

**SUNY-Institute of Technology
Spring Semester 2003**

**Understanding Human Nature:
Nature, Nurture or Neutral?**
GEN 304-01 MW 10:00-11:50am Donovan G219

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Course overview:

It may be dangerous to claim that we'll arrive at one, single, definitive conclusion on human nature by the end of the semester. Instead, let's say that we will spend the semester honing our abilities to ask questions about ourselves and other humans. Are we, as individuals or as a whole, inherently good or evil, stronger or weaker, superior or inferior? Or, do we learn these characteristics? Are we taught to become them? What do the societies and the technologies we develop tell us about ourselves and do they inform these questions?

In Part I of this course, "**Who are you?**," we will compare and contrast a wide range of sources, from ancient and not-so ancient texts accepted by many as adequate explanations for the human condition to a summary of cutting-edge biological and psychological research that claims to unseat the given assumptions. Then, in Part II, "**What do you do?**," we will consider other classic texts alongside a keen observer's take on the late 20th century. In seeking the answer to that classic question, she wonders whether the new faith in science (social and natural), technology, and development might be more similar to the old beliefs, i.e. not fitting human nature entirely well, than their proponents would have us think, when it comes to trying to improve how we live and work.

The readings assigned for this course are rich, but fruitful discussion will depend even more on input from all of us, who can and should bring our beliefs, preferences, experiences, learning, and new insights to the material and questions at hand.

Assigned Readings:

Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (USA: Viking, 2002)
 Leslie Forster Stevenson, ed., *The Study of Human Nature: A Reader*, 2nd ed. (NY: Oxford University, 1999).
 Barbara Garson, *All the Livelong Day: The Meaning and Demeaning of Routine Work*, revised and updated ed. (USA: Penguin Books, 1994).

All readings are available at the campus bookstore. Copies of all the readings are also available on two-hour reserve at the library.

Grading:

Your grade in this course is based on the following (see below for complete descriptions):

1. 10% = Attendance and participation:
2. 25% (10% + 15%) = Group presentation using Pinker and Stevenson readings (**mine due**
_____)
3. 20% (4 @ 5%) = Source review essays (**due Weds.: __Feb. 12; __Feb. 26; __Mar. 19; __Apr 2; __ Apr 16**)
4. 10% = Short paper #1 (**due Mon., Jan. 27**): 10%
5. 15% = Short paper #2 – Individual book review of Garson (**due Wed., Apr. 30**): 15%
6. 20% (2 @ 10%) = Midterm (**Mar. 5**) and Final (**week of May 5, date TBA**)

Please see my website for explanations of what my standards are for assignments and how I calculate grades.

Course Requirements and Policies:

Attendance policy and class participation (10%):

Faithful attendance in the class is important. We have a lot to cover! An attendance roster will be circulated at each class meeting, and your signature on it is the official record for having attended each class. ***It is your responsibility to assign the attendance roster at each class meeting.*** Absences for religious observances will be excused as will be those for *genuine* medical reasons or family/ personal emergencies. You must provide written documentation for medical absences, and must describe in writing (e-mail or note) any family/personal emergencies. Absences for university appointments on or off campus will not be excused.

However, we are adults, things happen, and they have their reasons. I will allow one unexcused absence (i.e., I receive no

notification or written explanation thereof) per student per term, but then will begin counting, reducing your attendance grade, which starts out at A+, by half a letter grade for each unexcused absence (e.g. if you have 3 unexcused absences, expect a A-; six unexcused absences, a B-, etc.). Lateness and early departures are also a problem, as they prove disruptive for your peers and instructor during discussions and activities and complicate record-keeping. If frequent, significant departure from compliance with class times is observed, a similar penalty will be applied to your grade.

Active participation in class discussions and preparation for them is required of all students. You are expected to come to each class having done the readings and having thought carefully about them. Your goal should not be to talk as much as possible or regurgitate facts easily figured out from the reading. Rather, you should aim to ask critical questions regarding the readings and other materials and to bring your insights to the attention of your peers and your instructor. Remember, though this material may be new to you, you also bring a new background, point of view, and intellect to it – so share your thoughts!

It will help you to bring your books, copies of the readings for the day, and/or really good notes, both for your presentations and for the activities I design for the class. Additional structured discussions or group activities, film clips, slides, music, and literature may be used from time to time in class, and additional material (articles, websites) may be recommended to you for further reading – it is your responsibility to inquire regarding any missed content, should you miss a class.

A Note on Writing Assignments in General:

Each writing assignment is listed with a due date in the Course Schedule. These due dates are real; firm due dates enable you – and me – to plan. Assignments must be turned in at the beginning of class on the days listed, and any paper handed in after that point will be counted as late. Without a *genuine* excuse (preferably approved ahead of time by me), late assignments will be penalized half a letter grade (e.g. from an A to A-, B- to C+) for each class session they are overdue. Any assignment handed in more than 12 classes late (when you would receive an F for an otherwise A+ paper) will receive no higher grade than a 64, and may be accorded less points according to its quality.

Good, documented writing is what being a scholar is all about. For all writing assignments prepared outside of class you MUST document all information that is not your original thought, interpretation, analysis, or synthesis. This includes both direct quotes (phrases or sentences taken from another source, surrounded by quotation marks: “blah blah blah”) and paraphrases (rewordings and summaries of ideas or analyses that are not yours).

You may choose the system of citation you would like to use (University of Chicago, Modern Language Association, American Psychological Association, etc.) as long as you are CONSISTENT and THOROUGH. All papers should utilize footnotes, endnotes, or citations within the text, and should include a works cited list (a.k.a. bibliography) at the end. Any paper handed in without some form of citations and works cited list will receive no higher grade than a C, regardless of the quality of the writing.

Plagiarism—passing off someone else's work as your own—is not just a violation of academic integrity or basic ethics—it *is a crime*. The *SUNY-IT Student Handbook*, available in print and online, states clearly that the instructor may assess a reasonable penalty for plagiarism (22 and ff.). Penalties can include failure for the assignment, the permanent placement of a letter describing the incident in your file, or even failure for the course (students may challenge these decisions before the Academic Conduct Board). To be clear, my procedure for dealing with plagiarism is as follows:

1. The first assignment found to contain significant amounts of copied material (more than the occasional missed quotation mark or forgotten footnote) will receive an F grade, equaling 0% in the final tally.
2. Then, I will give the writer an alternate (stricter) assignment that MUST be handed in one week from the date of the return of the paper. The highest grade that paper can receive will be a B- (=80), but can be lower according to its quality. If the alternate assignment is not handed in by that date, or if it does not meet adequate standards for the class (missing citations, poor writing), the F=0 grade will remain. No late alternate assignments will be accepted.
3. The next incident of plagiarism by the same student will result in an F=0 grade for the assignment with no alternate assignment option, and a letter describing the incident will be placed in the student's folder.
4. If any other incidence of plagiarism should follow these first two actions, the student will receive an F for the course, and an additional letter of explanation will be placed in the student's file.

But please do not despair—proper documentation is not hard to do, and strengthens your writing! Guides for different systems can be found in the SUNY-IT library at the reference desk, and are also available online at the Learning Center's website: <http://www.sunyit.edu/academics/offices/lc/>. We'll discuss documentation issues in class, too. I encourage you to seek advice from the campus librarians or from the Learning Center (Donovan G155, x7310) as you write your papers. Of course, I also encourage you to contact me—by e-mail or telephone call (I'll try to respond by the next business day at the latest), or come by my office—whenever you have questions about your sources or would like to show me a draft of some writing.

For that matter, the Learning Center offers workshops on plagiarism several times throughout the semester; I will announce the dates in class. I encourage you to attend one if you are not familiar with humanities-style writing or documentation. In fact, I will give **5% extra credit** (an A grade x .05 added to your total grade for the course) if you demonstrate that you have attended one of these workshops.

Should you need additional assistance or support, I also encourage you to utilize the facilities at the campus counseling center (Campus Center 208, x7160, <http://www.sunyit.edu/saf/offices/counseling>). The counselors there can offer advice on dealing with the pressure of long-term and voluminous assignments along with other classes, jobs, and/or family; suspected learning disabilities, how to work with them, and how to notify your instructors about them while maintaining confidentiality; and other issues that might interfere with your studies. Official communications from the director, Mary Brown-DePass, have official weight for faculty, including me.

Group Presentation on Pinker and Stevenson readings (10%+ 15%, 25% total):

At the beginning of each class, from Monday Feb. 3 through Monday Apr. 7, groups of students will give a presentation based on the selected readings assigned for the day. In about 30 minutes' time, there are three goals that you should accomplish:

1. Relate the readings to each other: how might Pinker and the authors he agrees with criticize the other sources, or would he/they agree with them?
2. Then, identify a common theme that the class can use to understand the issues at hand and discuss them. Be creative in your method of presenting them to the class. If the readings remind you of a poem or a cartoon, you can project an image or distribute copies; if it reminds you of a song or a film clip, you can play it.* If you want the class to perform an activity or break up into groups to brainstorm, that's fine, as long as it fits into your time frame and you leave enough time for discussion afterwards.
3. Your third task in this assignment will be to check the references Pinker uses in the chapter that your group is covering. Using the facilities available to us, you should at least be able to find references from frequently used sources such as the *New York Times*, periodicals available on the databases in SUNY-IT's library, and the websites Pinker cites—but the more you can find and analyze, the more impressed I will be! Check out his sources—is he quoting in or out of context? Does what he cites really support his argument? Explain to the class where you think Pinker's conclusions are stronger or weaker, and why. This can be either a separate part of your presentation or integrated with the other two objectives.

* Note: to use SUNY-IT's technical equipment (LCD projector, VCR, CD player, etc.) you **MUST** notify me of what you need by 10am at least two business days (M-F) in advance of your presentation date so that I can request the equipment. Also, I will make a set of up to 2pp. of copies for the class, but again, please submit the items you want copied at least 2 days before the class in which you will distribute them. I will not be held responsible for a presentation that suffers because preparations were not made in advance for equipment or copies.

You will receive two grades for this assignment. One will be a letter grade for the presentation as a whole: e.g., if it's A work, everybody in the group will receive an A worth 10% of their respective final grades; if things don't gel, everyone might earn a C+. This is to encourage you to plan and work together so that all members of the group participate in making a quality presentation. I will write up an evaluation and give a copy to each group member along with her/his individual paper.

On the same class day as the presentation, you will present an individually written summary of your topic with a focus on goal #3, judging Pinker's conclusions by researching and examining as many of his sources as you can. This paper (roughly 1200-1800 words, or 4-6 double-spaced pages) should support the work for your group presentation, but should also give you the chance to express your individual opinions and conclusions, and to include elements that you believe are important but may have been left out of the presentation due to time constraints or a need for cohesion. This paper will be worth 15% of your individual, final grade.

Additional source reviews (4 @ 5% each, 20% total):

Similar to goal #3 in the group presentation, I have assigned 5 dates for additional source reviews. For the readings we have done over that time period, select a section or chapter and try to find at least **one** of the references cited by Pinker or Garson (she uses footnotes too, don't let her off the hook!). Does the author use sources responsibly and credibly to make a point, or is s/he playing a bit fast and loose with the evidence? You may use other sections of the readings or outside sources to make your own argument, provided that you document them correctly. If you really, *really* cannot find a single one, write about a bothersome point you would like to see evidence for, and what sources (cited) lead you to disagree with Pinker or Garson.

You must write 4 out of 5 to receive full credit for this part of the grade; you can take a break for one paper, but if you write a 5th, I will count it as 5% extra credit (.05 x grade). These source reviews need not be as long as those handed in as part of your group presentation; roughly 300-600 words/1-2 double-spaced pages, or more if you feel it necessary.

Short paper #1 (10%):

This first assignment, **due Monday Jan. 27**, is less of a research paper and more of an opportunity to share your thoughts, though you are of course welcome to bring in references from the readings and other sources (documented correctly, of course). Looking briefly at Pinker's description of Donald E. Brown's "List of Human Universals" (Pinker 435-439) and Pinker's description of it (55), pick at least one item that you agree is a universal of human behavior (regardless of age, race, gender, physical ability, culture, education, etc.), and explain why you think it is so. Then, select at least one that you feel is not a universal of human behavior, and explain why. If you truly think that every single one is universal, or that none of them are, explain how you came to this conclusion. This paper should be at least 600-900 words/2-3 double-spaced pages.

Short paper #2 (15%):

The second independent, written assignment is a scholarly review of Garson's book, *All the Livelong Day*. In this review I expect more than a summary of the book's content or whether you liked the book or not. Evaluate the book in light of the work done in the class to date: is it well-researched? Well written? Does Garson tell us some important things about human nature and behavior, or help us understand how we think and act? Was it an effective teaching tool for this class, and can you think of other classes or situations where her book might be useful?

You can find examples of scholarly book reviews in academic journals in the library and on databases like Infotrac. I have also posted some of my own reviews on my website; you are welcome to read them and use them as a template (I do not expect the same degree of research or detail as produced by a specialist—this is just to give you an idea of the kind of writing I'm looking for!). This review should be longer than your source reviews, about 1200-1800 words/4-6 double-spaced pages.

Midterm and Final (10% each, 20 % total):

The midterm and the final will be in-class exams, basically writing definitions (1-3 sentences) and short essays on issues raised in the readings. I will distribute study guides one week prior to the exams so that you can prepare your ideas. No item that was not given on the study guide will be given as a test question.

Course Schedule:**Part I: *Who are you?*****Week 1:**

Mon. Jan 20 – Introductions and syllabus review; discuss and sign up for group presentations.

Wed. Jan. 22 – **Reading:** Louis Menand article (distributed Mon. Jan. 20)
Pinker, 1-29
Skinner in Stevenson, ed., 207-221

Week 2:

Mon. Jan. 27 – **Reading:** Pinker 30-58
Chomsky in Stevenson, ed., 237-256

Short paper #1 due: Look at Pinker's description of Donald E. Brown's "List of Human Universals" (Pinker pp. 435-439) and Pinker's description of it (55), pick at least one item that you agree is a universal of human behavior (regardless of age, race, gender, physical ability, culture, education, etc), and explain why you think it is so. Then, select one that you feel is not a universal of human behavior, and explain why (if you truly think that every single one is universal, explain how you came to this conclusion). Length: 600-900 words/2-3 double-spaced pages.

Wed. Jan. 29 – **Reading:** Pinker, 60-102

*** Fri. Jan. 31 is the last day to add or drop a course without Academic Record—W grade begins Mon. Feb. 3**

Week 3:

Mon. Feb. 3 – **Reading:** Pinker, 103-120
E. O. Wilson in Stevenson, ed., 270-287

Presentation 1

Wed. Feb. 5 – **Reading:** Pinker, 121-135
Rose, Lewontin and Kamin in Stevenson, ed., 303-315 AND Descartes in Stevenson, ed., 84-90

Presentation 2

Week 4:

Mon. Feb. 10 – Reading: Pinker, 137-158
Bracken in Stevenson, ed., 257-269
Presentation 3

Wed. Feb. 12 – Reading: Pinker, 159-173
“Christianity” (St. Paul) in Stevenson, ed., 56-68
Presentation 4

SOURCE REVIEW DUE DATE # 1

Week 5:

Mon. Feb. 17 – Reading: Pinker, 174-185
Sartre in Stevenson, ed., 185-207
Presentation 5

Wed. Feb. 19 – Reading: Pinker, 186-194
Kant in Stevenson, ed., 117-138
Presentation 6

Week 6:

Mon. Feb. 24 – Reading: Pinker, 195-218
Hume in Stevenson, ed., 98-108
Presentation 7

Wed. Feb. 26 – Reading: Pinker, 219-240
“Hinduism” in Stevenson, ed., 9-21 AND Darwin in Stevenson, ed., 162-168
Presentation 8

Study guide for midterm distributed
SOURCE REVIEW DUE DATE # 2

Week 7:

Mon. Mar. 3 – Reading: Pinker, 241-268
“Confucianism” (Mencius and Hsun-tzu) in Stevenson, ed., 22-33
Presentation 9

Midterm review

Wed. Mar. 5 – MIDTERM

Week 8—SPRING BREAK!—No class Mon. Mar. 10 or Wed. Mar. 12—Relax!

Week 9:

Mon. Mar. 17 – Reading: Pinker, 269-280
Ridley in Stevenson, ed., 316-330
Presentation 10

Wed. Mar. 19 – Reading: Pinker, 281-305
Plato in Stevenson, ed., 34-55
Presentation 11

SOURCE REVIEW DUE DATE # 3

Week 10:

Mon. Mar. 24 – Reading: Pinker, 306-336
Lorenz in Stevenson, 222-235
Presentation 12

Wed. Mar. 26—INDEPENDENT RESEARCH DAY
Professor attending a conference—use this day to catch up on reading and writing

Week 11:

Mon. Mar. 31 – Reading: Pinker, 337-371

Holmstrom in Stevenson, ed., 289-302

Presentation 13

Wed. Apr. 2 – Reading: Pinker, 372-399
Rousseau in Stevenson, ed., 109-116

Presentation 14

SOURCE REVIEW DUE DATE # 4

*** Fri. Apr. 4 is the last day one can officially withdraw from courses ***

Week 12:

Mon. Apr. 7 – Reading: Pinker, 400-420
No additional reading—extra impetus to be creative here!

Presentation 15

Wed. Apr. 9 – Reading: Pinker, 421-434

Part 2: What do you do?

Week 13:

Mon. Apr. 14 – Reading: Garson, ix-xvi and 3-79
Marx in Stevenson, ed., 139-152 [OK to split this between Mon. and Wed.]

Wed. Apr. 16 – Reading: Garson, 80-134
“The Hebrew Bible” in Stevenson, 1-8

SOURCE REVIEW DUE DATE # 5

Week 14:

Mon. Apr. 21 – Reading: Garson, 135-181
Hobbes in Stevenson, ed., 90-97 and Mill in Stevenson, ed., 153-161

Wed. Apr. 23 – Reading: Garson, 182-237
“Islam” (Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari) in Stevenson, ed., 69-83

Week 15:

Mon. Apr. 28 – Reading: Garson, 238-271
Study guide for final distributed

Wed. Apr. 30 – No reading: final discussion

Short paper #2 due: Scholarly review of Garson, *All the Livelong Day*. Evaluate the book in light of the work done in the class to date: is it well-researched? Well written? Does Garson tell us some important things about human nature and behavior, or help us understand how we think and act? Was it an effective teaching tool for this class, and can you think of other classes or situations where her book might be useful? Length: 1200-1800 words/4-6 double-spaced pages.

Final review

Week of May 5—FINAL—Exact date, time, and place TBA

Will most likely be Mon. May 5 at 10:15 am in this room, but let's check again closer to the date!