

HUM 200: Philosophy and Human Nature

Spring 2023

Course Information

Time: MW 13:50A–15:05P

Instructor Name: Ge Fang

Email: gfang1@iit.edu

Instructor office: Siegel Hall 235

Office Hours: W 15:10P–17:10P or by appointments

Classroom: Siegel Hall 203

Course Description

How should we organize our cities and nations? How to live well? How do we know something such as Einstein's general relativity theory? Why do we fight or help each other? How can we change current injustice? These questions are inescapable questions that have preoccupied philosophers for centuries. A common requirement in discussing these question is some understanding of ourselves: what are human beings? Are we our mind, our body, or both? Are we good, bad, or both? Do we know by sensing, by intuiting, or both? How much are we like other animals?

This course introduces the most influential texts on these topics. The aim is to get students acquainted with the history of ideas about human nature and how these ideas connect to what we care about. Along the way, the students are trained to develop philosophical skills in

- Interpreting philosophical text
- Judging whether a claim about social science is philosophically controversial
- Identifying theses and defining key terms from philosophical articles
- Reconstructing important arguments from readings in a charitable way
- Evaluating arguments written by other authors
- Constructing valid arguments to support or counter a thesis

Evaluation

Quizzes (25%): Before each class, you are expected to complete the assigned reading and answer one or a few open-ended essay questions. Think of each essay question as a guide that help you to focus on the important aspects of a difficult reading material. You are encouraged to reflect about these questions while or before you read the text. There is no time limit for the quizzes. **Top 15 out of 20** count towards your final grade.

There is no limit on length of your response. **Your grade on quizzes won't be evaluated on the basis of whether your answer is correct or not.** This is not because there is no correctness or wrongness in philosophy, but because it is very rare to get everything right on your first read of a philosophical text. You will get a full grade of 5 points **if I can see, from your response,**

that you have read the assigned material and have thought about it. Reflection on the material beforehand also prepares you toward the discussions in class.

Take-home Exams (65%): There will be three exams: two mid-terms, due Feb. 10 and Mar. 24, and a final, due Apr. 28. The two midterms will each account for 20% of your final grade, while the final will account for 25%. The form of the exams will be similar to the quizzes: you will read an essay and answer some questions about it.

The reading for exams are not covered in class, because I would like to prevent any opportunity you have for repeating what other people have said about the text. So, as you work on the exam, please only rely on your background knowledge and the assigned reading for writing your answer. I expect you to not consult any other material, such as other books, journals, or analysis on the internet. When I sense that you have done so (it might not seem so, but it's extremely easy to infer this from your answer), I will deduct points.

The skill I am evaluating with these exams is your ability to analyze a difficult philosophical text from multiple different perspective, and the ability to take a stand and defend against alternative readings. You can train these skills by reflecting for the daily quizzes, listening to your peers' different responses, and participating in the debate in class.

Information literacy assignment (10%): This assignment will be posted and graded by our librarian at the Gavin Library.

Discretionary bonus and penalty points: Students who contribute regularly to class discussions will get one grade higher (B to A, C to B, etc.). Students who disrupt the learning environment will lose points. Causes of disruption include arriving late or departing early, leaving the room during class without a medical emergency, **having a computer or other electronic device on during the class**, having a cellular phone or other electronic device beep or ring during class, or otherwise engaging in activities other than attending to class during class.

Attendance: I understand that students sometimes have very good reasons to miss class: religious obligations, illness, a commitment to family or teammates. I will not excuse some absences and not others, and we have designed our procedures to make it possible to score a strong participation even if one falls ill or has multiple religious obligations. I simply ask that you make your decisions as you think wise, and live with the consequences.

Paper (optional, not graded): You may choose to write a final paper, on which you will receive feedback but not a grade. I will ask you whether you want this exercise or not at the end of the third week. If you answer "Yes" but fail to submit a final paper by the last day of class, Apr. 26, you will receive a half of letter grade as penalty. This is set to motivate you to finish the paper once you made the commitment.

Why would you choose to write an optional paper? If you plan to pursue a career in which writing is important, or if you think it is important to write an argumentative paper, this is a good opportunity for some low-risk trial and for some feedback on your writing. Since the paper is optional, the topic and the length of the paper will be flexible. I will give you prompts if you need help choosing a suitable topic.

Textbook

Many but not all readings may be found in

Stevenson, Leslie, *The Study of Human Nature*, Oxford (hereafter, SHN for short). Other required readings will be uploaded to Blackboard (hereafter, BB for short). Physical copies are required so that you can refer to the text during lectures. You will need to download and print these. (Since electronic devices are not permitted in the classroom, you need to print these readings out to be able to refer to them in class. If you want to save paper by printing out just one copy that you will share with your neighbor in class, you may arrange to do this. If you want to study the essay on the screen and then print out the paper in small format, two or more pages to each sheet of paper, you may do that.)

Course schedule (tentative)

Topic 1: Human nature and political philosophy (For the purpose of political organizations, shall we assume human nature is good or bad?)

1/9 M: Introduction.

1/11 W: Ancient “good” answer.

Required readings: Selection from Mengzi 6A[1-2,6-7,11-17] (SHN, pp.23–27);
Additional selection from Mengzi (BB; 1A7, pp.7–15; 2A6, pp. 45–47; 6A8, pp.151–152; 6A10, 153–154) (You might skip bracketed commentaries, but you can also read them if you find the original text confusing).

“Mengzi’s philosophy” (in Mengzi van Norden’s Introduction, BB, xxv-xxvi);

“The goodness of human nature” (in Mengzi van Norden’s Introduction, BB, xxix-xxx).

Optional but recommended: historical contexts in the Introduction; alternative translations of 6A in the BB selection; bracketed commentaries in the BB selection; if you read classical Chinese, corresponding original Chinese Text: <https://ctext.org/mengzi/zhs>)

1/16 M: MLK day. No class.

1/18 W: Ancient “bad” answer.

Required readings: Selection from Xunzi chapter 23 (SHN, pp.27–33);

Additional selection from Xunzi (BB; chapter 1, pp. 1–8);

Optional but recommended: SEP entry of Xunzi: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/xunzi>, section 1 and 2; Alternative translation of Xunzi chapter 23 in the BB selection; if you read classical Chinese, corresponding original Chinese Text: <https://ctext.org/xunzi/zhs>)

1/23 M: Modern “bad” answer:

Required readings: Selection from Hobbes, *Leviathan* (SHN, pp.91–97);

Additional selection from *Leviathan* Introduction and chapters XVII, XVIII (BB)

Optional but recommended: *Leviathan* chapters XIX–XXIV

1/25 W: Modern “good” answer:

Required readings: Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, Part 1 (BB, skipping paragraphs [25]–[32], i.e., skipping pp.145–149)

Optional but recommended: the skipped part in Part 1, and Part 2

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Optional but recommended: Leviathan chapters XIX–XXIV

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Required readings: Rousseau, Second Discourse, Part 1 (BB, skipping paragraphs [25]–[32],

i.e., skipping pp.145–149)

Optional but recommended: the skipped part in Part 1, and Part 2

Topic 2: Human nature and well-being (What does the study of our nature tell us about living well?)

1/30 M: Just people live well:

Required readings: Plato, Republic, Book I, (BB, 327a-336a)

Optional but recommended: Reeve's Introduction to Republic (BB, ix-xiii)

2/1 W: **Required readings: Plato, Republic, Book I, continued (BB, 336b-354c)**

Optional but recommended: SEP, "Calicles and Thrasymachus", sections 1–3 (Web resource: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/calicles-thrasymachus/>)

2/6 M: **Required readings: Plato, Republic, Book II, (BB, 357a-376c)** Optional but recommended: SEP, "Plato's Ethics and Politics in The Republic", section 1 (Web resource: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-ethics-politics/>)

2/8 W: **Required readings: Plato, Republic, Book IV, (BB)**

First mid-term exam posted on 2/8 (Wed), due on 2/10, 23:59pm (Fri)

2/13 M: **Required readings: SEP, "Plato's Ethics and Politics in The Republic", section 2.1 (Web resource: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-ethics-politics/#HumaMoti>); Plato, Republic, Book IX, (BB, 576c-592b)**

Optional but recommended: SEP, "Plato's Ethics and Politics in The Republic", section 2 and 3

2/15 W: Skillful people live well:

Required readings: Zhuangzi (BB, Zhuangzi selections, chapters 1–3; skipping pp.11-17 from chapter 2)

Optional but recommended: Zhuangzi Introduction (BB); if you read classical Chinese, corresponding original Chinese Text: <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi>

2/20 M: Non-attached people live well: Theravada Buddhism, (Web resources:

Dhamma: <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/index.html>;

Four noble truths: <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/index.html>;

The 1st noble truth: <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca1/index.html>;

The 2nd noble truth: <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca2/index.html>;

The 3rd noble truth: <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca3/index.html>;

The 4th noble truth: <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca4/index.html>);

2/22 W: Authentic people live well:

Required readings: Sartre, "Existentialism and Humanism" (SHN, pp.185–206)

Topic 3: Human nature and the epistemology of sciences (What does the study of our nature tell us about the foundation of our scientific knowledge?)

2/27 M: The intellect is the foundation for knowledge:

Required readings: Descartes, "Discourse on Method" (SHN, pp.85–89), Meditation I (BB)

- 3/1 W: **Required readings:** Descartes, Meditation II-III (BB)
- 3/6 M: **Required readings:** Descartes, meditation IV-V (BB)
- 3/8 W: Experience is the foundation for knowledge:
Required readings: Hume, “Treatise of Human Nature” (SHN, pp.99–108)
- 3/13 M: Spring break. No class
- 3/15 W: Spring break. No class
- 3/20 M: Library instruction module, please visit Galvin’s Library Learning Center (LLC) located on the lower level of the library just past the circulation desk
- 3/22 W: Library instruction module, please visit Galvin’s Library Learning Center (LLC) located on the lower level of the library just past the circulation desk

Second mid-term exam posted on 3/22 (Wed), due on 3/24, 23:59pm (Fri)

Topic 4: Human nature and the scientific explanation of human behavior (Does our nature explain our behavior?)

- 3/27 M: Yes:
Required readings: Darwin, “The Descent of Man” (SHN, pp.163–168) and E. O. Wilson, “On Human Nature” (SHN, pp.271–287)
- 3/29 W: Against Yes:
Required readings: Rose, Lewontin & Kamin, “Not in Our Genes” (SHN, pp.304–315)
- 4/3 M: No:
Required readings: Skinner, “About Behaviorism” (SHN, pp.208–221)
- 4/5 W: Against No:
Required readings: Chomsky, “Language and the Human Mind” (SHN, pp.238–256)
- 4/10 M: Partially yes, via psychology:
Required readings: Cosmides & Tobby, “Evolutionary Psychology: A Primer” (BB)
- 4/12 W: Partially yes, via culture:
Required readings: Boyd et al, “Cultural niche” (BB)

Topic 5: Human nature and social justice (What does the study of human nature tell us about how to change the world?)

- 4/17 M: Economic inequality: **Required readings:** Marx, “The Materialist Theory of History”; “Consciousness and the Division of Labour” (SHN, pp.140–152)
- 4/19 W: Gender inequality: **Required readings:** Mill, “The Subjection of Women” (SHN, pp.154–161); Holmstrom, “Do Women Have a Distinct Nature” (SHN, pp.289–302)
- 4/24 M: Racial inequality: **Required readings:** Bracken, “Essence, Accident and Race” (SHN, pp.258–269)

4/26 W: Review session. No required readings.

Final exam posted on 4/26 (Wed), due on 4/28, 23:59pm (Fri)

5/2-7: Exam week.

Academic Honesty

Students are bound by the IIT policy on academic integrity in all aspects of this course. One of the most common violations of academic integrity is plagiarism. Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to, copying someone else's exact words, paraphrasing their sentences, or summarizing their thoughts or ideas, without giving credit to the original author. Here is a web resource on when to cite:

http://tiger.uic.edu/~edelberg/crediting_others/index.htm

Disability

Students with disabilities may request accommodations to ensure equal access and equal academic opportunities. Requests for accommodation are coordinated through Center for Disability Resources. The Center for Disability Resources is located in Suite 3F3-1, 10 W 35th St. You can also call them at 312-567-5744 or email them at disabilities@iit.edu. Should accessibility issues arise, be sure to reach out to your instructor about your Accommodation Plan.