



Core 102-Culture and Values

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Course Title: The Objects of Its Love: Culture and Values

A city (*civitas*) is, according to Augustine, fifth-century Bishop of Hippo in Africa, “a gathering of rational beings united in fellowship by a common agreement about the objects of its love.” The foundation of culture and of civilization (literally “citification”) is this cooperative unity among humans, and the unity can only be brought about by “a common agreement” as to the values of a culture, “the objects of its love.” While these qualities of unity, agreement, and love are in themselves good, Augustine immediately goes on to warn that the things a culture loves can be in themselves evil and bring it to destruction. Consider the extreme case of Nazi Germany.

This is to be a course on the formation of cultural values in what is commonly and loosely

referred to as western culture. I will propose to you that western cultural values fall into three coherent systems that have superseded each other in time, although residue from the superseded systems always remains in some attenuated form.

The first system is the Heroic; it is the initial system of values produced by almost all the cultures we know of, and certainly all the civilizations, western and non-western. It values the domination, possessions, and fame won by theft and violence. Its most profound activity is killing, particularly in vengeance (think *Game of Thrones*). It is a world of horrors, but also of strange and unexpected beauties and loves.

The second system is the Philosophical-Religious. It completely inverts the Heroic, seeking peace, humility, knowledge, love of this world and of a transcendent beyond. We will also begin here a secondary theme of the course: the conflict between literature and philosophy (or epic and utopia). Literature is about evil caused by the endless quest for distinction, to be greater than others. Philosophy proposes that by giving up distinction it should be possible to live a natural life of knowledge and peace.

The third is the Empirical-Romantic, which persists to the present, and which is the only one of these systems that might be considered unique to the west, and is simultaneous with western world domination. Empiricism, or scientific materialism, proposes that all previous "learning" was futile, that the mechanics of our physical world is the only valid object of knowledge, that this machine-knowledge will bring us power over nature. It generates its opposition: the Romantic, which values neither transcendent God nor mechanical world, but instead loves human subjectivity, the experience of thought and feeling.

Are cultural values arbitrary or determined? Do they exist only to mask and justify power? Are they responses to the material conditions of existence? Are they reflections, intuitions, however imperfect, of absolute values encoded within the cosmos itself? These are only a few of the questions we will ask.

I. First Value System: Heroic

Anger and Civilization

Homer, *The Iliad*

Yamamoto Tsunetomo, *Hagakure* (excerpt provided)

August

M22

W24

M29

W31

September

M5 Labor Day

Violence and the Recovery of Community

Homer, *The Odyssey*
Sappho, "Ode to Aphrodite," "Tithonus" (provided)
W7
M12
W14
M19
W21

2. Second Value System: Philosophical-Religious

The City and the Transcendent

Plato, *The Republic*

M26

W28

October

M3 Midterm Exam

M5

Judaism and Jesus

John's Gospel (read online)

M10

W12

M17 First Paper Due

W19

3. Third Value System: Empirical-Romantic

Enlightenment

Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning, Instauration Magna, Novum Organum, Temporis Partus Masculus* (excerpts, provided)

Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents, Dora*

M24

W26

M31

November

W2

Romanticism and Decadence

John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale" (provided)

Arthur Rimbaud, Letter (provided)

Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals, The Twilight of the Idols, The Antichrist*

M7

W9

M14

W16

M21

W23 Thanksgiving

M28

W30

December

F9 Final Exam 11-1 and Final Paper Due

Required Booklist

Freud, Sigmund. Civilization and Its Discontents. Ed. James Strachey. The Standard Edition. New York: Norton, 1989.

_____. Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria. Ed. Philip Rieff. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

Homer. The Iliad. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.

_____. The Odyssey. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. New York: Harper Trade, 1999.

Friedrich, Friedrich. The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals. Trans. Francis Golffing. New York: Doubleday, 1990.

_____. The Twilight of the Idols and The Antichrist. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Penguin Classics, 1990.

Plato. Republic. Trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford. New York: Oxford University Press, 1951.

Learning Objectives

In this course you will:

- Reflect on what it means to be human through close study of human experience throughout time and across diverse cultures. The first works we will study were written (after generations of oral recitation) around 800 BCE; the last was published in the late nineteenth century. Apart from English, they were written in Greek, Latin, German, and French. Although you will be reading them mainly in translation, I will be pointing out details of how the original languages work and how this affects our reading of them.
- Cultivate a critical appreciation for various forms of human expression, including literature, language, philosophy, and the arts, as well as develop an understanding of the contexts from which these forms emerge. We begin with the two extraordinary poems of Homer: strange, formal, ancient, windows on to a world utterly unlike ours. They begin the genre of the epic. They are so comprehensive they seem to create entire worlds in themselves. They are also full of strange Easter eggs, surprises, and tricks played with time. Then we move to two poems of Sappho: short, exquisite meditations on love and time, just barely recovered from the past, the latter of the two in mummy wrappings. And then on to entirely innovative forms of writing: the most important Platonic dialogue, and a gospel, then argumentative essays in the foundation of science, psychoanalytic theory, existentialist philosophy. At the end of the semester, we will even read a letter from a sixteen-year-old runaway, truant child, writing to his one sympathetic teacher, containing the most influential theoretical statement in all of modern art.
- Engage with lasting ideas and values that have animated humanity throughout the centuries for a more purposeful, more ethical, and intellectually richer life. The very center of this course is to be the ideas and systems of value of past worlds, emerging towards our modern world, preserved in the miraculous human practice of writing. We will examine the ideas of the

first real philosopher, of the founder of the world's largest religion, the founder of modern science, of psychoanalysis, to name only a few.

- Learn to evaluate ideas from multiple perspectives and to formulate informed opinions on complex issues of critical importance in today's global world. This course will provide you with knowledge and understanding of some of the most profound, inventive, influential ideas of value in the history of human culture. They are multiple, and, as you will see, nothing is obvious or easy.

Course Requirements

- Learn to read and interpret actively and analytically, to think critically and creatively, and to write and speak persuasively. Expect to read an average of a hundred pages a week, which will be front-loaded towards the beginning of the semester because of Homer. There will be two examinations, at midterm and in the final examination time. These will be as objective as I can make them, and will test knowledge of the readings and of class content. We will write two papers of seven to eight pages each, due around midterm and at the final exam date. We will concentrate on writing as investigation, enquiry, the attempt to solve a mystery, or to deepen it. I will provide you with written (by me) guides on how to write a paper, mistakes to avoid, and grammar and punctuation.