Views of Human Nature

PHRE-370-2 / Spring 2017

Phillips Academy



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Course Description

A critical examination of selected traditional and contemporary views of human nature with the following questions in mind: Do we have a characteristic nature? What are our basic needs, purposes, rights, obligations, and values? To what extent are our actions determined by heredity and instinct? Are we free? Are we responsible for our actions? Do the answers to any of these questions differ for males and females? Given an understanding of human nature, how should we structure society to satisfy our needs and take advantage of our potential?

Course Requirements, Evaluation, and Policies

**I. Required Texts:**

1. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).
2. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).
3. Additional readings will be made available as handouts in class and posted on Canvas

**II. Evaluation**

**i. Classroom Participation (25%) –** Much of this class will proceed as a seminar, which means careful reading of assigned work, regular attendance, and participation in class are all essential in order to succeed in the course. A separate handout/rubric will be distributed regarding expectations for classroom participation/discussion.

**ii. Essays (70%) –** Four different analytical/argumentative essays will be assigned throughout the term (two shorter, two longer). More specific information about the nature of these essays will be provided in a separate handout. Class time will be set aside for working on each paper on the class meeting prior to its due date.

1. **Essay 1 (12.5%)** – Due Friday, April 7
2. **Essay 2 (20%)** – Due Monday, April 24
3. **Essay 3 (17.5%)** – Due Friday, May 12
4. **Essay 4 (25%)** – Due Thursday, June 1

**III. Extensions –** Generally speaking, I do not grant extensions. In addition to allocating class time for papers, prompts are also handed out at least one week prior to the due date, so the expectation is that students will plan ahead and manage their time appropriately. The only exception to this policy is when a student has three or more major assignments due on the same day, in which case students are expected to follow the protocols outlined on p. 51 of the Blue Book under “Workload & Assignments” (which includes 24-hours advance notice).

**IV. Late Work Policy –** All written assignments are to be uploaded to Canvas as word documents (.doc) by the beginning of class. Any work uploaded after this point will be counted as late. Please note that technological difficulties are **not** an excuse for lateness. Anticipate that the printer will break, that files will be lost, or that your computer will die! **Any work handed in after the due date will receive a grade no higher than a 3+.** Work that is handed in more than one week past the due late will not receive credit.

**V. Rewrite Policy** – All students may choose to rewrite any essay during the term (except for the final). Revisions must be substantial; it is not sufficient simply to plug in the instructor’s feedback. I strongly encourage students to meet with me if they are electing to complete a revision. The grade for the rewrite will be averaged with the initial grade to determine the new grade for the assignment. All rewrites are due one week after the initial essay is returned. Please note that I do not accept rewrites for unauthorized late essays.

**VI. Absences** - As noted above under Classroom Preparation/Participation, regular attendance is essential if one is to succeed in this course. However, I realize that this course is not your only commitment this term, just as I realize that circumstances inevitably arise that our outside of your control. First and foremost, I ask that you communicate with me (the earlier the better). Regarding **Personal Time**, I ask that students follow the procedures outlined on pp. 54-55 of the Blue Book (specifically, the request must be made at least 24 hours prior said class meeting). Please note that students are responsible for all announcements or changes made in class. Finally, in the event that an assignment is due on the day a student is sick (with an excused absence from the Health Center), said assignment will be due at the beginning of the next class meeting.

**VII. E-mail** – I will respond to all e-mail within 24 hours. However, please note that any e-mail sent after 8:00 PM will not receive a response until the following morning, so please plan ahead!

**VIII. Religious Observances –** Some students may wish to take part in religious observances that fall during the term. Should you have a religious observance that conflicts with participation in the course, please contact me as soon as possible to discuss appropriate accommodations.

**IX. Disabilities –** Students with learning, physical, or psychiatric disabilities who may require disability-related classroom accommodations are encouraged to see me as soon as possible to discuss your particular needs. All discussions will remain confidential, though I may consult Student Health Services to discuss appropriate implementation of any accommodation requested.

**X. Technology** – Although we live in an increasingly digitized world, please note that I do not allow the use of computers/tablet/phones during class unless otherwise specified.

**Schedule of Assignments**

(Subject to Change)

**Unit 1: What is Reality?**

**Week 1 – The Allegory of the Cave**

**Tuesday, March 21 – Introduction & Overview**

* No assigned readings

**Wednesday, March 22 – Allegory of the Cave**

* Read: Plato, *The Republic*, VII.514A-521B.
* Due: Drawing of Plato’s Cave

**Friday, March 24 – An American Cave?**

* Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, pp. 5-20.

**Week 2 – What is “The Other”?**

**Monday, March 27 – Preserving the Dream**

* Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, pp. 20-39.

**Wednesday, March 29 – Class Will Not Meet**

* Mr. Prescott away at Eight Schools Conference

**Friday, March 31 – Addison: Constructing the Other**

* Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, pp. 39-57.
* Note: Class will meet at the Addison

**Week 3 – Plato and Coates**

**Monday, April 3 – Intersecting Identities**

* Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, pp. 57-71.

**Wednesday, April 5 – Writing Workshop**

* Due: Rough Draft (upload to Canvas)

**Friday, April 7 – A Moral Dilemma**

* Due: Essay #1

**Unit 2: Morality and Human Behavior**

**Week 4 – The Ring of Gyges and Moral Hypocrisy**

**Monday, April 10 – The Ring of Gyges**

* Read: Plato, *Republic*, Book II, 357b-368c

**Wednesday, April 12 – The Death of Prince Jones**

* Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, pp. 75-99.

**Friday, April 14 – The Dream and Moral Hypocrisy**

* Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, pp. 99-111.

**Week 5 – Stimulating Moral Integrity**

**Tuesday, April 18 – A Fish Out of Water**

* Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, pp. 111-132

**Wednesday, April 19 – Waking Up From the Dream**

* Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, pp. 135-152.

**Friday, April 21 – Non Sibi Days (No Class)**

* Class will not meet

**Unit 3: The Origin (and Dissolution) of Society**

**Week 6 – The Social Contract**

**Monday, April 24 – Writing Workshop**

* Due: Rough Draft of Essay #2

**Wednesday, April 26 – The Prisoner’s Dilemma**

* Due: Essay #2

**Friday, April 28 – Is Too Much Empathy a Problem?**

* Read: Sam Kean, “The Man Who Couldn’t Stop Giving,” *The Atlantic* (May 2016), pp. 99-102.

**Week 7 – The State of Nature**

**Monday, May 1 – The State of Nature**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 3-46.

**Wednesday, May 3 – A Question of Survival**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, The Road, pp. 47-92.

**Friday, May 5 – The Extremes of Human Nature**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 93-115.

**Week 8 – Human Behavior in *The Road***

**Monday, May 8 – Faculty Development Day (Class Will Not Meet)**

**Wednesday, May 10 – Writing Workshop**

* Due: Rough Draft of Essay #3

**Friday, May 12 – The Sisyphean Endeavor**

* Due: Essay #3

**Unit 4: Making Meaning in an Absurd World**

**Week 9 – The Absurdist Challenge**

**Monday, May 15 – A Return to the Cave?**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 115**-**156.

**Wednesday, May 17 – The Old Man**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 156-187.

**Friday, May 19 – A Return to Morals?**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 188-215.

**Week 10 – Conquering the Mountain**

**Monday, May 22 – The Ocean and False Hope**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 215-252.

**Wednesday, May 24 – Humanity’s Search for Meaning**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 252-287.

**Friday, May 26 – Writing Workshop**

* Due: Rough Draft

**Week 11 – Finals Week**

**Tuesday, May 30 – Writing Workshop (Optional)**

* Work on final paper

**Thursday, June 1 – Final Paper Due**

* Due: Essay #4