HUMAN NATURE AND HUMAN DIVERSITY
185:253 & 730:253
SPRING 2024

Prof. James Quilty-Dunn
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Meeting times: Mon + Wed, 3:50pm-5:10pm
Classroom: 100 Milledoler Hall
Office hours: Thursdays, 1pm-2:30pm; Philosophy dept, 106 Somerset St., Room 545

Discussion section instructors:

Name: Dr. Chuanxiuyue (Carol) He
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Psychology A106 (Busch campus)

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Name: James McIntyre
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Name: Avraham Sommer
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

We are so alike and yet so different from each other. This course will explore the push-and-pull between the idea that there is an invariant human nature that binds us together and the idea that diversity distinguishes us and presents a challenge to simplistic, unified theories of our species. We will read widely on the nature of topics such as: evolution, culture, perception, belief, development, bias, consciousness, religion, and race. All these topics will be explored from a scientifically informed philosophical perspective. We will have frequent visits from world-class researchers, mostly over Zoom, who will share their cutting-edge work on these topics with us.

READINGS

This syllabus is a living document; the readings may change! When that happens, the new syllabus will be posted on Canvas and there will be an announcement made on Canvas and in lecture.

You don’t have to buy any books for this course. Readings will be posted on Canvas in .pdf form. You should be able to find a free .pdf reader online—one example is Adobe Reader.
The readings will be difficult. But our job is to work to understand them together. You may sometimes feel lost while doing the reading, but just power through and make yourself read the whole thing. Once we start going over the issues in lecture and discussion, some of the material you didn’t understand might click for you.

**COURSE GOALS**

1) To acquaint students with some philosophical concepts and theories that have played an important role in the development of cognitive science, and to explore some of the ways in which findings and theories in cognitive science can contribute to debates in philosophy.

2) To acquaint students with some of the descriptive facts about diversity in a variety of domains including:
   i) WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich & democratic) vs. non-WEIRD
   ii) beliefs (religious & non-religious)
   iii) sensory perception
   iv) race
   v) morality
   vi) human vs. non-human (animal & artificial) minds

Students will also learn about some of the features of human psychology that might reflect an innate human nature.

3) To examine and critically assess some of the theories that have been proposed to explain why various sorts of human diversity exist. The theories considered will include, among others:
   i) evolutionary psychology
   ii) environmental variability
   iii) memetic spread
   iv) social constructionism

4) To explore some of the philosophical issues that are linked to various aspects of human nature and various sorts of human diversity. Issues that will be considered include:
   i) The role of reason, emotion and intuition in moral judgment
   ii) The distinction between perception and thought
   iii) The nature of religious belief
   iv) The nature of human races: Are they social constructions, biological phenomena, or illusions that don’t really exist at all?
   v) Differences and similarities between humans, animals, and AI

**ASSIGNMENT STRUCTURE**

I. **Midterm**, In-class written exam covering material from the first half of the course. 25% of the total grade.
II. **Final.** Written exam during finals period covering material from the second half of the course. 30% of the total grade.

III. **Quizzes.** Most weeks, a set of quiz questions will be posted on Canvas. You must submit three quizzes throughout the semester. You pick which three quizzes you do; you may not do more than three (i.e., you cannot submit more than three and accept your three highest quiz grades). 30% of the total grade (10% each).

IV. **Short reactions.** At least two hours before your discussion section meeting each week, submit a short response (a sentence or two is fine) to the reading on Canvas—this can be a question about something you were confused about, or a critique of some aspect of the reading, or an extension of one of the ideas from the reading in a novel direction, etc. 15% of the grade.

- The purpose of these short reactions is threefold: to provide extra incentive to do the reading, to invite you to criticize the text, and to provide material for discussion.
- Please feel free to bring up your short reaction in discussion section or lecture. (Don’t feel like you “already said it” so you shouldn’t bring it up—your instructors will be happy to hear from you!)
- Don’t sweat these short reactions too much, they will not be graded individually. As long as you send them in on time and they are meaningfully related to the reading, you will get full credit for them.

**Plagiarism is strictly forbidden.** If you are caught plagiarizing, you will fail the course, and your case will be reported. This means, specifically, that you are not allowed to copy text, or even to closely paraphrase text, from anywhere. To review the university’s policies on academic integrity, please consult: [https://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/pdfs/current.pdf](https://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/pdfs/current.pdf)

**GRADING**

- Midterm exam (25%)
- Final exam (30%)
- Quizzes (30% [10% x 3])
- Short reactions (15%)

**ATTENDANCE POLICY**

Attendance is mandatory. If you must miss discussion or lecture because of illness, religious observance, personal emergency, or another reason, please use [https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/](https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/). If you miss discussion or lecture multiple times without letting your discussion section instructor know, your grade may be penalized on a case-by-case basis.
If you need to miss an exam day because of an emergency or illness, let your discussion instructor know as soon as possible so we can organize a make-up.

READING LIST

Week 1: Wed (1/17): [no class!]

Week 2: Mon (1/22): Syllabus day, overview of course

Wed (1/24): WEIRDness [Henrich, Ch. 1 of *The Weirdest People in the World*]

Week 3: Mon (1/29): For evo psych [Tooby & Cosmides, first 18 pages of “Evolutionary psychology: A primer”]

Wed (1/31): Against evo psych [1. rest of the Tooby & Cosmides reading; 2. Smith, “Is evolutionary psychology possible?”]


Wed (2/7): Does thought affect perception? Guest: Chaz Firestone [reading tbd]


Wed (2/14): Do humans have poor senses of smell? Guest: John McGann [McGann, “Poor human olfaction is a 19th-century myth”]


Week 7: Mon (2/26): Do infants reason about morality? [Hamlin, “Does the infant possess a moral concept?”]

Wed (2/28): Development of social cognition, Guest: Alan Leslie [reading tbd]

Week 8: Mon (3/4): Catch-up class; midterm review

Wed (3/6): Midterm exam, in class

Week 9: [Spring break, no class]


Week 12: Mon (4/1): What does it mean to say something is “socially constructed”? [Mallon, “A field guide to social construction”]


Week 13: Mon (4/8): Can there be conscious AI? [Dehaene, Lau, & Kouider, “What is consciousness, and could machines have it?”]

Wed (4/10): [no lecture]


Wed (4/17): Does the psychology of religion undermine theism? Virtual Guest: Justin Barrett [Geertz & Markusson, “Religion is natural, atheism is not”]

Week 15: Mon (4/22): Are religious beliefs really beliefs? [Van Leeuwen, Prologue AND Chapter 4 of Religion As Make-Believe]


Week 16: Mon (4/29): Final day; catch-up, wrap-up, final exam review

Final exam: 5/8, 12pm.