

European Thought

Fall 2020-2021 E block Meet in room 206 (when possible).

John Holloran

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Email read 7am - 7pm

Course Overview: "European Essays on Civilization and Life in Modern Times"

In today's world it can be difficult to escape the legacy of European Thought. Ideas that were published in Europe from roughly 1600-1930 shaped the way Europeans and others understood themselves and their relationship to others.

Historically, Europeans drew on a tradition of learning that centered around the study of a common academic language, Latin that made possible intellectual conversations across the various countries and local languages despite the many and often heated political, religious, cultural, and intellectual conflicts. There was never a single European tradition, and yet one can locate some essays that were so widely read and discussed, praised and denounced that one can argue that they helped establish certain ways of speaking and writing about ideas.

In this class we will focus on a few of these essays that center on ideas of civilization, progress, and the prospects of improving our minds and our humanity by way of education. These essays have been some of the most influential and, at the time they were written, the most controversial books of their day.

The authors are European, but thinkers, politicians, and revolutionaries all over the world have read and discussed these works. These readings build off of each other, with the later ones referring back to the prior ones, and thus help exercise the main techniques and traditions of intellectual history. Put together, a difficult book like Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* will make far more sense to you than it would if you tried to pick it up and read it cold.

Philosophical literature, in general, can offer indirect ways to approach and discuss topics that are otherwise difficult to raise and frame. In this class, we will use these essays as a starting point for engaging topics of current concern and interest.

In this class you will develop your ability to (1) question, reflect about, and discuss real things with other students, (2) read challenging writing with intense focus, and (3) write clearly, powerfully, and personally about real things, with an eye to craft, voice, and editing. For all its intensity, the papers and reading assignments will be relatively short. We will be spending our time in class going over the reading and working to draw out the arguments and implications of the essays. Be prepared to be challenged, to think, to discuss, and to question. I will post assignments and supplemental readings in the Intellectual History Google Classroom.

Major Readings (Some involve excerpts):

René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*. 1637

Voltaire, *Candide*. 1759

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality." 1755

Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. 1792

John Stuart Mill, "Coleridge." 1840

Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*. 1848

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*.

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

Big Questions:

1. What does it mean to be human and live in society? What is human nature? What is the nature of history and civilization? What do I think about the world and my role in it? What does it mean for me to question what I know and encounter other ways of thinking?
2. Why and how do ways of thinking about the world emerge, change and conflict?
3. What is it like to read philosophical literature? What can one do with an essay?
4. What it is like to write an essay that can make sense of my own experience? What does it mean to contextualize or historicize thoughts and ideas?
5. Where am I coming from? What does it mean and have real conversations? What does it take? What is the role of perspective?
6. How is philosophy relevant to me? How can its tools and the tools of the essay serve and support me my projects of self-discovery and service to others?

Skills:

1. How do I put into words what I am thinking?
2. How do I communicate what I am thinking and where I am coming from with others?
3. How do I layer several elements into a single essay?
4. How do I speak up, listen well, and draw out other people's ideas?
5. How do I read a complex, dense, philosophical text?
6. How can I apply these skills and understandings in other areas of study or practice?

Major Assessments:

Writing: 80%

1. "What am I thinking?" Essay drafts & exercises
2. "What are they thinking?" Essay draft
3. Final, revised essay (built of previous drafts)

The quality of the work (in a variety of modes) - commitment to revision, detail, specifications); personal engagement/interest in the material as reflected in voice, scope: depth and/or breadth of research, sense of purpose and application, commitment and/or connection beyond the classroom.

A = evidenced by work that is distinguished in terms of its quality, voice, personal engagement, creativity, connection, applicability outside the bounds of the assignment or classroom. Clear and compelling evidence of

understanding in the content of the work and in one's reflections. Successfully weaves together three frames into a single essay.

B = work that is complete, on time, and satisfies the specifications of the assignment. Evidence of developing understanding in the content and reflections. Work that develops at least one frame well.

C = work that is partially incomplete or needing significant revision to satisfy the specifications of the assignment. Evidence of misunderstanding based on the content and/or reflections.

D = work that is significantly incomplete and does not yet satisfy major specifications of the assignment. Lacks evidence of understanding in content and reflection.

F = work is missing.

Final Essay Specifications:

- Has a title that helps frame the essay

- Develops an opening frame (and closes the frame at the end)

- Develops three layers/frames (personal/narrative, technical/conceptual, literary)

- Develops an idea/concept

- Establishes what is at stake (personally) for the writer.

- Locates the discussion in time and space/

- Uses sensory images to engage the reader

- Develops a closing metaphor (image + idea)

- Revised for clarity, efficiency, format, and polish

Participation: 20% ([History Department Engagement Rubric](#))

Evidence/indicators:

- Portfolio of 3 reading/argument analysis/outlines (drawn from three different authors)

- Conversation/Participation Reflection Portfolio

- Preparation (observation and analysis of texts)/ Offers Astute Observations, Insights, Questions

- Formulation of questions for self and others

- Engagement with questions raised by others

- Modes of Engagement: reading portfolio & discussion reflections (shared with JH).

- In class presence — spoken conversation

- In class presence — written conversation (online, backchannel, Haiku)

Participation/Preparation Feedback Rubric

- 4 = Daily, Positive Preparation and Participation, (Leader)

- 3 = Frequent, Positive Preparation and Participation, (Supporter)

- 2 = Occasional, Positive Preparation and Participation, (Follower)

- 1 = Absent, missing materials, late to class, passive, disruptive (Bystander)

A grade in this class reflects: (See Grading [Indicators](#))

How far you have developed as a learner in your ability to engage with the materials and extend your learning beyond the specific requirements of the assigned work based on the quality of your work and the scope of evidence of understanding based on class participation.

Note: this is not based on an average over time, but based on evidence of understanding and

distinction across the scope of the class - so a final project could provide evidence of understanding and distinguished work in several areas that were previously less developed. And early evidence of understanding or distinction is sufficient - one does not have to keep proving distinction but can move onto another kind of challenge.

Excused Absence Policy:

Occasional Absences: can be compensated for by consistent, positive participation.

Scheduled, Extended Absences: (3 or more days in a row) require make up work in the form of written engagement with the texts and online contributions discussed during the absence.

Multiple Absences: (more than 5 in a semester) require compensatory contributions to make up for the absences.

[History Department Policies](#)