

## Philosophy 3334: Philosophy of Biology Spring 2018

### Basic Information

Instructor: Joel Velasco

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Office Hours: T, W, TH 2:00-3:00 or by appointment

Class meets T/TH, 12:30-1:50 (in Phil 163)

### 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 human nature broadly understood. In the process, we will ask about the relationship between evolution and the mind, evolution and ethics, and we will ask ourselves basic questions about sex, gender, and race such as whether they are fundamentally biological categories, social categories, and even whether they actually exist at all.

### Class Participation

Philosophy is a communal enterprise: the ability to make valuable oral 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. Evaluation will be based upon the quality, not the quantity, of comments made during class. Students are encouraged to continue class discussions after the class is over, by meeting with me in person, 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 class participation, short essays, a midterm exam, and a final essay.

- Weekly, ‘One-Minute’ Papers (10%): At the end of class on most Thursdays, we will do ‘one-minute’ papers individually. This involves answering two questions: (1) What is the most significant thing you learned this week?; and, (2) What question is uppermost in your mind after the previous two class discussions? These short assignments will help you isolate confusions about the course material and guide my instruction in subsequent class presentations. Each ‘one-minute’ paper (11 total) is worth 1% of your grade and you may miss one without penalty (no extra credit given). Grading is according to a ‘✓’ (done) or ‘Ø’ (not done) rubric. (This assignment must be completed in class, no exceptions).
- Short Essays (30%): Periodically throughout the semester (see due dates marked on the course schedule), you will be asked to write short essays (between 1 and 2 double-spaced pages). These short essays are intended to stimulate you to think independently and creatively about the readings for that week. There will be 6 think pieces in all, and I will drop your lowest think piece score.
- Midterm Exam (30%): There will be one midterm examination on Thursday, March 10<sup>th</sup> (before spring break). The midterm will be divided into two parts, short answer and essay. The short answer section will test knowledge of important concepts, often by either providing an example to which you must apply the concept or by asking you to supply an example yourself that illustrates the

concept. Questions in the essay portion of the exam will test your ability to reconstruct chains of philosophical argumentation, for example, the back-and-forth between two contrasting views. The essay questions may also ask you critically assess ideas or arguments.

- Final Essay (30%): One of the most important skills you can gain from studying philosophy is the ability to make a clearly and cogently argued case for a particular perspective. More details about the criteria for argumentative essays will be posted on the course website and will be discussed in class. The paper will be due during our scheduled final exam (Tuesday, May 17<sup>th</sup>). There will be no in-class final.

**Rough Grading Scale:**

92—100% → A  
90—91% → A-  
88—99% → B+  
82—87% → B  
80—81% → B-  
78—89% → C+  
70—77% → C  
65—70% → C-  
50—64% → D  
0—49% → 0

**Late Paper Policy**

In the absence of a documented excuse, late short essays will not be accepted (recall that I do drop the lowest short essay score).

**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)  
*Arguing About Human Nature: Contemporary Debates* edited by Stephen M. Downes  
and Edouard Machery

All other readings will be found on the course website:  
<http://joelvelasco.net/teaching/3334>

Rough Course Outline:

Week 1: Dawkins, ch 1

Week 2: Dawkins, ch 2-5

Week 3: Dawkins, ch 6-7

Week 4: Dawkins, ch 8-9

Week 5: Dawkins, ch 10-11

Week 6: Dawkins, ch 12

Week 7: Dawkins, ch 13

Week 8: Thursday, March 8th. In class exam.

Week 9+10: Evolution and Human Nature

Week 11: Evolutionary Psychology

Week 12+13: Sex and Gender:

Week 14-16: Race