

PHIL 110: Human Nature
Instructor: Devin Fitzpatrick
Fall 2017, MTWR, 106 FR from 9-9:50 AM
Office hours: Thursdays from 10-11:50 AM
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Course Description

Who are we, what is good for us, and how do we know? This course is an introduction to philosophical theories of human nature and its descriptive and normative dimensions. The main themes of the course will concern the descriptive limits of the human species and the normative question of whether our values and principles must be based in some idea of human nature. We will begin with an overview of a history of philosophical views on human nature and transition to scientific debates on the validity of the concept. From there, we will consider challenges to the normative relevance of human nature and ask: If our values cannot be justified by appeal to our nature, then what justifies our values?

This is a highly participation-focused course with challenging required reading assignments. Please read the Course Requirements closely, particularly the section on Participation.

Course Objectives

In this course, students will:

- 1) Learn in detail about important philosophical and scientific theories of human nature in both their descriptive and normative dimensions.
- 2) Learn to apply these theories to their own lives through thoughtful reflection and rigorous argumentation, criticism, and deliberation.
- 3) Convey their comprehension of the material through argumentative essays.
- 4) Discuss challenging and sometimes volatile questions in a charitable, generous, and fair-minded manner.

Course Requirements

Reading

No books will be required for purchase for this class. All readings will be posted on Canvas in PDF form or will be linked to as online articles.

Writing

You will be required to write **three 1,250-word essays**, one at the conclusion of each section of the course. In your essays, you will be expected to develop an argument that clearly asserts a thesis, considers possible objections, and is attentive to the texts and our discussions in class. I will be writing thorough and constructive comments for your first two essays, and for your third essay if you request them.

Attendance

I will be taking attendance every morning in class. Full attendance each week is worth 1% of your grade, for a total of 10%. However, **for every unexcused absence beyond three, your total grade drops by a partial letter grade.** This means that if you have B in the class and you miss four lectures, you will automatically have a B-, and if you miss five, you will automatically have a C+. I will excuse absences for medical emergencies if I am contacted in advance.

Participation

Participation is a significant part of your grade in this class, so please read this section carefully. We have four classes each week. You may earn 1 participation point a day and up to 2 participation points each week, for a total of 20% of your grade over the term. To earn a participation point, you must raise your hand and contribute to the conversation, whether by answering a question or asking one of your own. I will still grant participation points for wrong answers if they are given in good faith (as in, it was a genuinely hard question and you tried).

In sum: You must ask or answer at least one question in two out of the four classes each week. To make time for everyone to do this, I will structure my lectures around questions to you. I will begin by asking questions about what we learned in the last class, and I will proceed by asking you questions about the reading for that day, guiding us to new insights. While I will give context, I will not stand there and simply tell you about what you read. **If it's obvious you didn't do the reading, you're not going to get participation points, and that's 20% of your grade, so do the reading!** Review your reading notes before class starts so that you're ready.

There is an alternative for those of you uncomfortable speaking up in class. You may attend my office hours on Thursday or make an appointment with me for at least 10 minutes of conversation about philosophy to earn 1 participation point for that week. You may still only earn a maximum of 2 points per week. This means that if you come to my office hours, you only need to speak up once in class per week to earn full participation credit, but you cannot get full credit with no speaking up at all.

Grading

- Participation: 20%
- Attendance: 10%
- First Essay: 15%
- Second Essay: 25%
- Third Essay: 30%

Academic dishonesty (e.g. cheating, plagiarism) is strictly prohibited and may result in severe penalties. Definitions, procedures, and penalties for such cases are spelled out on the UO website for Academic Misconduct.

Course Schedule

Week 1

Monday, September 25: Johnson, “The WEIRD Evolution of Human Psychology,” found online at <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/primate-diaries/the-weird-evolution-of-human-psychology/>. *Recommended:* Heinrich et al., “The weirdest people in the world?”

Tuesday, September 26: Lau, “Cognitive Biases”

Wednesday, September 27: James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” found online at <https://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/jcertain.html>

Thursday, September 28: Hull, “On Human Nature”

Week 2

Monday, October 2: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, Chapters 1-7

Tuesday, October 3: Nussbaum, “Human Functioning & Social Justice: A Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism,” 214-223

Wednesday, October 4: Nussbaum continued, 229-242

Thursday, October 5: McInerney, “Aquinas’s moral theory,” and Harris, “The Ethics of Natural Law”

Week 3

Monday, October 9: Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditations 1 and 2

Tuesday, October 10: Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Introduction, Chapters XIII-XIV, XVII (7-8, 76-88, 103-106)

Wednesday, October 11: Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, 37-41, 211-215, 357-363

Thursday, October 12: Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 109-114, 126-148

Week 4

Monday, October 16: Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” and Buchanan, “Human Nature and the Natural,” 1-7

Tuesday, October 17: Buchanan continued, 8-21

Wednesday, October 18: Singer, “Speciesism and Moral Status”

Thursday, October 19: In-class philosophical writing workshop
First essay due Sunday, October 22 at 5 PM

Week 5

Monday, October 23: Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 240-245, 287-291

Tuesday, October 24: Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, from Part I Chapter II, “Natural Selection”

Wednesday, October 25: Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, Introduction, Part I Section I, found online at https://brocku.ca/MeadProject/Dewey/Dewey_1922/Dewey1922_toc.html

Thursday, October 26: Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, Part II Section III

Week 6

Monday, October 30: Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, Introduction

Tuesday, October 31: Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, Chapter 1

Wednesday, November 1: Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Section 15

Thursday, November 2: Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Introduction

Week 7

Monday, November 6: Foucault, "The Perverse Implantation," *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*

Tuesday, November 7: Hacking, "Making Up People"

Wednesday, November 8: Chomsky, "Language and the Human Mind"

Thursday, November 9: Foucault & Chomsky, *Human Nature: Justice vs Power*, 1-14, 36-45

Second essay due Sunday, November 12 at 5 PM

Week 8

Monday, November 13: Bracken, "Essence, Accident, Race"

Tuesday, November 14: Haslanger, "A Social Constructionist Analysis of Race"

Wednesday, November 15: Oyama, "Essentialism, Women, & War"

Thursday, November 16: Rose et al., *Not in Our Genes*, Chapter 2: "The Politics of Biological Determinism"

Week 9

Monday, November 20: Pinker, "Why Nature & Nurture Won't Go Away"

Tuesday, November 21: Rorty, "Philosophy-Envy"

Wednesday, November 22: Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, Chapter 16: "Politics"

Thursday, November 23: Thanksgiving Vacation

Extra Credit: Short response to Hirsch, "Rorty and the Priority of Democracy"

Week 10

Monday, November 27: Washington & Kelly, "Who's Responsible for This?" 1-11

Tuesday, November 28: Washington & Kelly, 11-26

Wednesday, November 29: Microbes and Human Nature

Thursday, November 30: Review

Third essay due Sunday, December 3 at 5 PM