

Concepts of Human Nature
Spring 2026
M/W 12:00pm – 12:50pm
G24 Cathedral of Learning

Instructor

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Teaching Assistants

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Course Description:

What does it mean to be a human being? Are we fundamentally selfish, compassionate, or collaborative beings? Or is there something more to our nature? If so, what is it and why should we care? In this course, we'll draw on different philosophical attempts to make sense of the question human nature in hopes that a deeper understanding will help guide us on how to live and structure our society and institutions.

Course Objectives:

By the end of taking this course, students should be able to:

1. Read and identify the main arguments of the texts for this class and develop reading skills that can be applied to other material from different courses.
2. Analyse and critically evaluate the main arguments presented in class.
3. Critically reflect on your own assumptions about the topics we have in class.
4. Write a clear, well-structured argumentative paper that are supported by reasons and evidence and in conversation with a philosophical topic related to this class.

Readings:

There is no textbook for this class. All of the readings and videos will be available to download from Canvas. For each unit, there will be a different module with the readings for it.

Requirements: Lectures

There will be two 50 minute lectures each week. You must attend all the lectures. You may take notes on your laptop, but please refrain from other activities. If it is clear that you are using your laptop for reasons not related to class, this will negatively affect your participation grade.

Recitation attendance and participation: 10%

Attendance and active engagement in these sessions is mandatory to do well in this class. Attendance will be taken, so please make sure that you are on time. Showing up late to class will count as a ½ absence. Unexcused absences will affect your overall grade.

Participation includes doing the reading and coming to class ready to actively engage with peers about the texts assigned for that day. In-class participation will be determined not only by how much you speak in class, but also how well you listen and give others a chance to speak as well. It also means being fully present in class – it is palpable in class or recitations when students have checked out. The kind of community we are able to build will in large part be determined by your preparation and presence when we meet together.

Quizzes: 10%

There will be 8 pop quizzes throughout the semester given at the beginning of class but only your top 6 will count towards your final grade. These quizzes will be multiple choice and based on the previous lecture's material.

Two short in-class writing assignments (10% each)

These in-class writing assignments will give you a chance to critically engage with one of the texts we have read up until that point in the semester. You will have a choice between two prompts. You may not use any notes.

Midterm (20%)

The midterm will take place on **Thursday, February 25th in class**

Final (25%)

The final will take place on **Friday, May 1st location TBD (from 2:00pm – 3:50pm)**

Final paper (15%)

The final paper will be about 1400 words long and will require you to demonstrate competency and the ability to critically engage with the material from class.

Accessibility

If you have any medical or personal issues which are having or can be expected to have an impact on your attendance or performance in class, please let me know as early on as possible. I will make every effort to accommodate you. If you have a disability, requests for academic accommodations should be made as soon as possible. Students can register with the Student Disability Services to verify their eligibility for accommodations at the Disability Resources and Services (DRS), 140 William Pitt Union, (412) 648-7890, drsrecep@pitt.edu, (412) 228-5347 for P3 ASL users, as early as possible in the term. I am also open to feedback throughout the semester. If there is something that I can do to make the class more accessible, please let me know.

Plagiarism and statement on AI usage

Students are expected to adhere to the University of Pittsburgh Code of Academic Integrity. Students who do not comply with this code will earn a failing grade for the course and the case will be reported to the college. For a tutorial on plagiarism and the college's plagiarism policy visit <https://pitt.libguides.com/academicintegrity>. All papers will be scanned by Turnitin plagiarism detection software and will be included in the Turnitin database (where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting future plagiarism). Please familiarize yourself with the usage policy posted on the Turnitin.com website. In choosing to take this course you agree to this arrangement.

Please note that using generative AI to produce work and presenting it as your own is plagiarism and will result in a failing grade for the course. This does not mean that I am prohibiting you from

using *any* generative AI to help you through this course. For example, using AI to search for interesting sources on a topic that you want to write your final paper on as a starting point would be just fine. However, if you do use generative AI in this class, you must acknowledge that you did at the end of your assignment. You must also explain how you engaged with it and how you incorporated it into your work.

Class Schedule (subject to change over the course of the semester)

Week	Date	Topic	Reading
1	January 12 th		Introduction to class; no required reading - why does this matter?
	January 14 th	What is human nature and how does it affect how we structure society?	Hobbes, <i>Leviathan</i> , Chapters. 6, 10, 11, & 13
2	January 19 th	NO CLASS – Martin Luther King Day	
	January 21 st	What is human nature and how does it affect how we structure society?	Hobbes, <i>Leviathan</i> , Chapters 14, 15, 17
3	January 26 th	What is human nature and how does it affect how we structure society?	Locke, <i>Second Treatise</i> , Chapters 1-5
	January 28 th	What is human nature and how does it affect how we structure society?	Locke, <i>Second Treatise</i> , Chapter 7
4	February 2 nd	What is human nature and how does it affect how we structure society?	Rousseau, <i>Discourse on the Origins of Inequality</i> , Part One and Two
	February 4 th	What is human nature and how does it affect how we structure society?	Rousseau, <i>On The Social Contract</i> Bk I; Bk II ch. 1-6, 11; Bk III ch. 1-4, 10-15; Bk IV ch. 1-2
5	February 9 th		In Class Writing Assignment
	February 11 th	What is human nature and how does it affect how we structure society?	Marx, <i>Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844</i>
6	February 16 th	What is human nature and how does it affect how we structure society?	Marx, <i>The German Ideology</i>
	February 18 th	What does human flourishing look like?	Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> , Chapters 1, 2, and 4 LeGuin, “The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas”
7	February 23 rd	What does human flourishing look like?	Nozick, “The Experience Machine” Chalmers, “The Value Question: Can You Live a Good Life in a Virtual World?”

	February 25 th		MIDTERM
8	March 2 nd	What does human flourishing look like?	Nagel, "The Absurd"
	March 4 th	What does human flourishing look like?	Taylor, "The Meaning of Life" and Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning"
	March 9 th	Spring Break	
	March 11 th		
9	March 16 th	How can we live a moral life?	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , selections from Books I, Chapter 1-2, 4-5, & 7, II, III, X Annas, "The Phenomenology of Virtue,"
	March 18 th	How can we live a moral life?	Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics."
10	March 23 rd	How can we live a moral life?	Kamtekar, "Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character"
	March 25 th	How can we live a moral life?	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> Book IV Ariely, <i>Predictably Irrational</i> , "The Problem of Procrastination and Self-Control" Ariely, "Procrastination, Deadlines, and Performance: Self-Control by Precommitment"
11	March 30 th	What does Stoicism teach us about humans, flourishing, and morality?	Epictetus <i>The Handbook</i>
	April 1 st	A response to Sotoicism	Táíwò, "Stoicism (as Emotional Compression) is Emotional Labor"
12	April 6 th		In Class Writing Assignment
	April 8 th	Humans and Animals	Hull, "On Human Nature"
13	April 13 th	Humans and Animals	Nussbaum, "Human Functioning and Social Justice"
	April 15 th	Humans and Animals	Singer, Chapter 1, <i>Animal Liberation</i>
14	April 20 th	Humans and Animals	Diamond, "Eating Meat and Eating People"
	April 23 rd	Faith in Humanity	Preston-Roedder, "Faith in Humanity"
FINAL PAPER: Friday, April 16th 11:59 PM FINAL EXAM: Friday, May 1st location TBD (from 2:00pm – 3:50pm)			