



Collège
Édouard-Montpetit
École nationale d'aérotechnique

345-CEG-EM
WINTER 2011
Humanities

PLAN DE COURS

COURSE : Humanities III : Ethics and Politics

PROGRAM : All programs

SUBJECT : 345 Humanities

TIME ALLOCATION : Theory : 3 Practical : 1 Personal study : 3

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TEACHER'S COUNSELLING PERIODS

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
Morning					
Afternoon					

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Humanities : Goals and Main Characteristics

Humanities, as part of the general education component, is intended to promote personal and social development and to give students a foundation that will help them understand their roles in contemporary society as members of the work force, citizens and individuals. The three sets of objectives and standards in humanities propose common frameworks for understanding the experiences, ideas and values of humankind and their diversity. They are aimed at developing critical thinking, reinforcing the ancillary skills involved in careful reading, organized writing, and well-developed oral presentations, and, where appropriate, improving media and computer literacy. Once students have mastered the three-stage process of analysis, synthesis and evaluation, they will be able to reflect in an informed manner and to communicate what they have learned in an organized and coherent.

Modernity, Freedom and Moral Obligation

Ethics

What is Good? What is Evil? The specificity of Man is found precisely in his capacity to not only ask such questions but to live his life as a function of the answers which he comes up with. A cursory knowledge of the great variety of cultures which characterises the history of humanity highlights a glaringly obvious fact: the human capacity to divide up reality into two distinct moral spheres of good and evil, of that which is allowed and forbidden, of right and wrong is universal. Ethics then as the assigning of moral value to human thought and activity is both transhistorical and transcultural. Another way of putting it is to say that a world without ethics, a world without values, is logically a world *without humans*. Conversely, the human world is necessarily a world which is value-laden. Man is a veritable value-creating machine.

Ethics, in the most general sense of the word, is about values. It's the ultimate set of guidelines which allows men to know when they are and when they are not doing the right thing. Historically, these ethical guidelines have been founded and justified in a variety of ways: by religion, by political ideologies such as nationalism, by atheism, by non-rational cultural traditions, by history, by emotional ties, by reason. Often, the values which any given society hold dear are a combination of most of these. What all of these ethical systems have in common is their implicit shared goal: to equip their fellowmen with the same criteria which allow them to discern right from wrong. To put it bluntly, a shared sense of moral obligation is fundamental to any stable political arrangements.

Politics

Politics, in the most general sense, is about power. It is safe to say that this is universally true concerning all human societal arrangements because, regardless of the political structure in place, the quest for power is common to all human communities. However, if we can say that the link between power and politics exists transhistorically and transculturally, we are still at a loss to explain the great variety of political structures which have existed in the past and exist today. Why, in the vast course of human history do we witness the polar opposites of legalised slavery and universal equality? How does the functioning of politics yield such radically different ideas? In order to understand these differences we must strive to find out where political positions, ideas, laws and legislation get their justification. In other words, if through the course of history politics has constructed both slave-owning *and* egalitarian societies as *legitimate*, there must be something other than just politics going on.

What I'm getting at here is that political legitimacy is founded on something other than just the anarchic, unstructured chaotic quest for power. There are, at all times in history, implicit or explicit rules which allow men to discern the difference between legitimate and illegitimate political power. One can say then that both ethics *and* politics are about values and legitimacy. But beyond this superficial assertion there lies a deeper, more complex and dynamic relationship between ethics and politics. In other words, the "glue" that holds a society together is *both* ethical and political. Any given society owes its existence to the coherent manner in which its ethical claims are in harmony with its political structure. In a word, there is no politics without ethics... and vice-versa.

Modernity's Challenge: Reconciling Freedom and Moral Obligation

By positing the ideals of liberty and equality, Modernity, in the most general sense, has as its primary goal the liberation of humanity from all arbitrary authority. However, at the very moment in which modern thinkers affirm that the emancipation of humanity as the highest value a troublesome question arises: if the ethical and political foundations of human society must do away with all of that which is non-human (Gods, religion superstition, blind tradition), how to come up with an ethics that is nonetheless *universal*? In other words, if values, moral obligations and political power are no longer sacred or divine by nature, what could possibly be the new legitimate source of moral and political authority? This is where we find Modernity's challenge: how can we reconcile the ideals of freedom and equality with moral and political authority?

COURSE OBJECTIVES

By means of a rigorous understanding of what we mean by «ethics» and «politics» the student will: firstly, have a clearer grasp of the inherently dynamic and complex relationship between a society's ethical foundations and its political structure; secondly, be armed with new conceptual tools enabling him to think through in a critical manner contemporary ethical and political dilemmas.

Course Requirements and Relative Weighting of Assignments

Required Texts (available at the Coop):

- KANT, E., *Fundamental Principals of the Metaphysics of Morals*.
- MILL, J. S., *Utilitarianism*
- *recueil de textes: # t.b.a.*

Evaluations

- 1) Mini exam (Meeting 3, 15%)
- 2) Exam on Mill's *Utilitarianism* (Meeting 7, 25%)
- 3) Essay Paper on Kant's *Fundamental Principals of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Meeting 11, 30%)
- 4) Final exam (Meeting 15, 30%)

Table of Contents

Meeting 1: Introduction

- Syllabus
- How to define ‘ethics’? What is ‘politics’? For our first meeting we will take a comparative and historical approach to these questions. In that way, we will be able to begin to highlight the specificity of modernity’s conception of ethics and politics.

Reading for next time: Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*

Meeting 2:

- What is Modernity? How is it different than pre-Modernity? What are its ethical and political characteristics? Taking a close look at the ethical and political ideals which have philosophically framed the hopes and goals of Modernity will set the table for our future readings of the eminently modern thinkers Mill and Kant.

Reading for next time: In-Class Mini-exam

Meeting 3:

- **In-Class Mini-exam**
- From ethics to politics: finding yourself on the political spectrum
- Introduction to Utilitarianism

Reading for next time: Mill, *Utilitarianism*

Meeting 4:

- *Utilitarianism* is the ethical theory that all action should be directed toward achieving the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. In other words, the moral value of an act is determined by the consequences said act has upon the greatest happiness principal. In other words, utilitarianism is the ethical system which seeks to give a moral value to the most universal of human quests. But is the pursuit of happiness equal to a moral life and a politically just society?

Reading for next time: Mill, *Utilitarianism*

Meeting 5:

- Mill, *Utilitarianism*

Reading for next time: Mill, *Utilitarianism*

Meeting 6:

- Mill, *Utilitarianism*
- Utilitarian case studies

Reading for next time: Prepare for the exam on Mill!

Meeting 7:

- In-Class Exam on Mill

Reading for next time: Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

Meeting 8:

Kant is at once a conservative and radical theorist of the universally valid foundations of moral obligation. Kantian ethics is paradoxical in that he sees neither theoretical nor practical conflict between human liberty and moral duty. If one can sum up utilitarianism as the duty of *happiness* could it be that Kant proposes the happiness of *duty* ?

Reading for next time: Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

Meeting 9:

- Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

Reading for next time: Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

Meeting 10:

- Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

For next time: essay paper on Kant due; movie: *The Promise*.

Meeting 11:

- **Essay Paper on Kant Due**

- Viewing of the movie *The Promise*. This Belgian film by the Dardenne brothers allows us to engage both Kant and Mill in a critical philosophical analysis of the ethical actions of its main characters

Reading for next time: Mill, *On Liberty*

Meeting 12:

- Concretely, how do ethics get translated into the political sphere? Mill's *On Liberty* is a good illustration of the strong link between ethical and political thought and the ways in which one can delineate the limits of political authority in the name of individual freedom.

Reading for next time: Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace*.

Meeting 13:

- In *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Kant proposes how to construct a politically just and ethically good system of international relations; utopian dream or rational blueprint of man's possibilities?

Meeting 14:

- Exercises and review of course material

Reading for next time: Study for next week's exam!

Meeting 15:

FINAL EXAM

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.