

PHILO 378 Philosophy of Biology:

Professor Justin Garson – Spring 2016

This course will introduce students to conceptual, ethical, social, and methodological questions concerning biology. Today, biology shapes our collective understanding of ourselves more than any other scientific discipline. It is not uncommon, for example, to read about the discovery of genes for complex psychological traits such as shyness, extroversion, intelligence, anxiety, or mental disorders such as schizophrenia. Evolutionary biologists, psychologists, and journalists have pointed to our evolutionary heritage to argue for, or against, our capacity for altruism, cooperation, or long-term fidelity. Discoveries in neuroscience frequently challenge traditional beliefs about the nature of consciousness, free will, and criminal responsibility. Biomedicine and psychiatry play a profound role in shaping our understanding of what kinds of bodies and minds are healthy or pathological, 'normal' or 'abnormal,' and these ideas influence health care legislation, criminal law, and psychiatric classification. We will address questions from four major areas of biology: evolutionary biology, molecular biology and genetics, neuroscience, and biomedicine and psychiatry. Given the impact of biology for understanding human nature and society, it is of paramount importance to have a clear grasp of some of the major philosophical issues that emerge from different biological disciplines.