

Interpretive Practices: “On Human Dignity”

Professor: Vince Punzo, Ph.D.

Office: LBC 301 (office ext.: 1255; cell/home: 765-966-8866; email: punzovi)

Fall Semester, 2011; MWF 11:00

Required readings: “Genesis”; selections from the Koran; “Letters from a Stoic”, Seneca; “Circe”, Giovanni Gelli; “Man’s Search for Meaning”, Viktor Frankl; “Praisesong for the Widow”, Paule Marshall; “Satire Against Reason and Mankind”, John Wilmot; “Anthem”, Ayn Rand.

Course Description. This year marks the 63rd anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights which begins with the assertion that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. . .” But what exactly is meant by the notion of inherent human dignity? And can this concept really serve as a foundational concept in providing a universal standard of ethics and socio-political harmony?

Through the centuries the meaning and relevance of the concept of human dignity has been debated by philosophers, psychologists, and theologians. It has found creative expression in the works and lives of writers, artists, and musicians, who, some believe, embody the concept in their work as well as through the practice of their craft. But human dignity cannot solely be understood as an abstract concept divorced from the lived reality of particular lives other than scholars and artisans. It is not uncommon for individuals who are confronted by complex moral choices, or beset by sorrow and loss, to express the hope that they retain, or even more fully express, their human dignity. Nevertheless, the precise meaning, value, and content of this term remain elusive and clouded in obscurity for most of us. It is, rather paradoxically, a concept that is better felt than understood. And yet with increasing sophisticated advances in technology, coupled with the increasing awareness of the complexity and mysteries of the natural world, the question of the reality of a unique human dignity becomes more pressing, and perhaps more difficult to answer.

The purpose of this course will be to provide students an opportunity for interdisciplinary study and dialogue on the meaning, value, significance, and utility of the notion of human dignity within the contemporary world. Students will be encouraged to reflect on, and discuss, the personal value or significance they attach to the term and/or their own particular lived experience of human dignity.

(The development of this course was facilitated by an Enduring Questions Pilot Course grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.)

A short summary of the major elements of this course include:

1) **Reading:** One objective of this course is to provide you with an opportunity to develop the skill of reading a text analytically and imaginatively. Rather than simply consulting outside sources you should begin to develop an independent "dialogical" or "conversational" approach toward discerning, fully appreciating and responding to the authors' purpose and intention.

2) **Writing:** You are required to write eight papers during the term. The first seven papers will usually be between three and four pages long. The final paper will be approximately 7-9 pages in length. Late papers, may not be accepted, or will be penalized by one full letter grade for each day they are overdue. The papers should be interpretive essays, not book reports or research papers. An interpretive essay consists of two essential components: 1) You should interpret and support with textual evidence an issue or position that is important to the author. 2) You should offer a carefully reasoned and well-developed response to the interpretation you have offered. If you would like an opportunity to rewrite a particular paper, consult with me first.

3) **Attendance/Participation:** Missing three classes will result in a significant lowering of your final grade. Missing four or more classes will likely result in a failing grade in the course. Timeliness in coming to class each morning will also count heavily in your grade. It is also important that you participate in a constructive, meaningful manner in class discussions. Class attendance is only a prerequisite of this requirement. You should develop the skills of careful listening and making meaningful contributions in a manner befitting collaborative scholarly inquiry. It is also important that you manifest the principles of respect (for both self and others) and integrity by comporting yourself in the classroom in ways that are in keeping with the seriousness and meaningfulness of a shared search for knowledge, understanding, and truth.

Evaluation: Final grades will be based on your level of mastery of each of these three components. A student who does not meet the minimal requirements of regularly attending class on time, completing the assigned reading or turning in every paper in a reasonable time should not expect to pass the course. At the end of the semester, the seven paper grades will be averaged with more weight given to the later, and more complex, paper assignments.

Course Schedule

(Paper due dates are tentative and may be subject to change as the course unfolds. Some minor additional readings and assignments may be added during the course of the semester.)

8/24 Course Introduction

8/26 UN Declaration of Human Rights/Nations Constitutions

8/29 Genesis/Koran (Paper Due)

8/31 Genesis/Koran

9/2 Genesis/Koran

9/5 Seneca (Paper Due)

9/7 Seneca

9/9 Seneca

9/12 Seneca

9/14 Seneca

9/16 Seneca

9/19 Circe

9/21 Circe

9/23 Circe (Paper Due)

9/26 Circe

9/28 Circe

9/30 Circe

10/3 Wilmot

10/5 Wilmot

10/7 Wilmot (Paper Due)

10/10 Anthem

10/12 Anthem

10/14 Anthem

10/17 Frankl

10/19 Frankl (Paper Due)

10/21 Midterm Break

10/24 Frankl
10/26 Frankl
10/28 Frankl

10/31 Marshall
11/2 Marshall
11/4 Marshall (Paper Due)

11/7 Marshall
11/9 Marshall
11/11 Marshall (Paper Due)

11/14 Prepare final paper
11/16 Prepare final paper
11/18 Prepare final paper

11/28 Prepare final paper
11/30 Prepare final paper
12/2 Prepare final paper

12/5 TBA
12/7 TBA
12/9 Last Class Day (Final Paper Due)