

PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

(a) First paper:

21L002

Spring, 2003

Papers are due by the end of Lecture #11, and should consist of approximately five pages (figure 320 words/page), not counting the title-page. I add that choice of large type, triple-spacing and huge margins are of no avail; word-count is what matters, and this should be checked with your word-processing program and the number of words entered on the title-page. Please number the pages; it will help me in writing my comments.

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 obvious that no one would be able to argue in its favor.

The following questions and topics are meant to be suggestive. If you wish to modify them or invent a topic of your own, you may do so, but the object of the discussion should be one (or more) of the texts read and discussed so far this term.

Machiavelli says that people will continue to trust someone who breaks his word because (a) you can always give good reasons for breaking your word; (b) people are "so ready to obey present necessities" that they allow themselves to be deceived. What is meant by "present necessities"? (Don't just say; give reasons for your interpretation, in the light of your understanding of the text.) Is the notion of "allowing yourself to be deceived" a coherent notion? Explain, and in doing so, elucidate what Machiavelli had in mind in the light of his whole argument.

Why do people need the illusion, if not the reality, of the five qualities the appearance of which Machiavelli says that the prince must cultivate: merciful, sincere (keeping your word), humane (compassionate), forthright (openness about your intentions, i.e., without a hidden agenda), religious? (NB: the qualities differ slightly, depending upon what translation you read.) Machiavelli does not give reasons but he comments often upon "what most people are like". Do any of these comments explain the matter? Machiavelli did not publish "The Prince" but circulated it in a semi-public way, and there is ample indication that he meant it for such general publication. If the prince is supposed to cultivate the illusion of possessing these qualities, doesn't blabbing the need for this rather give the game away?

Machiavelli's adage, "The ends justify the means," is justly famous, although he evidently did not say this (or, rather, its Italian equivalent) precisely. What he did say was that the motives behind anyone's actions are hard to know and that this is especially the case with the actions of princes, who can't be observed by their subjects at close hand; hence, in the case of princes, actions are usually judged by their results. Despite the inaccuracy, however, the attribution of the phrase "the ends justify the means" to Machiavelli has stuck (our translation, which dates from two centuries back, uses it), and the reason is,

evidently, that the phrase suits the spirit of Machiavelli's argument. Comment on this. Further, you might consider whether there is a possible contradiction implied by the phrase: if the ends justify the means, what sense does it make to say that the Prince has to learn "how not to be good". If the means are necessary for a good end aren't they, therefore, good?

In this connection, what does it mean to advise a chief executive that he must "learn how not to be good"? In what way is "learning" involved? Machiavelli advises the ruler to be both beast and human being. Is this like wearing two hats, one for the office and another for home? Can you put on and take off the hat of a beast at will?

Machiavelli introduces a radical split between the advice that he will give and the advice found in books, which (he says) is suitable only for imagined republics and principalities, "for there is such a gap between how one lives and how one ought to live that anyone who abandons what is done for what ought to be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation." Would More disagree with this judgement? The Prince was written for those who rule territories that they did not inherit; Utopia was such a territory, conquered by King Utopos. What would More have said of Machiavelli's book, could he have read it? More appears in his own book, offering judgement about Raphael's praise of Utopian institutions at the end of part two. Do you think that this expressed his genuine opinions? If so, what's the point of writing the book?

The Utopians value nothing beyond what it is "naturally" worth, and this seems connected with its utility, in easing the life of mankind. Hence gold and silver, the so-called "precious" metals are held to be nearly worthless in comparison with iron; ceremonies and public honors, whereby many acknowledge the superiority of some, are regarded as "empty gestures which do nobody any good". Valuing these things is said to be the result of "an idiotic notion" that things that are scarce are better than things that can be available to everyone. Comment in any way that deals with an understanding or response to the praise that Raphael heaps upon utopian life.

The Utopians have an argument which says that pleasure is the aim of human life. Is this argument any good? This argument is sometimes advanced by other moralists in order to condemn mankind, but here it serves as praise. Does this imply that non-Utopians, like ourselves, do not always act for pleasure? that with non-Utopians (that is, us) the sacrifice of their own interests or pleasures is a reality? And if so, should we be praised for it? Isn't self-sacrifice a good thing? Give some account of the Utopian notion of pleasure, paying careful attention to the details of the text—e.g., the division of pleasure into kinds—and some account of the idea of "false pleasure" that follows. There are some features of the discussion of pleasure that might seem contradictory—in particular, there are two sorts of people, those who want to work extra hours and certain lay brothers (corresponding to monks in Europe) who work hard and deny themselves much of the pleasure enjoyed by others, and these two sorts are honored by the rest of Utopian society and are obviously useful to others. Is the notion of pleasure consistent? At the same time, pleasure is not enough—for pleasure to be sanctioned as the goal of individual life, Raphael, argues, one has also to believe in a god who will reward us after death for sacrifices of pleasure that are not rewarded eventually during our lifetimes. How does this affect the argument that pleasure is the ultimate good? Is the need for a belief in eternal reward a valid reason for believing in God? What would Machiavelli say of this? What do you think More actually thought of this aspect of Utopian society?

More's Utopians do not follow Machiavelli's advice about not keeping one's word when one makes a treaty with a neighbor because they never make treaties; neither do they swear solemnly to do what they've already said they'll do. Solemn promises are useless; either you are someone who would break your word anyway or someone who would keep it, and so there's no point to treaties and solemn promises. (You can't really trust anyone who wants to make them--only a villain or an idiot would defend the notion that swearing makes your word more trustworthy.) How sound is the utopian argument?

Show how this sort of issue is characteristic of many practices distinguishing utopians from the rest of mankind.

Compare and contrast some of the features of Utopian life that, in your opinion, were meant to be outlandish with those that were meant to be taken seriously—e.g., the absence of poverty. Taking all in all, do you think that the Utopians way of life was admired by More, the author? (Not as direct a question as it looks—More might have admired them but thought them unsuitable for Europeans.) The text concludes with the character “More” dismissing what Raphael has said on grounds that it would simply mean the end of aristocracy, dignity, splendor, and glory. Is the character “More” to be identified with the author? Argue for your answer.

“Any discussion of the constraining features of Utopian society must take into account three aspects of the way of life that it affords. First, in the name of equality, it does away completely with the subservience that the institutions of More’s day enjoined upon the mass of the population to an aristocratic group in point of interest, deference of manner, and obedience to command; second, its institutions carefully diffuse authority throughout the whole of society; and third, its impositions are modest (there is relative liberty in choosing one’s occupation, for example) in comparison with the life of labor in pre-industrial society.” Discuss the issues raised by this statement, paying attention to the details of the text and being mindful of the constraints imposed by modern free-market economies upon those less successful than others in the struggle for subsistence.

Compare and contrast the character of More's Utopians with Montaigne's cannibals in any way that seems productive of illuminating the texts.

Montaigne says that he may contradict himself but he never contradicts the truth. Is this possible? Take any three (apparent or genuine) contradictions in the texts that we have read and examine the extent to which they contribute to Montaigne's overall purpose.

Montaigne gives several accounts of his purpose in writing and also has something to say about its novelty. He is not simple and straightforward about justifying this purpose (e.g., to write about an unimportant life, etc. etc.). Can you say anything about the inexplicit underlying justification, the *value* that Montaigne thinks his work has, the good that it might do? Why doesn't he speak overtly about it?

Montaigne has often been accused of ambling, not to say rambling--of writing essays that move about a topic with no apparent cumulative effect or discernable argumentative order. Comment in any way that seems pertinent.

Montaigne's text is replete with witty maxims, sometimes offered in paradoxical form: e.g., we must lend ourselves to others but give ourselves only to ourself; act in a circle, not a straight line; we must be deceived so that we do not deceive ourselves (on p. 769.); since we will not reject ambition out of conscience, let us reject it out of ambition (p. 783); we have to exercise our souls to feel how it is gradually ebbing away; do not neglect the pleasures of copulation but do not strain to do it with your fingers and toes. Pick out a few and show how they fit in with the general theme of the essays as a whole.

Comment on any recurrent theme in the Essays—e.g., the idea of duty to others versus one’s duty to oneself.

Exposit the first scene in *King Lear* in connection with what in your view are the central themes of the play. Get the details right. Was Cordelia right or wrong in her resistance to Lear's request? "Oh, reason not the need," exclaims Lear later in the play (when asked why he needs any retainers). Isn't Cordelia's answer, when she finally speaks, reasoning the need? Recall that the Fool and Edgar (disguised as Poor

Tom) tease and torment Lear and Gloucester, respectively; they do not flatter. Why do they do this?

Shakespeare's *King Lear* was a revision of an earlier play, called *King Leir*, which was based upon a story about ancient Britain in a well-known collection of historical chronicles. The old play ended with Cordelia and France coming back and winning back King Lear's kingdom for him. Two generations after Shakespeare, people felt dissatisfied with Shakespeare's ending and produced a version in which Lear gets his kingdom back and then resigns, and Cordelia marries Edgar, Gloucester's good son (the king of France gave her shelter in exile and support in the war but didn't marry her). This version held the stage until early in the nineteenth century. Comment in any way on the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the ending as we have it.

Examine the concern in *Lear* with the distinction between getting down to essentials and concern with the trappings of life. This starts early, with France's declaration that Cordelia is herself a dowry, runs through Lear's exchange with the disguised Edmund during the storm, and reaches a kind of climax with Lear's vision of anarchy in the "mad scene" on the heath. Of course, it is involved in Lear's remark about giving away the power of the king and yet keeping "the additions" and in the great speech beginning "O reason not the need", which talks about giving nature (that is, human nature) more than nature needs.

When the disguised Kent tries to enlist himself in Lear's service, he says "Thou hast that in thy face which I would fain call master--authority." (I am paraphrasing slightly.) What meaning does "authority" seem to have in the play?

Hobbes says that perhaps "there never was such a time" as the time that mankind lived in a state of nature (although "savage people in many places of America" come close) but that we can see what kind of life this would be in civil war and also in wars between nations. The "state of nature," then, isn't a historical concept; it does not refer to a historical time, in Hobbes' view. What sort of concept is it? Hobbes writes of the natural condition of mankind that it is a state war of "of every man against every man" in which "nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place". Hobbes identifies war as a state of nature--is he correct about the absence of right and wrong in war? If the state of nature has no historical location, where is "there" in the sentence just quoted?

"Of all voluntary acts, the object is to every man his own good," writes Hobbes (p. 93.), and this holds for acts of benevolence, forgiveness, gratitude--the exercise of all the virtues, that are possible only in the civilized state (which Hobbes calls the "civic state"). The difference between the natural condition and the civilized condition makes no difference to the essentially self-interested nature of all human activity, in Hobbes' view. (You might also want to recall the passage in Hobbes, where he says that "in the condition of mere nature" good and evil are just names for what we like and what we hate, and that this is not changed by the fact that in civil society we all like the moral virtues and hate the vices.) How is this view central to Hobbes' argument?

Hobbes also believes that to depose the sovereign is unjust--the people may commit injustice against the sovereign but not vice versa--and that all injustice is "absurd", that is to say, a form of self-contradiction, like affirming and denying the same proposition. Enlarge upon this notion and elucidate its connection with Hobbes's argument.

Imagine that More's Utopians stumbled upon Hobbes's text, via some kind of time warp. What would they make of it? Alternatively, imagine what Hobbes might have said about More's depiction of Utopian life. (Hobbes actually knew More's text but never commented upon it.)
