

Philosophy of Human Evolution (PHIL 6014)

Professor: Karen Kovaka

Spring 2020

E-mail: kkovaka@vt.edu
Office Hours: Thurs 1-3pm
Office: Major Williams 220

Web: karenkovaka.com
Class Hours: Wed 5:30-8pm
Classroom: Major Williams 225

Course Description

This course explores philosophical issues related to human evolution. We will begin by asking what scientists think they know about human evolutionary history. Then we will analyze the methods that anthropologists and other paleo-investigators use to reconstruct the history of our species. Finally, we will consider ethical and metaphysical questions about language, culture, morality, human nature, sex, and gender. In each case, we will ask whether and how knowledge about human evolution should inform the way we should approach these questions.

Assessment

Your grade in this course is determined by 3 factors:

1. Active participation during seminar, including one in-class presentation
2. Short reading responses
3. Final paper

Participation

The success of the course depends on active engagement and input from everyone, so I expect all of us to come to class prepared to discuss the assigned readings. Environments where discussions are dominated by a few loud voices, or where many people are physically in the room but mentally disengaged, are bad for learning. We all have to do our part to make class time a valuable, exciting experience for one another.

More formally, you will give one 15 minute presentation in class on one of the assigned readings. You and I will co-lead the seminar on the week that you present.

Reading Responses

You will submit 3 short response papers (500-700 words) on readings of your choice. These are due before the class in which we discuss the readings. The goal of these assignments is to provide you with low-stakes opportunities to practice writing and working out your own ideas.

Final Paper

You will develop a final paper in collaboration with me and your fellow students. The finished product will be a 3000-4000 word piece on a topic or question from class. The process for developing this paper is as follows:

- Topic proposal, due March 19
- Outline, due April 1
- Rough draft, due April 15
- Final draft, due May 11
- In-class discussion of paper project sometime in April

Fine Print

- **Attendance:** I fully expect you to come to every single class session except when illness or other personal circumstances prevent you. If you need to be absent, please discuss with me ahead of time.
- **Accessibility:** We all learn differently, and I am committed to making this course accessible to everyone. Please come talk to me if some aspect of the course isn't working for you: we can collaborate on alternatives that suit your needs, interests, and learning style. If you have a disability (or think you might), it's also a good idea to contact [Services for Students with Disabilities](#).
- **Technology:** Phones, tablets, and laptops often distract us during class. If you do use a laptop or tablet, please do not check your email, message people, or use the Internet for anything that isn't course-related.
- **Academic integrity:** I take academic integrity very seriously. It's important that all the assignments you complete are your own work and that you know how to credit and cite sources appropriately. If you have any questions about my expectations for a particular assignment, be sure to talk to me!

The Undergraduate Honor Code pledge that each member of the university community agrees to abide by states: "As a Hokie, I will conduct myself with honor and integrity at all times. I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I accept the actions of those who do." Students enrolled in this course are responsible for abiding by the Honor Code. A student who has doubts about how the Honor Code applies to any assignment is responsible for

obtaining specific guidance from the course instructor before submitting the assignment for evaluation. Ignorance of the rules does not exclude any member of the University community from the requirements and expectations of the Honor Code. For additional information about the Honor Code, please visit: <https://www.honorsystem.vt.edu/>

- **Changes to the syllabus:** I may adjust the course readings and schedule as the semester goes along. It is your responsibility to pay attention to Canvas and your email so that you are aware of any changes.

Texts

There are no required books for this course. All of the readings will be available on our Canvas site.

Reading Schedule

Date	Content
Wed. 1/22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Biological Evolution • Reading: <i>Philosophy of Biology</i>, Peter Godfrey-Smith, ch 3 • Reading: <i>The Tangled Bank</i>, Carl Zimmer, ch. 14
Wed. 1/29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Epistemology of the Historical Sciences • Reading: <i>Rock, Bone, and Ruin</i>, Adrian Currie, ch 3, 6
Wed. 2/5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Evolutionary Psychology • Reading: "Evolutionary psychology: A primer," Leda Cosmides and John Tooby • Reading: "The basic components of the human mind were not solidified during the Pleistocene epoch," Steve Downes
Wed. 2/12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Cooperation, Culture, and Cognition I • Reading: The philosophy of social evolution (summary), Jonathan Birch • Reading: "Culture and the evolution of human cooperation," Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson • Reading: "Two key steps in the evolution of human cooperation," Michael Tomasello et al.
Wed. 2/19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Cooperation, Culture, and Cognition II • Reading: <i>The Evolved Apprentice</i>, Kim Sterelny, selections
Wed. 2/26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Cooperation, Culture, and Cognition III • Reading: <i>Cognitive Gadgets</i>, Cecilia Hayes, selections
Wed. 3/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Language • Reading: "The mystery of language evolution," Marc Hauser, et al. • Reading: "Empirical approaches to the study of language evolution," W. Tecumseh Fitch • Reading: "Linguistics from an evolutionary point of view," James Hurford
Wed. 3/11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spring Break
Wed. 3/18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Morality I • Reading: "Evolution of morality," Edouard Machery and Ron Mallon • Reading: <i>The Evolution of Morality</i>, Richard Joyce, selections
Wed. 3/25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Morality II • Reading: "A Darwinian dilemma for realist theories of value," Sharon Street
Wed. 4/1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Morality III • Reading: "Evolutionary debunking arguments meet evolutionary science," Arnon Levy and Yair Levy
Wed. 4/8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No Class

Date	Content
Wed. 4/15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Human Nature I • Reading: "On human nature," David Hull • Reading: "A plea for human nature," Edouard Machery
Wed. 4/22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Human Nature II • Reading: "What makes us human? Answers from evolutionary anthropology," James Calcagno and Augustín Fuentes • Reading: "Confronting variation in the social and behavioral sciences," Steve Downes • Steve Downes visits VT. This session will be rescheduled for sometime on Thurs 4/23 to accommodate his schedule.
Wed. 4/29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Sex and Gender I • Reading: TBD
Wed. 5/6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Sex and Gender II • Reading: <i>Evolution's Rainbow</i>, Joan Roughgarden, selections