

PHL244 H5S - HUMAN NATURE (Spring 2009)

Course Number: PHLB16H3S
Tue & Thu 3-4:30pm in NE 160

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Office Hours: Tue. 1-3pm & by appointment

Course Description and Objectives

What is human nature? What makes humans different from animals? Are there uniquely human characteristics? And if so, are they universal and belong to us innately or are they culture-relative and dependent on our upbringing? This course will provide a philosophical analysis of several classical responses to these questions and will reveal their mythological character. We will read accounts of human nature by ancient sources and modern philosophers, and consider contemporary criticism of these positions. In the second part of the course, we will examine the significance of the theory of evolution for our conception of human nature, and we will learn some lessons from evolution concerning the nature of our emotions. Finally, we will deal with the contemporary debate between situationism and character-based theories regarding the existence of character traits.

The course will be organized into two relatively independent sections: the first will focus on classical myths concerning (a) the origins of human beings and (b) the relationship between nature and civilization; and the second part of the course will deal with two contemporary debates on human nature, namely, the debate on the universality of human emotions and the debate on the existence of character.

Requirements and Grading

Participation & Improvement (10%). Class participation includes active involvement in class discussion and several in-class written short quizzes or comments on a topic discussed during that class.

Mid-Term Examination, Feb 12 (25%). The exams will include short-answer and essay questions. Students will be expected to demonstrate clear understanding of the central concepts, distinctions, theses, and arguments discussed in class.

Course Paper, Mar 19 (30%). The course paper will be a 6-7 page paper. Students will have a choice among several assigned topics.

Final Examination (two hours), Date TBA (35%).

Course outline

Introduction

1. Introduction. Why is the question about human nature important for us?

Myths Concerning Human Nature: Ancient and Modern

2. **Ancient Myths of the Origin of Human Beings I. Lessons from the *Genesis*.**
Readings: *Genesis* (selections); Augustine, *The City of God* (selec. from book 14) Velleman, D. 'The Genesis of Shame' (selec., from *Self to Self*, ch. 3, §§1-4, pp. 45-52).
3. **Ancient Myths of the Origin of Human Beings II. Lessons from Plato's *Protagoras*.**
Readings: Plato, *Protagoras* (selec.: Myth of Prometheus).
4. **Ancient Myths of the Origin of Civilization. Introduction to the nature vs. convention debate: Callicles, Antiphon and the Cynics.**
Readings: Plato, *Gorgias* (selec.), Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (selec. Bk. 6).
5. **Modern Myths concerning Human Nature and Civilization I. Pessimistic views of the human condition and the state of nature: Machiavelli and Hobbes.**
Readings: Machiavelli, *The Prince* (selections); Hobbes, *Leviathan* (selections).
6. **Modern Myths concerning Human Nature and Civilization II. Optimistic views of the human condition and the state of nature: Butler, Hume, and Rousseau.**
Readings: Butler, *Sermons 1-3*; Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* (selections); Rousseau, *Second Discourse* (selections).
7. **Modern Myths concerning Human Nature and Civilization III. Two Concepts of Freedom: Berlin.**
Readings: Berlin, I. *Two Concepts of Freedom*.

* **Midterm exam** *

Debate on the Universality of Human Emotions

8. **Darwin: Theory of Evolution and the Expression of Emotions in Humans.**
Readings: Darwin, Ch. *The Origin of Species* (ch. 7) & *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (ch. 14: 'Concluding remarks and summary').
9. **The Infinite Malleability of Human Emotions. 'Blank Slate' Views and Social Constructionism: Behaviorism and Cultural Anthropology.**

Readings: , P. 'Afterword' to *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*; Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (selec.)

10. Universal Traits in Human Emotions. Evolutionary Psychology and Ekman's Affect Programs.

Readings: Ekman Griffiths, P. 'The Psychoevolutionary Approach to Emotion' (*What Emotions Really Are*, ch. 3)

11. The Middle Path between Affect Programs and Blank Slate Views. Paradigm scenarios.

Readings: DeSousa, R. *The Rationality of Emotion*, Ch.7: 'Paradigm Scenarios'.

***** Course paper due*****

Debate on the Existence of Character

12. Aristotle on Character. The notion of 'second nature'.

Readings: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2, 1-6.

13. Experiments in Social Psychology. Milgram's experiments about obedience, Zimbardo's Stanford Prison, and the 'Good Samaritan' experiment.

Readings: Harman, G. 'Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology' (1st part); Milgram, S. 'The Perils of Obedience'; Zimbardo, P.G. 'A Pirandellian Prison'; Darley & Batson, 'From Jerusalem to Jericho'.

14. The Challenge against the Existence of Character: Harman.

Readings: Harman, G. 'Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology' (2nd part), Doris, 'Persons, Situations and Virtue Ethics'.

15. Responses to Situationism: Sreenivasan, Kamtekar.

Readings: Sreenivasan, G. 'Errors about Errors: Virtue Theory and Trait Attribution'; Kamtekar, R. 'Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character.'

16. Final remarks.

Required Texts

All the texts required for the course will be made available online through links from the extended syllabus on the course webpage.

General Policies

1. **Email:** The University requires that you use your UT email account in all correspondence with me. I check email daily during the week and I am typically able to reply within 48 (often 24) hours.
Unfortunately, substantive questions about the contents of the readings or lectures cannot be answered on email at length, but I am more than happy to talk about them with you during my office hours.
2. **Submission of Papers:** Your papers must be submitted in hard copy at the beginning of class on their due date. You can hand hard copies of your papers in to me directly or you can drop them off in the course box.
3. **Late Papers:** All excuses for late papers must be properly documented by an appropriate authority (e.g., a medical note from a doctor, a registrar's letter, etc.). Late papers without a properly documented excuse will be penalized 2% per day, including weekends.
4. **Extensions:** In order to be granted an extension, you must provide a documented excuse (same as above). All extensions must be negotiated *before* the deadline.
5. **Missed Test or Exam:** The only excuse for missing the exam is illness or emergency. These must be properly documented.
6. **Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty:** All work submitted must be your original work. Any idea that is not your own, or that you have submitted or are submitting for credit in another context must be fully cited. If you are not sure, err on the side of caution. Failure to fully cite your sources will result in a "0" on your assignment or other disciplinary action.

For more information on what constitutes academic misconduct (ex. cheating, plagiarism) and what disciplinary measures may be imposed, please read: see: <http://www.artsandscience.utoronto.ca/ofr/calendar/rules.htm#behaviour>

7. **Classroom Environment:** Vigorous and heated debate is part of philosophy, as is a professional and respectful attitude towards others. You should aim for both.