Views of Human Nature

PHRE-370 / Winter 2016-17

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/Reflection Papers (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. It is not enough to merely run our eyes over the pages: we must be active in our effort to understand what we are reading. In order aid this process, students will be asked to complete **1-page reflection papers** in conjunction their readings (generally speaking, one per week on a night of the student's choosing). A separate handout on reflection papers will be provided. Additional prompts will also be assigned in-class throughout the term, which will also be factored into the participation grade.

**ii. Essays (75%) –** 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 set aside for working on each paper on the class meeting prior to its due date.

1. **Essay 1 (13%)** – Due Thursday, December 15
2. **Essay 2 (20%)** – Due Thursday, January 26
3. **Essay 3 (17%)** – Due Thursday, February 9
4. **Essay 4 (25%)** – Due Friday, March 3

**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 4-.**

**V. Rewrite Policy** – All students may choose to rewrite **one** essay per term. Revisions must be substantial; it is not sufficient simply to plug in the instructor’s feedback. Indeed, students electing to complete a revision are required to meet with me to discuss the revision process – please note that any revision completed without this meeting will not be accepted. 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.

**Schedule of Assignments**

(Subject to Change)

**Unit 1: What is Reality?**

**Week 1 – The Allegory of the Cave**

**Thursday, December 1 – Introduction & Overview**

* No assigned readings

**Friday, December 2 – Allegory of the Cave**

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

**Week 2 – What Is Water?**

**Monday, December 5 – What is Water?**

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

**Thursday, December 8 – The Streets and the Schools**

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

**Friday, December 9 – Race and Otherness**

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

**Week 3**

**Monday, December 12 – Writing Workshop**

* Due: Rough Draft (upload to Canvas)

**Thursday, December 15 – Between the World and You**

* Due: Essay #1

**Friday, December 16 – Intersecting Identities**

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

**Happy Winter Break!**

**Unit 2: Human Society**

**Week 4**

**Monday, January 9 – Understanding Human Society**

* No assigned readings

**Thursday, January 12 – The Death of Prince Jones**

* Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, pp. 75-92

**Friday, January 13 – New York, NY**

* Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, pp. 92-111

**Week 5**

**Monday, January 16 – A Fish Out of Water**

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

**Thursday, January 19 – The Price of Freedom**

* Read: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, pp. 132-152.

**Friday, January 20 – Writing Workshop**

* Due: Rough Draft

**Unit 3: The Dissolution of Society**

**Week 6**

**Monday, January 23 – Visions of the Future**

* Due: Essay #2

**Thursday, January 26 – A Scorched Earth**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 3-33.

**Friday, January 27 – Is Empathy a Problem?**

* Read: Sam Kean, “The Man Who Couldn’t Stop Giving.” *The Atlantic*, May 2015. 99-102.

**Week 7**

**Monday, January 30 – The State of Nature**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 33-58.

**Thursday, February 2 – The Prisoner’s Dilemma**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 59-92.

**Friday, February 3 – Head of School Day!**

**Week 8**

**Tuesday, February 7 – The Extremes of Human Nature**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 93-130.
* Note: No reflection paper due this week

**Thursday, February 9 – Dreaming of the Past**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 130-156.
* Note: No reflection paper due this week

**Friday, February 10 – Writing Workshop**

* Due: Rough Draft (min. 2 pages uploaded to Canvas)

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

**Week 9**

**Monday, February 13 – The Myth of Sisyphus**

* Due: Essay #3
* Note: No reflection paper due this week

**Thursday, February 16 – The Old Man**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 156-187.
* Note: No reflection paper due this week

**Friday, February 17 – A Return to Morals?**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 188-215.
* Note: No reflection paper due this week

**Week 10**

**Monday, February 20 – The Ocean**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 215-252.
* Note: No reflection paper due this week

**Thursday, February 23 – Man’s Search for Meaning**

* Read: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 252-287.
* Note: No reflection paper due this week

**Friday, February 24 – Writing Workshop**

* Due: Rough Draft (min. 2 pages uploaded to Canvas)
* Note: No reflection paper due this week

**Week 11 – Finals Week**

**Monday, February 27 – Writing Workshop (Optional)**

* Work on final paper

**Tuesday, February 28 – Final Paper Due**

* Due: Essay #4