

JOSEPH CAREW
WHAT IS HUMAN NATURE?

Course Description: What is it to be a human being? What distinguishes us from other living creatures? From antiquity onwards, one of the most common answers to these questions is that we are rational animals. While this answer may seem simple and intuitive, how we understand human reason, its source, and potential limits will have drastic consequences for how we view human nature, our conception of the self, how we should live, and even our place in the universe.

In this course, we will examine these consequences by looking at several highly influential accounts of reason in the history of philosophy and the continental and analytic traditions. They propose original theories concerning the following:

- the immortality of the soul;
- the self as conflictually divided between desire, appetite, and reason;
- the rational soul as a biological form of nature;
- the limitations of reason, which must be supplemented by faith in God;
- the unbridgeable gap between mind and body;
- the interconnection between thinking, consciousness, and personal identity;
- reason as a capacity for radical freedom and the basis of morality;
- the existential value of religious experience as superior to that of reason;
- the causal role reason plays in decision-making.

Class Schedule

Week 1: The Distinction of Body and Soul and Arguments for the Soul's Immortality

- Plato, *Phaedo*

Week 2: The Tripartite Soul and Leading a Virtuous Life

- Plato, *The Republic* (excerpts)

Week 3: The Body-Soul Unity: The Soul as a Natural Form of Life

- Aristotle, *De Anima* (excerpts)

Week 4: Reason, Faith, Revelation: Participating in the Divine Intellect

- Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (excerpts)

Week 5: Mind-Body Dualism: The Difference Between Mental States and Causes

- Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (excerpts)

Week 6: Is the Self a Substance? Consciousness, Memory, and Personal Identity

- Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, "Of Identity and Diversity"

Week 7: What is the Source of Morality?

- Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Preface, Sections I-II

Week 8: The Interconnection Between Reason, Radical Freedom, and the Moral Law

- Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, III

Week 9: What is Faith? Can it be Rationally Understood?

- Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Preface, Speech in Praise of Abraham, Preamble

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Week 10: Is There Something Higher in Human Life than Reason and Morality?

- Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, Problematika I-II

Week 11: The Rationality of Human Actions and Decision-Making

- Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons, and Causes'

Week 12: Problems of Irrationality: The Competing 'Territories' of the Mind

- Davidson, 'How is Weakness of the Will Possible?'
- Davidson, 'Two Paradoxes of Irrationality'

Week 13: Review for Final

Assessment

The final grade will consist of four components:

1. Participation (10%)
2. In-Class Midterm Exam (20%)
3. Term Paper of 2500-3000 words (40%)
4. Take-Home Final Exam (30%)

Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course, students will become acquainted with several major figures and texts in the history of philosophy and be introduced to continental and analytic approaches through the lens of a perennial philosophical question: What is human nature? But since the question of human nature is tied up various concerns such as the nature of human knowledge, what our relationship is to nature and God, the limits of thinking, and how we ought to live, students will also learn about epistemology, metaphysics, and value theory. This will ensure not only that they will acquire a basic knowledge of various philosophical disciplines, but also that they will gain an appreciation of the richness of philosophy and its methodology. The two exams, in which students are asked to summarize key concepts from different texts, are meant to assure that they have sufficiently internalized this knowledge for their future studies. Students will also improve their critical reading and writing skills by analyzing texts and creatively putting them to use in order to explore their own philosophical interests and existential concerns through course material. The term paper, the topic of which can be freely decided by each student in consultation with the instructor, is to promote the development of such skills. Philosophy is not just a body of knowledge, but also a distinctive methodology of critical thinking best learned in practicing it.