

Human Nature Studies
ISF 98/198 (2 Units P/NP)
Spring 2012

Facilitated by Antonio Roman-Alcalá (antidogmatist@gmail.com)
Faculty Advisor: Renate Holub (rholub@berkeley.edu)

Human Nature is an incredibly complex and contestable concept and terrain; it generally refers to “characteristics, feelings, and behavioral traits, regarded as shared by all humans”. But is there a human nature? And if there is, how can we go about finding out what it is? Through an interdisciplinary lens of biology, ecology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and cognitive science we will explore questions about humans and human nature including:

- 1) Why do humans think and behave the way we do?
- 2) Are the influences of nature versus nurture distinguishable in their impacts on our ways of being, or are they convenient but illusory dichotomies useful for discovering what might be “inborn”? If this dichotomy is indeed inaccurate, is “nature *via* nurture” a suitable replacement concept?
- 3) Does other peoples' behavior create the evidential basis for personal views of human nature? Or can believing in certain human natures result *in* certain behaviors? That is, how do contingent world circumstances affect views on human nature, and how are those circumstances affected by those views?
- 4) What is the relation between politics, economics, and views on human nature?
- 5) Can *Sociobiology* or *Evolutionary Psychology* explain convincingly how our biological evolution and contexts have led to certain thoughts and behaviors? Or do they function as excuses for justifying social relations as they exist now?
- 6) Are there multiple human natures? Different natures based on race or ethnicity?
- 7) Do men and women have different natures? How and why? How does homosexuality relate to evolution? Perhaps most importantly: are humans by nature monogamous or polyamorous?

Description: This class will provide a survey of literature on human nature, limited by the duration of the class (13 weeks) and the purview of the facilitator. The class time will consist of: critical readings and debate on the literature, thoughtful discussions resulting from our out-of-class observation-based research, and in-class video screenings. Each 3-hour class will have an intermission break for casual conversations and food procurement.

Prerequisites, Assignments, and Requirements:

To begin the class, you must be able and willing to think and write about theories and concepts critically—examining their provenance and their road to recognition—as well as provide your own perspective, whether informed or intuitive.

There will be **three assignments**:

- 1) **Observation Paper:** For this 2-4 page paper you will observe persons' behavior and relate your observations to supposed “human natures”. Do the behaviors you see match the predictions? Why or why not? Are there alternate explanations for these behaviors that seem more appropriate?
- 2) **Media Paper:** For this 2-4 page paper you will interpret a media sample (*mainstream* or otherwise widely available television, books, movies, or news; only *popular fiction* books are

allowed¹) as relating an assumption about human nature, and elucidate whether you agree with the assumption(s) or not.

- 3) **Rumination Paper:** Your final 4-6 page paper will put together material from the readings, discussions, and assignments, and form an argument on human nature. This argument will explain if and how you think human nature should or should not be considered. If you do not believe in a human nature, you must convincingly explain why its existence is impossible. (Alternately, you may do a report on one of the major works we've read from², including the same arguments in relation to that work)

All papers should be double spaced unless you don't want them to be; page lengths are guidelines: I really don't care how long the paper is as long as it is clear you put some work and thought into it. If you don't have an idea of what constitutes "work and thought" you should read the "Prerequisite" section again.

Grading:

The first two assignments will be worth 15% each.

The last assignment will be worth 20%.

Attendance and having done the readings will count for 40% of your final grade: **PLEASE READ.**

The remaining 10% will be allocated based on your participation in class.

Students need to achieve 75% or more to pass this class.

Class will be for three hours once a week. There will be approximately 1 to 3 hours of reading and/or outside video viewing per week; these required texts will be posted to bspace, or are already available free online. More reading is assigned in the first half of the class; those that are committed will be rewarded by finding the second half of the class lighter on reading and heavier on in-class video watching (just on time for midterms and finals!). Overall, there will be no week with more than 3 hours of out-of-class requirements.

The **requirements** to pass the class are as follows:

- 1) Show up to class: if you miss more than 3 classes you will not pass;
- 2) Show up to class having done the appropriate readings beforehand (all required and recommended readings and videos are listed in the Course Outline);
- 3) Participate in discussions in earnest;
- 4) Turn in all assignments within a reasonable amount of time after requested (I don't want all papers coming in at the end of the semester), late papers may get lowered grades;
- 5) Be honest and kind with your fellow classmates (including your dictatorial facilitator).
- 6) At the termination of the course, students should be able to convince me that humans are precisely like *this* because of human nature, or that there is *no way* that humans could be precisely like *this* for any reason pertaining to their evolution or biology. Extra cool points if you can do it using pop cultural references.

1 Popular fiction includes the following themes: Action-adventure, Crime, Detective, Horror, Mystery, Romance, Science fiction, and Western. Hybrid genres are also allowed. My mom has some lesbian mystery novels; if you'd like to borrow one, let me know.

2 Including *Sex at Dawn*, *The Blank Slate*, *The Selfish Gene*, *Why Beautiful People Have More Daughters*, *The Doctrine of DNA*, *In Search of Human Nature*, *Lifelines*, or *Evolution's Rainbow*.