SUBJECT: Report on PHIL 201 (Human Nature, Ethics and the Natural World) and the GE-EC Requirement

TO: Professor Donavan Taylor, Chairman, General Education Committee

FROM: Imtiaz Moosa, Philosophy (and History) Dept.

DATE: October 28, 2013

In the year 2006, PHIL 201, which was originally titled "Ideas of Human Nature", was reworked precisely so that it could meet the GE-EC designation; and was retitled thus: "Human Nature, Ethics and the Natural World." Hence, ethics is at the very core of this course. And, PHIL 201 fulfills GE-EC requirement by enabling students to recognize factors that influence ethical decision-making; and my course evaluates students' ability to do this by examining specifically their comprehension of: (i) how precisely various ethical stances or points of view are rooted in certain conceptions of human nature; (ii) what ethically are at stake in adapting the one or the other conception of human nature, and; (iii) how any resolution we propose to contemporary ethical dilemmas or problems often involves us taking a stand on human nature, by tacitly affirming certain conceptions, while repudiating others.

Consider the first two outcomes, one about the study of various ideas of human nature, and the other of studying ethical theories linked to the former. Now while these two outcomes are conceptually distinct, for all practical purposes, in my course, they are merged and conjoined. Soon after I began teaching PHIL 201, I realized that it is best to examine the many theories of human nature, and the concomitant ethical implications, or ethical imperatives derived from them, along side each other, together and in conjunction with each other. It is entirely normal for philosophers and intellectuals, to interweave and inextricably link ethical perspectives with presuppositions about human nature. Here are instances where separating the discussion of human nature from ethics requires unproductive conceptual acrobatics: Plato's rejection of sensuality (his ethics) and his tripartite view of human soul, Marxist discussion of modern alienation and distortion of human nature in capitalist society, Nietzsche's theory of will to power and value perspectives implicit in this, Freud on id and super-ego and his rejection of repression, Christian ethics and the idea of the eternal in humans, capitalist ethos and the primacy of egoism, Confucian ethics of reciprocity and humans as social creatures, Hindu meditation and the idea of Brahman Atman, etc. The first two exams, therefore, tests simultaneously for say Platonic or Marxist ethics and Platonic or Marxist view of human nature. Now with regard to the third outcome, of examining present day conflicts, I tie this in the first exam to issues of environmental crisis today, and in the second exam to examining our modern age in particular. Given this, collecting data on how well students performed in the first two exams would provide how well they did in meeting the three outcomes delineated in the paragraph above. Only if students grasped the interconnection between various conceptions of human nature and ethical outlooks imbedded in them, while applying this to certain contemporary issues, could they perform well in the first two exams (of three).
Hence, for each student I made an average of the grades of the first two exams. And the two exams are to be found in the appendix.

I have data for only three courses of PHIL 201 (PHIL 224 alternates with PHIL 201). One striking fact about the data of the average grade of the first two exams is, the higher percentage of B’s (from 40% to even 55%), and even D’s to those failing outright (the combination reaching 22%), while there are relatively fewer A’s (hardly 10%) and C’s (about 15%). I confess, I am bothered by how few students excel in this course. Now given that many more get B’s than they do in my other courses, exams are not unfairly tough. One explanation for fewer A’s is, students did not consistently perform well in both exams. And perhaps this has to do with the fact that the kind of material discussed before the first exam is considerably different from the material covered for the second exam. The first section of the course covers the ancients and those of other traditions (ancient Greeks, Hebrews, Chinese, Indians, etc), while for the second exam we discuss more modern philosophers of the West. Students have to show a little more versatility to really excel in this course; however, those who are reasonably attentive and do their readings can do reasonably well, while those who are lax in attending the class will perform very badly (even below C’s). One strategy that could work to raise the grades is, to mix the ancients and the moderns, so that each section is not so different from the other. However, I am unwilling to do this because proceeding chronologically reveals much about the progression and history of ideas.

Naturally the course is evolving, and new material is added, while others deleted; however, the basic structure or scheme remains the same, and the strategy for meeting the outcomes remain unaltered. It is not the case that my reason for not bringing about any serious changes to PHIL 201, is merely because the data are generally in the range I expected. Besides the validation I get from the data, I am further reassured by excellent student evaluations, by students’ liveliness and enthusiasm in class, and by their comments to me.
GOAL FIVE – Evaluate individual responsibility to self, society, and the world

Ethical Citizenship (EC)

Course Number and Name PHIL 201: Human Nature, Ethics and the Natural World

All courses with a General Education designation will include, to the extent possible, critical thinking, written composition, oral discussion, and graphic components.

To obtain an EC designation, the proposed course must meet all the criteria, as well as all of the outcomes listed below.

Criteria:

a. Courses designated EC will identify individual and collective responsibilities to the physical and social environment in the community, nation and world.

b. Courses designated EC will focus on the process of decision-making regarding values and ethics in personal, professional, and civic life.

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<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>How will outcome be met?</th>
<th>What assessment procedure(s) will be used?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Students will recognize factors that influence ethical decision-making.</td>
<td>The ethical question about how we can understand our citizenship in the natural kingdom, and what are our ethical responsibilities as a result of this, is answered differently, depending on how human nature is conceived. We will see how this particular ethical debate is influenced by (i) religious conceptions of a human person, (ii) political conceptions, (iii) philosophical conceptions, and (iv) scientific &amp; evolutionary perspectives. Ethical debates that originate from ideas of human nature are not confined to environmental ethics. Here are some other issues: How are we to understand the &quot;call of conscience&quot;? Is it just internalized social mores (Freud, behaviorists) or is the voice of a &quot;higher self&quot; (Plato, Christianity)? Do men and women have different value schemes? Also: are gender roles rooted in biology (sociobiologists) or social conditioning? Does morality require &quot;altruism&quot;? Or can morality be founded upon</td>
<td>The two exams and the paper will evaluate, among other things, students' abilities to recognize factors that influence ethical decision-making. And this is determined by evaluating specifically their comprehension of: i) how precisely various ethical stances or points of view are rooted in certain conceptions of human nature; ii) what ethically are at stake in adapting the one or the other conception of human nature, and; iii) how any resolution we propose to contemporary ethical dilemmas or problems often involves us taking a stand on human nature, by tacitly affirming certain conceptions, while repudiating others.</td>
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| Students will identify and evaluate ways to address ethical, moral, social, and political conflict and work cooperatively to serve the physical and social environment, community, nation, and world. | Identifying, evaluating and striving towards resolving some of the moral and social conflicts facing us today, is one key point of this course. And the following are the ways in which the course goes about achieving it:
1. We delineate key conceptions of human nature that are at the very basis of many resolutions proposed to many a contemporary ethical dilemma.
2. We draw parameters of what is acceptable and what not, by hopefully arrive at a concensus on, what sorts of resolutions to contemporary problems are founded on bankrupt conceptions of human nature, or have consequences demeaning to what it means to be humans.
3. Striving at a resolution presupposes appreciating and recognising what is at stake on both sides of what is being argued. It is incumbent on us to see, not only to see where each is coming from, but also what are the stakes for each side. | The exams and the paper test for, among other things, students' ability to:
1) identify what conceptions of human nature are at the basis of what proposed resolutions to what contemporary ethical or social problem;
2) know the precise reason for how and why certain resolutions proposed to some contemporary conflicts belittle what many regard as something inviolable about being humans;
3) appreciate both sides of many a conflict, by recognizing precisely what is at stake for each. |

All General Education courses will be reviewed by the General Education Committee. What data will be provided to the committee to demonstrate the extent to which students in this course are meeting the outcomes?

OUTCOME ONE

Strong (A,B)
The answers or papers show a clear and precise understanding of the inter-relationships between conflicting ethical viewpoints and various conceptions of human nature. They must not only be able to point out, but even give reasons for their position on (a) what conceptions of human nature result in what ethical outlooks, and (b) what tacit presuppositions about human nature underlie what ethical dilemmas.
Adequate (C,D)
Students cannot provide adequate reasons for why certain ethical viewpoints can inferred or derived from specific conceptions of human nature, nor do they identify with specificity and thoroughness the tacit presuppositions about human nature in many a social or ethical debate.

Inadequate (F)
Students have no idea what is the link between a specific debate in ethics and various conceptions of human nature; and if they believe there is a connection between the two, they cannot identify the reasons for making a linkage.

OBJECTIVE TWO

Strong
1) Students display skill and understanding in applying their knowledge of various conceptions of human nature to delineate what is at stake for each side of many ethical debates; and why each side can make a plausible case for itself.
2) Students can clearly articulate why (a) certain conceptions of human nature are demeaning, and (b) the ethical consequences of accepting certain conceptions can be unpalatable.
3) Students can launch a well-argued refutation of many a proposed resolution to contemporary ethical debates, while giving the other side its proper due.

Adequate
1) Students may be articulate in defending one side, by formulating well what is at stake, should that side be rebuffed. But they cannot do sufficient justice to the opposite point of view. Being too one-sided is a major drawback in even intelligent students.
2) Students may perhaps "have a feel" for why certain conceptions or resolutions are just not right, but they cannot with precision delineate the basic and fundamental moral principles that areviolated.
3) Students could be generally on the right track, and could have a point, when voicing their opposition to many a theory. But yet, they do not do sufficient justice to the other side. They do not articulate clearly, why the other side could not come up with a proper retort to their criticisms.

Inadequate
1) Either students are unclear about, or the just cannot appreciate what is at stake in any of these debate. When the latter applies, students view these debates as mere expressions of personal likes and dislikes, and not as reasoned intellectual stances.
2) They refuse to accept any parameters for what ought to be the "bottom line" of decency; not because they have a reason to reject the line that is being drawn on the sand, but because they see no point is drawing lines. Them adopting a stance of absolute relativity and "devil may care" attitude, means that all meaningful dialogue are sabotaged, and no attempt is made to seriously consider the various viewpoints.
PHIL 201: EXAM ONE

1a. The spirited part of the soul for Plato is the part that gets angry. Why does Plato regard the spirited part as something other than the appetitive part? Should not anger, like jealousy and lust belong to the appetitive part of the soul? Why claim there is a third separate part called the spirit part, which is neither the appetitive nor the rational part? What is so special about a part that gets angry?

b. Would Plato approve of biocentric or anthropocentric reasons for taking care of nature? Also answer: Suppose if taking care of wild nature is costly, and prosperity is somewhat compromised in order to preserve wild nature, then would Plato approve of us taking care of wild nature? Give reasons.

2a. Confucius and Plato disagree about the point of morality, of why we should be good. In particular, consider this issue: For Confucius one fundamental aspect of morality is reciprocity. First explain what this means, then answer whether Plato would agree with Confucius here.

b. Kierkegaard would agree with Plato that there is the spiritual part of human soul, which is different from the physical/animal part of our souls. But yet he does not agree with Plato’s views regarding these two parts of our souls. Where would he disagree with Plato?

3a. In the Upanishads, the highest (or deepest) level is the “Brahman Atman” or the “cosmic energy.” What is this? What arguments can you come up with, to justify a belief in this highest Self, often also called, Nothing or even the Real Self?

b. For Kierkegaard, we are “sick unto death.” He examines the sickness as result of the “lack of finitude” as well as a result of the “lack of infinitude.” Obsession with knowledge is an instance of the lack of finitude. First question: what is wrong with seeking knowledge; and what has this to do with lack of finitude? Also for him, people who have lost their “primitiveness” are suffering from a lack of infinitude. Second question: why is the loss of primitiveness a bad thing? What has losing primitiveness to do with lack of infinitude (or with too much of finitude)?

4a. State whether each of the following three claims are true or false for the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). You do not have to give any explanations; just state whether the following are true or false claims. (i) It is stated that in the GENESIS that God gave us dominion over all animals, and that the natural kingdom exist for us. (ii) The GENESIS permits us to over-exploit and lay waste to nature. (iii) The GENESIS would want us to put our own interests above any other species.

b. Some would argue that since the Upanishads is so introverted, and since it does not offer guidance about how to deal with nature, following it is irrelevant as far as the environment goes. Yet, environmentalist would love it if people were informed and molded by the teachings of the Upanishads. Why so?

c. Make use of Confucius’ ethics of reciprocity to formulate an environmental ethics. Can relation with nature be reciprocal? And if so, how?

5a. Hobbes believes that fear, ambition and greed drives humans. Why is this view “psychological egoism.” And what sorts of things can it not explain?

b. Show how these two versions are obviously incorrect:

Version One: We always act in ways that promote our self interest.

Version Two: In everything we do we are always selfishly motivated.

c. Also state: Which version of psychological egoism (but do NOT choose Hobbes’ version) is NOT obviously false? Is this version empirically verifiable?
EXAM TWO: PHIL 201

1a). Libertarians or liberal right would be generally in agreement with our technological, industrial, capitalist societies (TICS) of USA or Europe. They would argue that TICS are on the whole morally right, because they tend to reward those who deserve to be rewarded. Who needs to be rewarded, for liberal right? And why is this view a form of (ethical) egoism? (Answer both questions.)
b). Another reason why for liberal right TICS are desirable is, because

What would Nietzsche say about the liberal claim that TICS promote liberty and personal interest. How would he object to their claim?
c). Nietzsche preaches neither straightforward egoism, nor hedonism. Explain how so.

2a). What is Marx’s “dialectic materialism”? And how does he explain why our natures are so competitive in TICS? (When answering the second question, make use of Marx’s dialectic materialism.)

b). Why would Marx be in favor of technological and industrial societies (so long as they are not capitalist)? And also why would Nietzsche oppose Marx’s stance in support of TICS (while Nietzsche would defend vast wilderness).
c). In what way do liberal right and liberal left uphold equality? And how is Nietzsche not egalitarian?

3a). For Freud there are at least two demands or requirements that have to be met, for modern humanity to find a place in TICS. What are they? And How come meeting these demands is so burdensome to humans, according to Freud?
b). Even though Nietzsche is no fan of TICS, he would reject Freud’s reasons for rejecting TICS. Why would Nietzsche reject Freud’s reasons.

4a). Contrast Freud’s superego with Plato’s rational part of the soul. How would Freud argue against Plato on this? Do you think Freud is right?
b). Perhaps Nietzsche could concede that Freud, with his idea of the superego, has explained why many feel guilty or ashamed in our modern civilization. But Nietzsche would certainly reject that anything like superego could account for most of ancient moralities among many a group, especially if they are noble moralities. Why for Nietzsche did people come up with the (noble) moralities they did?
PHIL 201: Human Nature, Ethics and the Natural Environment

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Office Hours: T. & Th. 9:30 - 10:30 as well as 3:30 - 4:00, and M. 1:30 - 3:00.

2. Paul Ehrlich, Human Natures

Description of this course

Philosophers and thinkers of past and present have come up with many theories about what defines human nature, what makes humans distinctive and unique, what is the essence of being human, what are the most primary of human drives under which all secondary drives can be subsumed, and what, if any, is the "essential" human nature underlying the merely apparent natures of individuals. Although more attention will be expended on recent theories, we will commence this course by examining the religious views of human nature both in the Judea-Christian and non-western traditions. In the final weeks of this course, we discuss the issue of nature versus nurture, by examining the conflict between behaviorists and the evolutionary views of "sociobiologists", especially on this issue: Are the gender roles arbitrary societal rules or are these roles founded on essential differences between men and women? We could then (time permitting) examine Kurzweil's claim that humans are increasingly moving away from nature, and being merged with technology. But my intention is not to examine human nature for its own sake. This course after all meets the designation of an "Ethical Citizenship" course. The question about what are humans is intimately connected to ethics in two ways: First it sheds light on personal ethics, about what humans can and should aspire to be. Secondly, it can shed light on our relationship and responsibilities to the natural environment. Hence the various ideas of human nature will be discussed in conjunction with corresponding ethical views.

Grading assessment

Two tests.................. 70% (35% each)
Final exam................30%
**PHIL 201 and the GE-EC requirement.**

Any course that meets the Ethical Citizenship requirement should enable students to recognize "factors that influence ethical decision-making." And this course will discuss and examine:

i) how precisely various ethical stances or points of view are rooted in certain conceptions of human nature;

ii) what ethically are at stake in adapting the one or the other conception of human nature, and;

iii) how any resolution we propose to contemporary ethical dilemmas or problems often involves us taking a stand on human nature, by tacitly affirming certain conceptions, while repudiating others.

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*Course outline till First Exam (ON March 5):*

**Feb 5** ....... TOPIC ONE: Human Nature in *Genesis* Text 1, pp.43-48

**Feb. 7** ......TOPIC TWO: The tripartite self in Plato. Text: 53-55

**Feb 12** ...... TOPIC THREE: Human nature in the Upanishads (i.e., Hinduism) Text, pp. 11-21


**Feb 19** ...... Topic Five: A Christian view as interpreted by Kierkegaard. (A handout.) See also St. Paul pp.57-62. A brief comparison with Rousseau (pp.110-16) and Hsun-tzu (pp.27-32), especially on the issue of whether humans are good or evil by nature.


Feb 26 ...... Topic Seven: Nietzsche's rejection of psychological egoism. We could begin to examine Nietzsche's claim that life is will to power.

**March 5** ...... **EXAM ONE.**