

Core 101–Symbols and Conceptual Systems

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Office Hours: MW 11-12
Lecture MW 2-3:20 CPA 210
Lab ?

Course Description

A symbol is a token of identity. It is a concrete object, or a verbal description of such an object, that stands for a concept that cannot be represented or described, except abstractly, at great length, with great difficulty and obscurity, or with transgression. A symbol is a substitute for what is symbolized, because the symbolized is in various ways unutterable, inconceivable, sublime, holy, dangerous, or repulsive. What is that dark thing that the symbol represents? The answer depends on the conceptual system within which the symbol operates, and human conceptual systems have been many, and are generally each at war with all of the others. Each conceptual system claims exclusively to be the correct description of the ultimate nature of the world in which humanity finds itself.

So, this course is to be a study of a number of conceptual systems and the ways in which symbols operate within them. I have chosen those conceptual systems that have had the greatest influence on how you conceive of yourselves and the world. The goals of the course are to make your own conceptual system conscious to yourself, and to allow you to recognize its constituent elements, the ideas and assumptions you have taken from others. You will also, perhaps, gain some knowledge of systems utterly foreign to you; you may develop some sympathy for these, or you may be appalled by them. You may also find that elements of your own system lead to conclusions you do not wish to reach. You may be shaken in your allegiance to your own conceptual system, or confirmed in it. You will, I hope, understand it, perhaps for the first time.

Learning Objectives

1. Reflect on what it means to be human through close study of human experience throughout time and across diverse cultures. The writers we will be studying are each struggling to find new ways of being human. So should you.
2. Cultivate a critical appreciation for some of the most profound and innovative forms of human expression. We will be reading examples of almost every genre of literature.
3. Understand and engage critically with the cultural and intellectual movements that these works propose, examine, oppose. Thought, like matter, is clumpy. As matter tends to constellate into planets, stars, solar systems, galaxies, so ideas tend to constellate into movements.
4. Learn to read and interpret actively and analytically, to think critically and creatively, and to write and speak persuasively. With this in mind, we will write two substantial long-form papers. I will give extensive written instructions on what works and what does not. The goal is to learn from the first paper, in order to improve your thinking and writing substantially in the writing of the second. Every student should budget at least one hour to go over your first paper with me.

Introduction: How Do Symbols Work?

January

M 9

Readings:

Homer, *Odyssey*, Aeolus' island and Polyphemus episodes, handout

1. Two Religious Conceptual Systems: A God Comes to Visit

W 11 Euripides, *The Bacchae*

M 16 Martin Luther King Day

W 18

M 23 John's Gospel, online

W 25

M 30

February

W 1

2. Materialism

M 6 Bacon, handout

W 8 Condillac, *Logique*, handout

M 13 Holbach, *System of Nature*, handout

3. Romanticism

W 15 Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," handout

M 20 President's Day

W 22 Shelley, "Ozymandius," handout

M 27 Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," "Self-Reliance"

March

W 1 Yeats, "The Second Coming," handout **First Paper Due**

4. Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud

M 6 Hegel **Midterm Exam**

W 8 Marx, handout

M 13 Spring Recess

W 15 Spring Recess

M 20 Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist*

W 22

M 27

W 29 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *Dora*

April

M 3

T 5

W 5

5. Decadence

M 10 Rimbaud, Letter, handout

W 12
M 17 Huysmans, *Against Nature*
W 19
M 24
W 26
May
F 5 **Final Exam 11-1 Second Paper Due**

Required Book List

Euripides. *The Bacchae* in *Euripides V*. Eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. University of Chicago Press. 9780226308982
Emerson. *Nature and Selected Essays*. Ed. Larzer Ziff. Penguin. 9780142437629
Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Francis Golffing. Doubleday Anchor. 0385092105
Nietzsche. *Twilight of the Idols and The Antichrist*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Penguin. 9780140445145
Freud. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. James Strachey. Norton. 0393304515
Freud. *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. Ed. Philip Rieff. Touchstone. 0684829460
Huysmans. *Against Nature*. Penguin. 010447636

Evaluation

There will be two papers, a midterm and a final exam. Each will count for one quarter of the grade. Papers will be a minimum of five pages in length and are to comply with my written instructions, which will be provided to each student.