

# Nature and Modernity

## Syllabus

**Spring 2006**

**Prof. Matthew Shockey**

### **Meetings**

TBA

### **Texts:**

Course packet of philosophical readings

*Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad

*Middlesex*, Geoffrey Eugenides

### **Description**

The modern age in the West has witnessed the rapid development of natural science, the exploration and colonization of the non-Western world, industrialization, and the secularization of both political and everyday life. In this course we will look at what we mean by the terms 'nature' and 'human nature' and how our understanding of them is tied to these defining trends of modernity. We will begin with a look at the early modern 'mechanical' view of the natural world, its link to the human dominance of nature through science and technology, and the difficulty of fitting human beings into nature so conceived. Our readings here will include short excerpts from the architects of the so-called "scientific revolution" but will be primarily philosophical, focusing on selections drawn from Rene Descartes, Gilbert Ryle, Martin Heidegger and others. We will then look briefly at how the idea of nature figures in the work of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century moral and political thinkers Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which will in turn set up a longer discussion of the ideas of wilderness, savagery, civilization, reason and culture in the context of European colonization and American expansion. Our primary text here will be Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. This will also introduce us to the problem of what it is to be an existentially engaged human self in the modern period. The remainder of the course will consider this question through a reading of Geoffrey Eugenides' recent novel *Middlesex*, which will also give us an occasion to discuss the ideas of sex and gender and the impact of modern biological science on our understanding of living nature generally and human nature specifically. In the background of all of this will be lurking a question about God and what has happened in modernity to the once-universal idea of a supernatural basis of the world and our place within it.

### **Course Goals**

Our topics will range from physics to sex, our approach will be historical, and much of what we read will be literary – so most students will find something familiar in the course-content, no matter their majors – but this is a philosophy course. Thus, our aim will be to abstract from much of the detail of the works we read in order to articulate a number of basic conceptions of nature and human nature, which we will then critically examine. The most basic goal is to get you thinking about these concepts and the roles they play both in your life and in the other academic work you do.

Careful reading and writing will be at the heart of the course. You will do work both on your own and in groups. Assignments will include some that focus just on the assigned texts and others that require you to draw on outside sources, which will give you an opportunity to appeal to work in your home disciplines.

Classes will involve both lecture and discussion, the latter centering around weekly presentations by small groups of students.

### **Course Requirements:**

1. 5 bi-weekly one- to two-page “response papers”: 10% (2% each)

These will give you the experience of articulating your own reactions to the works we study, which will help you integrate academic learning into your own lives and thought. I will grade these on the basis of how well you try to do this, not on the basis of your ability to regurgitate facts from the readings, or parrot back to me thoughts I or the writers studied have expressed.

2. Participation in 2 group presentations: 20% each.

These presentations will require you to work together in small groups of three or four to outline the assigned material, present it succinctly to the class, and formulate questions that will generate discussion. Each group will also be responsible for taking notes during class and posting them.

3. Two substantial papers (10 – 12 pages): 25% each

The first is to be based on your first group presentation (which will occur in the first half of the term), giving you an opportunity to think more deeply about a particular issue you’ve already put time into. The other will be on a topic of your choice, tied to but not simply drawn from the assigned material, and will be due at the end of the term.

### **Course Timeline**

Weeks 1 – 3: The mechanical conception of nature and the nature of human life within that

Weeks 4 – 7: The “state of nature” in moral and political thought; wilderness, savagery, culture, and the self

Weeks 8 – 10: The human self, sex and gender, biology, and fate

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