

## Philosophy and Human Nature Course Outline

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This class is intended to introduce students to the philosophical analysis of human nature. We shall begin by familiarizing ourselves with one of the earliest Western excursions into the theory of natural law that was carried out in response to queries concerning the human condition. The premises that serve as the foundation for the theory of natural law will help in guiding our analysis of subsequent theories of human nature, especially in Plato, Aristotle, and the *Bhagavad Gita*. By the end of the course, students should be able to give a somewhat insightful response to the question, “What does it mean to be human?” from various philosophical perspectives and be able to enunciate why the study of such a question is so important. Topics to be covered include the nature of the soul, the role of the appetites, the mind/body problem, what constitutes a “good” relationship with other people, gender differences, essentialism vs. the plasticity of human nature, and what it might mean to have an aesthetic sense.

### Schedule:

Week	Topic	Readings
1	Natural Law Theory	The Sophists on Human Nature (handout)
2	<i>Physis/Nomos</i> debate	Handout; Plato, <i>Phaedrus</i>
3	Tri-partite soul	Plato, <i>Phaedrus</i> (entire dialogue)
4	Immortality of the Soul	Plato, <i>Phaedrus</i>
5	Love	Plato, <i>Phaedrus</i>
6	The Vegetative Soul	Aristotle, <i>De Anima</i> bk. II, 1-4.
7	Perception	Aristotle, <i>De Anima</i> bk. II, 5-6, 12.
8	The Mental Faculties	Aristotle, <i>De Anima</i> bk. III, 1-6
9	Knowing, Memory	Aristotle, <i>De Anima</i> bk. III, 7-12
10	Death	<i>Bhagavad Gita</i> 1-6
11	Action and Yoga	<i>Bhagavad Gita</i> 7-12
12	Holism vs. Discreteness	<i>Bhagavad Gita</i> 13-18

**Assignments:** Students will be required to complete three short written responses to the ideas presented in the text, and a final exam. The responses should be two pages in length, and will be worth 15% of the final grade, the essay will be worth 25%, and the final will be worth 30%. A response will consist in an answer to one of the questions given in the assignments below. Students must provide a response to one question from each section. The essay should be roughly 5-7 pages in length (1250-1750 words). In the first class I’ll go over some general comments on how to construct a philosophical response, or at least what kinds of things I’m looking for in the assignments; responses will be evaluated according to the attached assessment form.

### Response Questions:

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Section: Due Monday, Week 3 (No Argument Outline Required)

Is it natural for a human to act altruistically, or is the care we sometimes show to other people at our own expense an artificial behaviour forced upon us by society? Why do you think this?

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> Section: Due Monday, Week 6

Does Plato think that physical beauty in a person is indicative of a beautiful character and mind? Why does he think this? Do you agree?

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Section: Due Monday, Week 10**

1) Why does Aristotle think plants and animals consume food and reproduce? Here students must make reference to the principle end that Aristotle thinks all life aims at.

#### **Essay Questions (answer only one of these questions): Essay due last day of classes.**

1) All the major philosophers studied so far hold an immaterialist position in the philosophy of the mind; that is to say they all believe that the mind is not (or at least not solely) a physical object. What are the arguments they marshal in support of this position? Do you agree? Why or why not?

2) Similarly, all the major authors we have studied have argued for some kind of immortality of the soul. The question here revolves around what kind of a soul could be immortal. For Plato, Aristotle, and the *Gita*, what does the immortal soul *have* to look like in order to meet the constraints of their various metaphysical positions?

3) At 432a24-432b11, Aristotle seems to offer up a criticism of Plato's analysis of the soul. Explain this criticism. Is it a good one? How would Plato respond to it?

4) Aristotle argues that the life of activity is the one most worth living, while in the *Gita* Krishna states, "Actions do not cling to me" (4:14). Well, which is it? In responding to this question students must give an adequate explanation of both positions, and then provide criteria for their relative evaluation.

5) Create a work of art that provides an examination of some philosophical problem or theme we have covered this semester. If you are enrolled in the Fine Art program, you may paint a picture, do an etching, or sculpt a figure that does the same. If you are a musician, write and record a song. Include with your art piece an explanation of how it illustrates the point of the principle or argument you wish to explore, and how it builds upon what you have learned in this class. The explanation of your art **MUST** be at least three pages long, and it must explicate the art, not just give a summation of some philosophy. A word of warning here: this is not the time to discover whether or not you can draw. I also expect to keep all artwork handed in, unless you make a special plea to get it back. If you wish to see examples of previous art assignments handed in, I should have a few examples hanging around in my office.

#### **Technical Considerations for Written Assignments:**

1) All written assignments must be typed (black ink, please) and double-spaced on pages with at most 1 inch margins. No extra line spaces between paragraphs. Indent the first line of a paragraph. Printing on both sides of a sheet of paper is quite acceptable.

2) Please no title pages. Also no "Works Cited" or "Bibliography" pages referring to one work; do bibliographic references in a footnote if you must. Also no enormously large-fonted titles, names, dates, course numbers, student numbers, phone numbers, or due dates that take up half a page of space. Your title, name, and student number at the top of the first page is quite sufficient. Please visibly number any multiple-page assignments. If for some reason you must hand in the assignment to the office, please include my name at the top of the assignment as well.

3) No duo-tangs, folders, binders, or paperclips. Please staple the pages of your work together. Do not hand in loose sheets of paper.

4) Under no circumstances will emailed assignments be accepted. Please hand in your assignments at the start of class on the day they are due.

5) For help on writing humanities papers, please consult the website

<http://www.princeton.edu/~jimpryor/general/writing.html>

This site gives an excellent overview on what a philosophy paper is all about and how to write it.

- 6) The final page of this outline is the evaluation form that will be used in the assessment of your writing. This evaluation form provides the clearest explanation of my requirements for an essay. Please, study it carefully before you write your work.
- 7) Many of the above requirements are arbitrary demands on my part, but they really do facilitate the assessment of your work. If you do not follow these guidelines, YOUR MARK FOR ORGANIZATION ON THE EVALUATION FORM WILL SUFFER DRASTICALLY.
- 8) My late policy is a 3% reduction per day late. You will have known the due dates for your assignments since the start of the semester, thus providing you with ample time to complete your work, so last minute excuses will be met with some skepticism.
- 9) Plagiarism is completely unacceptable. If you make use of an idea that is not of your own devising, you must cite the source of that idea.
- 10) Students are obliged to keep a spare copy of their completed assignments for themselves.

**Required Texts:**

Plato, *Phaedrus*, Focus Publishing Group, 2003

Aristotle, *On the Soul and On Memory and Recollection*, Green Lion Press (September 2001).

Eknath Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita*, Nilgiri Press, 2007.

**EVALUATION FORM**  
**(Late assignments will not receive comments)**

Style:

Grammar: Are the sentences understandable? Are there any spelling mistakes? Is the diction clear and concise? Can the thought behind each sentence easily be grasped? /10

Organization: Do the ideas logically follow each other, or were they haphazardly strewn together? Is there evidence of the student having constructed an argumentative outline? Is the structure of the argumentation explicitly stated and easily perceived? /10

Content:

Argument Outline: /10

Thesis: Do the assignment give an answer to a question or problem put forward? Is the answer more than a simple “yes” or “no”? Is the answer insightful, being an interpretive idea itself? Is the thesis explicitly stated? /10

Arguments: Are there arguments presented in the paper? Are the arguments interesting or banal? Are the arguments incisive or superficial? Do the arguments explicitly outline broad premises that act as guides to understanding and reveal the unquestioned perspectives adopted in the paper? /20

Originality: Does the student provide input into the conceptual debates the text engages in? Is there evidence of insight on the student’s part into the topic? Are there any new ideas being explored in the assignment? Is the student able to go beyond ideas raised in class discussion? /20

Evaluation: Does the student give a fair summation of the ideas contained in the texts used? Are passages from the text cited? Does the use of these ideas meaningfully contribute to the thesis of the essay, or is the use of material a mere addenda to the main arguments of the paper? /20

/100