What does it mean that earth is not the center of the universe? That our universe is 14 billion years old? That the environment and its inhabitants are constantly changing? How can we care?

According to Dr. de Fontaine, professor emeritus in materials sciences at UC Berkeley, the complexity and inconceivable age person knows about any field of science is pure rabbidity, and that, he says, is dangerous. It leads to big mistakes because we can’t afford to make. None of us can know everything but we can know what matters and what doesn’t. We can know how to find out and we can know what questions to ask.

In his new UC Berkeley Lifelong Learning Institute course, “Scientific Revolution and Evolution,” beginning Jan. 26 at Lafayette Library and Learning Center, participants examine the changing thinking in fields as far-ranging as cosmology and evolutionary biology with the goal of understanding how any of it relates to problems facing human survival.

“What do new technologies like gene splicing mean to the human race?” Dr. de Fontaine asks. “And does knowing about it matter?”

“What does it mean that our universe is 14 billion years old? That the environment and its inhabitants are constantly changing? Why should it matter? Why should we be interested?”

Dr. de Fontaine’s lectures grew out of that fascination. He met Linhart at a college club in Paris and convinced him to collaborate. This will be their second OLLI course.

In addition to teaching, de Fontaine is writing a book on thermodynamics. He travels to Belgium each year to visit family and attend the Queen Elizabeth competition in classical music.

New OLLI Classes in Lafayette

Four new six-week courses from UC Berkeley’s Osher Lifelong Learning Institute begin Jan. 26 at Lafayette Library and Learning Center. There will be a free Info Session with faculty from 3 to 4:30 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 7 in the Library’s Community Room.

Short Stories of Franco Kafka analyzes and interprets the horrific and comic short stories of Franz Kafka, one of the most enigmatic writers of his time. Taught by poet and UC Berkeley professor John Campion. Tuesdays from 10 a.m. to noon.

How the Brain Works and When It Doesn’t, Part 2 describes how nerve cells and neural networks affect both normal and damaged brain function and how new technologies are improving our understanding of the brain. No prerequisite. Taught by Peter Kalb, professor emeritus in anatomy at UCSF. Thursdays from 10 a.m. to noon.

Italy and Ideas looks at great literary works from Synrapeze, Florence, Venice, Milan, and Naples to understand their rich history and heritage as well as the cultural formation of individual Italians. Taught by author playwright and professor Beverly Allen. Thursdays from 1 to 3 p.m.

For more information, visit olli.berkeley.edu or call (510) 642-9934.