

POSC 251, MODERN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY:

THE NEW SCIENCE AND HUMANITY

Laurence Cooper
Fall 2011
Willis 416

Fall 2011
Office hours: MW 3-4, F 10-12,
and by appt.

I. Purpose and Scope

The modern age—the period beginning in the sixteenth or seventeenth century—began with a radical and intentional break with the ancient and medieval worlds. Do we still live in the modern age? Some would say yes. Others would say that the modern age ended in the twentieth century and that the world of today is better described as *postmodern*. But all would agree that our world and even our minds have been shaped by the modern age. So—what *is*, or what *was*, modernity?

Politically, the modern age has seen the rise of a variety of new ideologies and regime types, ranging from messianic nationalism to communism and socialism to liberal democracy. Economically, the modern age has been characterized by unprecedented wealth and industry, which have arisen from new and unprecedented technologies. And culturally, the modern age has been characterized by a host of attitudes and beliefs which we now take for granted but which would have been alien to all pre-modern peoples. At the core of these widely divergent phenomena, tying them together, has been a new understanding of human beings and their place in the world. In short, modernity has been the epoch characterized by the vindication and elevation—some would say, the divinization—of human will. Human beings, in Descartes' words, have sought to establish themselves as “masters and possessors of nature.” What was once considered the prerogative of God has been assumed by human beings. The primary means to this mastery, and therefore in some ways *the* defining characteristic of modern life, has been scientific technology. Science has been more than just a means to material wealth and power, however. It has also come to shape the way we understand (or misunderstand) ourselves.

How did all of this come about? What caused the massive revolution that created the modern world? And what should we think of it? Our task in this course will be to inquire into the origins, the character, and the meaning of the modern age. We will undertake this task by studying several brief but seminal texts. In Machiavelli, Bacon, and Descartes, we will see the launching of the modern age. In Hobbes, we will encounter the first great effort to interpret human beings and human behavior, including political behavior, according to the principles of the new modern science. In Swift, Rousseau, and Nietzsche, we will find powerful interpretations and critiques of modernity from three distinct and illuminating perspectives. Finally, in our brief concluding encounter with Hans Jonas and Walker Percy, we will be presented with reflections on how the modern project has made us what we are—and how, through knowledge of this, we might achieve some freedom of mind.

II. Course Requirements

By far the most important requirement is that you read all assigned passages **closely** and **before class**. The readings are generally not long but they will often be difficult, and they demand—and success in the course will demand— careful attention and frequent rereading. You should come to class prepared to discuss what you've understood and prepared to ask about what you haven't understood. Course grades will be determined by three papers (30% each) and class participation (10%).

III. Academic Honesty

Strict standards of academic integrity will be upheld in this class. Your submission of written work means that your work is your own, that it is in accord with Carleton's regulations on academic integrity, and that you have neither given nor received unauthorized aid. Be sure you are familiar with Carleton's principles and policies on Academic Honesty: if you haven't done so already, review the website found at <https://apps.carleton.edu/campus/doc/honesty/>. I take academic honesty very seriously: students who are found to have violated these standards should expect severe sanctions.

IV. Assigned Texts

The following books are available for purchase at the bookstore:

Bacon, *New Atlantis and the Great Instauration*
Descartes, *Discourse on Method*
Hobbes, *Leviathan*
Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*
Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*
Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*
Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*

Other required readings will be on eReserve at the Library (password: POSC).

V. Class Schedule

Note that this is an *approximate* schedule. We are likely to depart from it as class discussions, etc. so require. Adjustments will be announced in class, typically at the end of the class period.

September 13: Introduction: read Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapter 25 (on eReserve)

September 15: Bacon, *New Atlantis*

September 20: Bacon, *New Atlantis*

September 22: Descartes, *Discourse on Method*

September 27: Descartes, *Discourse on Method*

September 29: No class

October 4: Descartes, *Discourse on Method*

October 6: Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Author's Introduction and chapters 5-6, 9-10, 11, and 13-15

October 11: Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapters 17-18, 19 (first seven paragraphs only), 21 and 29 (recommended: chapter 46)

October 13: Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, part 3

October 18: Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, part 4

October 20: Rousseau, *First Discourse*

October 25: Rousseau, *First Discourse*

October 27: Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Preface for the Second Edition and §343-49

November 1: Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, § 350-63

November 3: Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, § 364-72

November 8: Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, § 373-83

November 10: Two essays by Hans Jonas (both on eReserve):

(1) "Technology and Responsibility"

(2) "Seventeenth Century and After: The Meaning of the Scientific and Technological Revolution"

November 15: Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*, pp. 1-126

VI. Due dates

Papers may be submitted electronically or by hand. Papers are due in my office by 4:00 PM of the day indicated:

First paper due Friday, October 7

Second paper due Friday, November 4

Third paper due Monday, November 21