

PEAC 304: SENIOR SEMINAR: GROUNDING HUMAN RIGHTS

An introduction to debates about the sources of humanistic values and human rights

Ronald E. Osborn
Peace and Justice Studies Program
Wellesley College

Professor:	Ronald E. Osborn	Location:	Clapp Library 148
Contact:	ronaldosborn@gmail.com	Time:	Wednesday, 2:15-4:45pm
Credit Hours:	1	Office Hours:	By appointment Africana Studies 24

I. Course Description

Since the United Nations' adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the language of "rights" has come to play an increasingly central role in international law. Yet recent decades have also seen the rise of significant challenges to the idea of rights as understood by the framers of the UDHR as a set of transhistorical, transcultural norms for how every person ought to be treated. Do appeals to universal values do violence to cultures with very different traditions than those that have inspired many rights advocates in the West? What does it mean to say that every person possesses an inviolable dignity, sanctity, or equality simply in virtue of the fact that they are human? Are these ideas unproblematic or self-evident truths? What if "rights" is just a pious word we now use to mask certain configurations of power? Are rights strictly secular in their origins? Or do they require a strong metaphysical or religious basis, such as the idea that every person is made "in the image of God"? When we engage in rights-talk, what do we imagine is the ultimate source or warrant for our normative claims?

Building on Charles Taylor's account of our historical moment as a "multi-cornered fight" concerning the meaning and future of secular modernity, we will explore four very different responses to these questions: secular humanism, anti-humanism, "heroic humanism", and religious humanism. While there are many varieties and divisions within each of these camps, we will pay especially close attention to major works by (or about) controversial and exemplary champions of each of these rival views: a feminist convert to Judaism who at the same time stands squarely within the Enlightenment tradition of seeking a strictly secular, rational, and universal grounding of rights; a seminal postmodern philosopher who is suspicious of the idea of rights and would unsettle our complacent ideas about what it means to be human; a French novelist and Noble Prize winner born and raised in Algeria who continues to defend humanity in the face of absurdity and despair; and an Eastern Orthodox theologian who traces our ideas about humanism and human rights to the scandalous particularity of a religious narrative.

II. Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course you should be able to demonstrate the following knowledge and skills:

1. Deeper understanding of the contested nature of humanistic values and human rights.
2. A firm grasp of four rival frameworks for thinking about the grounding dilemma facing contemporary rights advocates.
3. Experience writing reflective papers with depth and rigor on substantive questions arising from our readings.
4. An ability to engage in critical scholarly dialogue, discussion, and civil debate with your peers about the nature and sources of humanism, human rights, and their discontents.

III. Grading Scale and Distribution

The grading scale for this course is as follows: A (93-100); A- (90-93); B+ (87-90); B (83-87); B- (80-83); C+ (77-80); C (73-77); C- (70-73); D (60-69); F (< 60). As a general benchmark, to receive a solid A in this course you should do exemplary work in all areas. To receive a grade of A- you should do strong to excellent work in all areas. To receive a grade in the B range you should do strong work in all areas. To receive a grade in the C range you should do passable work in all areas. You will be assessed based on the following distribution of points:

- 10% Seminar Leadership: You will be responsible to help guide a seminar by providing an overview of an assigned reading or readings and by raising some incisive questions to launch our discussion. (For more on what seminar leadership entails, see section IV below.)
- 10% Reading Journal: As you read you should keep an ongoing reading journal or set of notes in which you jot down your impressions and responses to the ideas you are encountering, highlight key quotations, outline arguments, and raise questions. These notes, which can take the form of bullet points, will be useful to you when it comes time to write your reflection paper. They will also be a valuable aid to discussion. You should bring your reading journal with you to class each week and also provide me with a copy (either a photo-copied version of hand-written notes or a typed version) each week at the start of class.
- 20% Seminar Attendance (10%) and Participation (10%): You are expected to attend all classes on time and to actively contribute to discussions through thoughtful dialogue and respectful (but hopefully also vigorous!) debate with others based upon your careful reading of all assigned texts. *Note: There are no excused absences apart from days of religious observance and serious medical or family emergencies. Three late attendance marks will count as one absence. However, out of consideration for the vicissitudes of college life, you are permitted two missed classes without question over the course of the semester without any grade reduction. Each additional missed class will result in a letter grade reduction from your final overall grade for the course.*

60% Writing Assignments: You will hand in three reflection papers (each paper counting toward 20% of your overall grade) that address important questions or themes from the readings using only our assigned texts as sources. You are required to meet with me by appointment after your papers have been handed in to receive feedback on your writing. Papers should be approximately 1000 words in length and should be handed in on double-spaced, single-sided pages in 12-point Times New Roman font with half-inch margins on all sides (no cover page is necessary). No cover page or plastic binders are required. Use the standard citation method (MLA, Chicago, etc.) that you are most familiar with. In addition, you should email me an electronic Word version of your paper by the due date. *Note: there is a letter grade reduction for late papers with each additional day a paper is turned in late resulting in an additional 10% deduction; papers more than three days late will not be accepted.*

Due Date for Paper #1 = September 30

Due Date for Paper #2 = October 21

Due Date for Paper #3 = November 24

IV. Seminar Leadership

As seminar leader you will present a timed 10-minute introduction to the assigned reading for the day and take a lead role in facilitating the class discussion over the next 40 minutes. You should NOT use Powerpoint or any other electronic or onscreen aids. However, you should prepare a single-page handout (front and back if necessary) to distribute to the class. Your task as seminar leader is to do the following as clearly and concisely as possible:

- 1) Summarize: You should briefly identify the key ideas, facts, theories, and/or evidence in the reading, calling attention to especially insightful passages or quotations. Make your summary succinct on the assumption that others have done the reading and do not need to have the entire reading repeated back to them.
- 2) Engage: You should critically discuss the significance of the reading and analyze its possible strengths and weaknesses. In doing so, strive to be a sympathetic and open reader even when confronted by an author you may strongly disagree with.
- 3) Reflect: Raise several questions for reflection and further discussion with the entire class. Good questions might do one of several things. They might: a) seek to clarify a difficult concept or theory; b) invite vigorous debate over a controversial or contentious idea; or c) encourage “big picture” thinking by bringing one author/reading/theory into conversation (or collision!) with others.
- 4) Facilitate: Facilitating means both speaking as needed and leaving space for others to speak. A good facilitator will not dominate the discussion and might barely talk at all, interjecting only occasional remarks or helping to gently guide the conversation if it begins to stray too far from the topic (although digressions are also sometimes welcome

relief!). You have wide discretion in how you approach your role as a facilitator.

V. Students with Special Needs

Students requesting academic accommodations based on disability or special needs are required to contact the Director of Disability Services with the necessary documentation. The Director will then notify me of what specific accommodations should be granted. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early as possible. More information about school policies and procedures for students who need academic accommodations can be found on the College website. Note that while this course does not include particularly graphic reading material, it is a course focused on the less than cheerful realities of conflict, war, genocide, and violence. Some of the things we read might therefore be unsettling to some students. If you have any concerns after examining our reading list please do not hesitate to speak to me about it.

VI. Academic Integrity

Your work on all assignments should be your own. You should not use the words or ideas of others without giving full credit to them using proper citation methods. If you have any questions about how and when to cite other peoples' work you should come and speak with me. Students found to be copying or plagiarizing the work of others on any assignment will receive an automatic failing grade for the course.

Academic integrity means more, however, than simply not cheating or plagiarizing. It also means fulfilling assignments with the care and rigor of a serious scholar, showing basic respect and courtesy to others both in and out of the classroom (including being in class on time), and being honest and forthright in dialogue. While not all of these virtues are directly subject to grading, they will serve you well in this class and in your academic and professional lives in general.

VII. No Electronic Devices Policy

This course depends upon your active participation as an attentive listener and generous conversation partner with others. Texting devices, internet, and social media are grave impediments to conversation and are not permitted in class at any time. Their use at any time will result in an automatic absence mark for the day. Because this is a discussion-based seminar, there is no need for you to use a computer to type extensive notes, although you might periodically wish to jot some notes on paper for your future reference or type notes when we have more formal lecture segments. It will be clear to you when we are in a lecture mode and when we are in a discussion mode.

VIII. Course Outline and Weekly Reading Assignments

To encourage active reading and discussion, you are required to bring all assigned texts to class, preferably copiously marked. You should purchase your own copies of all full-length books included in the reading list below (weeks 2 through 11) or request assistance

from me in acquiring books if you are in need of financial assistance. I will post PDF versions of the other readings online (weeks 1, 4, 12, and 13). A typical week will require in the range of 120 pages of reading (which can, of course, be very manageably divided into approximately 20 pages of reading per day!).

I. Setting the Stage: The Three-Cornered Fight

Week 1: September 2 (94 pages): Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature* (New York: The New Press, 2006), pp.1-68.

Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.13-39.

II. Rights Without Metaphysics: The (Qualified) Secular Humanism of Martha Nussbaum

Week 2: September 9 (111 pages): Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp.1-111.

Week 3: September 16 (130 pages): Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, pp.111-241.

Week 4: September 23 (76 pages): Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, pp.241-305.

Amartya Sen, “Human Rights and Capabilities,” *Journal of Human Development*, Vol.6, No.2 (July 2005), pp.151-163.

FIRST REFLECTION PAPER DUE – SEPT.30

III. Beyond Rights: The Antihumanism of Michel Foucault

Week 5: September 30 (110 pages): James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp.13-123.

Week 6: October 7 (137 pages): Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, pp.148-285.

Week 7: October 14 (102 pages): Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, pp.285-387.

SECOND REFLECTION PAPER DUE – OCT.21

IV. Between Humanism and Antihumanism: The Heroic Humanism of Albert Camus

Week 8: October 21 (160 pages): Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), pp.1-160.

Week 9: October 28 (160 pages): Camus, *The Plague*, pp.160-320.

V. Sacred Canopies: The Religious Humanism of David Bentley Hart (and an Excursus on Missionaries and Colonialism)

Week 10: November 4 (111 pages): David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) pp.1-111.

Week 11: November 11 (132 pages): Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, pp.111-243.

Week 12: November 18 (107 pages): Olúfemi Táíwò, *How Colonialism Preempted Modernity in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp.1-97.

Arvind Sharma, “Widows are not for Burning: Christian Missionary Participation in the Abolition of the Sati Rite,” in *Sati: Historical and Phenomenological Essays* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), pp.57-67.

THIRD REFLECTION PAPER DUE – NOV.24

****THANKSGIVING BREAK: NOVEMBER 25-27****

VI. Conclusions: An Elegy for Human Rights? Or Are Reports of the Death of Rights Premature?

Week 13: December 2 (111 pages): Stephen Hopgood, *The Endtimes of Human Rights* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), pp.1-47, 119-183.