

ESRI 2024:
“Living in Groundlessness with Responsibility”

This year marks the second year in a three-year thematic arc, “Caring for Life,” which aims to foreground caring as an active, processual, and participative feature of being sentient in a wildly complex and rapidly evolving ecosystem. In year 1 (2023), “*Sentience and Responsibility in Critical Times*,” we began by questioning the basic terms of inquiry: What is sentience? How do we understand responsibility in the widest possible sense? How might responsibility at once emerge from sentience and tend toward sentience?

This year, we will interrogate more closely the notion of **groundlessness** in all its conceptual and existential density, carefully reflecting on the **phenomenology** of ground/lessness, how **meaning** arises from groundlessness, and how groundlessness intimately informs our **sense of ethics and being-in-the-world**. The week will loosely follow an arc of investigation, allowing faculty and participants to:

- reflect together on the **basic terms of inquiry** (what exactly does one mean by ground and groundlessness?);
- consider the **import and valence of groundlessness** within and across several academic disciplines (philosophy, neuroscience, quantum physics, psychology, anthropology, and more);
- explore the **possibility of a ‘middle path’** that considers wisdom and compassion as two sides of the same coin;
- and find ways of **integrating the experience of groundlessness** — or the realisation of it — in our everyday lives and work.

Our collective exploration will be guided by some **key generative questions** associated with each day of the program:

What might the term ‘groundlessness’ evoke from scientific, philosophical, and contemplative perspectives? How can we fruitfully address the conundrum of what the authors of *The Embodied Mind* called “**the Cartesian anxiety**”? Are there dangers in considering groundlessness as ‘how things actually are’? What do we mean by **truth and faith** in a groundless world? How have we come to see the **self and world as grounded**?

What is the **neuro-phenomenology of ground/lessness**? How might we compare different groundless experiences under scientific investigation (e.g. meditation-induced ‘selflessness’ and psychedelic-induced ‘ego-dissolution’)? How does groundlessness change the nature of scientific research? What **different experimental paradigms** become possible in this light?

How can **contemplative practice foster and/or reveal groundlessness**, and what are the implications for the (social, narrative, embodied) self? What does it actually mean

to experience groundlessness? How do we care for ourselves within these explorations? What does it look like to **pursue a life of meaning** against the backdrop of groundlessness?

Is a **'middle path'** possible in a world that seems beholden to the extremes of dogmatism and nihilism? How do scientific, philosophical, and contemplative perspectives help us appreciate the **relationship between groundlessness and compassion**? How might we cast a new light on altered or non-ordinary states of consciousness, thereby depathologizing them?

How does the **ethical dimension of groundlessness** permeate different fields of human activity? If we take groundlessness seriously, what are the implications for our everyday life? If we reflect on groundlessness through the prism of **open space** and the **space in-between**, what might this imply for our interactions with one another, in contexts such as medicine, psychotherapy, education, anthropology, and beyond?