Rethinking the Human Mind

PSY 197H1 ● Winter 2025 ● Mondays 12-2PM ● Location BL 113

Have you ever made a decision you later regretted? Held onto a belief despite contradictory evidence? Fallen victim to flawed logic or hidden biases? If so, you're far from alone. As humans, we often struggle to think rationally about complex issues. This course explores how we get things right—how we overcome the various biases, prejudices, and fallacies that get in our way. Topics will include the complex interplay of deliberation and snap judgment, the role of rationality in ethical decision-making, how we deal with controversial political, social, and religious issues, and the debate over the capacities of generative AI. Readings will draw from many disciplines, including psychology, evolutionary theory, and political science. Weekly reading responses will be required. This is not a lecture course—participants will be required to actively engage in discussion and debate. The course is restricted to first-year students and is not eligible for CR/NCR option.

Do I need to read this syllabus?

Yes, you do. Besides the obvious details that you really need to know—like where we're meeting and what the readings are—it contains some information about the course that might dissuade some of you from taking it. Better to find out now!

Who is the professor?

Me. Professor Paul Bloom. My email is paul.bloom@utoronto.ca. My webpage is paulbloom.net. Office hours by appointment.

Where and when will we meet?

The class is currently scheduled to meet in person, in BL 113. Following U of T policy, the classes will meet 10 minutes after the hour, so the class will actually be on Monday, from 12:10 – 2:00.

Where can I find the readings?

You need to buy a book for this course. It is not available in the bookstore, but can be purchased cheaply online, at amazon.ca and other sites.

Steven Pinker, *Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters*. 2021.

Other readings will be either be accessible online or in this folder. (I'll add the readings to the folder a couple of weeks ahead of time)

https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/v8c1b1pgaxqxgm8j0eb20/h?rlkey=ljq9124471xyi5v4vyybcd679&dl=0

Tentative Schedule — subject to change

The readings include book chapters from Rationality, chapters from other books, blogposts, magazine articles, and online debates. And, for one week, you'll listen to a podcast. Please note that this is a tentative schedule and will certainly change.

Jan 6   Introduction to the class

Jan 13   How smart are we?
               Preface, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2 of Pinker book

Jan 20   How and why do we argue?
               Chapter 3 of Pinker book
               Arguing is Bullshit—short post by David Pinsof.
               https://www.everythingisbullshit.blog/p/arguing-is-bullshit
               The War on Reason, *The Atlantic*, by Paul Bloom

Jan 27   Are stereotypes rational?
               Chapters 4 and 6 of Pinker book
               Excerpt from *Psych* by Paul Bloom

Feb 3   Is it rational to be good?
               Chapter 8 and 11 of Pinker book
               Excerpt from *Just Babies* by Paul Bloom
               Excerpt from *Strangers Drowning* by Larissa MacFarquhar
               The reluctant prophet of effective altruism, *New Yorker,* by Gideon Lewis-Krauss

Feb 10   Can we be rational when it comes to big life choices?
               Excerpt from *Transformative Experiences* by Laurie Paul

How should we make the most important decisions of our lives? *Slate*, discussion with Laurie Paul and Paul Bloom.
https://slate.com/culture/2015/03/transformative-experience-by-l-a-paul-in-conversation-with-paul-bloom.html

Feb 17   No class, reading week

Feb 24   Are psychologists rational?
              Excerpt from *Psych* by Paul Bloom
              Listen to this Podcast episode: "The Replication Crisis Gets Personal",
              https://www.fourbeers.com/4

March 3   The misinformation wars
              Chapter 10 of Pinker book
              What is misinformation, anyway? By Dan Williams
              https://www.conspicuouscognition.com/p/what-is-misinformation-anyway

March 10   How smart is AI?
              Why GPT fails to act like a human? Blog post by Lionel Page
              https://www.optimallyirrational.com/p/why-chatgpt-fails-to-interact-like
              Other readings TBA

March 17   Student Choice

March 24 and 31:   Student presentations

Evaluation

Reading responses = 30%, participation = 30**%**, Presentation = 20%, Final paper = 20%

What do I need to do?

1. You need to send in a reading response. Before every class except for the first one and the last one, participants will submit a 200-250 word comment about the readings. This comment will be a response to a question raised in the previous class and should be sent to me by email (no attachments, please). It is due by **Friday at noon**. Your comments will demonstrate to me that you have done the readings, and, more importantly, will help structure the discussion we have during class.

Late reading responses will have a deduction of a letter grade. No reading responses will be accepted after Monday at noon.

2. You need to do a final written assignment. In consultation with me, you'll write a brief theoretical paper on a topic related to the course. More details later.

3. You need to *talk*. Seminar participants are expected to … participate. You should participate in the discussion every time we meet. (Having said this, I understand that serious crises and unavoidable obligations do occur—please try to let me know in advance if you need to miss a seminar meeting.)

Participants should also be aware that I intend to ask them for their opinions and arguments. I may ask a specific individual to expand on a point made in the comment that he or she sent in, for instance. I'll note also that I expect participants' contributions in class to reflect a careful reading of the assigned materials. If you haven't done the readings, don't show up. (As Wittgenstein was reputed to have said: No tourists!)

All of this might be a factor when deciding whether to take this course.

By the way, here's an Easter Egg. If you've made it this far into the syllabus, please email me a picture of your favorite musician.

Academic Honesty

Sorry to have to say this, but just to get this out here: I take academic honesty very seriously. Please be scrupulously careful to cite all your sources. Please be aware as well that if you take some quotation without attribution and change the wording, it still counts as plagiarism. Finally, this is expected to be entirely your own work, and should not be collaborative. If you have any questions at all about what counts as academic honesty, please contact me *before* you submit the reading response or paper.

What about AI?

This might be a surprise, but I do not object to students using AI—Bing, ChatGPT, Bard, etc.—when writing their reading responses and final assignments. You are allowed (but not required) to use these systems in limited ways to help you improve your writing and your thinking about these topics. Some possible usages are:

- Finishing a draft and then asking the AI to give comments on the writing (catching typos and poor word choices and so on) and then revising the draft accordingly. You can repeat until you're really satisfied with it.
- Asking an AI to challenge the ideas of an initial draft. Ask it: What are the weaknesses of my argument? Are there any counter-examples? And so on. And then revising accordingly.

But two important caveats:

First, **you must write the first draft yourself**. If you just type the assignment into AI and then send me what it outputs, this is **cheating**—even if you fiddle around with it later and change some words and move around sentences. I'll add that while it's technically difficult to prove that a response was AI-generated, it's incredibly obvious to the instructor (me) when someone has done this.

Second, if you use AI, you must describe exactly how you did so, which will mean including an appendix (outside of the assignment's word count) with all of your prompts, all of the AI generated content, and a description of how you used what it generated. Your description of how you used what it generated should make clear how it supported your learning rather than undermining your learning. (Use of AI support without this full disclosure will count as **cheating**.)

If you have any questions about the proper use of AI, please reach out to me before you submit your reading response.

Something to think about

Seminar participants will likely express different positions about sensitive topics revolving around domains such as sex, violence, religion, politics, and race. You might be shocked at some of the views that your fellow students have! I expect seminar participants to exhibit a high degree of intellectual charity when it comes to views that they disagree with, and to engage in civil, productive, and good-humored discussion. The discussion should be interesting, fun—and kind. If you have a low tolerance for disagreement over serious issues, again, this seminar may not be for you.

When we meet in person, can I have my laptop or phone open, so I can check my email, go on social media, and shop for shoes?

Sorry, no. I appreciate the temptation—I'm also often peeking at my phone during talks—but it's rude, both to me and to the people around you.

I'm in trouble!

Shit happens—there may be circumstances when you experience disruptions to your learning and circumstances when you need extra support. Accordingly, the department has provided a helpful guide to clarify your and your instructor's responsibilities when navigating these situations. I will frequently consult with these recommendations when providing you with support, and I recommend that you also consult it to learn more about your rights and responsibilities before reaching out to me.

Other stuff

Accessibility Needs
Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have an acute or ongoing disability issue or accommodation need, you should register with Accessibility Services (AS) (accessibility.utoronto.ca) at the beginning of the academic year. Without registration, you will not be able to verify your situation with your instructors, and instructors will not be advised about your accommodation needs. AS will assess your medical situation, develop an accommodation plan with you, and support you in requesting accommodation for your course work. Remember that the process of accommodation is private: AS will not share details of your condition with any instructor, and your instructors will not reveal that you are registered with AS.

Writing
As a student here at the University of Toronto, you are expected to write well. The university provides its students with a number of resources to help them achieve this. For more information on campus writing centres and writing courses, please visit http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/.

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism
All students, faculty and staff are expected to follow the University's guidelines and policies on academic integrity. For students, this means following the standards of academic honesty when writing assignments, collaborating with fellow students, and writing tests and exams. Ensure that the work you submit for grading represents your own honest efforts. Plagiarism—representing someone else's work as your own or submitting work that you have previously submitted for marks in another class or program— is a serious offence that can result in sanctions. Speak to me for advice on anything that you find unclear. To learn more about how to cite and use source material appropriately and for other writing support, see the U of T writing support website at www.writing.utoronto.ca/ . Consult the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters for a complete outline of the University's policy and expectations. For more information, please see http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/osai and http://academicintegrity.utoronto.ca/

Other Resources

Student Life Programs and Services (http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/)
Academic Success Services (http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/asc)
Counselling and Psychological Services (http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/hwc)

This is a wonderful syllabus, but I still have questions

No worries – email me! paul.bloom@utoronto.ca