

EMGT 1540-104. Cats: Why We Love Them

Jack W. Chen / Associate Professor of Chinese Literature

Meeting Time: M W 11:00–12:15 AM ONLINE

Office Hours: By appointment.

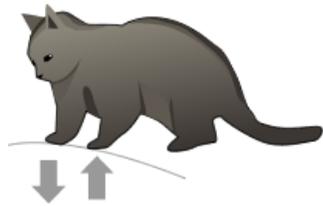
This is a truly unusual time for us all, and I want to say at the outset that this class is a safe space for you and that I will do my best to provide whatever support and advice you might need. The Engagements is a unique experience in your college years. It is an opportunity to think about the transformative power of intellectual work and to do so in a community of scholars and peers that is committed to reimagining the possibilities of the university. I'm glad that you are together with us, and I am looking forward to getting to know you.



How to tell if your

cat
is plotting to
kill you.

Kneading on you



You may think this is a sign of affection,
but your cat is actually checking your
internal organs for weaknesses.

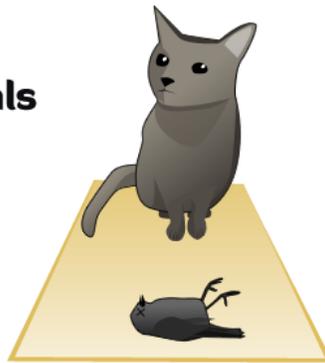


Staring Contests

If you get caught in a staring contest with your cat, do
not look away. Looking away will signal to your cat
that you are weak, and an attack is likely to follow.

Bringing you dead animals

This isn't a gift. It's a warning.



Excerpted from *The Oatmeal*: https://theoatmeal.com/comics/cat_kill

Course Description

Why do we love cats? Compared to other animals that share our lives, cats are contradictory creatures: seemingly independent yet needy, quick to temper yet affectionate, inexpressive yet adorable. It is not coincidence that many of us who live with cats are uncertain as to who is the owner and who is the pet. The complex relationship between human beings and cats poses a number of ethical questions that ask us to reconsider who is it that *we* are that we might love a creature of another species like a cat, what *love* means in this relationship, what our *responsibilities* are to the cat and the world in which the cat lives, and why we *privilege* certain animals (like cats) above others, creating bonds of kinship that we might not extend to fellow human beings.

This course will take up ethical topics relating to personhood, the human/animal relationship, posthuman morality, ecological and environmental concerns, and above all, the concepts of love, care, and friendship. While the focus of the class is on what might be considered philosophical issues of ethics and morality, we will approach these issues through a variety of media and forms, from philosophical essays to cat videos, from works of fiction to works of zooanthropology, from films to newspaper columns. Much of our work will begin with the question of how to think about the cat and what we owe to the cat (and to ourselves), and we will use these various media representations as springboards for our discussion.

Instructional Mode

This is an *online synchronous* course. We will be meeting via Zoom during our scheduled class times. I ask that you be fully present during our class meetings and not allow distractions to interfere with your participation. If you are comfortable using your camera, I do appreciate seeing your faces, since that allows for a greater sense of community for the class as a whole. However, I will *not* require that you turn your cameras on in general discussion. When we go into breakout groups, I do ask that you use your cameras so that everyone in your group gets to know one another better. I realize that for some of you, there will be issues with internet stability. Just shoot me a private chat message if you are encountering difficulties. If you think you may have difficulties with stable internet connections for the whole term, please let me know as soon as possible. All class meetings will be recorded so that anyone who is unable to attend a given class can make it up by watching the video and sending me comments or questions via email.

Learning Objectives

1. To be able to think, reason, and express oneself clearly (about cats) in moral argument.
2. To become aware of how our relationship to cats has a complex history that has changed over time, and what has informed our contemporary idea of the cat.
3. To reflect on the historical, geographical, and cultural differences that shape how our understanding of cats.

3. To respond to and take stock of the ethical dimensions of pet ownership and its impact on local ecologies and the environment.
4. To consider why we might choose to love a being of a different species and what love means in this context.
5. To learn to express these thoughts in writing, and to consider how our thoughts and beliefs might change as we learn more about a subject.

Assessment Criteria

| | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| 1. Participation | 20% |
| 2. Journal Writing | 40% |
| 3. Group Presentations | 10% |
| 4. Final Project | 20% |
| 5. Engagement Experience | 10% |

Participation is expected. This does not necessarily mean *attendance* in the synchronous class meetings time, though regular attendance is strongly encouraged. What we do in the Engagements is founded on your active participation, which may take the form of sustained thought in the journal reflections, considerate and deliberate discussion/chat comments during class, conversation during office hours, and emails to your instructor.

Journal writing is the heart of the class. You are expected to journal following each class session (the night of, if possible) and then to upload the journals either as in-line text or as a clear photo image to Collab Assignments **before 12 noon on the next day**. Journal grades are on a scale of 10 total points, with points assigned as follows:

- 2 points: Did the reflection engage with the class material under discussion?
- 2 points: Did the reflection demonstrate understanding of the class materials?
- 2 points: Did the reflection engage with/build upon the class discussion?
- 2 points: Did the reflection go beyond the instructor's comments?
- 2 points: Did the reflection offer an original, thoughtful contribution to the discussion?

There is no official make-up for these assignments, though students will be given every chance to complete the assignments during the 7 weeks.

I will ask you to lead class discussion in the form of **Group Presentations**. I am used to lecturing and talking, but I want to get to know **you** and I want you to get to know **each other**. I will assign students to groups and topics at the start of the term. Each group will be responsible for leading discussion for a given class. I will work with each group and help formulate questions for general discussion as needed.

The **Final Project** is meant to build out of your journal reflections and class discussion. This does not have to be a traditional paper! In fact, you are encouraged to think creatively about the form of your project and whether it is a group effort or an individual work. All that I ask is that the project engage with the work we've done over the term and that you contextualize the project with a short account that explains the problem/question you are addressing, how the project

reflects our classwork, and what you think was successful and what you thought could be improved about the execution of your project.

The **Engagement Experience** requires that you complete 3 experiences per EGMT quarter from a bucket list of intellectual opportunities from across the University and beyond. Complete one bucket list item from each category:

a. **Scholar Speak:** this includes forums, talks, and interactive discussions with scholars from the University and elsewhere. *You may choose your Scholar Speak bucket list item from [a calendar of options](#).*

b. **TA Talks:** this includes interactive discussions with upper-class undergraduate TAs (who are also your group guides). The talks address issues related to success at college such as how to choose a major, how to study for exams, and how to succeed in a seminar. *During your first Engagements course, in lieu of a TA Talk, you are required to watch the [Engagements Experience video](#). During quarters 2, 3, and 4, choose your TA Talk bucket list item from the [calendar of options](#).*

c. **Engaging Grounds:** this element remains consistent throughout the year. This year's Engaging Grounds bucket list item is our new [Enslaved African Americans at UVA Self-Guided Tour](#). You will return to the tour during each of your Engagements courses (yes, four times!), with the aim of understanding how the critical perspectives of each Engagements domain may be applied to one or more sites or stops on the tour.

Engaging Grounds instructions:

1. Download the ["Walking Tours of Grounds" app](#).
2. By week fifth of the quarter, complete the tour. This can be done virtually or in person. We strongly suggest that those who are able complete the tour in person.

Submitting Evidence of Participation

Demonstrate your participation in the EE by submitting the following four items via the appropriate Assignment in Collab:

a. **Ticket Stubs:** Ticket Stubs are photo evidence (a selfie or a screenshot) that you capture while completing/participating in your three Experiences. Therefore, you should submit three separate Ticket Stubs. Please also type the name and date of the experience into each Submission box in Assignments. For example, a Scholar Speak Ticket Stub might look like this:

Submission

Dr. Laura Goldblatt's talk on housing in Charlottesville, 9/26



b. Domain Reflection: By week 6 of each EGMT quarter, submit a 250-word “Domain Reflection” in response to the following prompt:

Having taken (or retaken) the Enslaved African Americans at UVA Self-Guided Tour, consider what stop/s or site/s strike you as particularly resonant with your current Engagement domain (**Ethical**). What material or ways of thinking in your current Engagement course intersect with the history, analysis, and experience distilled and sparked by the tour? How has your understanding of UVA (its spaces, its histories, its aspirations, its legacies) been enriched or transformed by the discussions you have had in your Engagement course this quarter? *In your response to one or both of these questions, please be sure to dig into one or two specific sites on Grounds included in the tour.* All items must be **correctly** uploaded to Assignments in Collab by **September 24, 2020**.

Required Readings/Films:

1. All readings will be available as PDFs on the Collab Course site and are linked below.
2. “The Cat Returns” and “Cats” will be available under “Announcements” on Collab.
3. A Netflix subscription is required for October to view “#cats_the_mewvie.” This is the one cost associated with the class; a basic subscription is \$8.99/month, and you will only need to have the subscription for **November**.

Academic Honesty

UVA has a strict code governing academic honesty, and you are expected to be familiar with the honor code: <https://honor.virginia.edu/plagiarism-supplement>. In essence, the work that you submit must be your own, and any language, ideas, or quotations from others must be properly cited and acknowledged. Academic honesty is what makes a community of scholars possible, and I take this very seriously. Please review the information from the link and feel free to ask me any questions.

Disability Policy

If you have a diagnosed disability, please contact the Student Disability Access Center (<https://www.studenthealth.virginia.edu/sdac/>) and arrange for any accommodations that you might need *as early as possible*. I will do everything that I can to accommodate different modes of learning, accessibility issues, and requests for support.

Schedule with Assignments

Meeting 1. Monday, October 12, 2020. Domestication and Wildness. PASSCODE: 8h464n.

URL: <https://virginia.zoom.us/j/97878331723?pwd=aGJacnlGRU91OGNwODZnRmVTQUZRZz09>

Reading: 1. [Carlos A. Driscoll, et al., “The Taming of the Cat,” *Scientific American* 300.6 \(Jun., 2009\): 68–75;](#) **2.** Excerpt from [Harriet Ritvo, “Species,” in *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*, 387–93;](#) **3.** Francie Lin, “Wild Thing: What It Means to Love a Cat,” <https://www.gazettenet.com/Home-Front-column-32430364>.

Discussion: We will talk about our cat experiences and then discuss what it means for a cat to be domesticated (if they ever have been domesticated), what domestication means and how it relates to ideas of species, and how we adapt our lives to cats.

Journal writing 1: Reflection on your cats or cats that you have loved to begin your journal, thinking in particular about the question of domestication and species difference. Discuss why you have chosen to take this class and say something about what you hope to get from it.

Meeting 2. Wednesday, October 14, 2020. Cats, Friendship, and Philosophy. PASSCODE: 1n542a.

URL: <https://virginia.zoom.us/j/94312840242?pwd=SlcrQWdMeEd2K2pBWDE3azFXOVVXUT09>

Reading: 1. [Gary Steiner, “What I Learned from a Cat that No Philosopher Could Teach Me,” in *What Philosophy Can Tell You about Your Cat*, 3–14;](#) **2.** [Diane Jeske, “The Friendship of Felines,” *What Philosophy Can Tell You about Your Cat*, 27–42;](#) **3.** Excerpt from [Agustín Fuentes and Natalie Porter, “Kinship,” in *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*, 187–89.](#)

Discussion: Why do we feel friendship and kinship with certain kinds of animals and not others? What does it mean to be friends with a cat or to treat a cat as part of one’s family? Is this a mutual relationship? Does my cat feel the same way about me? Is it still friendship or kinship if our relationship isn’t exactly symmetrical?

Journal writing 2: Consider the nature of family and friendship and make a cogent argument for whether relationships with cats (or other animals) constitutes family and/or friendship.

Meeting 3. Monday, October 19, 2020. The Ethics of Pets. PASSCODE: 4n244u.

URL: <https://virginia.zoom.us/j/94635709524?pwd=VDBONEt0WEhMbHM1MDICWUVNWWwrZz09>

Readings: 1. <https://theconversation.com/pets-is-it-ethical-to-keep-them-115647>.

2. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/aug/01/should-we-stop-keeping-pets-why-more-and-more-ethicists-say-yes>; 3. Evan Moreno-Davis, “Our Obligations to Domesticated Animals,” in *What Philosophy Can Tell You about Your Cat*, 111–20.

Discussion: We will consider what it means to own animals or keep pets, what the costs of keeping pets are, and whether pet ownership is morally justifiable. We will also consider whether we have special obligations toward domesticated animals as opposed to all animals, and how this relates back to ideas of kinship and friendship.

Journal writing 3: Reflection on the ethics of keeping cats as pets, what it means, morally, to have a pet, and what our obligations to our pets are.

Meeting 4. Wednesday, October 21, 2020. The Mind of a Cat. PASSCODE: 8q242g.

URL: <https://virginia.zoom.us/j/94543177109?pwd=Z3I4VDIvQnJCRGMyVUVWRzZpYXhKUT09>

Readings: 1. [Kristin Andrews, “Mind,” in *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*, 234–48](#); 2.

[Natsume Sōseki, *I Am a Cat*, chapter 1.](#)

Discussion: Do cats have minds? What does it mean for a cat to have a mind, and what does the concept of mind mean? We will examine the idea of mind through Sōseki’s literary representation of a cat mind, and consider to what extent it is an anthropocentric representation.

Journal writing 4: Reflection on the idea of mind as it relates to a cat. What is mind? How do we *evidence* cat minds? What does this say about our own understanding of human minds?

Final project: Please start thinking about your final project. We will talk a little about this during class (and if I forget, please remind me!!!).

Meeting 5. Monday, October 26, 2020. Sentient Beings and Persons. PASSCODE: 7w591r

Join URL: <https://virginia.zoom.us/j/99991119235?pwd=YTN5VTJjZ295dXhUQ0lZUIQ4NzFWQT09>

Readings: 1. [Gary Varner, “Sentience,” in *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*, 356–67](#); 2. [Colin Dayan, “Personhood,” in *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*, 267–77](#); 2. Excerpt from [Marc R.](#)

[Fellenz, *The Moral Menagerie: Philosophy and Animal Rights*, 47–49.](#)

Discussion: What is personhood? How is it different from sentience, and how are both concepts different from mind? Is personhood the same as selfhood? Should they be considered persons? We will discuss how sentience is used to underwrite moral standing, the nature of personhood in regard to cats, and how and whether animal-personhood differs from human concepts of person.

Journal writing 5: Reflection on the nature of sentience and personhood, how the two concepts differ from each other and from mind, and whether we should speak of cats as persons.

Meeting 6. Wednesday, October 28, 2020. Aesthetic Interlude I: [The Cat Returns \(directed by Hiroyuki Morita, 2002\)](#). PASSCODE: 1c328h.

URL: <https://virginia.zoom.us/j/97891212362?pwd=VW02dXVLR2JFYmV5SFV0dmE0aXZlQT09>

Film: [*The Cat Returns* \(directed by Hiroyuki Morita, 2002\).](#)

Reading: Miheala Mihailova, “Cats and Animation: A Brief Hisstory,”

https://blog.animationstudies.org/?p=3303&fbclid=IwAR32_BD4nUQBoQCtoM_EM-w7IVW8aVlsc-loXukMkbauZdHOXPHDOZeWM5Q.

Discussion: We will discuss the 2002 Studio Ghibli film *The Cat Returns*, focusing on the problems of anthropomorphism, interspecies understanding, catness, social hierarchy, and obligation that are at the center of the film.

Journal writing 6: Reflection on *The Cat Returns*, connecting it to any aspect of our previous discussions about ethics, mind, personhood, and obligation.

Final project: Be prepared to say something about your final project ideas during class. This will be very low stakes – we are just brainstorming together.

Meeting 7. Monday, November 2, 2020. Cats and Moral Rights. PASSCODE: 3w648q

Join URL: <https://virginia.zoom.us/j/95947966210?pwd=dXJ0SU9mZlE1ZzVCL0pBNTd2bUJJZz09>

Readings: 1. [Kristen Stilt, “Law,” in *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*, 197–208;](#) 2. [Doris Lessing, “An Old Woman and Her Cat,” in *Cat Stories*, 67–86.](#)

Discussion: What rights do cats have? How are these different from human rights? What is the status of the cat before the law? Does it differ from other animals and in what ways? And in terms of Lessing’s story, how do we make sense of our complicated reactions to the old woman and her cat’s fates?

Journal writing 7: Reflect on the role of the law in determining rights and personhood in society, and consider how those who exist in marginal spaces, be they human or animal, might fall in and out of moral community.

Meeting 8. Wednesday, November 4, 2020. Grief, Mourning, and Death. PASSCODE: 2n745m

Join URL: <https://virginia.zoom.us/j/96658524687?pwd=SHNmWlZxeS9BRFdaa2YxNEhpT2FjQT09>

Readings: 1. [Felicia Nimue Ackerman, “The Other Two Sides,” in *What Philosophy Can Tell You about Your Cat*, 89–100;](#) 2. [Jessica Pierce, “Animal Hospice,” chapter 5 from *The Last Walk: Reflections on Our Pets at the End of Their Lives*, 129–55.](#)

Discussion: Many of us have had some experience of a beloved pet’s death. Sometimes that death comes naturally, but sometimes we have to make a choice between prolonging a suffering pet’s life and ending it. What does death mean for an animal, and what does it mean for us, to have to make that choice? How do we mourn a beloved pet? How should we mourn?

Journal writing 8: This may be a personal and sensitive topic, but consider the act of mourning, what we owe to a pet at the end of its life, and what the moral choices are in prolonging life or ending it.

Meeting 9. Monday, November 9, 2020. Love and Care. PASSCODE: 1m390o

Join URL: <https://virginia.zoom.us/j/91464742652?pwd=MFhsME81dnFEbGU4T3ptaFA5OTRxdz09>

Reading: [Anca Gheaus, “The Role of Love in Animal Ethics,” *Hypatia* 27.3 \(Sum., 2012\): 583–600.](#)

Discussion: We’ve talked about various issues relating to moral obligation and rights, but we have not yet discussed the question of love and what it means, philosophically, to have love for a

cat. For our discussion, we will be joined by Dr. Elaine Bailey, Ph.D., a psychologist who works at Student Health and Wellness, and her daughter Julia, who has fostered numerous cats needing homes.

Journal writing 11: Reflect on the meaning of love in regard to a pet, how love differs (or not) from what one feels for another human being, and what love for cats teaches us about being human.

Meeting 10. Wednesday, November 11, 2020. Aesthetic Interlude II: [Cats \(directed by Tom Hooper, 2019\)](#). PASSCODE: 6y287g

Join URL: <https://virginia.zoom.us/j/97256308701?pwd=bTM4bC81SzcvSjczb01Udm1UOUxrUT09>

Discussion: We will discuss Tom Hooper's film adaptation of the musical *Cats* and consider how it represents cathood, whether it is an aesthetic failure, and if so, why. In preparation for this class, please find a **review of the film** (Youtube reviews are fine) and be prepared to discuss whether the review is fair or not, and what are the grounds on which the reviewer made her/his judgments.

Final project: By now, you should have a firm idea about your final project. Let's take some time during class to talk about what you will do and what issues or problems you foresee, if any. **All journal reflections are optional from this point on, so you have additional time for your final projects.**

All Engagements Experience work due today.

Meeting 11. Monday, November 16, 2020. Cats, Bioethics, Cloning. PASSCODE: 1n065s

URL: <https://virginia.zoom.us/j/97148128174?pwd=S3Q1Y1R0dnNLTG5WSWxRQjAwdWNCQT09>

Readings: 1. [Autumn Fiester, "Creating Fido's Twin: Can Pet Cloning Be Ethically Justified?"](#), *Hastings Center Report* (Jul.-Aug., 2005): 34–39; 2. [Bertha Alvarez Manninen, "Can Whiskers Have More than Nine Lives? Feline and Human Cloning,"](#) in *What Philosophy Can Tell You about Your Cat*, 191–204.

Discussion: If you could clone your cat, would you? What are the arguments for and against pet cloning? If there was no physical suffering or economic harm in the cloning of a cat, could it be justified? Is a clone the same as the original animal, and in what ways does it differ?

Meeting 12. Wednesday, November 18, 2020. Cats and Ecology. PASSCODE: 2g786o

Join URL: <https://virginia.zoom.us/j/97304092646?pwd=eXg0U3A2cUFxandQN1BRZjR2cCtpQT09>

Readings: 1. Alley Cat Allies, "Why Trap-Neuter-Return Feral Cats? The Case for TNR," <https://www.alleycat.org/resources/why-trap-neuter-return-feral-cats-the-case-for-tnr/>. 2. [Travis Longcore, Catherine Rich, and Lauren M. Sullivan, "Critical Assessment of Claims regarding Management of Feral Cats by Trap-Neuter-Return,"](#) *Conservation Biology* 23.4 (Aug., 2009): 887–94; 3. [Peter P. Marra and Chris Santella, "A Landscape with Fewer Free-Ranging Cats,"](#) chapter 8 in *Cat Wars: The Devastating Consequences of a Cuddly Killer*, 144–67.

Discussion: This will be a difficult conversation because it pits a beloved animal against the broader concerns of ecological protection. How do we adjudicate between cats and the environment? What has priority, cats who have been abandoned, or the songbirds who are harmed? Are the arguments for and against TNR persuasive?

Meeting 13. Monday, November 23, 2020. Cats and the Internet. PASSCODE: 5j694j

Join URL: <https://virginia.zoom.us/j/99237694501?pwd=MGlwRkdpa25Oa1BSbEpqaG5LWkprZz09>

Film: “#cats_the_mewvie” (directed by Michael Margolis, 2020). NETFLIX.

Discussion: We will consider cats in this contemporary moment with particular reference to how Internet culture has transformed our understanding of the cat. We will address the ethics of monetizing cats, the spread of cuteness as a new aesthetic category, and whether or not the Internet is actually made of cats.

Final Projects are due on Wednesday, November 25. If your project is in a physical medium, take photos of it and send it to me along with any supporting documentation.

About me: we currently have four cats, a hedgehog, and a box turtle. **Jasper** is the oldest, an 18 year-old ginger tom that my wife rescued from the streets of Taipei (our first Taiwanese street cat, **Mieke**, died of old age before we moved to Charlottesville). Jasper YELLS a lot; you will probably hear him in the background from time to time. Four-year old **Tamsin** was adopted in Los Angeles and lost her sister **Abigail** to FIP (Feline Infectious Peritonitis) when Abby was two. She is at least part Norwegian Forest Cat and will need to be cuddled every so often during class. She is big, beautiful, and fluffy; this is why I’m covered in fur all the time. You will probably not see **Maira**, the smartest cat in the world, a two-year old torbie who came to us from Louisa County. In her spare time, she enjoys hunting and accidentally killing lizards. Our newest cat is **Theodora**, who spent 4 years as a stray and 2 years in the CSPCA shelter. It took her almost two years to learn to trust us, and she has turned out to be the lappiest of the lap cats. Theo reminds us of Amy Klobuchar for some reason. Our hedgeie is named **Stan Pawprinka**, and we adopted him after our first hedgeie, **Roger Hedgerer**, died of cancer. We only name hedgehogs after Swiss tennis players. Our most recent member of the household is **Herbert**, a baby box turtle who wandered into our garage and looked pretty much like he had given up on life. We are going to take care of Herbert until April 2021, when we hope to release him back to the wild. Also, Herbert may be Herberta. We’re not sure. My wife would like a dog, but the household votes are currently against her.



Moira and Theodora



Jasper and Stan Pawprinka



Tamsin



Herbert (Herberta?)