CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN NATURE
Research seminar
Fall 2019
PhD (open for MA), 4 cp (8 ECTS)


DESCRIPTION
Is talk about ‘human nature’ in “crisis” as Ernst Cassirer (1944) postulated? Is ‘human nature’ even a “Western illusion,” as Marshall Sahlins (2008) recently suggested? Does it exist? If it exists, what does it amount to and why should we care about it? Can sciences tell us what it amounts to? Do humans use it as an ideal, i.e. to ascribe normatively how humans should be? Is it a social tool, used to exclude people on the margins of a society (e.g. poor people) or specific groups (e.g. refugees, ethnic groups, women) by perceiving them as ‘less human’? These and similar questions will concern us in this course.

After a historical and systematic introduction, we will start with Marshall Sahlins (2008) challenging book “The Western illusion of human nature” and then go into material related to the study of human nature in Post-WW2 sciences. We will then diversify our perspectives with selected scientific and philosophical papers from the recent collection “Arguing about human nature” (2013), ed. by S. Downes and E. Machery, and read further material pertinent to issues such as essentialism, genealogy, innateness, nature-nurture, dehumanization, normalcy, enhancement, pluralism versus unity of science.

Ample room will be provided for the specific research interests of students and no specific philosophical background knowledge is necessary. Students will be encouraged to follow their own interest, disciplinary background, material covered. During the course students will have to already formulate their own research proposal, which they develop over the last weeks into their final paper (3000 words) under the guidance of the lecturer. This will also involve triadic feedback groups.

Learning goals: Students will understand the core philosophical issues involved in a broad and interdisciplinary topic such as human nature. They will practice their reading skills, analytic and discussion skills, as well as their research skills.

Requirements: Students are required to read the mandatory material for each class and to participate in oral and written discussions. Students might have to prepare short presentations of the readings, depending on number of students participating. See for more details on rules of participation in the Handout attached to this Syllabus. Because of the research-focused style of the course, it is essential to participate regularly. Students who want to join via online sources can join as auditing students only, given the technical resources allow for weekly auditing.

Deliverables: During the course students will have to already formulate their own research proposal, which they develop over the last weeks into their final paper (3000 words) under the guidance of the lecturer. This will also involve triadic feedback groups. ¹

Grading will be based on the written final paper. Excellent class participation can contribute up to plus one grade (from B to B+ etc) to the final grade.

¹ See: https://ceurplab.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/handout_how-to-do-triadic-feedback-sessions.pdf
**SCHEDULE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WK</th>
<th>TOPIC/CORE READINGS</th>
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<tr>
<td>0)</td>
<td>Zero Week Introduction</td>
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| 1) | Lecture: Human nature from a critical perspective: A historical and systematic introduction.  
   - Siep Stuurman (2012).  
| 2) | A Western illusion?  
| 3) | Post-WWII accounts I: Understanding the beast in us.  
| 4) | Post-WWII accounts II: Darwinian freedom to the rescue.  
   - Pages from Theodosius Dobzhansky (1956). *The Biological Basis of Human Freedom.* |
| 5) | Post-WWII critics:  
   - David Hull (1986). On human nature. |
| 6) | Film seminar on the famous Chomsky-Foucault Live Debate on Human Nature. |
| 7) | Develop your own research focus (use the Downes & Machery volume to select a focus, or any of the other volumes mentioned below). |
| 8) | Topic 1  
   Topic 2 |
| 9) | Topic 3  
   Topic 4 |
| 10) | Topic 5  
   Topic 6 |
| 11) | Topic 7  
   Topic 8 |
| 12) | Triadic feedback groups for your first paper drafts  
   Tue, Dec 04 |
REFERENCES

Introductory

Core books

Handbooks or collections on contemporary debates

Further readings from a critical perspective will be provided on short notice at the online learning course site.

Media resources:

Anthologies with excerpts of classic accounts

Historical accounts of the history of ideas about human nature (from different scholarly perspectives)
GENERAL RULES: PARTICIPATION, PRESENTATIONS, WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

Maria Kronfeldner

Interaction in class should be based on mutual reliability and mutual respect and should result in a fair and open intellectual exchange.

Participation
- Students are required to **attend classes regularly**.
- Students should **participate actively in seminar discussions**.
- Students have to **prepare the required reading** for the course in depth.
- They have to **be able to ask questions and make comments on the required reading** and
- **respond to the presentations** of other students.

Presentations should
- include the **reconstruction of the main arguments of the text** and
- **interpretative remarks** or
- **substantial research questions** for discussion.
- If asked, students also have to **exhibit research skills** (e.g. referring to further literature regarding the topic).
- Students are expected to **prepare and distribute a one-page handout** (strict limit!) that they distribute before their presentation. The tendency in student presentations is to simply accumulate material, especially via powerpoint presentations. Yet, the art of thinking also consists in selecting the relevant from the irrelevant.

Written assignments

Format and length of the written assignments varies. See course syllabus or specification on the e-learning site for this. If a longer term paper is assigned as an argumentative piece, this can be:
- either a careful **critique** of a particular and important argument for a position,
- a **comparison** between competing arguments about alternative solutions to a problem,
- or a **defense** of some particular position/argument against some relevant criticism.

In all these cases, your own argumentation, your critical voice, should be a significant part of the paper. Rule of thumb for the ideal: 20/80 (20% retelling of what others said; 80% your own way of organizing and defending things).

We will **evaluate assignments** according to the criteria in the student record manual:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CEU GRADING SYSTEM</th>
<th>GRADE</th>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>POINT</th>
<th>CREDIT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Outstanding</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>yes</td>
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<td>B+</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>3.00</td>
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<td>C+</td>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>2.67</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>Minimum Pass</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>yes</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<tr>
<th>EUROPEAN CREDIT TRANSFER SYSTEM GRADING SCALE</th>
<th>GRADE</th>
<th>STUDENTS*</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>AT CEU</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Outstanding performance with minor errors</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Above average standard but with some errors</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Generally sound work with a number of notable errors</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>B+/B</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>Fair but with significant shortcomings</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>C/</td>
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<td>E</td>
<td>Performance meets the minimum criteria</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>C+</td>
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<tr>
<td>FX</td>
<td>Some more work required before the credit can be awarded</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>INC</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Considerable further work is required</td>
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* Percentage of successful students normally achieving the grade

Feedback: I will not comment on the content of student presentations during class, but in case students would like more feedback on their class performance, they can see me during office hours or after class. In response to written term paper work, students will receive a feedback sheet, which will translate the CEU grading system into philosophy specific criteria. See next page.

**To stay up-to-date** students need to regularly check the e-learning site of the course!
Feedback-Sheet

Kronfeldner

13.08.2019

Maria Kronfeldner

Seminar:
Piece:
Student ID/Name:

1. General evaluation

Grade (tendency):
(not necessarily the final grade)

2. Comparison to previous pieces (if applicable)

3. What you could improve

4. Further remarks
See also comments in your text.

SPECIFIC CRITERIA (Grade will result from scores on all criteria and also whether one is at the top or low end of a grade with respect to a specific criterion, which is not possible to represent in the grid, though)

A =4.00-3.68, A- =3.67-3.34; B+ =3.33-3.01; B =3.00-2.68; B- =2.67-2.34; C+ = 2.33 (Minimum pass)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research topic, argumentation and research skills</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>A-</th>
<th>B+</th>
<th>B-</th>
<th>C+</th>
<th>C</th>
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<tr>
<td>I. Does the paper have a precise, manageable, meaningful, independent and relevant substantial question, given its topic? Does it have a clear structure and upshot?</td>
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<td>II. Are the arguments precise, coherent and exhibiting argumentative depth?</td>
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<td>III. Are important concepts explicated?</td>
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<td>IV. Does the paper critically engage with the literature in an original way (e.g. anticipating counterarguments, developing an original organization of the material and/or argumentation)?</td>
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<td>V. Is there an indication for adequate comprehension of the relevant literature (incl. are the interpretations charitable)?</td>
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<td>VI. Is the paper mentioning relevant references, and is it clear who speaks (authorial voice)? Is there an indication of mastery of research techniques (e.g. have independently found sources been used)?</td>
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Form and Presentation

VII. Does the paper conform to the standards of academic writing? (quotations, layout, spelling, grammar, punctuation, word count mentioned, academic writing style, labeling of tables and figures, bibliography properly formatted and complete)