

## **PHI 197: Human Nature**

**Instructor: Christopher Bousquet, [crbousqu@syr.edu](mailto:crbousqu@syr.edu)**

**Time: T/Th 11- 12:20 pm**

**Office Hours:**

### **Course Goals:**

- This course should help you better understand yourself, the world around you, and your place in it. I hope that the course will be practical, enabling you to live a happier, more fulfilling, and more attuned life. To this end, we'll be reading about and discussing a wide range of topics: what humans are "naturally" like, which environments are best for us, how we should understand ourselves as individuals and as members of particular genders and races, what love is and where to find it, whether we should fear death, and how to find meaning in life. You'll also learn to apply the philosophical method to these topics, distinguishing between better and worse theories, analyzing arguments, and offering arguments of your own.

### **Grading:**

#### **Participation: 15%**

- This class will be heavily discussion-oriented, so I expect students to attend every session (barring excused absences) and contribute to conversation by asking/answering questions, making comments, and talking in small groups. This is a critical (perhaps the most critical) part of what it is to "do philosophy."
- I will also ask you to submit a short response about the week's reading each Wednesday before 3 pm on Blackboard. I'll post a question each Friday, to which you should respond in 200-250 words by the following Wednesday. Your response should seek to answer the question, but might also ask questions about the reading or challenge the author's argument. I'll use your responses to orient conversation on Thursday.

#### **1-page argument reconstruction: 10% due Friday September 23 before midnight**

- In this assignment, I'll ask you to summarize an argument from one of the articles we've read as clearly and concisely as possible.

#### **2-page objection assignment: 15% due Friday October 14 before midnight**

- This assignment will ask you to challenge at least one premise in one of the arguments we've encountered in our readings, explaining why you think this premise is wrong.

#### **Midterm: 15% October 27 in class**

#### **Essay Outline: 10% due Friday November 11 before midnight**

- Your outline will include a clear statement of your thesis, an explanation of at least three points you will make in favor of your thesis, and the identification of one objection an opponent might offer and how you will respond to this objection.

#### **Essay (4-5 pages): 20% due Friday December 2 before midnight**

- Your essay will reflect your considered opinion on some issue that we've covered in class, arguing in favor or against some view. Building on your outline, you will offer a clear thesis statement and justify it with at least three arguments that draw upon evidence we've encountered in class or that you've found on your own. You will also consider and respond to at least one argument against your view. The idea is to engage with what you have read and develop your own take.

**Final: 15% Date: Thursday, December 15 at 3pm**

### **Academic Integrity:**

Don't plagiarize! It's always painfully obvious to professors when someone does so. I also really wasn't in college that long ago, so I know all the tricks. Depending on the severity of the offense, consequences can range from a zero on an assignment to removal and failure of the course. If you're stressing for time or confused about an assignment, reach out to me instead!

### **Student Resources:**

#### **Center for Learning and Student Success (CLASS)**

Free, small-group and one-on-one tutoring and workshops.

Address: 014 Bird Library

Phone: 315.443.2005

#### **Writing Center**

Face-to-face appointments as well as online sessions to help students with writing projects.

Address: 101 H.B. Crouse Hall

Phone: 315.443.5289

Online Appointments: <https://syr.mywconline.com/>

#### **Counseling Center**

Variety of services to help with mental health, substance abuse, sexual assault/relationship violence and more.

Address: Barnes Center at The Arch, 150 Sims Drive

Phone: 315.443.8000

### **Course Schedule:**

#### **Week 1:**

- Tuesday, August 30: Introduction and syllabus, no reading
- Thursday, September 1: Philosophy Pages, "[Arguments and Inference](#)"

Is human nature good or evil?

#### **Week 2: Human Nature is "Good"**

- Tuesday, September 6: Ward, "Scientists Probe Human Nature--and Discover We Are Good, After All"

- Thursday, September 8: Smith, “As Babies, We Knew Morality”

**Week 3:** Human Nature is “Evil”

- Tuesday, September 13: Xunzi, “Human Nature is Evil” (Book 23)
- Thursday, September 15: Movie, *There Will Be Blood*

**Week 4:** How Good Must We Be?

- Tuesday, September 20: Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”
- Thursday, September 22: Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints”: p. 419-427, p. 435- 439

**\*Friday, September 23: One page argument reconstruction due\***

Humans in the contemporary world

**Week 5:** Things are better now than ever

- Tuesday, September 27: Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Introduction and Ch. 13
- Thursday, September 29: Taylor, “This is the best time in human history. We're designed to think otherwise”

**Week 6:** Things are worse now than ever

- Tuesday, October 4: Rousseau, *Social Contract*; *Second Discourse*, Exordium, Part I, and Note XV
- Thursday, October 6: Thompson, “How Civilization Broke Our Brains”

Identity

**Week 7:** Personal Identity

- Tuesday, October 11: Locke “The Prince and The Cobbler”
- Thursday, October 13: Reid “Of Mr. Locke’s Account of Personal Identity”

**\*Friday, October 14: Two page objections assignment due\***

**Week 8:** The Self and Robots

- Tuesday, October 18: Hume “The Self;” Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 198-201
- Thursday, October 20: Koch, “Will Machines Ever Become Conscious?” and Vaidy, “If a robot is conscious, is it OK to turn it off? The moral implications of building true AIs,”

**Week 9:** Robots cont.

- Tuesday, October 25: Movie: *Ex Machina*
- Thursday, October 27: **\*Midterm in class\***

**Week 10:** Gender identity

- Tuesday, November 1: Beauvoir, “Second Sex” excerpts
- Thursday, November 3: Fausto Sterling, “Sexing the Body” excerpts

**Week 11:** Racial identity

- Tuesday, November 8: Spencer, “Racial realism”
- Thursday, November 10: Appiah, “Against Races”

**\*Friday, November 11: Essay Outline Due\***

The big stuff: Love, death, and meaning

**Week 12: Love**

- Tuesday, November 15: Wolf, “The Importance of Love”
- Thursday, November 17: Vernon, “What is love?”

**\*Thanksgiving Break: No Class November 20-27\***

**Week 13: Death**

- Tuesday, November 29: Epicureanism
  - o Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 124-127
  - o Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* II
  - o Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Book III, 830-911
- Thursday, December 1: Deprivationism
  - o Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Book III, 912-1094

**\*Friday, December 2: Essay due\***

**Week 14: Meaning and Transcendence**

- Tuesday, December 6: Kelly and Dreyfus, *All Things Shining* (excerpts)
- Thursday, December 8: Shapshay “At Once Tiny and Huge: What is This Feeling We Call ‘Sublime’”

**\*Final Exam: Thursday, December 15 at 3pm\***