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. Our active work toward reconciliation takes place across our campuses through research, learning, teaching, community building and outreach, and is centralized within the work of our Truth and Reconciliation Working Group and the University of Waterloo’s Office of Indigenous Relations.

Winter 2022

Course Code: RS/SDS 420R
Course Title: Critical Encounters with Human Nature

Class Times/Location: M/W 1:00-2:20, REN 0402

Instructor: Douglas E. Cowan
Office: REN 315 (ask me for directions, though see below).
Office Phone: 519-884-4404 (x28607—very rarely checked).
Office Hours: Monday/Wednesday (11:30 am-12:30 pm, sort of).
While I will be on campus during these times, I would prefer to consult with students virtually. Besides being a more Covid-conscious option for everyone, this allows me (a) to be more flexible in terms of your schedule, and (b) to give you more direct attention in terms of particular questions and issues that you may have.

Email: doug.cowan@uwaterloo.ca
(This is always the best way to reach me. Please note that while I will make every effort to respond within a few hours during the week—within reason, of course—I do not read university email on the weekends or on holidays.)

Cross-listed course
Please note that a cross-listed course will count in all respective averages no matter under which rubric it has been taken. For example, an SDS/RS cross-list will count in an SDS major’s average, even if the course was taken under the Religious Studies rubric.
Course Description
This course explores the puzzling concept of ‘human nature,’ and asks the question: What does it actually mean to be ‘human’? The answer may seem obvious, but 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 particular assignment, students will choose their book from a supplied reading list. All choices are readily available in libraries, as used or new copies, and most are available in e-format.

Readings and Viewings Available on LEARN
Required readings, videos, and other material will be available on or through LEARN as necessary. When a reading or a video is linked in LEARN for viewing outside of class, it is your responsibility to access it. For readings, I definitely recommend that, at the very least, you download them to your device rather than read them online. You will benefit from some materials even more if you print them out. For videos, please ensure you have watched them before the class indicated. Slide decks used to support lectures will be available on LEARN after the class, but it is important to remember that these will not and cannot replace attendance. (If there is a discrepancy between a slide deck and the syllabus, the syllabus takes precedence.)

Course Requirements and Assessment

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<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Date of Evaluation</th>
<th>Weighting</th>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion Participation</td>
<td>After weeks 4, 8, and 12</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questions for Discussion</td>
<td>Sept 14</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Initial Position Paper</td>
<td>Sept 30</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book Response Paper</td>
<td>Nov 4</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subsequent Position Paper</td>
<td>Dec 6</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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Class Participation (20%)
Discussion participation is crucial to success in this course. It’s simply a fact that active engagement leads to more effective learning. In addition to in-class participation, each student has been placed into one of a number of discussion groups on LEARN.

For each week, I will post discussion prompts related to readings, viewings, lectures, or class discussions. For each of these prompts, you are required to contribute at least one initial post, and at least two response posts to your group. The prompts are designed to stimulate your thinking, not simply 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 not much more than “I agree” or “I disagree” is not an acceptable level of participation. This portion of the course supplements in-class discussion, so it should be taken with the same level of seriousness. Always think about how your own contributions and responses work to further the topic of discussion. I evaluate posts and threads for both quality and quantity.

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. If students only post initially, but make no effort to respond to their group-mates, this too will be considered insufficient. Lastly, 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 September 14: (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 could 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 Suggested maximum: 1200-1300 words

Initial Position Paper: Due September 30 (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. I will go over this assignment in more depth in class.
Minimum length: 1200 words Suggested maximum: 1500-1800
Book Response: Due November 4: (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 restatement of 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 and through the lens of the course.

Note well: Any summary or study guide material such as Sparknotes, E-Notes, Cliff Notes, Coles Notes, Wikipedia, 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. 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: 1800 words Suggested maximum Length: 2000-2200 words

Subsequent Position Paper: Due December 6 (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.

Think about this as a capstone essay for the course, but, once again, it 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 Suggested maximum: 3000 words
For all assignments, see the slide deck, “RS_SDS_420_Assignments” for tips and hints on doing well. Please pay particular attention to the material on minimums and maximums.

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.

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<th>Module</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<td>0</td>
<td>Sept 7</td>
<td>Introduction to the Course</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sept 12-14</td>
<td>What is ‘human nature’ and how do we know? “Properly Human Questions” *Questions for Discussion paper due Sept 14</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Sept 19-21</td>
<td>Beginning at the Beginning: Religion and the Human Story</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Oct 3-5</td>
<td>Questions of Meaning and Purpose: What does ‘being human’ actually mean?</td>
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<td>Oct 10-14</td>
<td>Thanksgiving Holiday/Reading Week</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Oct 17-19</td>
<td>How do we live together? Human ‘Being’ and the Question of Morality</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Oct 24-26</td>
<td>When bad things happen... Human ‘Nature’ and the Question of Evil</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Oct 31-Nov 2</td>
<td>Living our lives... Human Flourishing and Questions of Happiness *Book Response due Nov 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Nov 7-9</td>
<td>Sharing the planet with others... Human ‘Nature’ and the Ethic of Responsibility</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Nov 14-16</td>
<td>Secular Frameworks of Meaning I: Starting with the human...</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Nov 21-23</td>
<td>Secular Frameworks of Meaning II: The Example of Eupraxophy</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Dec 5</td>
<td>Catch up and Final Discussions *Subsequent Position Paper due Dec 6</td>
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Late or Incomplete 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.

Policy on Plagiarism
“Policy 71’s glossary defines plagiarism, in part, as “presenting, whether intentionally or not, the ideas, expression of ideas or work of others (whether attributed or anonymous) as one’s own in any work submitted whether or not for grading purposes”...

The Vice-President Academic and Dean has the authority to assess instances of plagiarism and the resultant penalties that are raised by an instructor. An instructor can propose a grade penalty to the Vice-President Academic and Dean, who will decide whether to accept the penalty or initiate a formal inquiry.”

For additional information on how plagiarism is dealt with at Renison, review the policy from where the above text is copied: Policy 71 - Student Discipline.

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 at uwwaterloo.ca/copyright-guidelines/fair-dealing-advisory Violation of Canada’s Copyright Act is a punishable academic offence under Policy 71 – Student Discipline.

Bottom line? Do your own work.

Electronic Device Policy
Students who choose to use electronic devices to support their learning may do so provided that the individuals in the class are not disturbed or prohibited from their own learning. Electronic devices should be used for the purposes of supplementing the learning experience and focus on topics being discussed in class. Phones should be kept on silent during the class.

Attendance Policy
I expect that everyone will be in class every day. It is simply the only way to do well in a course such as this. If you are aware of an upcoming absence, it’s your responsibility to let me know in advance so we can make arrangements for that.

Communication Policy
Email, using the uWaterloo provided email address, is the approved method of communication for Renison. The Office 365 email that you use to login using your WatIAM login and password is secure and confidential. Take caution when forwarding your WatIAM email to an external email service as confidential information forwarded to a third-party provider could be a data security breach and violation of FIPPA (Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act) under which all students, staff, and faculty are bound by law.
Please note that once you have successfully completed this course, we may email you about subsequent courses in this subject offered in future terms. If you do not want to be notified about subsequent courses, please email cls@uwaterloo.ca.

**Final Examination Policy**
There is NO final examination in this course. (Again, you’re welcome.)

**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 www.registrar.uwaterloo.ca/students/accom_illness.html

**Academic Integrity, Grievance, Discipline, Appeals and Note for Students with Disabilities**

**Academic Integrity:** 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 UWWaterloo Academic Integrity webpage at uwaterloo.ca/academic-integrity and the Arts Academic Integrity webpage at uwaterloo.ca/arts/current-undergraduates/student-support/ethical-behaviour for more information.

Renison University College is committed to the view that when a problem or disagreement arises between a faculty member and a student every effort should be made to resolve the problem through mutual and respectful negotiation. Most issues are resolved by a student/faculty meeting to discuss differences of opinion. It is only after this stage, when a common understanding or agreement is not obtained that further actions listed below could be taken.

**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 website at 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 or academic advisor. 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. For typical penalties check the Guidelines for the Assessment of Penalties.

**Grievance:** A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of their university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read Policy 70, Student Petitions and Grievances, Section 4. When in doubt, please be certain to contact the Department’s administrative assistant, or Academic Advisor, 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 is a ground. A student who believes they have a ground for an appeal should refer to Policy 72, Student Appeals.
**Academic Integrity Office (uWaterloo):** The website can be found at [uwaterloo.ca/academic-integrity/](https://uwaterloo.ca/academic-integrity/)

**Accommodation for Students with Disabilities**

*AccessAbility Services* is located in Needles Hall, Room 1401, and 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 AccessAbility Services at the beginning of each academic term.

Students are encouraged to register with AccessAbility Services (AAS) at the start of each term if they require accommodations due to a disability. However, some students not connected to AAS may require accommodations later in the term. In that case, you should immediately consult with your instructor and/or your Academic Advisor.

**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](mailto:counselling.services@uwaterloo.ca): counselling.services@uwaterloo.ca / 519-888-4096
- **MATES**: one-to-one peer support program offered by the Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association (WUSA) and Counselling Services
- **Health Services** – Student Medical Clinic: 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
• **Empower Me**: Confidential, multilingual, culturally sensitive, faith inclusive mental health and wellness service.
• Grand River Hospital: Emergency care for mental health crisis. Phone: 844-437-3247
• **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. Email: ok2bme@kwcounselling.com Phone: 519-884-0000

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.

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.

If you feel that you are experiencing the above from any member of the Renison community (students, staff, or faculty), you may contact Melissa Knox, Renison’s external anti-harassment and anti-discrimination officer, by email ([mnknox@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:mnknox@uwaterloo.ca)) or by phone or text (226-753-5669). Melissa is an employment and human rights lawyer and part-time Assistant Crown Attorney for the Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General. Melissa is experiences in case management, discipline and complaints processes, and works with organizations across Canada to foster safe, respectful, and inclusive work and learning environments through policy development, educational workshops, conflict mediation and dispute resolution, and organizational culture audits.

For additional information see Renison’s [Harassment, Discrimination, and Abuse](#) policy.