

Graduate Seminar: Human nature?

Wednesdays, 17:00-19:30

Bryce Huebner

Department of Philosophy

Georgetown University

lbh24@georgetown.edu

This course is organized around a very old and traditional set of philosophical questions:

- What kinds of things are human beings?
- Are they competitive or cooperative by nature?
- Are they naturally disposed toward hatred and violence, or love and compassion?
- Do human beings, like other animals, simply strive to increase their power?
- What roles do 'biological' and 'cultural' factors play in the production of constraints on human excellence and human well-being?

Such questions have long been the bread-and-butter of philosophy, and they are once again coming to prominence in both philosophical and scientific contexts. So it is a great time to be diving into these issues. But to my mind, it is not at all clear that these questions make sense, or at least not all of them. So, my primary aim will be to guide us through a set of readings that will help us to collectively examine the extent to which investigations in the cognitive and biological sciences can tell us something interesting about human nature. We will also evaluate the possibility that these types of investigations are hopelessly misguided. By the end of the semester, I hope that we will get at least a little bit clearer on the extent to which question about human nature make sense *as philosophical questions*.

Required Texts:

Sarah Hrdy, *Mothers and others: The evolutionary origins of mutual understanding*

Helen Longino, *Studying human behavior: How scientists investigate aggression and sexuality*

Kim Sterelny, *The evolved apprentice: How evolution made humans unique*

Michael Tomasello, *Why we cooperate* (with Joan Silk, Carol Dweck, Brian Skyrms, & Elizabeth Spelke)

Richard Wrangham & Dale Peters, *Demonic males: Apes and the origins of human violence*

Required work:

It is imperative that you come to class each week ready to discuss the material under consideration. This will not be a lecture-based course, it will be focused primarily on discussing the issues raised in the texts we read. Everyone in the classroom is responsible for making sure that these discussions go well. That said, I will always come prepared to discuss and defend my own views, and to field questions about the things we have read. But you should come prepared with questions, worries, and insights as well. I will typically begin with a brief (typically 15 min) overview of the material, we will then move into the discussion of issues that you are excited about. Midway through the seminar, we will take a break, and this cycle will repeat.

Each member of the seminar must present on *at least* one of the assigned readings; when it is your turn to present, you will be responsible for guiding the discussion for half of a class period, giving your own brief overview, and preparing to field questions and to expand on the worries and insights raised by your

colleagues. For the weeks that you are not presenting, you will write a brief reflection paper that is no longer than 600 words and engages with the reading for that week. These papers will be graded on a 3-point scale (1 – Poor; 2 – Good; 3 – Excellent), and your 10 best papers will be counted toward your grade.

Your primary writing goal in this course will be to produce a short paper that is no longer than 3000 words, and which addresses one of the arguments we examine over the course of the semester. A successful paper will be well suited for submission to a national conference such as the APA, or a more specialized conference that focuses on issues in the philosophy of mind or the philosophy of biology. To this end, you must submit a 500 word abstract for your paper by 27 October. You will then submit a first draft of your paper by 20 November, and a final draft during exam week. These deadlines are firm, and any necessary extensions must be confirmed in advance.

Tentative reading schedule:

4/9	Hull, " On human nature " Machery, " A plea for human nature " Mallon & Stich, " The odd couple "
11/9	Levy, " Culture by nature " Samuels, " Science and human nature "
18/9	Silvers, " A fatal attraction to normalizing " Anthony, " Human nature and its role in feminist theory " Haslanger, " Gender and Race "
25/9	Wrangham & Peters, <i>Demonic males</i> (At least Chapters 1, 4, 6, 8-12)
2/10	Hrdy, <i>Mothers and others</i> (Chapters 1-5)
9/10	Hrdy, <i>Mothers and others</i> (Chapters 6-9)
16/10	Longino, <i>Studying Human Behavior</i> (Chapters 1-7)
23/10	Longino, <i>Studying Human Behavior</i> (Chapters 8-11)
30/10	Tomsello et al, <i>Why we cooperate</i>
6/11	Sterelny, <i>The evolved apprentice</i> (Chapters 1-4)
13/11	Sterelny, <i>The evolved apprentice</i> (Chapters 5-8)
20/11	Boyd et al, " The cultural niche " Henrich, " A cultural species " Sharrif et al, " The birth of high gods " Gervais et al " The cultural transmission of faith "
4/12	Sperber & Claidière " Defining and explaining culture " Sperber & Hirschfeld, " Culture and modularity " Sperber & Hirschfeld, " Culture, cognition, and evolution "

	Boyer & Petersen " The naturalness of (many) social institutions "
--	--