

Philosophy of Human Nature

Phil 201, Sec. F04, Summer 2026, Session I (May 18 - June 26)

Location: Interwebs

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[Zoom office](#)

“Philosophy is thinking really hard about the most important questions and trying to bring analytic clarity to both the questions and the answers.” — Marilyn McCord Adams in *Philosophy Bites*

“...doing philosophy ought to be *fun*.” — Paul Grice, “Reply to Richards” in *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality*

Course Description

What does it mean to be a human being? That’s kind of a big question, and a lot of very smart people have tried answering it in various ways.

What is philosophy? That’s kind of a big question, and a lot of very smart people have tried answering it in various ways.

In this class, we’re going to tackle the question “what does it mean to be a human being” by doing a lot of philosophy. There are different ways of doing philosophy, so the first order of business for this class is to get a handle on ways of doing philosophy. (Caveat: the way in which I do philosophy is different from others, so go out there and experience the rich variety that is philosophy!)

We find in Plato and Descartes a view of human beings that can be summed up like this: we are rational, moral creatures that happened to be located in particular bodies at a particular time in a particular place, though this doesn’t make a big difference to who and what we are. Throughout the course, we’ll consider challenges to this view on several fronts.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the term, students will be able to:

1. explain competing models of conceiving of human beings involving philosophical concepts of soul/mind and body;
2. relate these models to contemporary concerns;
3. describe the implications of competing accounts of human nature for related topics, including freedom, sociality, and dignity;
4. recognize the relevance of concepts from the Catholic intellectual tradition — including God, the soul, and freedom — to conceptions of human nature.

Course Texts

All readings are linked in the syllabus.

Course Work

Here's a handy checklist for the assignments for the course:

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Graded (scores an A-F):	Discussion boards	Discussion boards	Discussion boards	Discussion boards	Discussion boards	Online Selves
Graded (scores an A-F):	<i>Nothing!</i>	Cartesian Memes	<i>Nothing!</i>	Social Existence Reflection	<i>Nothing!</i>	Online Selves
Credit (did you do it? You get the points):	Philosophy health test	Podcast / blog sharing	Free will psych test	News items & blogs on isolation and loneliness	Emotion podcasts/ blogs	Pop science articles on embodied cognition

All work is due by Saturdays at 11:59 pm of the respective week. The *one exception* to this is if your group is coming up with discussion questions. *Those are due by Wednesday at noon.* (See below for details.)

1. Discussion boards

There is a lot of information in this section. Please read it through to the end!

Each week, the designated groups will post **three** quality questions per week. Then, each student will post one reply to a question and two replies to other posts. These posts should be quality posts. What do I mean by a “quality” post? Here is my rubric for evaluating posts:

	High quality (A) (i.e. all four elements are included in the post)	Good quality (B) (three of the four are included)	Acceptable quality (C) (two of the four are included)	In need of improvement (D) (one of the four is included)
Compliment	X	X	X	X
Comment	X	X	X	
Connection	X	X		

Question	X			
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It follows [this framework for thinking about your discussion posts](#) (skip down to p. 3): “3C’s and a Q”. Each post starts with a *compliment*, followed by a *comment*, then a *connection* to something else (some other idea, an example in the world, a personal example, a thought experiment, etc), and ends with a *question* to keep the conversation going. But let me add this caveat: if it’s clear that the post satisfies the requirements only nominally (e.g. you have a question but it’s clearly not one into which you put much thought), your grade gets penalized accordingly.

What do I mean by a “quality question”? This one’s a bit harder. It’s easier to start with what’s *not* a quality question:

1. “What is the author saying here?”
2. “Do you think the author is right?”

In general, questions that ask “what does this mean?” aren’t quality questions. (READ THE IMPORTANT QUALIFICATION LATER ON THIS PAGE.) Quality Questions are questions that presuppose readers get what’s going on (more or less) and ask students to reflect and think more deeply about how the ideas are relevant to them and their view of the world. They are open-ended questions, often connecting with concrete experiences in people’s lives. Here is an example of a Quality Question:

EXAMPLE: Descartes tells us that we don’t know anything about the world around us because we could always be wrong. We do know stuff about math because, once proven, the math can’t be wrong. How useful is this theory of knowledge in practical everyday settings, like asking for directions or cooking mac & cheese? Is that a mark in favor of or against his theory? How did you come to that conclusion?

(I know that’s, like, three questions. But sometimes a few questions in a row are needed to get to the big ideas.)

IMPORTANT QUALIFICATION: It is always ok to post a question asking what the philosopher is getting at. But these questions do not count as part of a group’s Quality Questions.

Quality questions are also graded! Here is the rubric:

High quality (A)	Good quality (B)	Acceptable quality (C)
Question requires students to reflect on what they know and apply or synthesize that knowledge in a response. <i>Tip:</i> It’s useful to ask your classmates to reflect on connections between the material and events in their lives or their majors or other areas of knowledge. Be sure to structure	Question requires that students form an opinion; however, the opinion formed doesn’t require synthesis or application of knowledge from the issues under discussion for the week.	Question does not connect with issues under discussion for the week but does require that students form an opinion.

the question in a way that allows for deep reflection. E.g. not just “what do you think?” but “what do you think and why do you think that?”		
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Every week, two groups will be the *Discussion Leaders*. The job of the Discussion Leaders is to read the assigned texts and post 2 *Quality Questions* about the readings by **Wednesday at noon** of that week. I will grade and make tweaks (if necessary). I will then post those questions by Wednesday afternoon. The link for submitting them is on Canvas. The entire class (*except* Discussion Leaders) will then post *three responses*: *one* in response to a question and *two* in response to other posts by **Saturday at 11:59 pm**. The groups and dates for posting Quality Questions are already set up. Connect with your group a few days before the Quality Questions need to go up.

To sum up...

1. Groups will post questions for their module by Wednesday at noon.
2. Everyone (except members of the posting groups) will post one response to the question by Saturday night.
3. Everyone (except members of the posting groups) will comment/respond to two posts by Saturday night.

Purpose: Discussing ideas is at the heart of what it is to do philosophy. I try to make my classes very discussion-heavy. For an online, asynchronous class, discussion boards seem to be a good way of developing philosophical ideas in a public-ish sort of way. *Satisfies outcomes 2, 3, 4*

2. Cartesian Memes

In this assignment, you will create two memes (or gifs or short videos) illustrating two elements of the Cartesian Package that we’ve developed in the second module. If you need some inspiration, go [here](#) or [here](#)! If you need resources for creating memes, try [here](#) or [here](#)! In a 4-page paper (*not including the memes* — i.e. each meme is followed by 2 pages of philosophical analysis), please explain:

- ❑ the elements of the Cartesian Package that your memes are meant to exemplify
 - ❑ To do this, use examples, analogies — whatever! — to convey the content of the elements you’re expressing through your memes. The goal here is to show me that you know what you’re talking about.
- ❑ how your memes capture those elements.
 - ❑ To do this, analyze the meme you’ve created and connect it to elements of the Cartesian Package you’re discussing. Write this part as if I’m completely oblivious to how the meme connects with the philosophical idea.

Purpose: This is an opportunity to show me that you understand the Cartesian Package and that you can convey that information in interesting and novel ways. *Satisfies outcomes 1*

3. Social existence reflection

Read the prologue of *Invisible Man* ([pages 3-12 in this PDF](#)). Also check out this [Crash Course video](#) on it and this [Course Hero video](#). In the story, the narrator is a physical, flesh-and-blood human. But because he is a Black man in America in the 1950s, he is socially invisible.

We've all felt socially invisible to different extents in our lives. It might not have been as severe as those of the narrator in *Invisible Man*, but that doesn't take away from the fact of social invisibility. It's a part of social life that we will be invisible to certain people at certain times. You might experience invisibility by your peers, a coach, a teacher, or even politicians (i.e. the needs of you and your community aren't reflected in decisions made by your political representatives).

Using the ideas and concepts from module 4, *analyze your experiences of social invisibility*.

Questions include (but are not limited to):

- What does it mean to be invisible?
- If people can be socially invisible, can they also be socially *hyper-visible*?
- Can anyone ever be truly socially invisible?
- What kinds of cultural and social narratives render a person socially invisible?
- Is social invisibility relative to a social mask we put on?
- Can we choose social invisibility or is it always forced upon us?

Your paper should be **four pages**.

Purpose: Typically, existence is thought of in physical terms: I exist and Santa doesn't. But we're social beings, too. This paper is a chance to consider what happens when we consider existence in purely (or mostly) social terms. Furthermore, I want you to be very conscientious about how you go about arguing for your conclusions. I want more than a description of your experiences. I want you to talk about them using concepts from module 4. *Satisfies outcomes 1, 2, 3, 4*

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS: This is a pretty traditional philosophy paper. I will look for *reasons in support of your views*. If you think X is right or true, give me reasons for thinking that X is right or true.

4. Online Selves

It's easiest if we tackle this in two parts.

First the format.

There are a number of formats for presenting your ideas. You can create a podcast, visual essay, a slideshow, a TikTok, a video, or a collection of memes with analysis (so that the questions you need to answer get answered). You can also do a collection of these. E.g. you can answer some parts using a collection of memes and others using a video essay. If there are others that you have in mind, let me know! I'm open to you conveying this information in new and novel ways. Get creative! For example, one student submitted his project as a series of emails between himself today and himself 12 years ago. **If you choose audio and/or video submissions, please keep them to a maximum of 10 minutes.**

Second, the content.

In this course, we've taken a look at a number of different themes: mind and body, reason and emotion, free will and determinism, self and culture. In this project, you're going to use a number of these themes to do some reflecting about your *online self*. And you'll use concepts that we've learned in class to do your analysis.

First, please take a look at your online habits

...including (but not limited to):

- Patterns of posting and sharing on social media and messaging sites, e.g. Facebook, Twitter/X, Pinterest, Instagram, Snapchat, Tik Tok, Twitch, Reddit, Discord, WhatsApp, etc.
- The kinds of things you watch on Netflix, YouTube, Hulu, Amazon, Disney+, HBO, etc
- Music streaming services you use and the music you listen to (and any playlists you curate)
- Websites you visit regularly
- Online news sources you tend to read

A good way of getting an overview of your online habits is to look through your browser history. If you can, see how much time you spend online in a day — that includes not only your laptop or desktop but also any mobile devices you regularly use. You might also look up information about how people present themselves on social media (for example, [this](#).) **Please communicate 6-8 observations you have of your online self.**

Important note! After completing this exercise, previous students have commented that they should spend less time on social media. I'll tell you what my therapists tell me: don't "should" on yourself. It's not a question of whether you should or shouldn't spend more or less time on social media. It's a question of whether that helps you live the sort of life *you* want to have—whether it helps you live a meaningful life or the kind of life you want to live.

Second, think about how our online selves relate to our in-real-life selves.

Recall that Goffman describes us as wearing masks. **Do you believe the in-real-life you and the online you are different masks you wear? Why? How is your being embodied relevant to your online self?**

Third, according to Bruner, cultural narratives influence our personal narratives.

Our personal narratives help us find ourselves in a larger social context. In other words, the kinds of stories I tell about myself (e.g. "I'm a generally fair-minded person who is politically progressive and both these things are important to me") help me find "my people" — my social group of like-minded folks that I can get along with. **Given your online habits, what cultural narratives are true of you? Does this reveal anything about yourself to yourself?**

Fourth, the hypothesis of extended mind says that the external world is a part of your mind.

As some public figures have recently learned, the Internet never forgets. Instagram, Facebook, and Google will remind you of what you posted (or pictures you took) on a specific day, whether it's good, bad, or indifferent. Read [this New Yorker article](#) "How Social Media Shapes Our Identity." **What impact do you think social media has for our understanding of ourselves?**

Does social media act as part of our extended mind, tracking who we are over time, or does it act as a hindrance to our own growth by constantly reminding us of the past?

Fifth, AI companions are growing in popularity.

Read this [New York Times article](#) sharing the stories of three people who have fallen in love with AI chatbots. (If that link doesn't work, [try this one](#).) Reflecting on the relevance of emotion for reasoning and our embodiment, **are people making a mistake (that is, are they being irrational) when saying they have fallen in love with an AI chatbot? Are AI chatbots the kinds of things that can be loved? Why or why not?** (Other relevant questions include: is an AI chatbot a person? Does something need a body in order to be loved? Does love require choice and if so can a chatbot *choose* to continue or break off a relationship?)

Finally, **please post a 150-word summary of two or three of the above questions** to our discussion board for module 6 and respond to **two other posts**. *Alternatively*, you can use your reflections from the "[Extended Mind Explorer](#)" in place of your summary.

Purpose: Philosophy is all about discussion and trading ideas. This exercise is to allow students to use what they've learned over this session to explore ideas about mind, body, and society.

Satisfies outcomes 1, 2, 3, 4.

5. Weekly sharing

Every week, you are tasked with finding something online — a blog post, podcast, TED talk, video, whatever — relating to the topic of the week's module. But *please* do not link to any encyclopedia articles. The point is to find interesting extensions and applications of the ideas we discuss, not overviews of the philosophical literature. Post it to the course discussion board for the relevant module. Include with it a 1 or 2 sentence summary of the content of what you post. If you do it, you get the 1 point per week.

Purpose: The interwebs is an amazing place chock full of great information about philosophical ideas. The aim of this assignment is to encourage you to go explore some of what the interwebs has to offer for philosophical insights. *Satisfies outcome 2.*

Grading Scale

Here is how your final grade is calculated:

Discussion boards: 15%

Cartesian Memes: 25%

Social existence reflection: 25%

Online Selves Project: 25%

Weekly sharing: 10%

Here are the numerical and letter values.

Letter	Number range	Qualitative description
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A	94-100	Superior performance. Has mastered all class material.
A-	90-93	
B+	87-89	
B	83-86	Has a very good grasp on the class material
B-	80-82	
C+	77-79	
C	73-76	Has an adequate grasp on the class material
C-	70-72	
D+	67-69	Has not demonstrated a sufficient grasp of the class material
D	63-66	
D-	60-62	
F	<60	Has not demonstrated any grasp of the class material

AI Policy

Students are not allowed to use an LLM (or other AI) to write their papers or discussion board posts. This is because the learning of the material is in the writing and reflecting. That's where you develop your skills. Think of it this way: suppose you received a letter from your parents sharing how much they love and value you. Now suppose you learned they cranked it out using ChatGPT. I think anyone would be pretty upset. Why? Because the writing is a reflection of what they think and who they are. Similarly, your professors (or me, at least) are upset when students use an LLM to write a paper because we don't get a sense of what you think or who you are.

Perhaps more importantly, you're at Gonzaga to learn and grow into being a well-formed person. Doing that requires reflection and writing. Using AI

Course Schedule

Module 1: Introduction to philosophical methodology

In this module, you will be introduced (and reintroduced) to some of the tools we'll need to do philosophy. Some old friends from critical thinking will include some inductive and deductive patterns. Some of our new friends will be conceptual distinctions that are useful for getting clear

on a topic or for identifying objections that might have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Read

- Ann Barker, "[An Introduction to Philosophical Thinking](#)"
- Massimo Pigliucci, "[Reflective Equilibrium](#)"

Online activities

- [How to Ask Good Questions](#)
- [John Locke on Personal Identity](#)
- [Ship of Theseus](#)
- [Thinking about the "true self"](#)

Discussion Boards

- [Play with the The Ship of Theseus](#). Post your reflection on the last question to the discussion board. Reply to two other students.

Sharing

- Take the [Philosophical Health Test](#). Engage in some reflective equilibrium about your results and post both your results and a one-page reflection!

Module 2: The Cartesian Package

In this module, you will develop the "Cartesian Package" of human nature. This Package has four elements: minds are disembodied, we are as free as we could possibly be, we are rational (as opposed to emotional), and we are asocial (i.e. being a social animal is merely incidental to being human).

Read

- We're going a bit heavy on the reading this week. Descartes is a foundational figure in Western thought and culture, and students should have the opportunity to read it first hand: [Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy](#) Meditations I (all), II (all), III (all), IV (all), VI (read section (3) on p. 29 in the text hyperlinked at the start of this paragraph).
 - "That's a lot of reading!" You're right. So if you can't do it all, then I'll ask you to read *at least* Meditation II and IV. With that and the rest of the materials, you'll be ok.
- Also read this interesting piece: [Was One of Descartes' Most Original Ideas Previously Articulated by a Catholic Nun?](#)

Online activities (optional, but recommended)

- [Three minute philosophy on Descartes](#) (less serious)
- [BBC "In Our Time" podcast on Descartes](#) (more serious)
- [1977 interview with Bernard Williams about Descartes](#) (serious and highly recommended)

Discussion board

- Groups 1 and 2 generate questions.
- All others respond to one question and two student posts.

Sharing

- Find a blog post, newspaper article, etc. either discussing some element of the Cartesian Package or presupposing/assuming some element of the Cartesian Package.

Assessment

- [Check your understanding here](#)
- Create and share [two memes](#) on different elements of the Cartesian Package.

Module 3: Free will

In this module, you will learn about the major views around free will. There has been, as you might imagine, **a lot** of work in this area by philosophers, neuroscientists, and psychologists. A course module — heck even a whole course — isn't enough to scratch the surface of what's been discussed.

Read

- P.F. Strawson, "[Freedom and Resentment](#)," read pp. 149-159 ([here's a brief overview](#) of the ideas in this reading)
- Wenzel and Marchal, "[Chinese Perspectives on Free Will](#)"

Online activities

- Watch [this video from Crash Course Philosophy](#) for an introduction to the debate of free will and determinism
- Watch [this video from School of Life](#) talking about Spinoza's worldview and his determinism.
- Learn about [Nietzsche on amor fati](#).
- Optional but recommended:
 - Listen to this interesting podcast: [Hi Phi Nation's "Freedom and Hostile Design"](#)
 - Watch [this short video](#) discussing a neuroscience experiment that reportedly shows free will is baloney.

Discussion board

- Groups 3 and 4 generate questions.
- All others respond to one question and two student posts.

Sharing

- [Take the free will and determinism inventory](#) to get a sense of your attitudes around free will. Share your results and your reflections.

Module 4: Social character of humans

In this module, you'll learn about how humans are interestingly social. Descartes, as we saw, didn't have much to say about the social character of being human, but it's a theme going all the way back to Aristotle. For Aristotle, we are "naturally political animals" — that is, there is no

being human without being part of a social group.

Read

- Jerome Bruner, [from *Acts of Meaning*, pp. 99-116](#)
- Lucy McDonald, [“The Magic of the Mundane”](#)
- Adam Arola, [“Native American Philosophy”](#)

Online activities

- [Erving Goffman on the performed self](#)
- [More Goffman \(more detail\)](#)
- [Narrative identity](#) and [Paul Ricoeur on identity](#)
- [The concept of “Ubuntu” in African philosophy](#)

Discussion board

- Groups 5 & 6 come up with Quality Questions!
- All others respond to one question and two student posts.

Sharing

- Find news items, blogs, or podcasts on the effects of isolation and loneliness. If you’re looking for a place to go, google around for the psychological effects of solitary confinement. [Frontline from PBS has an excellent documentary “Solitary Nation.”](#) (Note that this is optional, but very interesting.) Also, Google around for findings on social network theory. One famous case is [six degrees of separation](#). (See also: [the six degrees of Kevin Bacon](#).)

Assessment

- Explore the [Social Mask Builder](#) and then write the [social existence reflection](#) paper.

Module 5: Emotion and Reason

In this module, you’ll learn about philosophical approaches to the relationship between emotion and reason. While the Cartesian Package downplays the role of emotion in action, Hume and Spinoza play up the importance of emotion and desire for getting anything done.

Read

- Alison Jaggar, [“Love and knowledge: Emotion in feminist epistemology”](#) (I won’t lie to you; this is a long paper. But it’s full of wonderful insights on emotions and reason.)

Online activities

- [Overview of Hume](#)
- [Interview with Susan James on Spinoza on the passions](#)
- [Psychological theories of emotion](#)

Discussion board

- [Explore different positions on reason and emotion in particular scenarios](#). Post your reflection on the designated discussion board.

- Groups 7 & 8 come up with Quality Questions!
- All others respond to one question and two student posts. You may respond to posts from the Quality Questions *or* the posts for reflections on reason and emotion.

Sharing

- Find and share podcasts or blog posts on emotions — what they are, why we have them, what causes experiences of specific emotions, emotional disorders.. There's a lot out there — go exploring!

Module 6: Embodying and extending minds

In this module, you'll get introduced to one way of thinking about how minds and bodies are connected: minds are actually manifested in bodily behaviors.

Read

- Andy Clark and David Chalmers, "[The Extended Mind](#)"
- Joel Kreuger and Thomas Szanto, "[Extended Emotions](#)"
- Charlie Lassiter and Aaron Kagan, "[Strong Embodiment](#)"

Online activities

- [Are you a body with a mind or a mind with a body?](#)
- [Andy Clark explaining the extended mind](#) AND/OR [Dave Chalmers explaining the extended mind](#)

Sharing

- Find and share podcasts or blog posts on embodied minds. It's also helpful to look for "embodied cognition" or "enactive cognition."
- [Explore extended and embodied cognition](#)

Assignment

- [Online Selves Project](#)

University Policies

There are a number of important GU policies. Rather than put them all here, below is a table to all the relevant policies. Each of these is important. Please read them!

University and Academic Policy Statements	Associated Links
Diversity, Equity and Inclusion	Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Bias Incident Assessment and Support (BIAS) Team
Harassment, Discrimination And Sexual Misconduct Policies	Harassment and Non-Discrimination Policy Title IX

Academic Integrity Policy	<u>Academic Integrity Policy</u>
Students With Disabilities/Medical Conditions and Accessible Documents (EITA)	<u>Disability Access and Resources Office</u> <u>Electronic Information Technology Accessibility (EITA)</u>
Religious Accommodations for Students	<u>Religious Accommodations for Students Policy</u>
FERPA and Privacy	<u>FERPA</u>
Class Attendance Policy	<u>Class Attendance Policy</u> <u>Amended Class Attendance Policy</u>
Notice to Students of COVID-19 Expectations	<u>Student Arrival & Return to Gonzaga Guides</u>
Notice to Students about Class Recordings (audio, video and photos)	<u>Zoom sessions might be recorded</u> <u>Gonzaga University's Student Code of Conduct</u>
Course Evaluations	<u>Course Evaluations</u>