In this course we will explore the cognitive, social, and emotional capacities of creatures without language or culture. How much of our complex psychology is unique to mature humans? How rich an inner mental life can be supported without language or culture? Topics will include cognition and thought (e.g., spatial navigation, numerical cognition, understanding the physical world, tool use & problem-solving, consciousness); social life (e.g., theory of mind, social learning, nonlinguistic communication, cooperation & altruism); and emotional capacities and experience. We will primarily focus on infants and nonhuman animals, but will at times consider other populations without language, such as “wild child” case studies of children without linguistic exposure, adults with language disorders, and so on. This course is highly interdisciplinary, bringing together work from psychology, cognitive science, anthropology, and evolutionary theory.

Class Format

This online summer course has a workload equivalent to that of a typical semester-long course. It lasts five weeks, with 2 online sessions each week - 8 online discussion sessions and 2 online exams. This class is a discussion-oriented seminar, in which we will together explore and discuss material, available from the class website, that you will have reviewed before each online discussion session. Each week covers specific topics with assigned lectures and readings. Readings are primary research articles, review articles and book chapters; there is no assigned textbook.

To prepare for the discussion sessions each week, IN ADVANCE OF THE WEEK’S FIRST DISCUSSION SECTION you should:

(a) Watch the lectures & other video items assigned for the week (available in the Modules section of the course’s Canvas website). Taking handwritten notes on the material in these lectures will help you significantly when it comes to studying for the midterm and final exams.
(b) Read the assigned chapters and articles (available for download in the Modules section of the course website). Taking notes that summarize the main points of each reading, again, will be invaluable in learning the material and doing well on the exams.

(c) Work through the Weekly Question Set for that week (available in the Modules section of the course website); and finally,

(d) Post two Questions/comments relating to the material for the week, on the class Discussion Board. These questions are due each week on Sunday by 9pm EST (i.e. the evening before the first discussion section of the week)

Requirements & Evaluation

75% Exams: There are two exams, taken online, worth 30% and 35% of your grade respectively:

Midterm exam – Monday, June 8, 6-8pm EST.

Final exam – Wed, June 24, 6-8pm EST.

You MUST take these exams during the scheduled times. The lectures and readings have some overlap of content, but there is A LOT of material in each that is not covered in the other. Exams will cover material equally from the lectures and the reading assignments.

25% Participation.

This includes two things:

(a) Your presence and active discussion during the sessions as we discuss the Question Set. You need not be restricted to the questions in the Question Set during online discussions – we welcome any and all questions and comments you have on the material. The collective class discussion on these issues, including input from both yourself and your classmates, will help you get the most from the class – and correspondingly, your input is critical to helping the other students gain the most complete understanding of the material.

(b) Your questions posted to the Online Discussion Boards. By Sunday, 9pm EST for each of the 5 weeks, you must post 2 questions on the class discussion board. These should relate to the lectures and/or readings assigned for that week. They can be as brief as a sentence or two; they don’t need to be essays. It is highly recommended that you write your own questions and post them BEFORE reading others’ questions on the discussion forum, as your questions will be graded in part based on original thought.

Words about Participation: YOU are an essential part of this discussion-oriented, seminar style class – your contributions and thoughts during our sessions will contribute to other
students’ understanding of the material, and their contributions will contribute to your understanding. You should carefully read the assigned readings, watch the lectures, and think about the material contained in each BEFORE the relevant discussion sessions. Our discussions will take as a starting point that all students have done this background preparation. In these sessions we will, as a group, discuss questions that students raise, interesting ideas that spring forth from the material, points of the material where you wish to gain greater clarity, and so forth. Your full and active participation and ideas will help both you, and the other students, to get the most out of the class. Your grade for participation will be based on the quantity but also the QUALITY of your contributions.

Please note: There can be a fine line between being actively involved in discussion, and ‘dominating the airwaves.’ It can be intimidating to share your thoughts in a group, and if this is the case for you, you’ll have to push yourself some (at least at first) to speak up. For others this comes quite naturally - if you’re an extrovert who loves taking the platform and sharing your thoughts, be considerate of others for whom this does not come as easily, and make sure to give them a chance to speak up so that we can all benefit from their ideas and input as well.

Policy on Electronics

Other than meeting virtually rather than physically, this is a regular seminar. We will all be paying attention to each other and fully involved in the discussion. Accordingly, all cell phones, Kindles, iPads, and the like should be turned off and kept tucked away while we are in session.

Academic Honesty

Exams are closed-book. You should NOT consult any written materials, or consult other students (or allow others to consult you) during the exams.

All incidents of suspected cheating or plagiarism will, without exception, be referred to the Executive Committee of Yale College. The consequences can be serious, including suspension and/or expulsion. If you find yourself in a difficult situation, there are always better options than cheating. If you are having problems in the course, contact myself or the TF, so that we can help and advise you.

Schedule

WEEK 1 – Understanding the Physical World: Physics, Space & Navigation, Number

WEEK 2 – Communicating with & Understanding Others: Language & Theory of Mind

WEEK 3 – MIDTERM EXAM on Monday:
June 8  MIDTERM EXAM on material of Weeks 1 & 2

June 10  Attachment & Emotional life

WEEK 4 – Understanding the Social World: Morality, Social Learning, and Culture

WEEK 5 – Putting it All Together; FINAL EXAM

June 22 Conclusions: What is ‘Uniquely Human’?

June 24 FINAL EXAM  on all material (strong emphasis on Weeks 3, 4, 5)

To prepare for Week One, by 9pm on SUNDAY MAY 24, you should:

(a) Watch the lectures & other video items assigned for Week 1 (available in the Modules section of the course’s Canvas website). Taking handwritten notes on the material in these lectures will help you significantly when it comes to studying for the midterm and final exams.

(b) Read the assigned chapters & articles (available for download in the Modules section of the course website). Taking notes that summarize the main points of each reading, again, will be invaluable in learning the material and doing well on the exams.

(c) Work through the Week 1 Question Set (available in the Modules section of the course website).

(d) Post two Questions/comments relating to the material for the week, on the class Discussion Board. These questions are due by 9pm EST on Sunday MAY 24 (the day before our first discussion section).