

PHI 197: Human Nature (Spring 2026)

Instructor: Liam V. Lieblein

Lecture Times: Mon/Wed from 2:15-3:35 pm

Lecture Location: 211 Hall of Languages

Contact Info: lvlieble@syr.edu

Office Hours: TBD

Overview of the Course

In this course, we will try to better understand the nature of human existence. To do so, we will attempt to answer 3 guiding questions: (1) What does it mean to be a human being? (2) What are some of the fundamental conditions that define what it is like to live as a human being? (3) What is humanity's place within existence as a whole? Through our discussions, we will attempt to answer all three of these guiding questions by pursuing some of the great many sub-questions embedded within them. It will become clear over the course of the class that in philosophy, there is often no definitive answers to these challenging questions. Nonetheless, in the process of attempting to answer these questions, we will reveal the multifaceted nature of what it is to be a human being, and gain a much greater understanding of what that may entail for one's own life. From this understanding, the various implications for one's beliefs on human nature will be made clear, laying bare all the reasons for and against various positions. This presents a complicated branching pathway of decisions to make in order to come to one's own answers to these three guiding questions. Each decision must be made carefully, considering all the paths ahead of you on the quest to answer these questions, or you will be forever left wondering what it would be like to live your life according to the path not taken. Choose wisely!

Course Goals

1. Learn how to do philosophy. We will learn how to engage with difficult questions with no clear answer in a critical but collaborative way. We will learn how to break down complex ideas into more easily graspable concepts, make connections between various ideas across topics, supply reasons in support of various positions that we encounter, and critically evaluate all of these reasons against one another to try to get the strongest overall picture of the nature of our shared humanity.
2. Engage with philosophy. The best way to start engaging with philosophy is by engaging with philosophers, and so we will read several prominent historical and contemporary philosophers to this end, including John Locke, Jean-Paul Sartre, and David Foster Wallace.

Most importantly, the point of this class is not just to receive information about philosophy, but to actively participate in philosophical discussions so that we each may benefit from the insights of everyone else in the classroom.

Format of the Course

- This course will be taught using a version of Team-Based Learning
 - This means that most of the class time will be spent on group activities rather than lecturing
- Teams will be formed on the second day of class and will be permanent for the rest of the semester
 - Teams will be selected based primarily on major, familiarity with philosophy, and years of experience in university
 - The goal is to create teams with a diversity of skillsets and experience, so that each team member is able to uniquely contribute to the group
- Most classes will start with a quiz on the learning material for the day and from the class previous, which is completed both individually and as a team
 - This is meant to ensure that all team members are prepared for the class and able to contribute to the group activities within class
 - While there is no specific grade tied to doing the readings for class, it will be very difficult to do well on the quiz, both individually and as a group, unless you have read the material for the day
- There will also be several graded peer evaluations spread throughout the class, where each student will anonymously evaluate their fellow team members on how well they have been contributing to the team
 - This is meant to give team members an opportunity to receive feedback in a safe and encouraging way to improve team performance over the span of the course

Grading

Grading is broken up into three main categories:

30% Quizzes

20% Participation

10% Peer Evaluations

40% Writing Exams

Quizzes: At the beginning of most classes, there will be a two-part quiz on the material we will be discussing for the day, as well as some recall questions from the previous class. For the first part of the quiz, you will answer the questions alone based on your own understanding of the readings. For the second part of the quiz, you will answer the same questions together with your team. Teams will be formed on the second day of class and will be permanent for the rest of the semester. **Your quiz grade will be an average of your individual grade and your team's grade on the same quiz questions, so even if you don't individually do well, you can make up for it by contributing to the group.** The form of the quiz will vary from class to class, but they will generally include a handful of true/false, multiple-choice, and/or matching questions. **You will have access to any hand-written or printed notes on the readings** (cannot use your laptop/electronic device during quiz, and cannot print out the slides for the class). Both the individual and team quizzes will be written on paper in class, and the answers will be given immediately after the team quizzes are handed in. **Your final quiz grade will be an average of all of the quizzes you've taken throughout the semester (there will be 22 in total), with the lowest grade dropped.** Note that, since the answers to quizzes are gone over immediately in class, if you are not present for the day of a quiz, then you will automatically receive a 0 on your quiz. If you have an excused absence for that day, then that quiz will instead be excluded from the final grade calculation.

Participation: Most of the rest of class will be spent participating in group activities, reviewing these group activities, or actively listening to mini-lectures. Participation will be graded using a point system:

1 Point for Attendance

1 Point for completion of group activity/activities

1 Point for individual participation

You can gain a maximum of 4 points per class, receiving 1 point for attendance, 1 point for completing the group activity/activities, and up to 2 points for individual participation. Individual participation takes the form of a substantial question, comment, or response during the mini-lecture or the class-wide review of group activities. Questions and responses are substantial when they are about the material of the day (i.e. not a technical question about an assignment) and demonstrate genuine engagement with that material (i.e. not surface level comments or questions that are obvious to anyone engaged in the class). Clarifications are welcome, and comments or responses that are incorrect but done in good faith are also counted as substantial; you do not need to already understand the material to individually participate, just be engaged with it. As for the completion of group activities, usually this will entail writing down your group's responses on a piece of paper or in an email sent to me at the end of class; details will be given in class. **In order to receive a 100% on your participation grade, you will need to earn 65 points by the end of the semester.** This means that, if you attend every class and complete the group activity every class, you would need to individually participate at least once in roughly half of the classes you attend to receive a 100%.

Every 2 points earned past the 65 needed for a 100% in participation will be added to your lowest non-dropped quiz score (i.e. if you earn 80 points at the end of the semester, I will add 8 points to your lowest non-dropped quiz score). It is possible to earn up to 100 points if you attend every class and individually participate twice in each one, which would add 18 points to your lowest non-dropped quiz score. There may also be opportunities to earn extra participation points throughout the semester, so keep an eye out in the announcements on blackboard.

Peer Evaluations: At the end of each of the major units (units 2, 3, and 4), you will complete a peer evaluation form for each of your teammates. The purpose of the peer evaluation form is to ensure that everyone is actively participating in completing the quizzes and group activities as a team. It is also an opportunity to receive anonymous feedback on your own behavior in the class in a safe and productive manner, potentially allowing you a chance to grow. While this can sound daunting, the typical result of these evaluations is that you will discover that your contributions to the group discussions have not gone unnoticed, and your teammates appreciate having you in the group, even if they do have some productive feedback to help make your working relationship even better.

The peer evaluations get procedurally more weighty as time goes on. **The first evaluation is worth 2% of your grade, the second is worth 3% of your grade, and the third is worth 5%.** This allows you time to get your bearings as a group earlier on so that by the end of the semester everyone will hopefully receive high marks on their peer evaluations. In terms of how they will be graded, the opinions of your peers will be taken as advisory for your grade, not definitive, as I will consider all relevant factors. Further, the majority of your grade will be based on whether or not you turned in your peer evaluation forms to begin with rather than this feedback. If you do your best to contribute to the group and you submit all your forms, even if there are some places you can improve, you can expect to receive a high grade on this assignment (95-100%).

These peer evaluations are due at the end of each major unit. Here is a breakdown of the due dates:

Peer Evaluation 1 (2.5% of Final Grade): **Sunday, February 15th at 11:59pm**

Peer Evaluation 2 (2.5% of Final Grade): **Saturday, March 26th at 11:59pm**

Peer Evaluation 3 (5% of Final Grade): **Saturday, May 2nd at 11:59pm**

Writing Exams: For each of the major units (units 2, 3, and 4), you will be expected to write an essay connecting at least 2 of the topics covered within that unit. More specific instructions, as well as suggestions, will be provided in the instructions document for the writing assignment on blackboard. **This will be done in class at the end of the unit.** Since you will know in advance what the prompt/prompts are for the exam, you can, and should, figure out in advance what you will be writing about. **You will be allowed one piece of notebook-sized paper with written notes on the day of the exam (front and back).** You can include anything you want on this piece

of paper except a pre-written draft of the essay itself. Bullet points of the main ideas in each of the sections is fine, for example, but you cannot pre-write the essay then simply use the class time to rewrite it on the exam booklet. I will look over your notes after taking the exam, and if they include a pre-written draft, then you will receive half credit for the exam (i.e. it will be graded in the same manner as other exams then divided by 2). If you are unsure if your notes count as a pre-written draft, please feel free to send a copy over email or have me look over it in class/office hours before the exam. **If you have never written in a philosophy course before, I would highly recommend taking a look at the philosophical writing resources below.**

In addition to the essay itself, you will be expected to both give and receive feedback from your peers for the first two papers. There will be a day of class from each of these units set aside to do the peer review and discuss the papers themselves.

Here is the breakdown of the grades and dates of each of these Writing Exams:

Writing Exam 1: The Human Being- **15% (10% for Essay, 5% for Peer Feedback)**

Exam Date: **Monday, February 16th**

Peer Review Date: **Wednesday, February 18th**

Writing Exam 2: The Human Condition- **15% (10% for Essay, 5% for Peer Feedback)**

Exam Date: **Wednesday, March 25th**

Peer Review Date: **Monday, March 30th**

Writing Exam 3: The Human Existence- **10%**

Exam Date: **Monday, April 27th**

Total: 40%

Philosophical Writing Resources

For many of you, this will be your first exposure to philosophy. I will try to give you advice on how to write philosophy in class as well as feedback on your writing assignments, but if you want some extra resources to look at in order to develop your philosophical writing skills, here is a list of places to look:

Harvard writing guide for philosophy:

https://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/files/phildept/files/brief_guide_to_writing_philosophy_paper.pdf

Pryor and Yablo's guide to writing philosophy:

<https://www.mit.edu/~yablo/writing.html>

Angela Mendelovici's Sample Philosophy Paper with Annotations:

https://prezi.com/z4h1_fwilbxj/a-sample-philosophy-paper/

Absence Policy

In order to get an absence excused, you must give me at least 24 hours notice (barring unexpected circumstances) and some form of proof of excuse. The proof of excuse need not be overly formal, although any official notice from the university (through SOaR for example) will of course be taken as sufficient proof. A health appointment receipt, cancelled flight, positive covid test, etc. will all be counted as sufficient proof. If the emergency does not admit of having any specific proof, reach out to me and we can try to figure out a solution. For those who will need an extended absence, due to some ongoing illness for example, please reach out to SOaR (

<https://experience.syracuse.edu/student-outreach/student-support/absence-notifications/>).

Lateness Policy

Quizzes are all in person, and we go over the answers immediately after taking them, so if you are not there in class that day before we go over the quiz, you will automatically receive a 0 for the quiz. An exception to this is if the day of the quiz is an excused absence – in this case, the quiz will not be counted against you. A similar policy holds for participation.

Since the Writing Exams and the Peer Review sessions that follow them are both in person, you will receive a 0 if you are not able to come during that time, barring excused absences. Since these make up a significant portion of your grade, you should reach out well in advance if you think there will be a conflict with the date of the exam and/or peer review session. I will provide a day to make-up the writing exam and will allow you to submit comments for the Peer Review session via email instead of in person if you have an excused absence.

Electronics Policy

Laptops and tablets are allowed for taking notes in class only – please do not distract yourself and others with social media, games, videos, etc. Phones, unless a special exception is made, are never allowed to be used in class (step outside if you need to take a call). All electronic devices are to be put away during quizzes, which will be paper and pencil.

Course Schedule

Unit 1: Entering into Conversation with Philosophy

Week 1

Day 1: Icebreakers, Syllabus, and the Scope of Philosophy (January 12th)

Assigned Reading:

Syllabus

Day 2: Socrates & David Foster Wallace (January 14th)

Assigned Reading:

David Foster Wallace, "This is Water"

Week 2

NO CLASS (Martin Luther King Jr. Day)

Day 3: Arguments and Logic (January 21st)

Unit 2: The Human Being

Week 3

Day 4: Human vs. Animal (January 26th)

Assigned Readings:

Charles Darwin, "The Descent of Man"

Christine Korsgaard, "Morality and the Distinctiveness of Human Action"

Day 5: Passion vs. Rationality (January 28th)

Assigned Readings:

David Hume, "A Treatise on Human Nature"

Immanuel Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals"

Week 4

Day 6: Human vs. Machine (February 2nd)

Assigned Readings:

Alan Turing, "Computing, Machinery, and Intelligence"

John Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs"

Day 7: Subjective vs. Objective (February 4th)

Assigned Readings:

Thomas Nagel, "What it is Like to Be a Bat"

Daniel Dennet, "Consciousness Explained"

Week 5

Day 8: Self-Invention vs. Self-Discovery (February 9th)

Assigned Reading:

Plato, "Alcibiates"

Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics"

Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism"

Day 9: Me vs. Mine (February 11th)

Assigned Reading:

William James, "The Principles of Psychology"

Epictetus, "Enchiridion"

Week 6

Day 10: Writing Exam 1 (February 16th)

Day 11: Peer Review & Discussion of Unit 2 (February 18th)

Unit 3: The Human Condition

Week 7

Day 12: Good & Evil (February 23rd)

Assigned Reading:

Thomas Hobbes, “Leviathan”

John Locke, “Second Treatise of Government”

Day 13: Justice & Security (February 25th)

Assigned Reading:

John Rawls, “A Theory of Justice”

Niccolo Machiavelli, “The Prince”

Week 8

Day 14: Intent & Consequences (March 3rd)

Assigned Reading:

Jeremy Bentham, “An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation”

Immanuel Kant, “Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals”

Day 15: Happiness & Suffering (March 5th)

Assigned Reading:

Frederick Nietzsche, “The Gay Science”

The Buddha, “The First Sermon, The Fire Sermon, The Pairs, and Happiness”

Spring Break

Week 9

Day 16: Independence & Harmony (March 16th)

Assigned Reading:

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”

Confucius, “The Analects”

Day 17: Mimicry & Originality (March 18th)

Assigned Reading:

Rene Girard, “Deceit, Desire, and the Novel”

Frederick Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra”

Week 10

Day 18: Life & Death (March 23rd)

Assigned Reading:

Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus”

Ernest Becker, “The Denial of Death”

Day 19: Writing Exam 2 (March 25th)

Unit 4: The Human Existence

Week 11

Day 20: Peer Review & Discussion of Unit 3 (March 30th)

Day 21: Immortality (April 1st)

Assigned Reading:

Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case: reflections on the tedium of immortality”

Week 12

Day 22: Transformation (April 6th)

Assigned Reading:

L.A. Paul, “Transformative Experience”

Day 23: TBD

Week 13

Day 24: Free Will and Wantonness (April 13th)

Assigned Reading:

Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of the Person"

Day 25: Free Will and Responsibility (April 15th)

Assigned Reading:

John Martin Fischer, "My Way: Essays on Moral Responsibility"

Week 14

Day 26: Meaning and Reality (April 20th)

Assigned Reading:

Robert Nozick, "Anarchy, State, and Utopia"

Day 27: Meaning and Happiness (April 22nd)

Assigned Reading:

Susan Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life"

Week 15

Day 28: Writing Exam 3 (April 27th)

Academic Integrity

As a pre-eminent and inclusive student-focused research institution, Syracuse University considers academic integrity at the forefront of learning, serving as a core value and guiding pillar of education. Syracuse University's Academic Integrity Policy provides students with the necessary guidelines to complete academic work with integrity throughout their studies. Students are required to uphold both course-specific and university-wide academic integrity expectations such as crediting your sources, doing your own work, communicating honestly, and supporting academic integrity. The full Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy can be found by visiting class.syr.edu, selecting, "Academic Integrity," and "Expectations and Policy."

Upholding Academic Integrity includes the protection of faculty's intellectual property. Students should not upload, distribute, or share instructors' course materials, including presentations,

assignments, exams, or other evaluative materials without permission. Using websites that charge fees or require uploading of course material (e.g., Chegg, Course Hero) to obtain exam solutions or assignments completed by others, which are then presented as your own violates academic integrity expectations in this course and may be classified as a Level 3 violation. All academic integrity expectations that apply to in-person assignments, quizzes, and exams also apply online.

Students found in violation of the policy are subject to grade sanctions determined by the course instructor and non-grade sanctions determined by the School or College where the course is offered. Students may not drop or withdraw from courses in which they face a suspected violation. **Any established violation in this course may result in course failure regardless of violation level.**

This class will use the plagiarism detection and prevention system Turnitin. You will have the option to submit your papers to Turnitin to check that all sources you use have been properly acknowledged and cited before you submit the paper to me. I will also submit all papers you write for this class to Turnitin, which compares submitted documents against documents on the Internet and against student papers submitted to Turnitin at Syracuse University and at other colleges and universities. I will take your knowledge of the subject matter of this course and your writing level and style into account in interpreting the originality report. Keep in mind that all papers you submit for this class will become part of the Turnitin.com reference database solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of such papers.

All students are expected to complete their course work in an ethical manner, particularly with respect to the writing assignments you will submit each week. Any work submitted by the student is done so with the understanding that it is his or her own work product.

Students should understand that plagiarism involves any case in which the words or ideas of another person are presented without a clear indication that the student has borrowed those words or ideas from a source. The following counts as plagiarism:

- Submission of a paper written by another person.
- Cut and paste material from an outside source which is not explicitly credited as such.
- Uncredited direct quotation from an outside source.
- Paraphrased text from an outside source that is not explicitly credited.
- Ideas, arguments, or objections taken from an outside source that are not explicitly credited as such.
- Any content from websites like Chegg or Course Hero that provide academic material for a fee
- **Any use of ChatGPT or similar AI Chatbot software that generates academic writing**

Syracuse's academic integrity expectations extend to the fast-growing realm of artificial intelligence (AI) and represent the importance of understanding, exploring, and evaluating emerging technologies. Artificial Intelligence cases may not be submitted to the Academic Integrity Office

with AI-detection results as the only evidence of an Academic Integrity Violation. Consider all course assignments and learning outcomes before choosing between the three artificial intelligence policies below for inclusion in your syllabus. Using and exploring artificial intelligence is an important aspect of understanding, exploring, and evaluating emerging technologies. Providing students scaffolded opportunities to use these tools, when possible, promotes information literacy, self-directed inquiry, and future career professionalism. If possible, provide opportunities for students to explore and practice with AI. Cases that involve suspected academic integrity violations for inappropriate use of artificial intelligence will not be investigated unless the course syllabus contains one of the three artificial intelligence statements provided below. Faculty may not write their own artificial intelligence statement or reference language from any option they did not choose.

All generative-AI tools are prohibited in this course because their use inhibits achievement of the course learning objectives. This policy applies to all stages of project and writing processes including researching, brainstorming, outlining, organizing, and polishing. Do not use Generative-AI tools to create any content (i.e., images and video, audio, text, code, etc.). If you have any questions about a feature and whether it is considered Generative-AI, ask your instructor.

If you have any questions about these requirements at any time, please feel free to reach out to me in person or via email.

Discrimination and Harassment

Federal and state law, and University policy prohibit discrimination and harassment based on sex or gender (including sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic/dating violence, stalking, sexual exploitation, and retaliation). If a student has been harassed or assaulted, they can obtain confidential counseling support, 24-hours a day, 7 days a week, from the Sexual and Relationship Violence Response Team at the Counseling Center (315-443-8000, Barnes Center at The Arch, 150 Sims Drive, Syracuse, New York 13244). Incidents of sexual violence or harassment can be reported non-confidentially to the University's Title IX Officer (Sheila Johnson Willis, 315-443-0211, titleix@syr.edu, 005 Steele Hall). Reports to law enforcement can be made to the University's Department of Public Safety (315-443-2224, 005 Sims Hall), the Syracuse Police Department (511 South State Street, Syracuse, New York, 911 in case of emergency or 315-435-3016 to speak with the Abused Persons Unit), or the State Police (844-845-7269).

You can also reach out to me personally if you wish via email or in person through office hours. **I will seek to keep information you share with me private to the greatest extent possible, but as a professor I have mandatory reporting responsibilities to share information regarding sexual misconduct, harassment, and crimes I learn about with the University's Title IX Officer to help make our campus a safer place for all.** If you are seeking to report an incident yourself, you can use the following link: <https://inclusion.syr.edu/report>

Mental Health Resources

Mental health and overall well-being are significant predictors of academic success. As such it is essential that during your college experience you develop the skills and resources to effectively navigate stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health concerns. Please familiarize yourself with the range of resources the Barnes Center provides (<https://ese.syr.edu/bewell/>) and seek out support for mental health concerns as needed. Counseling services are available 24/7, 365 days, at 315-443-8000. I encourage you to explore the resources available through the Wellness Leadership Institute, <https://ese.syr.edu/bewell/wellness-leadership-institute/>

Feel free to also reach out to me personally if you have any mental health issues that are interfering with your ability to participate in the class. Keep in mind, as above, that I am a mandated reporter, and so I can only provide confidentiality to the extent that the information you supply does not contain anything regarding sexual misconduct, harassment, or criminal activity.

Diversity and Inclusivity Statement

Syracuse University values diversity and inclusion; we are committed to a climate of mutual respect and full participation. There may be aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion and full participation in this course. I invite any student to contact me to discuss strategies and/or accommodations (academic adjustments) that may be essential to your success and to collaborate with the Center for Disability Resources (CDR) in this process. If you would like to discuss disability-accommodations or register with CDR, please visit Center for Disability Resources. Please call (315) 443-4498 or email disabilityresources@syr.edu for more detailed information.

Disability Accommodation Statement

All special needs and disabilities will be gladly accommodated in accord with SU POLICY STATEMENT ON ACCOMMODATION FOR DISABILITIES AND SPECIAL NEEDS: Students who are in need of disability-related academic accommodations must register with the Center for Disability Resources, 804 University Avenue, Suite 303, (315) 443-4498. Accommodations, such as exam administration, are not provided retroactively; therefore, planning for accommodation as early as possible is necessary. For more information, see the Center for Disability Resources, <https://disabilityresources.syr.edu/>