

# Abstract Systems, Concrete Lives

## *Selected Readings in Modern and Contemporary Humanities*

**This** course examines key moments in how modern thinkers, shaped by a distinctive relation to nature, came to approach certain aspects of the human lived experience (e.g., collective life and its “ordering”) through an abstract posture influenced by modern science and its ideals. It then traces how this abstract posture was progressively questioned, opening the way to new modes of thought in the humanities attentive to concrete dimensions of the human condition. Rather than offering a comprehensive survey, the course adopts a *schematic and synoptic* orientation, through a series of selected readings and figures.

### Course Breakdown

#### A.) Part I: Setting the Scene

#	Session	Theme	Suggested Reading(s)
1.	Prelude	Establishing the central themes of the course, its guiding questions, and its learning modality.	None before the session.
2.	The Greeks	An exploration of how ancient Greek thinkers approached the course's core problem, providing a conceptual background for subsequent discussions.	Selections from: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Natural Science and Hermeneutics: The Concept of Nature in Ancient Philosophy,” in <i>Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy</i>, 1, 1985, pp. 39-52.</li><li>2. Leo Strauss, <i>Basic Principles of Classical Political Philosophy</i>. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.</li></ol>

**B.) Part II: The Modern Experience with Nature, the Waves of (Modern) Abstraction in the “Humanities,” and Its Critics!**

3.	Nature in the Modern Experience	An examination of how the modern experience of nature departs from the ancient one, setting the stage for new forms of thought.	<p>Short Selections from:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. René Descartes, Discourse on Method. Trans. John Veitch. Illinois: La Salle, 1899.</li> <li>2. Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy. Trans. John Veitch. Lancaster: Lancaster University, 1901.</li> <li>3. John Milton, The Prose of John Milton. New York: Anchor Books, 1967.</li> <li>4. Benjamin Farrington, The Philosophy of Francis Bacon. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964.</li> <li>5. Isaac Newton, Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy. Trans. Andrew Motte. New York: Daniel Adee, 1846.</li> </ol>
4.	Modern Abstraction in Thinking the Collective Human Life: The First Wave	An exploration of how modern abstraction in relation to our main themes takes its early form in the work of Thomas Hobbes.	<p>Selections from:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1929.</li> <li>2. Quentin Skinner, From Humanism to Hobbes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.</li> </ol>
5.	Modern Abstraction in Thinking the Collective Human Life: The Second Wave	An analysis of how abstraction becomes formalized through the rise of social sciences as a modern academic discipline.	<p>Selections from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “The Modern Social Sciences,” in: Cambridge History of</li> </ul>

			Sciences, eds. Theodore Porter and Dorothy Ross. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
6.	Crises in Abstraction	A discussion of how abstraction is critically problematized in Marxism and the phenomenological tradition.	<p>Selections from:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ian Angus, “The Problem of Form: Recovery of the Concrete in Contemporary Phenomenological Marxism,” pp. 32–52, in: Marxism and Phenomenology, eds. Bryan Smith and Richard Westerman. London: Lexington Books.</li> <li>2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Institutions and Passivity. Trans. Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2010.</li> </ol>

**C.) Part III: Selections from the “Concrete-Turn” in the Humanities**

7.	The Decision!	A discussion of the concrete approach to the “political” by Carl Schmitt.	<p>Selections from:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political: The Extended Version. Trans. George Schwab. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2007.</li> <li>2. Carl Schmitt, Political Theology. Trans. George Schwab. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005.</li> </ol>
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8.	Power	An exploration of Michel Foucault’s account of power alongside his later work on ethics and technologies of the self.	<p>Selections from:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge. Ed. Colin Gordon. Trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.</li> <li>2. Michel Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics. Ed. Michel Senellart. Trans. Burchell. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.</li> <li>3. Michel Foucault, Technologies of the Self. Eds. Huck Gutman, Patrick Hutton and Luther Martin. Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.</li> </ol>
9.	Feminist Interventions	An exploration of feminist interventions in the “humanities,” focusing on the work of Judith Butler.	<p>Selections from:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Theater Journal, Vol. 40(4), 1988, pp. 519–531.</li> <li>2. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble. New York and London: Routledge, 1999.</li> </ol>
10.	The Narrating Voice	An inquiry into narrative and voice as concrete modes beyond abstraction.	<p>Selections from:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Adriana Cavarero, Relating Narratives. Trans. Paul Kottman.</li> </ol>

			<p>London and New York: Routledge, 2000.</p> <p>2. Adriana Cavarero, <i>For More Than One Voice</i>. Trans. Paul Kottman. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.</p>
11.	The Aesthetic	A discussion of how art becomes a center for attention in the “concrete turn” on which the course has been focusing thus far.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in: <i>Illuminations</i>, Ed. Hanna Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.</li> </ul>
12.	Buffer Session	This is a session to be used either as a concluding session, or as an extra session, if the group decides to a.) expand on any of the themes, b.) add another theme, or c.) perform a certain class activity [e.g., a revision session, a writing session, watching a film, etc.]	To be Decided.

- Notes**

- The course is mainly *offline*.
- From session 9 onward, the topics, figures, and/or readings remain open to reconsideration if the group, as a whole, sees a reason to redirect or refine them.
- Readings are assigned as a working framework and may be updated where necessary.
- The course relies on sustained, active engagement from all participants.

- Bio**

Hisham Fahmy is the teaching fellow of philosophy and poetry in this year’s Bridge Program at CILAS. He holds a B.A. in Political Science and Economics from Cairo University (2016) and an M.A. in Arabic Philosophy and Logic from the American University in Cairo (2025). Alongside his teaching at CILAS and the American University in Cairo, he is a writer, translator, and public speaker. And in his spare time, you will most probably find him happiest by the sea!