grade in that range. All specifications in a bundle must be met in order to earn that grade. In other words, the lowest level you complete in each category sets the ceiling for your grade. For example, if you earn 2 "meets expectations" out of 3 on your Final Paper Components, you cannot earn more than a B+ in the course, even if you have otherwise completed most of the A bundle.
2. Students may earn a "plus" on a letter grade by demonstrating exceptional growth, engagement, exceeding expectations on assignments, or showing special commitment to the course, including by writing extra Reading Notes or revising an essay that already received a "Meets Expectations." A student may earn a "minus" by consistently meeting only the basic requirements of coursework, by showing little evidence of growth over the semester, submitting late work, or repeated violations of classroom policies.

3. Participation includes being clearly prepared for and engaging in class discussions and seizing opportunities to learn, collaborate, and find support. It requires (but goes far beyond) attendance. Excessive absences (see the policy below) can result in failure in the course, regardless of performance in other grade categories. Participation will be evaluated at the end of each unit. Students who do not meet expectations on participation must meet with their instructor to discuss their participation goals and be re-evaluated later in the term. Particularly excellent or particularly poor engagement in the course can earn a plus or minus on the letter grade at the end of the semester.

Revisions Policy

As you can see from the grading policy above, your assignments will fall into one of two categories: "meets expectations" or "does not yet meet expectations." Any assignment that falls into the second category can (and should) be revised so that it meets expectations. The deadline for revising response posts is *one week* after receiving feedback. Revisions on the Final Paper are required for all students. If your Initial Submission received a "Does Not Yet Meet Expectations," it is possible for your revision to raise that initial assessment to a "Meets Expectations."

Classroom Policies

Attendance. Attendance is essential for doing well in this course. You may miss one class without question and without negatively affecting your final grade. After two absences, your contributions to class will be considered below "meets expectations," unless you have a legitimate, instructor-accepted excuse. Especially excessive absences can result in failure in the course, regardless of performance in other grade categories. Whether you are present or not, you are responsible for all materials covered in class.

Reading Assignments. You should have the reading assignment for each day finished by the time our class meeting begins. Always bring the assigned reading and your notes to class, since we will often spend significant portions of our discussion working through important passages, and it will be imperative that you have the material in front of you.

Food and Drink. Please do not eat in class. Drinks are fine.

Laptops, Phones, and other Electronic Devices. This semester we'll enjoy a *screen-free classroom*. The goal is to promote lively conversations in which we are fully present, confident that we have one another's attention, and are able spontaneously to react to each other and the reading in the moment.

In accordance with this policy, please: (i) bring physical copies of the texts to class; (ii) take notes either on paper or low-tech writing tablets that are grayscale and lack web-browsing, email,

messaging, etc.; and (iii) leave your laptops, tablets, and phones silenced in your bag (not in your pocket and not on the seminar table). If you have reason to request an exception to this policy, please let me know.

AI, Plagiarism, and the Honor Code. Turning to AI text-generation tools can all too easily degrade the quality of a student's learning experience in thinking through the material for themselves and creating their own work. It also tends to result in subpar writing, at least for the sort of writing you will be asked to do in this class. As such, use of generative AI is not permitted for the writing in this class. This prohibition includes not only the creation of paper drafts, but also its use in the planning stages of writing (such as brainstorming, constructing an outline, considering objections, searching for and incorporating secondary literature) through to the editing and revising stages (if you need a second set of eyes on your paper to go over your style, grammar, or spelling, swap drafts with a friend, a classmate, roommate, etc.).

Beyond that, all students are expected to complete the course requirements while fulfilling the Vanderbilt Honor System. Information on the Honor System can be found here: www.vanderbilt.edu/student_handbook/the-honor-system/. All cases of plagiarism or cheating will be handled through the Honor Council, and depending on severity may result in failure of the assignment, failure of the course, suspension, or expulsion.

Accommodations and Accessibility. I encourage any students with accommodations needs to submit requests for accommodations in accordance with the guidelines set out by Vanderbilt's Center for Student Access Services. Information, including the "Reasonable Accommodations Request Process," can be found here: https://www.vanderbilt.edu/student-access/.

Religious Holidays. Students who expect to miss classes or any other assignments as a consequence of their religious observance should provide us with notice of the dates of religious holidays on which they will be absent in the first two weeks of the semester.

Reading Schedule

Part I. Genealogy as Critique	
8/26	Amia Srinivasan, "Genealogy, Epistemology, and Worldmaking" (2019)
9/2	Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, Preface and First Essay (1887)
9/9	Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, Second Essay
9/16	Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, Third Essay
9/23	Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1971)
9/30	Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, pp. 1–73 (1976)
10/7	Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, pp. 75–159 (1976)
Part II. Genealogy as Vindication	
10/14	Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, Chap. 1–3 (2002/2025)
10/21	Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, Chap. 4–5
10/28	Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, Chap. 6–8
11/4	Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, Chap. 9–10
11/11	Miranda Fricker, "Williams' Philosophical Anthropology: A Humean and Nietzschean Synergy" (2026)

Part III. Writing and Rewriting	
11/18	Final Paper First Submission Due – No Class
11/25	Thanksgiving Break – No Class
12/2	Papers Returned with Comments Lightning Talks: Round 1 Matthieu Queloz, "Genealogy, Evaluation, and Engineering" (2022)
12/9	Lightning Talks: Round 2 Frieder Vogelmann, "Genealogy as a Philosophical Method: A Radical View" (forthcoming)