**THE 5521 Theories of Human Nature: Philosophy, Power, and AI**

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### Syllabus (Draft)

#### I. DESCRIPTION

What does it mean to be human? This enduring question has shaped philosophical, religious, and scientific thought for centuries. While classical traditions and philosophical theories offered profound visions of human nature, modern developments in science and technology—especially artificial intelligence and behavioral economics—pose new challenges that call for renewed reflection.

This course explores key philosophical theories of human nature through thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Arendt, as well as Eastern thoughts. These thinkers raised enduring questions about reason, freedom, morality, society, and the self—questions deeply connected to issues of power, agency, and human potential.

In addition to classical views, the course engages with contemporary debates that examine how emerging technologies and scientific paradigms are reshaping our understanding of humanity. Can machines think or decide morally? Is human behavior truly rational? How do power, culture, biology, and history shape our identity?

No prior background in philosophy is required. Students will gain foundational knowledge of key philosophical ideas, sharpen their critical thinking, and develop their own perspectives on what it means to be human in a rapidly changing world.

**II. OUTCOMES**

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. **Explain and contextualize** major theories of human nature within their broader philosophical traditions and frameworks.
2. **Compare and contrast** the core ideas and methods of key philosophers, identifying both shared themes and significant differences.
3. **Critically evaluate** each theory in terms of its underlying assumptions, argumentative strategies, contemporary relevance, and philosophical merits and limitations.
4. **Develop and articulate** a personal philosophical perspective on human nature, informed by critical reflection on course materials and one’s interpretive framework.

Assessment Rubrics

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Criteria | **Exemplary (A)** | **Proficient (B)** | **Developing (C)** | **Beginning (D/F)** |
| 1. Explanation and Contextualization of Theories | **Clearly explains theories with depth and accuracy; shows strong understanding of each theory's context within a broader philosophical framework.** | **Accurately explains key theories and their general context; may lack some nuance.** | **Basic understanding evident but lacks clarity or depth in explanation or philosophical context.** | **Misunderstands or misrepresents key theories; little or no understanding of philosophical context.** |
| 2. Philosophical Comparison and Interpretation | **Offers insightful comparisons; articulates nuanced interpretations of key similarities and differences between philosophers.** | **Provides clear and accurate comparisons; identifies core distinctions.** | **Identifies some relevant points but with limited analysis or depth.** | **Fails to meaningfully compare or interpret philosophical positions.** |
| 3. Critical Evaluation of Theories | **Provides a sophisticated critical analysis; identifies assumptions, strengths, weaknesses, and relevance with original insight.** | **Offers thoughtful evaluation of major aspects of each theory; shows some critical depth.** | **Attempts evaluation, but analysis may be superficial or inconsistent.** | **Minimal or no critical evaluation; mostly descriptive or off-topic.** |
| 4. Personal Philosophical Reflection | **Develops a clear and coherent philosophical perspective; integrates personal insight with rigorous engagement with course material.** | **Expresses a personal view grounded in course content; shows emerging philosophical reflection.** | **Personal view is stated but underdeveloped or weakly connected to course ideas.** | **Lacks a clear personal position; minimal reflection or engagement with course content.** |

**III. REQUIREMENTS AND EVALUATION**

All times are **US Eastern Standard Time.**

**1. Readings and Videos**

Read assigned readings and watch lecture videos and others.

**2. Discussion Board (DB)**

Post your answers to the questions on DB by due dates. Post your comments on at least two posts by other students.

**3. Reflective Journal**

Purpose: To foster personal growth and deeper understanding by connecting course material with their experiences, beliefs, and evolving perspectives.

1. **Weekly Entries**:
	* **Length**: 300–500 words.
	* **Content**: Reflect on how the week’s lectures, readings, and discussions impacted your perspectives and articulate them.

For example,

* Identify a key concept, theory, or dilemma that resonated with you.
* Connect the learning to a personal experience or current event.
* Pose questions or identify areas of ambiguity in your ethical reasoning.
* Highlight how your initial reactions or beliefs evolved after engaging with these frameworks.
1. **Midpoint Review**:
	* At the course’s midpoint, reflect your weekly journal entries and write **a one-page summary. Note any point you noticed in your learning journey up to this point.**
2. **Final Reflection**:
	* Write **a comprehensive summary** (500 ~750 words) of your growth throughout the course.
	* Address how the course has shaped your perspectives.

**Evaluation Criteria**:

* Depth of insight and personal engagement.
* Integration of course material with reflections.
* Clarity, coherence, and progression of thought over time.

**4. Midterm Exam**

Take the midterm exam (multiple choice, matching, true/falls) on CANVAS. *A list of keywords* is available for your study. You can take it only once.

**5. Multimedia Presentation (students’ presentation)**

The capstone video presentation is your opportunity to bring together the ideas, thinkers, and insights explored throughout the course and apply them in a meaningful and reflective way. This assignment invites you to choose a topic related to human nature, analyze it philosophically, and reflect on its relevance to your personal, social, or professional experience.

Assignment Description:

You will create a 5–7 minute video presentation on a topic related to human nature. The instructor must approve your topic to ensure it is relevant and manageable.

Your video should do the following:

1. Introduce your topic clearly and explain why it matters.
2. Draw upon at least two thinkers discussed in the course (e.g., Plato, Kant, Marx, Arendt, Frankl, etc.).
3. Explain how their ideas help illuminate your topic or question.
4. Offer your own perspective—do you agree, disagree, or want to reinterpret what they say?
5. Reflect personally: How does this topic relate to your own life, values, work, or community?

Examples:

* What does Viktor Frankl teach us about resilience in modern workplaces?
* How do AI technologies challenge Kantian ideas of autonomy and dignity?
* Can Aristotle’s idea of virtue help us deal with online misinformation?
* What would Hannah Arendt say about civic responsibility in your community?
* How have your beliefs changed after encountering Nietzsche or Kierkegaard?

Requirements:

* Clear structure: introduction, main points, conclusion
* Reference to at least two course thinkers/texts
* Original reflection and insight—not just AI summaries
* Submit your topic for approval by the due date.

Please note that **the instructor must approve presentation topics.** Post your presentation topic proposal by the due date on CANVAS.

**GRADING**

1. Weekly Discussion Board 30 points
2. Reflective Journal 40 points
3. Midterm Exam 20 points
4. Presentation 10 points

Grades are recorded by letter.

A Excellent

B Good

C Acceptable

D Acceptable, but below expectations

F Failure

Grading Rubric:

In calculating the final grade for the course, letter grades for assignments are converted into the following numerical equivalents, and the total is then converted back to a letter grade:

A        97                 A-        91.5             B+      87

B        82                 B-        77                C+     72.5

C        67.5              C-        62.5             D+     57.5

D        53                 D-        50                F        0

This scale severely penalizes Fs. Therefore, it is better to hand in a poorly done assignment than not to hand one in at all.

In computing the cumulative grade point average (G.P.A.) the following quality point scale is used:

A 4.00 A- 3.67 B+ 3.33

B 3.00 B- 2.67 C+ 2.33

C 2.00 C- 1.67 D+ 1.33

D 1.00 D- 0.67 F 0.00

Incompletes are given only when there are compelling medical or personal reasons.

\*See HJI catalog for a detailed grading policy.

**NETIQUETTE**

When posting online or by email, you need to follow the same ethical standards and laws as you would in face-to-face communications. Your language should be respectful of faculty members and fellow students. Do not post private or confidential information about anyone, and do not provide personal information that could put yourself at risk. The HJI’s LMS has robust security measures to protect communication between teacher and student. Yet please be aware that anything that you post in discussions and groups in which other students participate can be retrieved by others and copied.

Do not download and share course materials without permission of the instructor, as this may violate copyright. HJI reserves the right to delete postings on HJI maintained sites that are considered insensitive, harassing or illegal. Language that is illegal, obscene, defamatory, threatening, infringing of intellectual property rights, invasive of privacy, profane, libelous, threatening, harassing abusive, hateful or embarrassing to any person or entity, or otherwise, is a violation of the Student Code.

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Plagiarism is a form of dishonesty that occurs when a student passes off someone else's work as their own.  This can range from failing to cite an author for ideas incorporated into a student's paper, to cutting and pasting paragraphs from different websites, to handing in a paper downloaded from the Internet. It also includes buying or submitting a paper written by a third party. All are considered forms of “plagiarism” and a violation of the Seminary’s academic integrity policy. The instructor has the option of having the student repeat or fail the assignment. In cases of serious or repeated violations, the instructor has the option of having the student fail the course or of reporting the student to the Academic Dean for disciplinary action. Possible disciplinary actions include probation, suspension or withdrawal.

**AI USE POLICY**

Students are permitted to use AI tools, such as ChatGPT, to assist with coursework. However, the use of AI must comply with the following guidelines:

1. **Originality**: AI tools can help generate ideas, clarify concepts, and assist in drafting responses. However, **all final submissions must reflect your own understanding and critical analysis. Copying or submitting AI-generated content as your own is prohibited.**

2. **Citation**: If AI tools contribute significantly to your work, acknowledge how you used. Include a statement at the end of your assignment.

3. **Critical Engagement:** AI should support—not replace—your engagement with course readings and materials. Always review AI-generated content critically to ensure it aligns with ethical theories and concepts covered in the course.

4. **Plagiarism Detection**: This course uses Turnitin, which can detect AI-generated content. Any submission found to rely excessively on AI or lack proper citation will be subject to academic integrity review

5. **Integrity**: Misuse of AI to bypass critical thinking or generate misleading content is considered academic dishonesty and will result in disciplinary action (see ACADEMIC INTEGRITY section above).

By following these guidelines, you ensure ethical and responsible use of AI in your academic work.

##### VI. TEXTS (May change)

**Required Text:**

Kupperman, J. (2010). *Theories of human nature*. Hackett Pub. Co. ISBN 978-1603842921. Paper $19. Kindle ebook $14.95

Ariely, D. (2009). *Predictably irrational : the hidden forces that shape our decisions ; revised and expanded edition* (Revised and expanded edition). Harper Perennial. ISBN 978-0061854545. Paper $10.99, Kindle ebook $13.99

Kissinger, H., Schmidt, E., Huttenlocher, D. P., & Schouten, S. (2021). *The age of AI : and our human future*. Back Bay Books ; Little, Brown and Company. ISBN 978-0316274104. Paper $12.44, Kindle ebook $12.99

**Recommended Books (not required)**

Ariely, D. (2009). *Predictably irrational : the hidden forces that shape our decisions ; revised and expanded edition* (Revised and expanded edition). Harper Perennial.

Frankl, V. E., Kushner, H. S., & Winslade, W. J. (2006). *Man’s search for meaning*. Beacon Press.

Harari, Y. N. (2024). *Nexus : a brief history of information networks from the Stone Age to AI* (First U.S. edition). Random House.

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow* (First paperback edition). Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Kupperman, J. (2012). *Human nature : a reader*. Hackett Pub. Co.

Kurzweil, R. (2024). *The singularity is nearer : when we merge with AI*. Viking.

Schneider, S. (2019). *Artificial you : AI and the future of your mind*. Princeton University Press.

Stevenson, L. F., Haberman, D. L., & Wright, P. M. (2013). *Twelve theories of human nature* (6th ed.). Oxford University Press.

##### VII. PLAN – Draft Only. May change.

**Module 1: Introduction and Approaches to Human Nature**

*Kupperman*, Introduction & Chapters 1–2; Kissinger et al., *The Age of AI* Preface

* Philosophical reflection helps us uncover, question, and rethink assumptions about human nature.
* Kupperman highlights key questions:
	+ Are we rational, emotional, or both?
	+ Are we naturally good, evil, or neutral?
	+ Do we have free will, or are we shaped by external forces?
	+ Is human nature fixed, or does it change with history, culture, and technology?
* Kissinger et al. ask how AI challenges these ideas:
	+ What happens to reason, identity, and autonomy when machines can predict, decide, or create?
	+ What makes us unique if machines can simulate human abilities?
* Theories of human nature shape ethics, politics, education, and religion—and must now address challenges from AI and behavioral science.

**Discussion:**

We all carry assumptions about what it means to be human—whether shaped by family, culture, religion, or personal experience. Think of a moment when you found yourself reflecting on human behavior—your own or someone else’s—and wondered: Why do people act this way? or What does this say about being human?

What assumption about human nature shaped your thinking in that moment?

Where do you think that assumption came from (family, culture, experience, media, education)?

In light of Kupperman and The Age of AI Preface, how might that assumption be challenged or rethought today?

**Module 2: AI and the End of Human Exceptionalism**

*Kissinger et al.*, *The Age of AI*, Preface & Chapters 1–2
[The era of blind faith in big data must end | Cathy O'Neil](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_2u_eHHzRto)

* AI as a challenge to human reasoning and authority
* The shift in human self-understanding in the digital age
* Interpretation, autonomy, and responsibility

**Discussion**

Think of a time when you used or were affected by AI—whether in your personal life, education, or work. How did that experience make you reflect on what makes humans unique—or not? In light of the ideas in The Age of AI, especially the shift from human-centered reasoning to machine-generated insight, how has this changed the way you think about your own value, decision-making, or responsibility?

**Module 3: Behavioral Economics and the Predictably Irrational Self**

*Ariely*, *Misbelief*, Intro & Chapters 1–3
[Dan Ariely: Are we in control of our own decisions? | TED Talk](https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_ariely_are_we_in_control_of_our_own_decisions)

Dan Ariely, Psychology behind Misbelief and Conspiracy Theories feat.

<https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=TED%20Dan%20Ariely:%20%E2%80%9CHow%20misinformation%20works%20%E2%80%94%20and%20what%20we%20can%20do%20about%20it%E2%80%9D&mid=0A5BD80606C1115B0BD00A5BD80606C1115B0BD0&ajaxhist=0>

Predictably Irrational - basic human motivations: Dan Ariely at TEDxMidwest

<https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?&q=TED+Dan+Ariely%3a+predictably+irrational&&mid=32055547FCF079898FDB32055547FCF079898FDB&&mcid=4829A4A14F1642ACB6CEAD0730CA5A52&FORM=VRDGAR>

* Cognitive bias and motivated reasoning
* Fragility of belief and decision-making
* Emotional vs. rational self

**Discussion:**

Reflect on a decision you made—big or small—that you later realized wasn’t rational. What influenced you emotionally or socially in that moment, and how does Ariely’s work help explain your behavior?

**Module 4: From Cosmos to Soul – Pre-Socratics, Socrates, and Plato**

*Kupperman*, Chapter 5 (Plato and Aristotle); optional excerpts

BBC Genius Of The Ancient World 2of 3 Socrates With Bettany Hughes HD Documentaries

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HprauM9y_dA>

* Natural order and cosmic principles (logos)
* The examined life and ethical inquiry (Socrates)
* The tripartite soul, justice, and idealism (Plato)

**Discussion:**

Think about an area of your life where you’ve tried to live more thoughtfully or ethically. How might Socrates’ idea of the “examined life” or Plato’s concept of the soul help you better understand that effort—or its challenges?

**Module 5: Aristotle – Reason, Virtue, and Flourishing**

*Kupperman*, Chapter 5 (continued)

* Eudaimonia (flourishing) as the highest good
* Function of the human being (ergon)
* Virtue ethics and moral habituation

**Discussion Prompt:**

What’s a habit, discipline, or routine in your life that you believe has shaped your character? How might Aristotle describe the virtues you're developing—or neglecting?

### ****Module 6: Eastern Theories – Harmony, Spontaneity, and No-Self****

Kupperman, Chapter 3, 4, 6 (Confucius and Buddha); optional excerpts on Daoism
**Suggested videos**:

Genius of the Ancient World - 3 Confucius (BBC)

<https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?&q=bbc+the+story+of+china+confucius+documentary&&mid=08EA1C9BCA8F85B60DCE08EA1C9BCA8F85B60DCE&&mcid=E65E8B9AE85E44A3B98A671042361F18&FORM=VRDGAR>

The Buddha (PBS documentary) – Introduction section

<https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=The+Buddha+(PBS+documentary)+&&mid=716D800769550DB6AC49716D800769550DB6AC49&mcid=43AD86221D5B4B7186070C30BA22712A&FORM=VCGVRP>

* The relational and social self (Confucius)
* Self-cultivation, ritual, and harmony
* Naturalness (Daoism): wu-wei (effortless action), simplicity, spontaneity
* Impermanence and no-fixed-self (Buddhism): anatta, dukkha, compassion
* Alternative views of human flourishing: not individual autonomy, but integration with the world

**Discussion:**
Think of a time when your happiness or well-being depended on your relationships or your ability to go along with change rather than control it. How might Confucian, Daoist, or Buddhist ideas help you interpret that experience?

### Module 7: Machiavelli, Hobbes, and More – Power, Fear, and Political Realism

**Kupperman**, Chapter 8 (Hobbes)
**Handouts**: The Prince excerpts + Utopia highlights

BBC Imagine: Who's Afraid of Machiavelli?https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=BBC+Imagine%3a+Who%e2%80%99s+Afraid+of+Machiavelli&mid=B505888A2E59F3906414B505888A2E59F3906414&mcid=0050AF61472C4253B2A53F4EC6AAB10F&FORM=VIRE

* Human nature as self-interested and fearful
* Power, control, political manipulation
* The limits of law and utopian ideals (More)
* Security vs. morality in governance

**Discussion:**
Describe a time when fear, distrust, or rules shaped a group decision or community effort. What insights do Machiavelli, Hobbes, or More provide for understanding that situation?

**Module 8: Descartes – Rational Certainty and the Thinking Self**

Handouts

* Rationalism and methodological doubt
* Cogito and mind-body dualism
* Knowledge, certainty, and identity

**Discussion:**

Was there a point in your life when you seriously questioned a fundamental belief—about religion, politics, your identity, or the world? How does Descartes’ method of doubt echo or differ from your experience?

**Module 9: Hume – Sentiment, Experience, and the Fragile Self**

*Kupperman*, Chapter 9 (Butler and Hume)

Life and time of Scottish philospher David Hume – BBC

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wczJ5Cly1bA&t=30s

* Emotion as the basis of morality
* Habit and custom as foundations for belief
* Skepticism about the self and causality

**Discussion:**

Can you think of a decision or belief in your life that was guided more by feeling than reason? How does Hume’s view of sentiment and habit help explain or complicate that?

**Module 10: Kant – Autonomy, Dignity, and Moral Law**

*Kupperman*, Chapter 10

* Autonomy and rational will
* Categorical imperative
* Respect for persons as ends in themselves

**Discussion Prompt:**

Have you ever struggled with whether to follow a rule, speak up for someone, or treat someone with respect in a difficult situation? How might Kant’s ideas—like autonomy or the categorical imperative—illuminate what was at stake?

**Module 11: Marx – Alienation and Historical Humanity**

*Kupperman*, Chapter 11

* Alienation from labor, product, self, and others
* Materialism and historical development
* The human essence as creative activity

**Discussion Prompt:**

Have you experienced a job, role, or task where you felt disconnected—from yourself, others, or the purpose of your work? What insights might Marx offer into that experience?

**Module 12: Sartre and Kierkegaard – Anxiety, Subjectivity, and the Leap of Faith**

*Kupperman*, Chapter 12
BBC Documentary, Soren Kierkegaard: Sea of Faith

[【1984 | Kierkegaard】 Sea of Faith - BBC documentary](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C96czTXBCkU)

* Radical freedom and personal responsibility (Sartre)
* Faith, inwardness, and authenticity (Kierkegaard)
* Anxiety as a condition of human choice

**Discussion:**

Think of a time when you had to make a major decision without clear guidance or guarantees. How does Sartre’s notion of radical freedom—or Kierkegaard’s leap of faith—help you understand the weight of that moment?

**Module 13: Nietzsche – Overcoming, Power, and the Revaluation of Values**

Handouts

* BBC Human, All Too Human – Nietzsche

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9f1F5jUzaM>

* Will to power and self-overcoming
* Critique of conventional morality and religion
* Becoming who you are

**Discussion:**

Describe a time when you began to reject a belief or value you inherited—from family, school, or culture. What internal resistance or transformation did you experience, and how might Nietzsche frame that journey?

**Module 14: Hannah Arendt – Action, Freedom, and the Human Condition**

*Kupperman*, Chapter 13

[VITA ACTIVA : The Spirit of Hannah Arendt (Documentary Film)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Bd6JqZmQbw)

* Labor, work, and action as distinct human capacities
* Plurality and natality
* Responsibility and the banality of evil

**Discussion Prompt:**

Have you ever had to take responsibility in a public setting or community action? How would Arendt interpret your experience?

**Module 15: Viktor Frankl – the Meaning of Life**

Instructor handouts; Optional: *Ariely*, *Misbelief*, Chapters 6–7

* Meaning through suffering
* Responsibility and existential choice
* The “defiant power of the human spirit”

**Discussion Prompt:**

Has meaning helped you endure or make sense of a difficult time? How do Frankl’s ideas resonate with your experience?

##### VIII. Bibliography

**A. Internet Sources in Philosophy**

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://plato.stanford.edu/>

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://www.iep.utm.edu/>

Guide to Philosophy on the Internet <http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/gpi/index.htm>

Paideia Project Online <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/PaidArch.html>

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/>

**B. Books**

Arendt, H., & Kohn, J. (2003). *Responsibility and judgment* (1st ed). Schocken Books. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=725154

Arendt, H., Allen, D. S., & Canovan, M. (2018). *The human condition* (Second edition. Sixtieth anniversary edition). University of Chicago Press.

Ariely, D. (2009). *Predictably irrational : the hidden forces that shape our decisions ; revised and expanded edition* (Revised and expanded edition). Harper Perennial.

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Kierkegaard, S. (2000). *The essential Kierkegaard / edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong* (H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong, Eds.). Princeton University Press.

Kissinger, H., Schmidt, E., Huttenlocher, D. P., & Schouten, S. (2021). *The age of AI : and our human future* (First Back Bay trade paperback edition). Back Bay Books ; Little, Brown and Company.

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Machiavelli, N. (2009). *The prince* (; T. Parks, Trans.; Penguin classics deluxe edition). Penguin Books.

Nietzsche, F. W., & Kaufmann, W. (1954). *The portable Nietzsche*. Penguin Books.

Plato, & Rowe, C. J. (2012). *Republic*. Penguin.

Schneider, S. (2019). *Artificial you : AI and the future of your mind*. Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691197777

Stevenson, L. F., Haberman, D. L., & Wright, P. M. (2013). *Twelve theories of human nature* (6th ed.). Oxford University Press.

**How to write a philosophy essay:**

Vaughn, Lewis. *Writing Philosophy: A Student's Guide to Writing Philosophy Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

*A Brief Guide to Writing the Philosophy Paper,* Harvard College

https://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/files/phildept/files/brief\_guide\_to\_writing\_philosophy\_paper.pdf