

Modernity: liberated man; domesticated man

Course Description

A controversial idea

The title of this course may strike some as controversial, if not downright outlandish. Isn't modernity above all that which signifies man's liberation? Isn't modernity's promise precisely that which provides the philosophical foundations of the primacy of individual freedom? Would it not be more appropriate to speak of modernity *against* the domestication of man? Isn't it patently obvious that our commonsensical understanding of the idea of domestication necessarily excludes modernity's conception of human beings?

Our common-sense understanding of the idea of domestication usually goes as follows: the verb *to domesticate* refers to the human act of training or adapting plant or animal life in order to make it able to live in a human environment. It logically follows then that the noun *domestication* means something like this: domestication is that which describes the result of the human capacity to take charge of various plant and animal life forms and to *change* these life forms in accordance with human needs. The idea of domestication then involves both the notions of *control* and *change*, and more specifically the ways in which these two notions are oriented towards a particular *goal*. We can sum up this goal as follows: domestication has as its ultimate goal the control and transformation of various non-human life forms in order to improve the lives of human beings.

In the light of these definitions it is not at all obvious that the idea of domestication could or even *should* apply to humans themselves can have its place in modernity. Why then speak of the "domestication of man", especially when such an idea seems to be, at best, the putting together of notions that just do not go together or, at worst, that which conjures up images of inhuman control of some humans over others?

What is a human being?

Man is a quite particular kind of creature. He possesses, it seems, a twofold nature. He is both instinctual and rational. On the one hand, he is the kind of being that is made up of instinctual capacities drawn from his animal nature. On the other hand, he is able, if he so chooses, to rise above his animal self thanks to his ability to reason. This is what is specific to man: his rational faculty is what sets him apart from the rest of earthly life. This also explains why it is that man has this unique capacity to reflect upon whom or what he is, which makes it possible for him to orient his life and the lives both non-human and human life forms on the basis of the knowledge which reasoning allows him to obtain. Man not only has the capacity to domesticate non-human life but also to domesticate *human life itself*.

How can this be? How can one compare domesticated non-rational animals with the modern ideal of free rational man? Aren't these two forms of being diametrically opposed? Doesn't being modern precisely mean that man can escape, by means of his reason, from the control to which domestic animals are submitted? If it is self-evident to say that man has domesticated a great variety of non-human beings, it is perhaps less obvious to affirm that man too is the result of domestication, or more to put it more precisely: man alone has the ability to bring about his *self-domestication*. The guiding question of this course will be to find out to what degree modern philosophy has either consciously or unconsciously extended the notion of domestication to the realm of human beings.

It is not surprising then that our course takes up a philosophical question which is at once universal and personal which we can sum up as follows: what is a human being? This is a question of universal import for the attempt to arrive at a universally valid understanding of what constitutes a human being. This essential question is not just a matter for philosophy, for the answer which we give to the question "What is a human being?" has political and social repercussions. In other words, the way in which one defines a human being will necessarily be reflected in the kind of society which grows out of the answer which one gives to this fundamental question.

Course Objectives

If you read the texts, attend class religiously, pay attention and participate, at the end of this course you will have a broader understanding of various theories of what it means to be a human being. You will also be more sensitive to the ways in which these various theories are used by societies to justify the ways in which they organise human life socially and politically. More importantly still, if you are sufficiently courageous, you will find yourself face to face with the most enigmatic of philosophical questions : « Who am I ?».

Course Requirements and Relative Weighting of Assignments

Required Text (available at the Coop): *recueil de textes* No. _____

Evaluations

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|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Two essays: | 40% (#1 = 10%, #2 = 25%) |
| Two exams: | 55% (#1 = 25%, #2 = 30%) |
| Reading Checks: | 10% |

Rules and Regulations:

(I) Use me as a resource. None of us is so brilliant that we fully understand material the first time we encounter it. Please, don't be afraid to ask questions when you are confused. I am delighted with students who try to learn, and asking questions is the best way to learn.

(II) It is important that you (i) attend classes, (ii) arrive at class on time, and (iii) do the readings before the class session for which they are set. More than two unexcused absences from class will be factored into your final grade, as will more than two late arrivals. **When you do miss a class, it is your responsibility to find out what you missed.** There is no secret to learning: if you put work into a course-- including doing the readings and thinking about them-- you will learn and get a good grade. The readings are an essential part of the course and I expect that you will do them

(III) The assignment **must be submitted on the day it is due**. Any delay that is not approved in advance will result in a penalty. All papers must use standard 1" margins and a 12-point font. There must be a separate cover sheet. Your paper must be stapled and have page numbers. Humour me on this one.

(IV) Plagiarism: Passing off other people's work as if it were the product of your labour-- i.e. plagiarism-- is dishonest and will be punished. **Don't do it.** Whenever you need help with an assignment or with any other aspect of the course, you should come to see me. A very enjoyable part of my job is helping students and you should never hesitate to ask questions in class or to speak with me outside the classroom. In addition, you must write your own paper. It is a good idea to work with other students on assignments, for tests, or on the coursework in general, but you must put your thoughts together in your own words. You cannot simply copy long sections from the assigned pieces and claim that it is your paper. If you are not sure what constitutes an acceptable paraphrase, ask me. Getting help with an assignment is smart; letting someone else write your paper is academically illegal and will earn you zero for the assignment. Any student caught plagiarizing or otherwise cheating will be reported to the Higher Authorities.

N.B. It is important to keep all copies of your marked papers and exams. These documents are essential in the event that you are moved to plead for a review of your mark.

Table of Contents

Week 1: Introduction

- Syllabus
- Exploration and discussion of the guiding concepts of the course: modernity, liberty and domestication.

Reading for next week: Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*.

Week 2: Modernity

- What is modernity? How do we identify that which is « modern »? How to distinguish modern thought from other ways of thinking? Are there sure criteria which allow us to make such a distinction? To what extent does modernity offer a new way of thinking what it means to be a human being?

Reading for the next four weeks: Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Weeks 3 through 6: “*I think therefore I am*”

- The human according to Descartes
 - Human liberty and the domestication of life
 - Continuity and discontinuity in the birth of modernity
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Week 7:

Mid-Term Exam

Reading for the next three weeks: Hobbes, *Leviathan & On the Citizen*.

Weeks 8 through 10: “Man is a wolf for man”

- the human according to Hobbes
- freedom and violence ; freedom *is* violence
- reason and the felicitous domestication of man

For the next 3 classes: Readings from Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*

Weeks 11 through 13: “*Man is born free. Everywhere he is in chains*”

- the human according to Rousseau
- animal freedom ; human slavery
- reason and the calamitous domestication of man

*****Hobbes essay due*****

Week 14: Recap of the material covered during the semester

- Discussion and preparatory exercises for next week’s final exam.
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Week 15:

FINAL EXAM