

PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

(b) Second Paper:

21L002

Spring 2002

Papers are due by the end of Lecture #16, and should consist of six or seven pages (figure 320 words/page). Please number the pages of your essay; it will help me in writing comments. The questions and topics listed below are not meant to be addressed directly (although, of course, you may address them directly if you choose). They are meant to be suggestive, to get you thinking about the materials. If you wish to modify them or invent a topic of your own, you may do so. However, it remains the case that the subject of papers should be one (or more) of the texts read and discussed during the second third of this term, covering the readings from Hobbes through Rousseau.

I repeat some remarks from the first assignment: Please remember that you are writing an essay, not a book-report. An interpretative essay addresses itself to readers who have read the work under discussion and do not require an account of its contents (although they may not recall the work in detail). What an essay (as opposed to a book-report) does supply is some reminder of those contents in the context of an argument about them; the reminder is offered in the course of explaining how one should understand or interpret the work in question. Any good, short, coherent essay will be arguing something. It will help you to write an essay if you have in mind some point that you are trying to make. Such a point should not be self-evident; you should be able to state an opposing point (the one that you are denying) which is not so obviously silly that no one would be able to argue in its favor.

One final restriction: if you chose to quote one of the topics below by way of introducing your paper, do so on the title page. What I have written should not count as part of the quantity of prose that you are submitting in satisfaction of this assignment.

"O reason not the need. Our basest beggars are in their poorest things superfluous. Ask not nature more than nature needs, man's life were cheap as beasts." Several of the works we have read may be regarded as concerned with understanding the relationship between human nature's needs and the needs imposed by physical nature. Discuss the idea of needs in any text read after Lear and show its centrality to the text in question.

It has been observed (most notably by the character "More" at the end of *Utopia*) that utopia is not a place for human beings as we know them; and several of you argued that this was the right view in your papers. The view, of course, arguably applies to the land of the Houyhnhnms--the inhabitants *are* horses, after all, not people. At the end of the tale, however, Gulliver becomes "infatuated" with the Houyhnhnms way of life; he wants to live as the Houyhnhnms do. Does this invalidate the view of human beings that he expresses in the last chapter of the book?

What "nature teaches" is an underlying subject of some of the texts that we have read. Gulliver's master in Houyhnhm-land tells Gulliver that his kind have an equal affection for all young houyhnhnms and that Nature teaches them to love the whole of their species. Is this an ethical ideal? What about "family values"? The word "houyhnhnm" means "the perfection of nature" in Houyhnhnm-speak. The Utopians in More's book also lay claim to living "naturally". How valid is the application of the word "nature" and its derivatives in these cases?

A Houyhnhnm might well approve of Cordelia's reply to Lear's desire for an expression of exclusive, all-consuming love: "I love you according to my bond, no more nor less." Discuss.

Satire is a mode of literary discourse (if the whole text is satirical, one might call it a genre) which normally has a specifiable target. If the target is a person, the fiction will observe him or her as a specifiable type; and satire therefore generally implies the existence of specifiable norms of behavior, in respect of which the satirical target is in violation. The satirical target in *Gulliver* is sometimes described as "mankind", but this is a very large target indeed and hard to identify. It is also not clear which figures in the text represents the norm. Discuss.

It is possible to describe something (usually a practice of some kind) that is very familiar in terms which are accurate but which strips the item described of its significance--a process known in literary terms as "defamiliarization". Elucidate and discuss in relation to several examples drawn from *Gulliver's Travels*--you might devote particular attention to what the horses try to describe by using the phrase "saying the thing which is not".

A view of Swift's book has been often forwarded by many of its readers since its first publication--that Swift was a thoroughgoing misanthrope, a man so overcome with disgust at the physical facts of life that he could not see the potential dignity of humankind. To this end, they cite the continuing resort of the text to what is physically repellant--above all, the way in which Swift has taken everything connected with the passionate and erotic nature of mankind and made a kind of trash heap of it, which he called the Yahoos. In this view, Gulliver's rejection of humankind at the end of the book--his loathing of even so humane a person as Don Pedro--is taken to express Swift's own feelings. Comment.

Compare or contrast in any way you choose the land of the Houyhnhnms with either Montaigne's cannibals or the island of Utopia.

Comment on the statement made by Rousseau at the outset of his text that we must have a true idea of the natural state of mankind, even though it is a state that perhaps never existed or could exist. How does this notion relate to the rest of his views expressed in the text? Making judgements about the actual world by imagining a better state that perhaps never existed or could exist sounds like a recipe for writing a utopia. Is the idea of a utopia useful in discussing Rousseau's state of nature?

"In civilization we lose our authenticity as human beings." Rousseau didn't write this sentence, nor did he use the term authenticity (or its French equivalent), but the notion that the sentence expresses has often been offered as the meaning of the Second Discourse. How would you assess the validity this notion as a summary of Rousseau's views?

Rousseau actually had to invent the French word for "perfectibility" to describe the essential quality of mankind in distinction from all other animals. How would you explain this quality? How would you defend the idea that it is central to Rousseau's argument in the Second Discourse?

Rousseau gives a brief account of Hobbes's view of the state of nature. How accurate is his account? How astute are his criticisms of Hobbes? Compare their views of "mankind in a state of nature." The view each has of "the state of nature" is different from the other's; how different is their view of mankind?

It has been said that Hobbes's state of nature is very like the Yahoos represented by Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* and Swift's Houyhnhnms come close to Rousseau's notion of the earliest stages of civilization, where the capacities for goodness that Rousseau thought were inherent in human nature had not yet been thoroughly corrupted by early forms of socialization. Criticize or amplify either point or

both.

Wordsworth believes that the best self is a product of unconscious development, but in his case it is not fully expressed in the activity of reason, and it is not fostered by interchange with other human beings but by exposure to the influences of something that he calls Nature. Comment.

The learned among Wordsworth's first audience found his early verse "inconclusive"--it didn't seem to be clearly about anything. In *The Prelude* the poet is fairly explicit about this--he says that he makes breathings for incommunicable powers, that he would needs words unknown to man to present the visionary dreaminess of one of the moments in his past that contain a "renovating virtue" (this is in Bk 12), and so on. The typical Wordsworthian image is of something happening at great depth, psychologically, in response to something other or behind what is described, and the response is unwilling, undeliberative, sudden, "mildly shocking" or "mildly surprising"; for all its importance the impact of the experience doesn't reveal itself to an observer and sometimes doesn't reveal itself to the person responding. Take any few passages and comment in the light of your view of the overall intention of the poem.

In suggesting that "our heart is with infinitude, and only there. with hope and expectation and desire and something evermore about to be", Wordsworth touches upon a sense of the endless restlessness of the human spirit that is common to many of the Romantic poets. But this endless restlessness is also attributed to humanity by Hobbes, for whom it is also a defining feature of humanity. Yet the views of Hobbes and Wordsworth are diametrically opposed upon this subject, despite the appearance of similarity, for Wordsworth takes this feature of humanity to be something that gives each individual a spiritual depth, whereas for Hobbes it is a mark of the triviality of human desires. Comment.

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth writes that the French Revolution raised hopes of fashioning an ideal state in reality (not in "Utopias"), wherein mankind would a life fulfilled in public as well as private interchange. As a result, Wordsworth, at first plunged into despair but later came to realize that the proper exemplar (role-model) for humanity was not the statesman (the Roman republican, which the French revolution tried to revive in the figure of the "citizen") but the poet. In what sense is the poet an exemplary figure, a model for the best that we can be? In what sense does Wordsworth believe that everyone is, in essence, a poet? (This notion, which, we recall, went along with his willingness to speak of people who didn't write poetry--including small children--as "poetic spirits", was the occasion for some in his early audience to poke fun at his writings.)

Take any of the passages descriptive of Wordsworth's boyhood years and discuss their substance and their place in the overall argument about the lasting effect of early years on the mature person.

It could be said that Hobbes and Kant see ethics in similar terms, since each thinks in terms of laws that people can agree are reasonable. Describe the two theories and indicate the extent to which you think that they agree and disagree about the nature of morality.

One way (there are many) to describe Kant's view is to say that he does not think that you can justify an ethical maxim, for example, "Never tell a lie", but you can show that you cannot consistently will its contrary, "Lie whenever it suits you." The justification depends upon accepting the premise that maxims of ethical conduct are universal—that is, they are addressed not to whoever you happen to be by virtue of natural advantages, social position, lineage, or the appetites and aversions that you happen to possess, but simply to you in your capacity as a rational agent, which is to say that they apply to just anybody. Discuss.

Kant offers two different formulations of the Categorical Imperative—one that tests whether it makes sense to express the maxim upon which the agent will act as a universal law, the other that enjoins an agent to treat other rational beings never just as a means but always also as an end. Explain these two formulations and say something about the connection between them. Some philosophers have tried to discredit the first formulation by pointing out that it justifies trivialities ("Everyone must always write with a felt-tipped pen") or immoralities ("Always persecute those who hold religious beliefs different from your own") or numerical qualifications ("Never tell more than twelve lies a year"). Comment.
