

Handout I (1/29/07)

Very Short Summary of Some Core Concepts:

(as introduced in Lecture and discussed in Section)

By beatrice sasha kobow

Lecture 1:

In the traditional humanist understanding, “great books” contain universal truths about what it means to be human. The existential philosophers who provide the background for the approach taught in this course (Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre) claim that you cannot have this kind of universal truth about human beings. The ‘nature’ of human beings depends on their culture and on the contingencies of this culture in history (Pascal in 1660: “Custom is our nature.”) Truth about human beings is never a-historical, universal, cross-cultural, or essential.

Each culture opens up a space that allows people to live ‘as if’ they had some nature or other. As history changes, so does what people, things, gods, works of art, etc. are, that means, what they show us *as*. For example, Homeric Greeks could show up as heroes or slaves, medieval Christians showed up as saints and sinners.

Pierre Bourdieu says that culture is embodied in us. In the way we hold our bodies, we reveal what it means to be a man, a woman, a baby, etc. in a given culture. This cultural shaping happens very early on and does not require a conscious effort on our part (example: American vs. Japanese baby).

Our understanding of being (what it means to be someone in our culture) is typically invisible to us, we are in it like fish in water. How can we become aware of it? Myths, rituals and works of art make it manifest, according to Heidegger. A work of art focuses, glamorizes, illuminates, embodies, reiterates and sometimes reconfigures our way of being for us. This is how art is not a copy (mimesis) of reality, nor a representation of it, nor a symbol for something (because it points to itself, not to something else). Works of art do this for some time; if the culture they focus in this way ends, these works of art ‘die’ (that we appreciate the aesthetic beauty of a cathedral is different, it is not the work of art ‘at work’ in Heidegger’s sense).

The works of art up for our consideration in this class did the same job as the temple or the cathedral: they unified and held up to the people at the time their understanding of being. We seek to understand in this course what it means ‘to have a world’ by way of looking at different worlds over the course of Western civilization.

Lecture 2:

- The songs of the harper focus the polytheistic world of the Greeks at the time Homer was singing them around 700 BC, and even several hundred years later, when they were written down. ‘Homer’s work’ might have been written by several people, it is based on a song from the oral tradition which was sung usually over the course of several evenings. Certainly it is composed of many of the ‘set-pieces’, stories, legends the bards used in many songs. The question of ‘authorship’ does not really interest us, here. We want to see how the Odyssey exemplified to the Greeks of Homer’s time and some following generations what it meant to be ‘an excellent warrior, wife, father son’ etc. We want to see how it

- showed to them their world. Greeks were able to cite the text and use it on all occasion as authoritative reference (much like the Bible was used, later).
- Enlightenment believes in the unified, responsible agent-self of a unified culture; these elements are missing from Homer. Since we are not so assured of these things in our time, it makes sense to look back at Homer and see what we have lost.
 - Though the heroes and heroines of the Odyssey (and even the gods) are much like us, they are different in this crucial respect: The Greeks understood gods who impersonated people, disguised themselves, fought with each other, and these gods were very important to them.
 - Enlightenment Psychology assumes that the idea of gods are a childish way of putting what we now know better: the gods were personifications of psychological forces, the gods turn out to be outward projections of purely inward or subjective phenomena. The enlighten thinker could say: “Thanks to Descartes and Freud we now understand better than they did”. This statement will be challenged in this course.
 - Our question: What role do the gods play in the life of human beings?
 - Think about the following:
In what situations do the gods show up for people? Is there a skill for recognizing them? Why do they sometimes come as themselves, sometimes disguised? Does any one person see more than one god? Are the gods defenders of morality? Is the question of morality even relevant in relation to these gods?

Lecture 3:

- Focus on the Telemakheia (first 4 books) about Telemakhos’ ‘coming of age’.

There can be a psychological or an ontological reading of what happens to Telemakhos.

Psychological reading: ‘psychological’ comes from psyche. It has to do with the self, the soul, the mind. The Enlightenment explains human actions in terms of inner qualities of an individual human being, such as desires, beliefs, emotions, fantasies, talents. Since we can (and should) become lucid about our psychological states, we can become (and are expected to be) mature, autonomous, free agents.

Telemakhos receives advice from a family friend. He is inspired and due to his own impetus, takes charge of the situation.

Ontological reading: Ontology wants to understand being. Human actions are understood in terms of the world that facilitates them. (For example: Feminism shifted away from understanding women in terms of what they desire – Freud: What do women want? – to understanding the space in society that opened up possibilities and closed off others because of what it meant to be a woman in that world.)

Homer understands human actions as being in tune with the world one is in or out of sync with it. When Athena comes, she attunes Telemakhos to the world he is in; he is now able to see the possibilities he has for acting – as the future king, not as the dreaming boy anymore.

Only this reading explains the events at the public meeting. Everyone sees the change, Telemakhos is radiant and in tune with the situation. Yet, he fails in his speech. Possible explanation: Gods are not magic or luck. Athena does not give him superpowers. She

merely enables him to see the situation for what it now is – he needs to take charge, but of course he is still lacking experience.

- Focus on Helen:

Gods function like moods. Helen allows herself to be swept away by the mood that Aphrodite put her in and runs off with Paris. She is not sorry about it, but rather it is pride-inducing that she was able to let herself be in this mood so completely. Most interpretations see a flaw either in Helen or in Homer's understanding of psychology or morality; but it is important to see that being attuned to the mood that surrounds one and colors the world is a good thing for Homer. Helen does not repent and she does not feel guilty (a Christian woman might!).

- Focus on Odysseus:

Odysseus is just the opposite of Helen. He never loses his cool and always is in this mood. He never loses his head. With the help of Athena (his protectress) he is able to get in sync with every new situation he is in. He is eager to see new worlds and learn about them. Odysseus is involved in every situation and open to all the current possibilities. In this way, he is also attuned to the world he is in.

Lecture 4:

Explanation of the God-chart. First generation: forces of nature, mythical, no interaction with humans; second generation: time; third generation: general, universal elements in human society, invariant across all worlds; fourth generation (our 12 Olympians): the gods particular to the world / society of Homer's Greece.

Zeus: is the god who protects strangers, he is in charge of protecting different worlds. His favorites are Athena and Hermes: Athena is the god attuning to different worlds, Hermes is the Go-between, he can cross between worlds and guides people. For example, he takes people from this life into the underworld.

Versus the Comparison of Lives. Thesis: In Homer, there is a plurality of good lives and they are not ranked.

This thesis is tested on Achilles and the encounter Odysseus has with him in the underworld (Book 11). Achilles short and glorious life is compared to Menelaus long and luxurious life which in fact has no ending. Both are valuable, and although Achilles seems to initially regret his choice, he is content that his son did well as a warrior – he still holds true to all the values of his choice.

It is also tested in the scene in which Odysseus is interrogated by Calypso as to why he wants to go home to Penelope. Odysseus does not choose between the two, because the two do not compare. Their lives are incommensurate, and so are their qualities.

Homer's work, unlike the Oresteia, is a 'comedy', not a tragedy, because the worlds do not fight and do not really conflict. They are acceptable and can exist next to one another.

Multicultural Relativism vs. Polytheism of the Greeks. We seem to value diversity and accept a plurality of good lives, much like the polytheistic Greeks in Homer. Yet, for us this remains a question of choice and self-determination. We seem to be able to go between worlds as we please, the Greeks don't. The upshot is that for us none of these lives have the same seriousness and weight that they could have for the Greeks. What we can take from them is the idea that there is no common scale for ranking lives, and that other worlds need to be respected (mainly because they are unavailable for us, though, unless we are initiated into them by 'a god'!).

Study Questions:

- Why would Heidegger say that Marilyn Monroe or Martin Luther King are Works of Art?
- Why is this account of Works of Art not mimetic (copies of the world)? How can Works of Art cease to work?
- What is the difference in understanding something as a "great book" and a "great work"?
- Why is the question whether Homer was the author of the Odyssey or not unimportant for our approach?
- What are the gods doing in Homer?
- How are the gods like Works of Art for us? What can they do for us?
- How can Telemakhos' story be understood from an ontological, rather than a psychological point of view? What is the difference? Which one makes better sense of what happens to Telemakhos?
- What does it mean to say that the different lives are incommensurate? (Use the examples: Helen-Odysseus, Achilles-Menelaus, Calypso-Penelope)
- How does multicultural relativism differ for us from Homer's polytheism?

Suggestion for Further Reading:

- The Origin of the Work of Art, Martin Heidegger
- Existentialism Is a Humanism, Jean-Paul Sartre, 1946, (available online)