Instructor: J. A. Byers

Office Hours: TTH 2:00 – 3:00 PM. Office: 345 Life Science South.

Course Description and Objectives:

Discussion of human nature occurs in the earliest-known writings (e.g., The Iliad) and is a common topic of conversation. For millennia, people have used an appeal to human nature to write laws, explore moral questions, frame constitutions, explore aesthetical questions, and make decisions about societal issues. Fallacious assumptions about human nature can lead to significantly poor outcomes, such as unstable forms of government, infringement of individual liberties, and genocide.

In this course you will learn that human nature is the sum of our behavioral predispositions and emotional reactions to environmental and social events, and that these predispositions and emotions are evolved traits. Human nature arises from the architecture of our brains. Our brains are evolved organs. Thus, to understand human nature, we need to understand human social evolution and that of the mammals from which humans evolved.

The methods that are used to study human social evolution include comparison to close relatives (apes), study of human fossils and ancestral ecology, study of extant pre-agricultural societies, and evolutionary psychology – the study of human reactions to particular situations from an evolutionary perspective. Evolutionary psychology is a new and sometimes controversial discipline.

The overall goal of the course is to show you that the way that you think about yourself and others can be informed by science, and can be separated from belief and myth. To move toward this goal, you will learn the basics of evolutionary psychology, the difference between science and speculation, the concept of hypothesis testing, the fundamentals of biological evolution and of human evolution. You will learn to observe humans objectively, without interpretation.

Grades: Your grade will be based upon the portfolio that you write over the course of the semester, and upon the quality of your in-class participation.

Writing Assignments During the semester, you will complete 10 writing assignments. These assignments are due on the dates shown in the course schedule, but you may
continue to edit what you have written throughout the course. The portfolio, or collection of all 10 writing assignments, is due on December 12.