PHIL 120: Philosophy of Human Nature
Two possible topics for the Hobbes Essay Assignment (others to follow).

Hobbes’s intention in writing *Leviathan* is to do two things. First, he wants to show European civilization, and humankind more generally, the way to establish conditions of lasting peace; and, second, he wants to do that on grounds of a purely scientific conception of human nature.

Hobbes’s ideas about scientific principles and method, and the application of these to the special case of human nature, are a bit simplistic and crude, a reflection of the early period of scientific discovery in which he wrote. But he was not far off the mark, and the spirit and tenor of his approach is altogether consonant with scientific work today.

Today, we distinguish—as Hobbes did not—between the social sciences and the natural sciences. Hobbes himself is largely responsible for raising to conceptual clarity the very need for such a distinction to be made. His ideas, however, fall evenly in their influence on both sides of this fence. Hobbes’s way of thinking about human behavior and motivation have an enduring resonance with work being done in psychology, sociology and economics today, and his manner of approach to the question of human cognition is consistent with recent developments in neurophysiology, i.e., brain science—though in the latter case Hobbes’s ideas are so crudely formulated as to be almost entirely obsolete. But still, what Hobbes said has enduring significance for scientific and scholarly research today.

This essay assignment is intended to extend you the opportunity to explore the affinities between Hobbes’s philosophy and more recent work in economics or cognitive science. **There will be other topics coming your way, and you needn’t pursue either of these options.**

There are two articles available for you to consider: on e-reserves at the Library you’ll find a short (10-page) segment from Jonathan Aldred’s book, *The Skeptical Economist*. The segment is called “Are we always selfish,” and begins at the bottom of that first PDF page. Go to the Library Home Page, click on “Resources for Students”, find the link to course reserves.

The second one you can find on-line simply by googling “sorry but your soul just died” (without the quotes), a widely renowned essay by Tom Wolfe.

Your assignment is to **pick one or the other of these articles** and read it through. To help you choose which one to do I’d recommend you access both of them and read the first few paragraphs of each to see which one draws you in. Then, compose an essay in which you:

1. Introduce your reader to the precise issue in Hobbes that you intend to explore. This would be either the “pleasure maximization” thesis (Aldred) or the sensory-data processing model of human thought developed by Hobbes in *Leviathan*. Also, as part of your introduction, point forward to the essay you’ve chosen to discuss by alluding in general terms to the more contemporaneous statement of the issue your author shares with Hobbes. (Neither one of them mentions Hobbes by name.)
2. Articulate the relevant features of Hobbes’s position in a way that leads you to connect his thought with that of your chosen contemporary author.
3. Discuss the recent article with an eye to drawing out the Hobbesian features that it reflects.
4. Offer your own thoughts on the matter.

Feel free to raise any questions you have about the assignment in class, whether logistical (“how do I...”) or substantive (“what does Wolfe mean when he says...”).

The essay should be at least 750 words, but you may write as much as you want. Feel free, also, to stop by my office to discuss your essay, at whatever stage you find yourself (including the WTF stage). (What’s This For. What did you think it meant?)

Due date for the Hobbes essay—these, or one of the others that you might select—is December 3, Monday of the last week of classes.

**There will not be time for re-writes on this project; rough drafts (and they can be very rough), or individual conferences on the topics are welcomed and encouraged, but not required.**
Instructions: Unlike the critial essay you wrote on the Gorgias, this paper is primarily EXPOSITORY in nature. That is, the primary objective here is simply to present a clear and accurate statement of some one feature of Hobbes’ philosophy. The agree / disagree component is less the focus of attention.

Select any one of the topics below and compose an essay of approximately 750 words. Your “reader has not been reading Leviathan with us in class and knows nothing of his philosophy. Your primary objective is convey a clear and plausible rendering of Hobbes’ position. You will also offer your own views on the topic you select, but do more than simply state whether you agree or disagree; that is, you must provide at least some reason for thinking that your position is correct with respect to what Hobbes says, or raise a fundamental objection to what he says in a way to call his view seriously into doubt.

Please feel free to raise whatever questions you’d like in class, or stop by the office for some help in getting started. The essay is due the second class day after Thanksgiving break.

1.) Denial of Free Will
   Hobbes denies that human beings have freedom of the will and presents two arguments to establish his claim, the Argument from Strict Causal Determinism and the Argument from Pleasure Maximization.
   Select either one of these arguments and state Hobbes’ case. The objective here is to make as plausible and compelling a case as you can on Hobbes’ behalf. Convince your reader—if not of the truth of Hobbes’ conclusion, at least of the force of his argument. Then, you are “free” to agree or disagree, and to argue your case. But you have no choice whether to argue a case.

2.) The Relation between Reason and Appetite in Plato and in Hobbes
   Plato and Hobbes offer very different conceptions of the role reason plays in our thought processes. These different conceptions sponsor equally divergent ideas about morality. And they both use the term “appetite” to describe what reason must contend with in our motivational states.
   Contrast the views of Plato and Hobbes on the role and function of reason in human thought processes. How does reason work? What does it do? Explain how their respective notions about reason lead on to their very different ideas about morality.

3.) Moral Relativism
   What does it mean to call Hobbes a “moral relativist”? Why does he adopt this doctrine?

   Moral relativism is quite similar to, but also importantly different from an attitude, a posture one might take with respect to the opinions of another person who totally disagrees with you about an issue of serious moral significance. Explain. What is that similar but importantly different attitude?

4.) Human Relations
   In Chapter Ten Hobbes argues that all human relations are based upon perceptions of inequality of “power,” and human actions are directed at the effort to redress or eliminate or accommodate oneself to these inequalities. This essay will require you to interpret human behavior as you experience it, your life in relation to other people in society, in a way that is congruent with what Hobbes has to say in Chapter Ten of Leviathan. Having done so, you may either agree or disagree with what Hobbes says, but you’ll need to argue your case either way, offer supporting reasons for your position.

5.) The transition from the State of Nature to Civil Society: Chapters 13 & 14
   Explain why the Hobbesian State of Nature is the way Hobbes believes it would be. Show how the transition into civil society can be effected without the need for Hobbes to go back on his basic claims about human motivation generally.