

Philosophy 3334: Philosophy of Biology Summer 2020

Basic Information

Instructor: Joel Velasco

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Virtual Office Hours: M-F 12:00-1:00 (after class) or by appointment

Class meets virtually M-F 10:00-11:50 (from June 2nd – July 1)

Course Description

This course provides an introduction to the burgeoning field of philosophy of biology. This is a **reading-intensive, discussion-based** course. In other words, students are expected to come to class having read the assigned material and ready to discuss it. You are not expected to understand everything in the readings, but you are expected to raise questions about what you don't understand, engage in debate and dialog about the material, and raise objections to claims that seem questionable. Rather than sit passively, I want you to **THINK FOR YOURSELF** and **ACTIVELY ENGAGE** with the readings, other students, and the instructor. **You cannot do well in this course without doing the assigned readings.** Although there are no prerequisites, it is an advantage to have *some* background in philosophy and theoretical biology.

The goal of this course is to philosophically examine evolutionary theory and, in particular, to think carefully about how evolution should affect our understanding of ourselves. We will start by reading Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* which paints a particular picture of one way of understanding basic evolutionary concepts like selection, fitness, and adaptation. We will then spend the rest of the class thinking about issues that are particularly salient in the case of humans: ethics, sex and gender, and race. In each case, we will ask how (and even if) biology is relevant to understanding the issues properly.

Expected Learning Outcomes

- 1) The student will understand how evolution by natural selection works and will be able to demonstrate how it applies in particular cases
- 2) The student will understand some of the major views about the relationship between evolution and ethics and be able to critically evaluate these views.
- 3) The student will understand some of the major views about the nature of human races and be able to critically evaluate these views.
- 4) The student will understand some of the major views about the nature of sex and gender in humans and be able to critically evaluate these views.

Class Participation

Philosophy is a communal enterprise: the ability to make valuable contributions to philosophical discussions can be as important as the ability to write well. Moreover, since

the written assignments will force the students to think carefully about very specific topics, participation in class discussion is an important way for students to demonstrate a broader competence with the material than is possible in the papers alone. Students are encouraged to continue class discussions immediately after the class is over, by arranging an online meeting with me some other time, or continuing the discussion over e-mail with me. Of course discussion with each other outside of class is strongly encouraged as well. Students who for any reason have difficulty speaking up in class are especially encouraged to (and must!) pursue these options. It should go without saying that attendance is an absolutely essential component of class participation.

Academic Integrity:

Cheating and plagiarism are, of course, prohibited in this class just as they are in all university classes. They will be taken particularly seriously in this class, and any cases that may arise will be treated in a manner consistent with University policy. These two violations of academic integrity are each defined in the section of the Texas Tech online official publications titled “Academic Integrity.” Plagiarism is there described as follows: “Plagiarism’ includes, but is not limited to, the appropriation of, buying, receiving as a gift, or obtaining by any means material that is attributable in whole or in part to another source, including words, ideas, illustrations, structure, computer code, other expression and media, and presenting that material as one’s own academic work being offered for credit.”

<http://www.depts.ttu.edu/studentconduct/academicinteg.php>

You can find excellent explanations of what specifically constitutes plagiarism as opposed to proper citation, and also tutorials on how to avoid plagiarism at the following websites: <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/sources/>
<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml> Note: If, at any time, you are at all unclear about what counts as plagiarism, or about whether you are properly citing sources in any of your written work, please just come by and ask me about it. You do not want to be confused or careless about this serious matter.

Grades

The grades will be based on reading questions, homeworks, and take-home essays.

- Reading questions (30%): For every single class (after the first one) I will have prepared reading questions ahead of time usually consisting of a few questions where you will have to do the reading in order to understand and answer the questions and you will have to put some thought and reflection into answering. There are a total of 22 reading questions worth 2 points each. Your total score will max out at 30 points so if you are doing well, you may be able to skip some of them. Reading questions are to be uploaded into Blackboard before class begins.
- Take-home assignments (70%): We will have a total of five take-home assignments due throughout the semester. These will be a combination of homework problems and short essays. There will be two homework assignments

on Dawkins' book and then one short essay each on ethics, race, and sex and gender.

Rough Grading Scale:

92–100% → A

90–91% → A-

88–89% → B+

82–87% → B

80–81% → B-

78–79% → C+

70–77% → C

65–70% → C-

50–64% → D

0–49% → 0

Late Assignments Policy

In the absence of a documented excuse, late assignments will be docked 20% per day.

Religious holy days: a student who intends to observe a religious holy day should make that intention known in writing to the instructor prior to the absence. A student who is absent for the observance of a religious holy day shall be allowed to take an exam or complete an assignment scheduled for that day within a reasonable time after the absence.

ADA Statement: Any student who, because of a disability, may require special arrangements in order to meet the course requirements should contact the instructor as soon as possible to make any necessary arrangements. Students should present appropriate verification from Student Disability Services during the instructor's office hours. Please note: instructors are not allowed to provide classroom accommodations to a student until appropriate verification from Student Disability Services has been provided. For additional information, please contact Student Disability Services in West Hall or call 806-742-2405.

Required books:

The Selfish Gene by Richard Dawkins (Oxford University Press – originally 1976). The 40th anniversary edition is available at the bookstore but the 2nd or 3rd editions are fine too (they need to have the 'new' chapters 12 and 13 added in 1989). A pdf is available on blackboard. But you will need to be able to easily access the book in class so a paperback copy is easiest.

All other readings will be found on the course website:

<http://joelvelasco.net/teaching/3334>

Rough Course Outline:

Week 1: Dawkins, ch 1-6

Week 2: Dawkins, ch 7-13

Week 3: Evolution and Ethics, begin race

Week 4: Race, begin Sex and Gender

Week 5: Sex and Gender