

HSL7520

Human Nature

Objectives

The Instructor will:

1. Introduce diverse philosophical views on human existence, individual and collective behavior, and goals of life
2. Examine the possibility of gaining deeper insights on oneself and humanity at large
3. Analyze the relationship of humanity with social and material environment

Learning Outcomes

The students are expected to have the ability to:

1. Evaluate and appreciate diverse views on our existence, behavior, and goals
2. Understand the uniqueness, complexity, strength and weakness of human condition
3. Identify multiple facets of anthropocentrism in movements, scientific and technological progress, and social development

Contents

Ancient Views on Human Nature: Indian Tradition; Hebrew Tradition; Chinese Tradition; Convergence and Divergence (8 lectures)

Early Philosophers on Human Nature: Platonic Idealism, Aristotelian Thought; Buddhist Legacy; Advaita Vedanta of Sankara (10 lectures)

Dominant Modern Thinkers: Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Mahatma Gandhi (12 lectures)

Scientific Theorizing of Human Nature: Physicalist and Non-physicalist Accounts; Evolutionist Explanation; Rival Theories; Critical Analysis (5 lectures)

Anthropocentrism: Development of Anthropocentric View; Anthropocentrism in Diverse Movements, and Scientific and Technological Advancements; Follies of Anthropocentric Account of Progress (5 lectures)

Textbook

1. Stevenson, L & Haberman, D.L. (1998), Ten Theories of Human Nature, 3rd Edition, New York: Oxford University Press.

Reference Books

1. Plato. (2013). The Republic. New Delhi: Rupa Publishers
2. Aristotle. (1999). Nicomachean Ethics. Irwin, T.H. (trans), Cambridge: Hackett Publishing.
3. Freud, S. (2010). The Ego and the Id. New York: Dover Publications.
4. Chatterjee, S & Datta, D. (2007). An Introduction to Indian Philosophy. New Delhi: Rupa.
5. Gandhi, M.K. (2017). India of My Dreams. Prabhu R.K. (ed). Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust.
6. Kant, I. (2018). Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals. Wood, A.W. (ed.), New Haven: Yale University.
7. Nietzsche, F. (1977). A Nietzsche Reader. London: Penguin Books
8. Marx, K. (2014). Capital. New Delhi: Maple Press
9. Sartre, J.P. (2003). Being and Nothingness. Oxon: Routledge Classics
10. Habermas, J. (2004). The Future of Human Nature. Cambridge: Polity Press.
11. Arendt, H. (2013). The Human Condition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
12. Beauvoir, S. (2011). The Second Sex. Borde, C. & Malovany–Chevallier, C. (ed.), New York: Vintage.
13. Scruton, R. (2017). On Human Nature. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Online Course Materials

1. Strauss, L., Aristotle, Free Online Audio, 2014, University of Chicago, <https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/course/aristotle-ethics>.
2. Winfield, R.D., Lecture Course on Plato, Spring 2015, University of Georgia, <https://archive.org/details/rdw-plato>.
3. Guess, R. Nietzsche, 2016, Cambridge University, www.openculture.com/philosophy_free_courses.

Assessment pattern

(may have minor modifications if it is required)

50% to exams and 50% to internal components

Internal evaluation components:

- classroom interactions

- quizzes

- assignments (no online assignments)

- presentations

- mini project

- Any other method which is found appropriate

Any suggestions?

(NB: 5 minutes waver in starting classes)

How we go...

- PG standard
- Contributions from you
- Prior reading may be required
- Expect two classroom presentations
- A course paper (project) is an integral part

Availability of the primary text:

Stevenson, L & Haberman, D.L. (1998), Ten Theories of Human Nature, 3rd Edition, New York: Oxford University Press.

Other materials will be distributed from time to time

To nurture self reliance, autonomy, originality, and responsibility, no lecture notes will be provided (but study materials will be circulated)

Human Nature: What the Mob Says

(cfr. Britannica)

Human nature: fundamental dispositions and traits of humans

Theories about the nature of humankind form a part of every culture. In the West, one traditional question centred on whether humans are naturally selfish and competitive (see Thomas Hobbes; John Locke) or social and altruistic (see Karl Marx; Émile Durkheim). A broader problem is that of determining which ostensibly fundamental human dispositions and traits are natural and which are the result of some form of learning or socialization. Recent research in genetics, evolutionary biology, and cultural anthropology suggests that there is a complex interaction between genetically inherited factors and developmental and social factors. Basic drives shared with other primates are related to food, sex, security, play, and social status. Language use by humans is now generally recognized as genetically enabled, though the acquisition of any specific language also requires appropriate environmental stimuli. Some common behavioral differences between genders (e.g., regarding aggression) also appear to have a genetic basis, as does sexual orientation.

Human Nature: What Laypersons Say

(cfr. *The NewScientist*)

Six things we all do...

1. Playfulness

All mammals play – but no other species pursues such a wide variety of entertainment or spends so much time enjoying themselves



Human Nature: What Laypersons Say

Six things we all do...

2. Being Inquisitive

Humans are constantly sorting the world into categories, predicting how things work, and testing those predictions – the essence of science



Human Nature: What Laypersons Say

Six things we all do...

3. Being Normative/Legislative

Chimps stick to simple behavioural norms, but we humans, with our language skills and greater brainpower, have developed much more elaborate systems of rules, taboos and etiquette



Human Nature: What Laypersons Say

Six things we all do...

4. Being Epicurean

Compared with other animals, the feeding behaviour of humans is exceedingly odd. Where they just eat, we make a meal of it



Human Nature: What Laypersons Say

Six things we all do...

5. Being clandestine

Nothing is quite as puzzling as our predilection for clandestine intimate relations. Why so private?



Human Nature: What Laypersons Say

Six things we all do...

5. Being gossipy

Language has shaped our nature profoundly – and arguably, our way with words reaches its apogee in gossip



What is your view on human nature?

What all hard questions pop up while thinking about human condition?

Any theory of human nature familiar to you?

Reflection 1

Rival Conceptions of Human Nature (conflicting views)

So much depends on our conception of human nature: for individuals, the meaning and purpose of our lives, what we ought to do or strive for, what we may hope to achieve or to become; for human societies, what vision of human community we may hope to work toward and what sort of social changes we should make. Our answers to all these huge questions depend on whether we think there is some "true" or "innate" nature of human beings. If so, what is it? Is it different for men and women? Or is there no such "essential" human nature, only a capacity to be molded by the social environment—by economic, political, and cultural forces?

Example of disagreement:

Judeo-Christian view of man

imago dei

transcendent God created man with a definite purpose

vs.

Marxian view of man

man: nexus of social relations

Material interpretation; denied God

vs.

Sartrean view of man

man is condemned to be free

Not determined by the society

vs.

Evolutionary view of man

product of evolution

With biologically determined, species specific, patterns of behaviour

The term “**man**” used throughout is to be noted

To denote all (male, female, child...)

No more appreciated

Much more than linguistic usage

Points to a different concept human nature

Different conceptions of human nature lead to different views about what we ought to do and how we can do it.

If an all-powerful and supremely good God made us, then it is His purpose that defines what we can be and what we ought to be, and we must look to Him for help.

If, on the other hand, we are products of society, and if we find that our lives are unsatisfactory, then there can be no real solution until human society is transformed.

If we are radically free and can never escape the necessity for individual choice, then we have to accept this and make our choices with full awareness of what we are doing.

If our biological nature predisposes or determines us to think, feel, and act in certain ways, then we must take realistic account of that.

**Correlation between rival beliefs about human nature
&
Differences in scientific positions, individual ways of life, political
structures, and economic systems**

- Christian views regulating socio-economic-political systems in the west
- Marxian views dictating in communist societies
- Sartrean views dominating the liberal/neoliberal world
- Communitarian views prevailing in Afro-Asian societies

Convergence amidst divergence:

Christianity

Marxism

1. They each make claims about the nature of the universe (Xty: Theocentric; Mrx: Materialistic)
2. Both believe in history
3. Following from the conflicting claims about the universe, there are different descriptions of the essential nature of individual human beings (imago dei & providence; dialectical materialism)
4. Diagnoses of what goes wrong with human life and humankind (Xty: relation disrupted by sin, ; Mrx: alienation from oneself, real nature, society, ideal nature lost...)
5. Prescription follows the diagnosis (Xty: grace of God, God saves; Mrx: establishing communism saves). The future is envisioned accordingly
6. For each belief system, supporting organizational structure (church, party)

Four major components of conceptions/theories/ideologies of human nature:

1. A background metaphysical position about the world and humanity in it
2. A basic view of the nature of human beings, human society, and human condition
3. A diagnosis of what is wrong with us
4. A prescription for putting it right (how life should be best lived)

Only theories that combine the above constituents offer us hope of solutions to the problems of humankind. For instance, the single assertion that everyone is selfish is a brief diagnosis but offers no understanding of why we are selfish and no suggestion as to whether or how we can overcome selfishness. The statement that we should all love one another is a brief prescription, but it gives no explanation of why we find it so difficult and no help in achieving it. The theory of evolution, although it has a lot to say about human beings and our place in the universe, does not in itself give any diagnosis or prescription.