

# PHIL 176: Philosophy of Culture

T/Th 2-3:20pm; [Podemos](#) 1A22 (8<sup>th</sup> College, near Galbraith Hall)

Prof. Manuel Vargas

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## Overview

This is a course on philosophical questions connected to culture, including how to understand the nature of our thought and talk about culture, cultures, and cultural differences. Crudely, we are trying to understand the nature and place of human beings in the human-built parts of the world.

One ambition for this course is to train you to do cross-disciplinary work on questions where theories are not settled and/or the empirical and conceptual details remain contested. Our questions concern both “meta-” questions (e.g., whether these are useful categories to employ, what the relationship is between various concepts of culture, but also evaluative questions like whether there is any sense to be made about talk of “better” and “worse” cultures), as well as questions about specific aspects of culture (e.g., How does cultural learning work? What kinds of goods are produced by these cultural practices as opposed to those?).

Here’s a thought that animates parts of this course. Questions about social norms, moral commitments, pre-reflective defaults for reasoning, social values, and so on are sometimes talked about in moral and political philosophy, but often in ways detached from any attention to their cultural specificity, or even to some story about the history and context of the relevant symbols and meanings. Although these things—historical, embedded symbolic meanings—have often been taken up in systematic ways by disciplines like anthropology, history, sociology, and literature, accounts of these things are often ineradicably philosophical. So, a serious investigation into the philosophy of culture involves grappling with works often produced in other disciplines.

This course will be run like an exploratory research seminar. In that spirit, we will have lots of reading to do, but student interests will determine a lot of what we read. More generally, it is a mistake to think of this as a typical course aspiring to move a fixed body of knowledge from the mind of the instructor to the students. Rather, the course is aimed at us collectively constructing new knowledge. To do that, our goal is to collectively equip ourselves and each other to think deeply and advance our collective understanding about a diverse set of issues. Accordingly, the format of this class will be a seminar format, in which you will regularly present and receive feedback on your thoughts in a low-stakes format with opportunities to revise and improve your work for a better grade.

## Contact info

[mrvargas@ucsd.edu](mailto:mrvargas@ucsd.edu)

Office: RWAC- Bldg 1, Arts & Humanities, Floor 4, room 0468

Office hours: T @ 3:30-4pm; Th @ 1-1:50 + by appointment. *Note: If you cannot make scheduled office hours, just send me an email listing three times when you have availability, and I’ll do my best to make something work.*

## Evaluation

- 10% Participation
- 25% In-class writing assignments (we will drop one or more of your lowest scores)
- 20% Midterm
- 20% Presentation
- 25% Final paper (with the option of your final assignment also replacing the grade of the prior element on which the final paper is based).

In-class writing assignments are small, in-class writing assignments that will regularly occur over the quarter. They may be about the reading and/or the ideas discussed in the course. They are graded on a high pass/pass/low pass/no credit model (100/85/70/0). Unless otherwise specified, they will be written and submitted in an exam book (aka “blue book”), that you will purchase in advance. **Buy a bunch now!**

The midterm will be a mix of objective questions (multiple choice, short answer) and essays. It will be in class, written in longhand in a blue book.

The presentation is an in-class and focused presentation on & discussion of some specific element or passage in the reading, where you guide class discussion by setting up an issue, raise an objection, offer a novel interpretation, or cast the text in a very different light than it presents itself. You will sign up for this in advance; handouts or slides are required, and these will be submitted to me in advance; presentation should be 10-15 minutes, but capable of sustaining a class discussion for at least 15 minutes after your presentation is done. Presentations will be evaluated in terms of the following criteria, as relevant: knowledge power and originality of interpretation of the text; depth of critical engagement; connection to other ideas or texts in the course; effectiveness at sparking an illuminating conversation, and so on. You needn't do all these things well, but you should do at least two of these things well. To prepare for this, it may help to do some outside research, but the emphasis should be on the text and its connection with the ideas and readings in the course. If we get a lively discussion going, partly framed by your demonstrated expertise, then this is a sign of success.

The final paper will be a revision and expansion of either an essay you write for the midterm or some idea from your class presentation. You will have an opportunity to talk through the ideas of your final paper with other people in the course, and to receive feedback with a grade being at stake. This will involve presenting an outline that clearly demarcates what is new and/or revised and/or expanded from the prior work on which the final assignment is based. You will submit that outline on the day you present your ideas for feedback in class. For the in-class final exam, you will write that essay.

## **Readings**

Readings are available through Canvas. Readings provide the background context for the lectures, but class meetings will be primarily focused on the ideas discussed in the readings, and only secondarily on the readings themselves.

## **Tech, slides, etc.**

- This class is intentionally low tech. Phones should be in pockets or bags, and use of technology is generally discouraged, except in cases where there is a documented university-authorized exception.
- When slides are used for lectures, they will be posted later in the week on canvas (not before, as this precludes Socratic-style education; in agreement with the OSD office, AFA letters will be adjusted when the OSD office has a moment to update).
- Given that this class covers race/class/gender content as well as controversial topics about morality, recording the contents would undermine the quality of discussion, making it ill-suited for podcasting. Therefore, recording in any format is not permitted without explicit prior authorization by the instructor.
- Use of AI, ChatGPT, and equivalent for evaluated work is not permitted.

## **Provisional Schedule**

Read the articles *prior* to the date of the class meeting.

<b>Week 1</b>	<b>Intro</b>
1/7	Class ambitions; format; topics; syllabus
1/9	Different approaches to culture Kant (1784) “What is Enlightenment?” Appiah (2018) “Culture” from <i>The Lies that Bind</i>
<b>Week 2</b>	<b>Cultural diversity and some consequences</b>
1/14	Lenard, P (2000) Culture (SEP) pp. 1-14 Song, S (2024) Multiculturalism (SEP), pp. 15-29
1/16	Henrich et al (2022) A Cultural Species & its Cognitive Phenotypes: Implications for Philosophy
<b>Week 3</b>	<b>Evolutionary approaches to culture</b>
1/21	Henrich, J (2020) <i>The WIERDest People in the World</i>
1/23	Henrich, J (2020) <i>The WIERDest People in the World</i>
<b>Week 4</b>	<b>The algorithms are here</b>
1/28	Vallor, S. (2024) <i>The AI Mirror</i>
1/30	Vallor, S. (2024) <i>The AI Mirror</i>
<b>Week 5</b>	<b>Religion</b>
2/4	van Leeuwen, N (2023) <i>Religion as Make-Believe</i>
2/6	van Leeuwen, N (2023) <i>Religion as Make-Believe</i>
<b>Week 6</b>	<b>Morality and politics</b>
2/11	Roy, O (2023) <i>The Crisis of Culture</i>
2/13	Roy, O (2023) <i>The Crisis of Culture</i>
<b>Week 7</b>	<b>Gender</b>
2/18	<b>M AWAY- likely asynchronous</b> Castellanos, R (1950) <i>On Feminine Culture</i>
2/20	Castellanos, R (1950) <i>On Feminine Culture</i> Castellanos, R (1972) Meditation on the Brink Castellanos, R (1973) Woman and Her Image
<b>Week 8</b>	<b>other questions</b>
2/25	tbd by students
2/27	MIDTERM
<b>Week 9</b>	<b>other questions +</b>
3/4	
3/6	<i>feedback sessions on papers</i>
<b>Week 10</b>	<b>feedback sessions, wrap-up</b>
3/11	<i>feedback sessions on papers</i>
3/13	Wrap-up [Last day to submit any other (i.e., non-final-exam) work for the course.]
<b>Finals week</b>	
3/20 (Th)	<b>3-6pm</b> In-person final, essay-format (i.e., your paper)

## **General Information**

### *Student drop-in hours/office hours*

Office hours are listed under contact information. Alternatively, you can email me to set up an appointment to meet for individual or small group office hours.

### *Email Policy*

The instructors and instructional assistants for this course are happy to reply to emails sent from UCSD email addresses. We do not reply to emails from non-UCSD addresses. Please note that there are two subjects the instructor will not discuss by email, even if they are sent from a UCSD account. These are:

- a) Requests for information about the exam or final assignment that arrive in the 24-hour period immediately preceding the exam.
- b) Requests to adjust your final class grade. If you have an issue with your grade please make an appointment to discuss it during my office hour next quarter.

### *Missed exams*

There is no opportunity to make up exams. A missed midterm exam will entail that the score on the next exam is applied to both the missed exam and the exam that was taken. However, failure to take the final exam, and/or failure to have taken at least one midterm, will constitute a failure to pass the course.

### *Evaluation*

Assignments and their weights are expected to be as stipulated on the first day of class, but the instructor retains the right to make changes to the syllabus. If so, notification of those changes will be provided in advance.

### *Regrading*

There is no option to regrade final exams, final assignments, or to complete assignments for bonus points. However, for students unhappy with their grade for non-final TA-graded assignments can apply to have it re-graded. There is a process to this. First, students must arrange a face-to-face meeting (zoom is fine) with their grader to discuss the basis for the original grade. Please note that email is not an acceptable substitute, and no regrading will occur without an initial face-to-face meeting. If the student and grader come to an agreement on the merit of the initial grade, or on an adjusted grade resulting from their meeting, no further student action is required. If the student still prefers a re-grade, he or she should provide the professor with the originally submitted work for re-evaluation.

For a re-grade to occur the professor will need to receive the submission within two weeks of the original assignment, or before the end of week 10, whichever is sooner. Whatever grade the second grader gives the essay will be the final grade, even if it is lower than the original grader's grade. The professor reserves the right to review and decide any re-grade cases.

### *Disabilities*

Students requesting accommodations for this course due to a disability must provide a current Authorization for Accommodation (AFA) letter issued by the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) which is in University Center 202 behind Center Hall. Students are required to present their

AFA letters to Faculty (please contact me privately) and to the OSD Liaison in the department in advance so that accommodations may be arranged. Contact the OSD for further information: 858.534.4382 (phone), [osd@ucsd.edu](mailto:osd@ucsd.edu) (email), [disabilities.ucsd.edu](http://disabilities.ucsd.edu) (web).

### *Academic Integrity*

Integrity of scholarship is essential for an academic community. The University expects that both faculty and students will honor this principle and in so doing protect the validity of University intellectual work. For students, this means that all academic work will be done by the individual to whom it is assigned, without unauthorized aid of any kind. Plagiarism in this course is ordinarily grounds for failing this course. For more information about UCSD's policy on academic integrity go to: <http://senate.ucsd.edu/Operating-Procedures/Senate-Manual/appendices/2>

### *Slides, handouts, etc.*

Any handouts, slides, or the like that are used in class and that have substantive content will be made available via Canvas in some or another form.

### *Technology*

For remote courses, the expectation is that you will minimize educational distractions while in synchronous elements of the course (including social media, alerts, and the like).

For in-person, non-virtual meetings, electronics (including but not limited to cell phones and laptops) are not ordinarily permitted in lecture or during exams. If you believe you have compelling grounds for an exception, talk to the professor in advance. The second violation of this policy will trigger a 0% for the participation grade. Your TA will let you know what the policy is in discussion sections.

For remote classes, attendance in synchronous meetings constitutes permission to record your voice and image for the purposes of making a recording of the synchronous class meetings available to students of the course. Recordings made for the asynchronous elements of remote learning courses will be made available in Canvas.

For non-remote, in-person courses, recording lectures introduces several complicated issues about consent and student participation in class. For that reason, students may not record (audio or video) in this class except in accordance with documented ADA accommodations. Any recordings made in connection with a disability accommodation are for the student's personal academic use only and may not be distributed in any manner to any other individual.

### *Waitlist*

Students will be admitted to this class according to their place on the waitlist.

### *Exams*

By enrolling in this class, you agree to take the final exam, if there is one, by its scheduled day and time, unless registered with OSD. Failure to take the exam at that time constitutes failure to pass the course. For take-home assignments, you agree to submit them by the posted deadlines. Plan your end of term travel and other commitments accordingly.

### **Where can I get help?**

In addition to the readings, class, office hours, and maybe even sections, we've also got handouts.

[How to Survive Your First Philosophy Class](#)  
[How to Write Philosophy Papers](#)

If you have questions about any academic matters at all, please contact your TA or professor.

UCSD has some useful support resources for non-academic needs. Check out [Basic Needs](#) and [Mutual Aid](#) for help with some of the basics every student needs. And check out [Student Health and Well-Being](#) for resources to keep you going. Also, if you are skipping and/or stretching meals, or having challenges accessing food, you may be able to get funds for free food money. [Details here](#).

[Satisfactory Academic Progress \(SAP\)](#) refers to the academic standards students must maintain to remain eligible for federal, state, and institutional financial aid. If you are receiving financial aid, please ensure you review the [SAP requirements and the appeals process](#).

## Initial candidate reading list

### Contemporary Evolutionary Theory of Culture

- Henrich, J (2015) *The Secret of Our Success* (sociality in general) [ANTHRO]
- Henrich, J (2021) *The WEIRDEST People in the World* (co-evolution of psych and culture in the West) [ANTHRO]
- Muthukrishna, M (2023) *A Theory of Everyone* (cross-disciplinary account of cultural evolution) [PSYCH]

### The algorithms are here

- Vallor, S (2024) *The AI Mirror* (tech, culture, and human well-being) [PHIL]
- Fourcade & Healy (2024) *The Ordinal Society* (algorithmic capitalism's reshaping of contemporary life) [SOC]
- Risse, M (2023) *Political Theory in the Digital Age* (phil of tech and its relevance for political philosophy) [PHIL/GOV]

### Religion and culture

- Luhrmann, TM (2022) *How God Becomes Real* (on the anthropology of religious practice vs. the unimportance of religious belief) [ANTH]
- Hagglund, M (2019) *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (On re-capturing the goods of religion without the religious stuff) [PHIL]
- Katsafanas, P (2024) *Philosophy of Devotion: The Longing for Invulnerable Ideals* (On the costs/benefits of sacralizing things) [PHIL]
- Van Leeuwen, N (2024) *Religion as Make-Believe* (religious "beliefs" as something like pretendings for the purpose of group identity) [PHIL]

### Morality and politics

- Roy, O (2023) *The Crisis of Culture: Identity Politics and the Empire of Norms* (a splashy recent book arguing that that displacement of W Culture isn't from other cultures but from collapse of features that make culture possible) [CULT ANALYSIS]
- Nietzsche, F (1887) *Genealogy of Morality* (on social/cultural/moral transformations over 2k years of Western history) [PHIL]

- Leiter, B (2019) *The Death of God and the Death of Morality* (a contemporary recasting of Nietzschean ideas; we'd read this along with something else) [PHIL]

## Further topics

### Understanding the major transformations in Western culture

- Mac Sweeney, N. *The West: A New History in Fourteen Lives* (debunking of the idea of the West and a unified cultural inheritance to it) [HIST]
- Taylor, C (2023) *Cosmic Connections* (Romanticism as a strategy of response to modernity and the collapse of meaning) [PHIL]

### Contemporary politics and culture in the US

- Hunter, JD ( *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America's Political Crisis* (how cultural transformations, especially the loss of convergence on Enlightenment presumptions, has undermined social/political solidarity in the US) [SOC]

### Status, selves, and contemporary culture

- Burton, TI (2023) *Self-Made: Creating our Identities* (history of W. efforts at self-individuation and pre-occupations with self-realization) [hist/contemporary CULT ANALYSIS]
- Marx, D (2022) *Status and Culture: How our Desire for Social Rank Creates Taste, Identity, Art, Fashion, and Constant Change* [CULT ANALYSIS]

### Other traditions we could consider

#### Africana

- Appiah, A (1993) *In My Father's House* [chapters 5-6, on modern African philosophy]
- Wiredu, K (1996) *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspectives*

#### Mexican

- Ramos, S (1939) *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*
- Uranga, E (1952) *Essay on the Ontology of the Mexican*
- Revueltas, J (1958) *Possibilities and Limitations of the Mexican*
- Villoro, L (1989) *Sahagún or the Limits of the Discovery of the Other*