

PHI 197: Human Nature

Spring 2026

Heroy 113

MW 12:45 – 2:05

Instructor: James Lee

Office Hours: Use any of the contact info below if you have questions or need to meet.

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Textbook

There is no required textbook for this class. All supplemental readings and videos will be available on Blackboard

What is this class about?

This class is about doing philosophy. You will learn to do what philosophers do and apply these skills to various areas both in philosophy and in ordinary life. You'll learn the following 3 skills:

1. Conceptual Analysis
2. Philosophical Explanation
3. Thought Experiments

Once you learn these skills, you will apply these skills to questions about human nature. Some central questions about human nature include the following:

- What does it mean to be a human being?
- Are human beings fundamentally different from everything else in the universe?
- Why do human beings the way that they are? Why do they do what they do?

Course Requirements

(FYI There is NO final exam in this class.)

1. Attendance: 50%

Attendance will be taken at the beginning of class.

2. Exams 30%

There will be three exams. Each exam is graded out of 10 points is worth 10% of your grade. Each exam will assess each of the three skills listed above. Exam dates are tentatively as follows:

EXAM 1: Feb 11

EXAM 2: Mar 18

EXAM 3: Apr 27

3. Dialogue Assignment: 20%

An email dialogue assignment is a conversation that I have with you over email. You start by answering the prompt given below, and I give you follow up questions for you to answer until the assignment is complete. The dialogue assignment is worth 20 points and is 20% of your final grade.

Here's how you do the dialogue assignment.

1. Will send me an email with an answer to the following question:
 - a. **What are the necessary conditions for your own life to be meaningful?**
2. Email me your answer to the question above before the end of the due date. If you miss the due date, you will lose 1 point. You will continue to lose 1 point for each day after until you send me an answer.
 - a. **This is not a paper!** Don't open a Word or Pages document. If I see an attachment in your email, I'm just going to reject it and tell you to redo it. Just write me an email with your answer to the question. **Your answer should not be longer than one paragraph.**
3. Once you've answered the question, I will reply with at least one follow up question within 48 hours. You have 48 hours after I've replied to answer my follow up question. If you don't reply within 48 hours, then you'll lose points in the same way as mentioned above (i.e. 1 point for each day you're late).
4. **THERE ARE NO CHANCES TO MAKE UP POINTS IF YOU ARE LATE.** If you need more time to respond, just let me know in advance and I'll give you more time.
5. After you've responded to my reply, I'll probably have more questions for you. We're going to go back and forth until we are finished with this conversation. There is a rubric on Blackboard that provides a checklist of all the things that this assignment needs to cover
 - a. **Remember that each time that I reply, you have 48 hours to respond.**
6. **I will announce in class and on Blackboard when the assignment will start.**

Course Schedule

So this schedule is kind of tentative and there may be changes. If there are any changes, then I'll make announcements both in class and on Blackboard.

Phase I

- Learning how to perform a conceptual analysis
- Analyzing the question, "What is a human being"
- Understanding the difference between what it is that makes something a human being and what characteristics are associated with human beings
- Analyzing the following concepts
 - Intelligence
 - Rationality
 - Morality
 - Empathy
 - Altruism
 - Self-Interest

Phase II

- Learning how to understand and interpret thought experiments
- Apply thought experiments to the questions below.
- Are humans unique among other animals? If so, what makes them unique?
- What is a mind?
- Is there life after death? When does a human go out of existence?
- Do humans have free will?

Phase III

- Learning how explanations work and what makes for a good philosophical explanation
- What is the ultimate nature of reality?
 - Is reality completely physical?
 - Is reality correctly described by a particular religion?
 - Is reality non-physical, but not like how any religion describes it?
- How does one's view about the ultimate nature of reality explain their view on human nature and intrinsic values?

POLICY STATEMENT ON ACCOMMODATION FOR DISABILITIES AND SPECIAL NEEDS:

Students who are in need of disability-related academic accommodations must register with the Office of Disability Services (ODS), 804 University Avenue, Room 309, (315) 443-4498. Students with authorized disability-related accommodations should provide a current Accommodation Authorization Letter from ODS to the instructor and review these accommodations with the instructor. Accommodations, such as exam administration, are not provided retroactively; therefore, planning for accommodation as early as possible is necessary.

For more information, see the Office of Disability Services, <http://disabilityservices.syr.edu>.

POLICY STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

The Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy holds students accountable for the integrity of the work they submit. Students should be familiar with the Policy and know that it is their responsibility to learn about instructor and general academic expectations with regard to proper citation of sources in written work. The policy also governs the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments as well as the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verifications of participation in class activities. Serious sanctions can result from academic dishonesty of any sort.

For more information and the complete policy, see the Academic Integrity Policy and Procedures on the University's website at <http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>.