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 men and women. 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 encounters 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 for this course are engaging but also very demanding if we want to learn what’s being taught. When possible, you would do well to read the assignments more than once. Grades for those enrolled in POSC 251 will be based on three 6-8 page papers (25% each) and class participation (25%). Grades for those opting for the POSC 371 version of the course will be based on a twenty page seminar paper on a topic approved by the instructor (75%) and class participation (25%).

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 17: Bacon, *New Atlantis*

September 22: Bacon, *New Atlantis*
September 24: Descartes, *Discourse on Method*

September 29: Descartes, *Discourse on Method*

October 1: Descartes, *Discourse on Method*

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

October 8: Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapters 17-18, 19 (first seven paragraphs only), 21 and 29 (recommended: chapter 46)

**POSC 251: FIRST PAPER DUE AT NOON ON FRIDAY, OCTOBER 9**

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

October 15: Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, part 4

October 20: Rousseau, *First Discourse*

October 22: Rousseau, *First Discourse*


November 5: Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, § 373-83

**POSC 251: SECOND PAPER DUE AT NOON ON FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 6**

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 17: Conclusion

**FINAL PAPER FOR BOTH POSC 251 AND POSC 371 DUE MONDAY, NOVEMBER 23**