



AFFILIATED WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

Renison University College
Affiliated with the University of Waterloo
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Renison University College Land Acknowledgement

With gratitude, we acknowledge that Renison University College is located on the traditional territory of the Attawandaron (also known as Neutral), Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples, which is situated on the Haldimand Tract, the land promised to the Six Nations that includes ten kilometres on each side of the Grand River.

Winter 2021

Course Code: **RS/SDS 420R**

Course Title: **Critical Encounters with Human Nature**

Class Times/Location: Offered remotely in Winter 2021

Instructor: Douglas E. Cowan

Office: REN 315 (not on campus in Winter 2021)

Office Phone: 519-884-4404 (x28607)—rarely, if ever, checked.

Office Hours: Monday/Wednesday, 11:00 am-12:30 pm,
by open videoconference. (Links will be provided in LEARN)

Email: decowan@uwaterloo.ca (This is the best way to reach me)

Course Description

This course explores the puzzling concept of 'human nature,' and asks the question: What does it mean to be 'human'? While the answer may seem obvious, is it? This course considers issues fundamental to human life and our relationship to the world around us, including various theories that have developed to explain these issues. It discusses different ways by which we have defined what it means to be 'human,' both positively and negatively, and how these definitions have shaped our social and cultural relationships. The approach is interdisciplinary and intercultural/interreligious, with emphasis on such themes as self knowledge and community, questions of morality and evil, free will and purpose in human life, the human process of Othering, and the nature of human flourishing and happiness.

Course Objectives and Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

- A. Demonstrate a critical knowledge of a variety of concepts and theories pertaining to 'human nature,' which includes notions of social functioning and personal fulfilment.
- B. Critically apply the course material to the concepts of human 'being,' 'functioning,' and 'fulfilment.'
- C. Through iterative assignments, reflexively begin developing one's own perspective on human nature, the questions of human 'being' that this raises, and the purpose of human existence.

Required Text

There is no one required textbook for this class. For one assignment, students will choose one book from a supplied reading list. All these are readily available in libraries, as used or new copies, and most are available in e-format.

Readings and Viewings Available on LEARN

Information on other required readings or viewings will be posted on the course site in LEARN. When directions pointing students to readings and/or viewings are posted, it is the student's responsibility to access them.

Course Requirements and Assessment

Assessment	Date of Evaluation	Weighting
Discussion Participation	Feb 7; Mar 7; Apr 11	20%
Questions for Discussion	January 25	15%
Initial Position Paper	February 8	20%
Book Response Paper	March 8	20%
Subsequent Position Paper	April 12	25%
Total		100%

Class Participation (20%)

Discussion participation is crucial to success in this course. This is even more so, since we are working together remotely this term. It's simply a fact that we learn more effectively when we are actively engaged with course material.

Each student has been placed into one of five discussion groups on LEARN. For each module, I will post discussion questions related to the reading, viewings, PowerPoints, mini-lectures, or issues derived from your 'Questions for Discussion' assignment. For each of these questions, you are required to

contribute at least one initial post, and at least two response posts to your group. The questions are designed to stimulate your thinking and discussion, not simply to be answered with "I agree" or "I disagree"-type responses. In all cases, you must tell your group (and me) why you think what you do.

That is, a response that says, simply, "I agree" or "I disagree" is not an acceptable level of participation. This is the portion of the course that replaces in-class discussion, so it should be taken with the same level of seriousness. Always think about how your own questions and responses contribute to the furthering the module's discussion.

It is important to keep up with class discussion participation. If students consistently post either their initial contributions or their responses at the last moment, this will be considered inadequate for participation. Similarly, students may not 'do all the discussions at the same time'—either ahead of the module or at the end of the semester. Obviously, this defeats the purpose of the assignment.

I will be assigning marks out of 5 for each of the three months of the course, reserving a further 5 for overall evaluation at the end of the semester.

Questions for Discussion: Due January 25: (15%)

Each student will write a brief paper outlining three (3) questions that you hope to see addressed or discussed during the course, and, more significantly, the reason(s) why these questions are important to you. Put differently, this assignment is not only about what you want to know, but why you want to know it. Each question and its accompanying commentary should be about 350-400 words. Think carefully about these, because they will form the 'question bank' upon which I will draw for a portion of our class discussion, as well as informing both your Initial Position Paper and your Subsequent Response Paper.

Minimum length: 1000 words

Maximum length: 1200 words

Initial Position Paper: Due February 8 (20%)

Each student will prepare an Initial Position Paper addressing three principal questions: (a) What do you think 'human nature' means? What does it mean to be 'human'? (b) How do you know this, or how do you think you know it? (c) What do you think it means to 'critically encounter' human nature? This

is intended as a thought experiment on your part; it is not simply an opinion piece. That is, you cannot simply say, "In my personal opinion..." you must tell me why you think this. You are not expected to do any outside research for this assignment. I am far more interested in what you think... and why.

Minimum length: 1200 words

Maximum length: 1500 words

Book Response: Due March 8: (20%)

Each student will write a response paper to a book chosen from the Suggested Reading List in the Resources section of LEARN. All of these books are works of fiction. The reason for this will become clear throughout the course. Core constituents of the assignment are:

(a) Meaningful engagement with the text itself, but which does not simply repeat the story back to me; that is, do not simply synopsise the plot or the narrative. (b) This is not a 'review' of these books, in the sense of whether you liked it or not, but critical responses to the ideas and arguments presented in the book, in light of the concepts and discussions of our course. Think of yourself entering into an intellectual conversation with the author.

Note well: Any summary or study guide material such as Sparknotes, E-Notes, Cliff Notes, Coles Notes, and the like, as well as material drawn from any essay-for-purchase site are NOT considered appropriate sources. Any use of these will significantly affect one's grade. Oh, and do I have to say anything about Wikipedia? Do I? Really?

If there are movie or television adaptations of your text (e.g., Frankenstein or The Handmaid's Tale), you must use the text version. That is, you must use the book. Under no circumstances may you use the film or television version. Since this is an assignment I use in more than one course, if you have done this in a different course, and there are similar books on the list, you must choose a book other than the one you did in the previous course.

Minimum Length: 1500 words

Maximum Length: 2000 words

Subsequent Position Paper: Due April 12 (25%)

Revisiting (a) your initial position paper, (b) the questions you submitted the second week of class, and (c) referencing course discussions and readings, each student will write a 'subsequent position paper' which, essentially, (i)

answers your own questions and (ii) reconsiders your initial position through the lens of the learnings that have taken place over the course of the semester.

Once again, this is not an opinion piece. All claims must be supported with evidence and argument. "I think..." is not an answer, unless it is followed by some form of "because..." The importance of this paper is not only the ability to articulate and support your own position, but to describe potentially opposing or alternate perspectives, then say why you adopt the views you do in the face of them.

This must not be a restatement of your initial position paper; you may quote from that paper only very briefly (i.e., no more than one or two lines at a time), and in all cases these quotes must be used as a platform to advance the argument you are making in this paper. Similarly, do not simply answer your own questions, without considering your initial position paper.

As much as anything, both papers bookend an educational process that asks you to think about what you believe (and why), and to reflect critically on how your views have changed (and to what). Or not, and, if not, why not? Remember: simply stating your position is not sufficient. Hint: You may find it helpful (a) to consider these questions through the lens of one of the key topics in the course, or (b) to contest a position with which you disagree.

Minimum length: 2400 words

Maximum length: 3000 words

See the PowerPoint, RS_SDS_420_Assignments for Tips and Hints on doing well.

Course Outline

Please note that since much of the class discussion is guided by the questions generated by each particular course offering, this is a general outline of the course. For more specific guidance throughout the course, refer to the LEARN modules.

Week	Date	Topic
1	Jan 11-17	Introduction to the Course What is 'human nature' and how do we know?
2	Jan 18-24	'Properly Human Questions' Storytelling and Human Nature
3	Jan 25-31	Beginning at the Beginning: Religion and the Human Story
4	Feb 1-7	Religious Stories and Human Being Viewing: <i>The Tibetan Book of the Dead</i>
5	Feb 8-14	Questions of Meaning and Purpose: What does 'being human' actually mean? Initial Position paper discussion
	Feb 15	Family Day
	Feb 16-19	Reading Week
6	Feb 22-28	How do we live together? Human 'Being' and the Question of Morality
7	Mar 1-7	When bad things happen... Human 'Nature' and the Question of Evil
8	Mar 8-14	Living our lives... Human Flourishing and Questions of Happiness
9	Mar 17-21*	Sharing the planet with others... Human 'Nature' and the Ethic of Responsibility
10	Mar 22-28	Secular Frameworks of Meaning I: Starting with the human...
11	Mar 29-Apr 4	Secular Frameworks of Meaning II: The Example of Eupraxophy
12	Apr 5-14*	What Next? The Future of Human 'Nature.'

Late Work

Assignments turned in past the due date will be assessed a penalty of 10% per day late, including the day on which you turn it in. If a paper is due on Friday and you turn it in Sunday, that is a 20% penalty. With the exception of drafts, turn in all assignments through the appropriate LEARN Dropbox;

do not simply email them to me. I only grant extensions for reasons of medical and family emergency, and documentation is required in both instances. See the University of Waterloo guidelines on Covid-19 to assist you in this. Extensions beyond the end-of-semester require that you complete Request for Incomplete form, available at the Renison Registrar's Office, and supporting documentation may be required.

Attendance Policy

See policy above on Discussion Participation.

Final Examination Policy

There is NO final examination in this course.

Accommodation for Illness or Unforeseen Circumstances:

The instructor follows the practices of the University of Waterloo in accommodating students who have documented reasons for missing quizzes or exams. See

http://www.registrar.uwaterloo.ca/students/accom_illness.html

Academic Integrity:

In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo community are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility. See the [UWaterloo Academic Integrity webpage \(https://uwaterloo.ca/academic-integrity/\)](https://uwaterloo.ca/academic-integrity/) and the [Arts Academic Integrity webpage \(https://uwaterloo.ca/arts/current-undergraduates/student-support/ethical-behaviour\)](https://uwaterloo.ca/arts/current-undergraduates/student-support/ethical-behaviour) for more information.

Discipline: Every student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for their own actions. [Check the Office of Academic Integrity (<https://uwaterloo.ca/academic-integrity>) for more information.] A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about "rules" for group work/collaboration, should seek guidance from the course professor, academic advisor, or Academic Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties are imposed under the University of Waterloo Policy 71 – Student Discipline. For information on categories of offences and types of penalties, students should refer to [Policy 71 - Student Discipline \(https://uwaterloo.ca/secretariat/policies-procedures-guidelines/policy-71\)](https://uwaterloo.ca/secretariat/policies-procedures-guidelines/policy-71). For typical penalties check [Guidelines for the](#)

[Assessment of Penalties \(https://uwaterloo.ca/secretariat-general-counsel/policies-procedures-guidelines/guidelines/guidelines-assessment-penalties\)](https://uwaterloo.ca/secretariat-general-counsel/policies-procedures-guidelines/guidelines/guidelines-assessment-penalties).

Students should also be aware that copyright laws in Canada prohibit reproducing more than 10% of any work without permission from its author, publisher, or other copyright holder. Waterloo's policy on Fair Dealing is available here: <https://uwaterloo.ca/copyright-guidelines/fair-dealing-advisory> Violation of Canada's Copyright Act is a punishable academic offence under Policy 71 – Student Discipline.

Grievance: A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read [Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances, Section 4 \(https://uwaterloo.ca/secretariat-general-counsel/policies-procedures-guidelines/policy-70\)](https://uwaterloo.ca/secretariat-general-counsel/policies-procedures-guidelines/policy-70). When in doubt, please be certain to contact the department's administrative assistant, who will provide further assistance.

Appeals: A decision made or penalty imposed under Policy 70, Student Petitions and Grievances (other than a petition) or Policy 71, Student Discipline may be appealed if there are grounds. Students who believe they have grounds for an appeal should refer to [Policy 72, Student Appeals \(https://uwaterloo.ca/secretariat-general-counsel/policies-procedures-guidelines/policy-72\)](https://uwaterloo.ca/secretariat-general-counsel/policies-procedures-guidelines/policy-72).

Academic Integrity Office (uWaterloo):
<http://uwaterloo.ca/academic-integrity/>

Accommodation for Students with Disabilities:

Note for Students with Disabilities: The [AccessAbility Services](#) office, located on the first floor of the Needles Hall extension (NH 1401), collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities, without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with the AAS office at the beginning of each academic term.

Intellectual Property. Students should be aware that this course contains the intellectual property of the instructor, which can include:

- lecture handouts and presentations (e.g., PowerPoint slides)

- lecture content, both spoken and written (and any audio or video recording thereof)
- questions from various types of assessments (e.g., assignments, quizzes, tests, final exams)
- work protected by copyright (i.e., any work authored by the instructor)

Making available the intellectual property of instructors without their express written consent (e.g., uploading lecture notes or assignments to an online repository) is considered theft of intellectual property and subject to disciplinary sanctions as described in Policy 71 – Student Discipline. Students who become aware of the availability of what may be their instructor’s intellectual property in online repositories are encouraged to alert the instructor.

Mental Health Support

All of us need a support system. The faculty and staff in Arts encourage students to seek out mental health supports if they are needed.

On Campus

- Counselling Services: counselling.services@uwaterloo.ca / 519-888-4567 xt 32655
- MATES: one-to-one peer support program offered by Federation of Students (FEDS) and Counselling Services
- Health Services Emergency service: located across the creek from Student Life Centre

Off campus, 24/7

- Good2Talk: Free confidential help line for post-secondary students. Phone: 1-866-925-5454
- Grand River Hospital: Emergency care for mental health crisis. Phone: 519-749-4300 ext. 6880
- Here 24/7: Mental Health and Crisis Service Team. Phone: 1-844-437-3247
- OK2BME: set of support services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning teens in Waterloo. Phone: 519-884-0000 extension 213

Full details can be found online at the Faculty of ARTS [website](#)
 Download [UWaterloo and regional mental health resources \(PDF\)](#)
 Download the [WatSafe app](#) to your phone to quickly access mental health support information.

A respectful living and learning environment for all

Everyone living, learning, and working at Renison University College is expected to contribute to creating a respectful environment free from harassment and discrimination.

If you experience or witness harassment or discrimination, seek help. You may contact Credence & Co., Renison's external anti-harassment and anti-discrimination officers, by email (info@credenceandco.com) or by phone (519-883-8906). Credence & Co. is an independent K-W based firm which works with organizations toward thriving workplace cultures, including professional coaching, consulting, facilitation, policy development, conflict mediation and ombudsperson functions.

Harassment is unwanted attention in the form of disrespectful comments, unwanted text messages or images, degrading jokes, rude gestures, unwanted touching, or other behaviours meant to intimidate.

According to the Ontario Human Rights Code, discrimination means unequal or different treatment causing harm, whether intentional or not, because of race, disability, citizenship, ethnic origin, colour, age, creed, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, or other personal characteristic.