

LST 7102: Nietzsche and Modernity

Spring 2011

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Class meetings: W 7:30-9:30 SAC 103

Office hours: by appointment

This is a “foundation: modern” course in graduate liberal studies (LST) at Villanova. As such, it is an interdisciplinary introduction to key texts and ideas of modern times. It will also train you in the skills needed for graduate work in the humanities and social sciences.

It is no easy thing to understand something as big, complex, and ambiguous as modernity; it is simply impossible to do so in only one semester. Nevertheless, we will do our best to get to the heart of the matter. In modern times, certain ideas have come to shape the way we think and live. We encounter those ideas every day, but they are treated on a much deeper level in certain foundational books, some of which helped introduce the modern ideas in the first place, while others radicalized, reformed, or rejected them. These movements and counter-movements were quiet enough on the written page, but they led to the great upheavals of 1776, 1789, 1917, and 1933. As Nietzsche writes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “The stillest words are those that bring the storm. Thoughts that come with doves’ feet guide the world” (Part II, “The Stillest Hour”).

But if the greatest books are the most revealing, they are also very hard to understand. It takes a lot even to scratch their surface, let alone to judge which of them is right. To gain real insight from even one of them would be a real accomplishment. That, therefore, is what we will attempt to do this semester. This is not a survey course in which you will read six books superficially. Instead, your task will be to read one book, Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*, as thoroughly as possible. To be sure, this will require you to read a good deal more: other works of Nietzsche’s, scholarly literature on Nietzsche, and foundational texts by authors whom Nietzsche himself discusses.

Why *Beyond Good and Evil*? Although Nietzsche himself singles out *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as the most far-sighted and profound of his works, *Beyond Good and Evil* is where Nietzsche focuses on seeing what is around us in modern times. “This book (1886) is in all essentials a *critique of modernity*, not excluding the modern sciences, modern arts, and even modern politics, along with pointers to a contrary type that is as little modern as possible – a noble, Yes-saying type.”¹ Few books are as valuable for forcing us to rethink our modern assumptions on a fundamental level.

Even though we have not the luxury of studying *Zarathustra* this semester, it will help to learn something of its aspirations in order to gain some perspective on *Beyond Good and Evil*. The beginning of *Zarathustra* first appeared in Nietzsche’s previous book, *The Gay Science*, in a section entitled “*Incipit tragoedia*,” or “[the] tragedy begins.” With this in mind, we begin the semester with a look at

¹ See Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Preface, 2 (in *Basic Texts of Nietzsche*, ed. Kaufman); *ibid.*, III, “Beyond Good and Evil”; Leo Strauss, “Note on the Plan of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*,” 174-5 (on WebCT).

Nietzsche's monumental early work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, as well as some other readings that will help us consider what he saw in tragedy and why that interest would require him to undertake a critique of modernity. After that preparation, we will spend nine weeks reading *Beyond Good and Evil*.

Evaluation

1. Class participation (20%)

This is a graduate seminar, which requires regular your attendance, preparation by doing the assigned readings, and contribution to class discussion.

2. Roundtable on *Birth of Tragedy* (20%)

On 2/9, you will participate in a roundtable discussion evaluating Nietzsche's attempt to rediscover "the birth of tragedy out of the spirit of music." In preparation for this exchange, write a 5-6 page position paper addressing the following three issues:

- a) How does Nietzsche's interpretation of Greek tragedy compare with the original, as exemplified by Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*?
- b) How does Nietzsche himself judge the strengths and weaknesses of the *Birth of Tragedy*? (Your main source should be the assigned readings for 2/9.)
- c) Why would the difficulties in that first attempt necessitate "a critique of modernity," to be undertaken in *Beyond Good and Evil* and subsequent works?

3. Expertise on the Nietzsche scholarship (20%)

Before 1/26, you will need to survey the scholarly literature on Nietzsche, including articles and books, and find two or three authors who have written interpretations of Nietzsche that you find to be especially interesting. Their work will need to include significant discussions of *Beyond Good and Evil*. This will require you to go to the library, probably a few times. For 1/26, you do not need to have read all of your sources thoroughly, but you should be prepared to give some summary of how your sources are interpreting Nietzsche and why you find them interesting. Then, in class, we will assign one scholar to each student in the class.

When we are studying *Beyond Good and Evil*, you will be responsible for offering suggestions of what your scholar might say about Nietzsche's ideas as they come up in the text. Then, on 4/17, you will submit a 2-3-page review of your scholar, taking as your model reviews in academic journals. This review will be made available to all of your classmates to assist them as they write their final papers.

4. Final Paper (40%)

At the end of the semester, you will write an 8-page paper on some aspect of Nietzsche's critique of modernity. Your topic and approach must be approved in advance by me.

Texts

Required

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Kaufmann. Modern Library. ISBN: 0679783393.

Aeschylus, *Aeschylus II*, ed. Grene and Lattimore. University of Chicago Press. ISBN: 0226307948.

Recommended

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Kaufmann. Penguin. ISBN: 0140150625.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*, ed. Kaufmann. Vintage. ISBN: 0394719859.

Daily Schedule

1/12

Introduction

Short readings from Nietzsche distributed in class

1/19

Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy* (Preface to Richard Wagner; sections 1-15)

1/26

Finish *Birth of Tragedy*

Organize class bibliography and designated scholars

2/2

Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*

2/9

Required reading: Nietzsche, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" (1886 preface to BT); remarks on BT, Z, and BGE in *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Write Such Good Books"

Recommended: *The Case of Wagner*

Roundtable discussion evaluating *The Birth of Tragedy*

2/16

Beyond Good and Evil, Chapter 1

2/23

BGE, chapter 2

2/30

BGE, chapter 3

3/2: No class: Spring Break

3/9 BGE, chapter 4

3/16 BGE chapter 5

3/23 BGE chapter 6

3/30 BGE chapter 7

4/6 BGE chapter 8

4/13 BGE chapter 9

4/17 Scholarly review due on WebCT

4/20 No class – it's a "Monday." Please schedule an appt to talk with me about your final papers.

Final papers due at the end of the semester (May 2)