

CONTEMPORARY WESTERN CIVILIZATION

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Office Hours: International Affairs Building, Room 736, Thursdays 12-1PM

"The past is never dead. It's not even past."

William Faulkner

"Every document of civilization is at the same time a document of barbarism."

Walter Benjamin

"Natural law? What natural law? That myth haunts human history. Haunts! It's a ghost. Its insubstantial. Unreal."

Duncan Idaho, Dune Messiah (Frank Herbert)

Course Aims

Contemporary Civilization is the signature course of Columbia College. It takes as its ambitious focus a broad range of eras, authors, texts, and ideas. As the course title states, it is a study of civilization, understood both on the small scale of the individual and on the larger scale of politics and society.

The Fall semester will focus on the basic, often conflicting concepts by which societies have been organized: justice and government, humanity and nature, what it means to live a good life. In particular we will focus our inquiry on how different understandings of humanity and nature lead to conceptions of the state and society. Do human beings fundamentally have a beneficent nature, a self-serving nature, or, for that matter, any "nature" at all? Should the function of government be to support human excellence, restrain human malevolence, or something else entirely? What relationship, if any, should human governments bear toward God and religion? Finally, what associations should people form in pursuit of just and happy lives for all? The first unit will investigate the linked concepts of happiness and justice in antiquity; the second unit will consider a wide range of religious and theological expressions of the same concepts and ask how to relate religion and the state; and the final unit will directly address the framing question of the semester: how do definitions of humanity and nature (and human nature) shape form and function of societies?

Learning Goals

- Become conversant in some major questions that have defined the **intellectual history** of philosophy, religion, and political theory in the West.

- Gain a facility for **reading and engaging** with theoretical and political discourse. Students will collaboratively develop strategies for navigating dense texts and finding openings for intervention.
- Develop a capacity for **critical fascination**. By critical fascination I mean closely engaging with a text while neither dismissing it nor accepting its conclusions as a matter of course.

Readings and Class Discussion

The readings for CC are rich and diverse. They will require reading with a close eye will often need to be reread to understand the author's meaning. Please complete all the readings before the session for which they are assigned, and arrive to class having thought through the material, with questions and comments ready. Always bring the assigned text to class, as our discussions will be directed rooted in passages.

For every class period **there will be a discussion thread** on CourseWorks with suggested resources, contexts, and reading questions. These are best read **before** you dive into the reading. There will also be an **explorations** thread for anything relevant to our reading you'd like to share.

The Texts

All students should purchase the standard list of CC texts. Texts are available for purchase at both Book Culture (112th st.) and the Columbia Book Store (on Broadway at 115th st). As translations and pagination vary in different editions, please get the edition specified here to ease focused discussion of the texts in class. Texts marked with an asterisk (*) are available on the CC reader (<https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/conciv/ccreader>).

In all cases, it is best to have physical paper copies of the texts to facilitate our discussions in class.

Required Materials:

- Plato, *Republic* (Hackett)
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford World's Classics, trs. Ross)
- Aristotle, *Politics* (Hackett)
- New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha* (Oxford)
- Augustine, *City of God* (Penguin)
- The Qur'an*, Abdel Haleem, ed. (Oxford World's Classics)
- Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Oxford World's Classics)
- Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* (Penguin)
- Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (Oxford World's Classics)
- Hobbes, *Leviathan* (the Norton Library, ed. By Hoekstra and Johnston)
- Locke, *Political Writings* (Hackett)
- Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings* (Hackett)

Any other required readings will be provided by the instructor as PDFs on CourseWorks.

The books listed above can be purchased through the [Columbia University Bookstore](#).

Digital and print copies of most books can be borrowed from Butler Library using the [online library catalog](#).

Students who identify as first-generation, low-income students may use the [Columbia FLI Partnership Library](#), a collection of textbooks and other course materials available to low-income and/or first-generation students from Columbia University's undergraduate schools. Students may register to borrow materials from the collection for extended loan periods by filling out the [FLI Partnership Libraries Access Form](#). The purpose of this form is to create a confidential channel for requesting access to the FLI library, while ensuring that the collection serves its primary audience of FLI undergraduates. Columbia's FLI Partnership library is located in Butler Library. Barnard also maintains its [own FLI Partnership Library](#) in Barnard Library, and qualified Columbia undergraduates may similarly borrow from that collection.

Students may access the collection by searching by location for "[Columbia FLI Partnership Library](#)" or "[Barnard FLI Partnership Library](#)" within CLIO. Additionally, they may browse both collections by searching just for "[FLI Partnership Library](#)." Next, students may check out books from our FLI Partnership collections by using the Libraries' pick-up options.

If you are having difficulty obtaining the required texts for any reason, please contact the Center for the Core Curriculum: core-curriculum@columbia.edu.

Academic honesty

Columbia College is dedicated to the highest ideals of integrity in academia. Therefore, in Literature Humanities and Contemporary Civilization, any instance of academic dishonesty, attempted or actual, will be reported to the faculty chair of the course and to the dean of the Core Curriculum, who will review the case with the expectation that a student guilty of academic dishonesty will receive the grade of "F" in the course and be referred to dean's discipline for further institutional action.

Honor Code

In accordance with the Columbia College Honor Code, as established by the student body, we faculty are asked to "require students to write that they have upheld the honor code and to sign their name on all examinations, papers, and other assessments." The Honor Code itself is: "I affirm that I will not plagiarize, use unauthorized materials, or give or receive illegitimate help on assignments, papers, and examinations. I will also uphold equity and honesty in the evaluation of my work and the work of others. I do so to sustain a community built around this Code of Honor."

Grading Policy

Assessment will be based on the following system. See accompanying notes for elaboration.

Final Grade Calculation and Scale

Assignment	Percentage	Assessment/Feedback
Participation	10	Completion points
Journal Entries	20	Completion points, comments
Midterm Exam	25	Comments, exam points
Final Exam	25	Comments, exam points
Oral Exam	10	Completion points
Argument Chart	10	Comments

Columbia College uses the following standard grade scale:

Grade	Percent	Scale
A	93-99	4.0
A-	90-92	3.67
B+	87-89	3.33
B	83-86	3.0
B-	80-82	2.67
C+	77-79	2.33
C	73-76	2.0

C-	70-72	1.67
D	65-69	1.0
F	Below 65	0.0

There is extensive evidence that grades hinder learning and reduce students' interest in what they are studying. For this reason, I try to use other forms of feedback as often as possible. For most assignments, you will receive completion credits — meaning you will receive full credit for the assignment if you submit original work on time that shows that you have made an effort (i.e., the work is not full of sloppy grammatical errors, spelling mistakes, or indications that you have not read the text). If, for some reason, you do not receive full credit for one of these assignments, I will let you know (this is rare). In late October, you will receive a letter grade for your overall performance in class. If I have any concerns about your grade before that time, I will let you know. If you have any concerns about your grade, you should reach out to me. You can use the grade calculation table at any time, of course, but you can also contact me with questions. Your goal should not be to attain a high grade, but rather to learn by doing the best work that you can.

Participation

Contemporary Civilization is a discussion seminar. Your preparation, participation, and collaboration are thus essential. You are expected to read the texts and come to class prepared to ask questions and actively participate in discussion and to listen to your peers.

As a means of engaging or posing questions outside of seminar, you will find an *Explorations* thread on the discussion boards. Here you are welcome to submit posts about your observations of CC themes and figures outside of the seminar, whether in literature, art, films, newspapers, or everyday life.

A few notes on participation: Attendance counts does not count as participation - you need to actively participate (whether asking a question, responding to a prompt, or offering a thought). If you are more than 10 minutes tardy, then your maximum participation grade for that class is 50%. Earbuds and headphones of all kinds are banned in the classroom.

If you do not have the text, then you are not prepared for class. “Having” the text does not mean that you *could* access it. It means that it is open and in front of you. Texts on the phone does not count. If you have a different edition of the text than the one assigned for class, then you are responsible for make it translatable. There should be no excuse for not having the proper text (if you have trouble getting it, contact the Core office).

Attendance and Punctuality

Contemporary Civilization is a discussion class, so you are expected to attend each class with that session's reading in hand. Whenever possible (e.g., in the case of religious holidays), you should provide advance notification of absence. If you are absent, please speak with me to review what you missed.

I permit three absences for any reason. You do not need to provide a note or ask to be excused from class, though it is helpful — but not required — if you can let me know in advance that you won't be there. **Your grade will be lowered by a full letter grade after four absences. A fifth absence will result in a grade of F.**

Reflection Journals

You are required to complete TEN journal entries throughout the semester using the **bluebook** that I will provide.

Entries may take a variety of forms. For example, they may concern (i) the meaning and internal logical consistency of particular arguments, passages, or ideas; (ii) what the arguments, passages, or claims may assume or imply, or (iii) how the arguments or claims may relate to other ones or similar ideas we have encountered in the course. Questions and comments may also, very simply, (iv) ask for clarification: "What does this passage actually mean?" Such a question or comment should also try to propose one or two candidate interpretations, and consider the implications of those interpretations.

For instance, "This passage confused me. I think the author is trying to say X. If they are, that might mean A, B, C should follow. That would be interesting because... But then again, the author may also be saying Y. If they are, then A, B, C should follow..." Finally, comments could also involve (v) connecting a work to contemporary issues or works of art (a film, a novel, a painting, etc.). You should treat the entries as an opportunity for you to safely ponder and deeply engage the reading, and for the class to benefit from learning about what you think is important in the reading.

I will also occasionally assign specific prompts for your journals to guide your writing. In those cases, I will provide detailed instructions.

At several points in the semester, I will collect your journals to chart progress and offer comments.

Exams

There will be three exams: a midterm, a final, and an oral. The first two will be composed of short answers, passage identifications, and a short essay. The oral exam will be composed of short discussions based on themes from the semester.

Argument reconstruction

Once in the semester you will be required to explain and analyze an argument from a text of your choosing. This is both a written and visual assignment, as you will be required to show the flow of logic of the argument. We will practice this in class before the assignment.

Extensions

Detailed instructions and assessment criteria for all assignments will be posted on CourseWorks and reviewed in class. I will allow one **72-hour extension** on any assignment for any reason. If you have an illness or medical condition, family emergency, or other serious situation that requires additional time, I will grant further extensions. Otherwise, late assignments will result in a lower grade.

Office Hours: Thursdays 12-1pm

Appointments can be made at <https://calendly.com/benjaminmueser/cc-office-hours>. If these hours are not possible and you'd like to meet, do not hesitate to contact me.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Tuesday, September 5: Introduction

1. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "[There is No Such Thing as Western Civilization](#)"
2. James Baldwin, "[A Talk to Teachers](#)"

Thursday, September 7: Plato's Kallipolis

- Plato, *Republic*, Book I-II, pp. 1-42
- Book II-III, pp. 42-93 (skip 379b-389b and 390a-394d)

Tuesday, September 12: Plato's The Philosopher-Kings

- Plato, *Republic*, Book IV, pp. 94-121, Books V-VI, pp. 147 (from "Then it was in order to have a model...") – 174 ("... and they'd be right to refuse.)

Thursday, September 14: Plato, Epistemology and the Good

- Plato, *Republic*, Books VI-VII, pp. 174-212

Tuesday, September 19: Aristotle I

- *Nicomachean Ethics* (Books I: 1-10, 13; II:1-6, III: 1-5)

Thursday, September 21: Aristotle II

- *Nicomachean Ethics* (Books V: 1-7, VIII: 1-8, X: 6-8)

Tuesday, September 26: Aristotle III

- *Politics*, (Book I:1-7, 13; Book II: 1-5; Book III: 1-13)

Thursday, September 28: Epicureanism & Stoicism

- Epicureanism – Epicurus
 - Letter to Herodotus*
 - Letter to Menoecus*
 - Principle of Doctrines*
- Stoicism – Epictetus
 - *The Enchiridion (Handbook)*, Sect. 1-29*

Tuesday, October 3: Abrahamic Texts

- Hebrew Bible, *Exodus* 1-24
- New Testament: *Matthew* (1-7, 24-28); *Romans* (1-9)

Thursday, October 5: Augustine

- *City of God*, Book I, preface; IV: 1-4; V: preface, 9-11; XII: 1-9; 21-23; XIV: 1-4, 11-17, 24-28; XIX: 13-17, 24-27 [70 pp]

Tuesday, October 10: Al Qur'an (Abrahamic Texts II)

- *Suras* 1, 96, 97, 114, 112, 109, 93, 75, 68, 42, 18, 10, 3, 2 (Note: Read in this order)

Thursday, October 12: Medieval Philosophy I, Islam

- Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy ibn Taqzan**

Tuesday, October 17: Medieval Philosophy II, Christianity and Judaism

- Thomas Aquinas, "On Kingship," "The Summa Against the Gentiles," and "The Summa of Theology"*
- Moses Maimonides, "The Guide of the Perplexed"*
- The Kabbalah, selections*

Thursday, October 19: MIDTERM EXAM

Tuesday, October 24: Machiavelli

- *The Prince*
 - Ch. 1-3 (up to p. 12), Ch 5-6, 8, 9, 15, 16 (up to p. 55, 'In our times...'), 17 (up to 59), 18, 19 (up to 64, 'One could cite countless examples...'), 25, 26 [35 pages total]
- *The Discourses*
 - Book I: Chapters 2-5, 7 (first three ¶), 16-18 (skim 16-18) [29 pages total]

Thursday, October 26: Conquest of the Americas

1. Council of Castile, 'El Requerimiento'
2. Vitoria, *On the American Indians* (questions 1, 2 (skim), 3)

Tuesday, October 31: Descartes – 'cogito ergo sum'

- *Discourse on Method* (skip §47-§56, corresponding to pages 39-46)

Thursday, November 2: Hobbes I

- *Leviathan*, "To My Most Honor'd Friend", 'Introduction', Ch. 1-2, 6, 8, 9, 11

Tuesday, November 7: NO CLASS, GO OUT AND VOTE

Thursday, November 9: Hobbes II

- *Leviathan*, 13-16, 17-19

Tuesday, November 14: Hobbes III

- *Leviathan*, 21, 29-33

Thursday, November 16: Locke I

- *Second Treatise*: 1-5

Tuesday November 21: Locke II

- *Second Treatise*: 7-9, 18, 19

Thursday, November 23: NO CLASS

Tuesday, November 28: Rousseau

- *Discourses on the Arts & Sciences* (all)
- *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* ('Letter to the Republic of Geneva' & Preface (12 pages), and Part I (until p. 60, 15 pages))

Thursday, November 30: Rousseau II

- *Discourses on the Origin of Inequality* (Finish Part I and all of Part II (32 pages), and note 15 (p. 117)).

Tuesday, December 5: Rousseau III

1. *Social Contract*
 - a. Books I & II (all, 33 pages)
 - b. Book III, ch. 1-4 and 15 (17 pages)
 - c. Book IV, 1-2, 8 (13 pages)

Thursday, December 7:

- Optional final discussion to wrap up the semester

Monday, December 11, Last Day of Classes

Wednesday-Thursday, December 13-14, Oral Exam

- There will be a signup sheet for time slots on both days.

Friday, December 15, Final Exam, 1pm