Course Summary C.8–11: Elements of the Philosophy of Culture,

General Overview

This course examines culture as the human capacity to find effective solutions to the challenges posed by nature and the overwhelming power of reality.

Starting from classical ontology and epistemology, it describes how medieval and modern nominalism replaced objective structures of being with intellectual constructs, leading to modern idealism and empiricism.

In liberal society, the social contract and argumentative deliberation form the basis of democracy, although pure reason without a metaphysical foundation proves to descend into undecidability and scepticism.

Through an analysis of the transition from premodern to modern and postmodern thought - illustrated by Pico della Mirandola's radical freedom, Descartes' provisional morality, De Sade's Enlightenment materialism and Derrida's postmodern differentialism - the course exposes the social and ethical crisis of modern humanity.

Finally, the course shows how modern revolutionary reason is permeated by fate: deliberate human projects often turn historically and ecologically into their direct opposite, while major ideologies collapse and humanity is confronted with planetary scarcity.

1: Definition of Culture and the Ontological Method

Culture is essentially defined as finding the right solution to a given problem or task, in other words, responding effectively to a social or natural challenge.

According to the philosopher Hans Blumenberg, culture consists of gradually reducing nature's overwhelming power through the use of veiling symbols, myths and scientific theories.

Franz Kafka, by contrast, illustrates the derailment of culture: modern human beings have become alienated from the fundamental laws of life and find themselves in an absurd reality in which they risk becoming soulless objects.

To investigate reality thoroughly, Charles Sanders Peirce distinguishes four methods of arriving at conviction: the method of tenacity, the method of authority, the a priori or preference-based method, and the scientific method. Only the scientific method is genuinely ontological, because it tests propositions against facts that are independent of what the thinking subject

merely assumes. Within established sciences, however, drawing a clear boundary between genuine science, pseudoscience and marginal hypotheses remains a persistent problem.

2: Sources of Knowledge, the Intellectual Climate and the Struggle over Reality

Western epistemology originates with the Greek Milesian thinkers and historians such as Herodotus, who relied on two primary sources of knowledge: direct personal observation and the reliable testimony of others. Classical logic rests on two fundamental principles: the principle of identity (whatever is, is) and the principle of reason or ground (nothing exists without an explanatory cause). In phenomenology, what is immediately given takes center stage, whereas logic seeks the deeper reason behind the facts.

In ontology, understood as the qualitative study of reality, conceptual realism and nominalism stand in opposition to one another. Realism maintains that human beings can genuinely know the objective essential structure (the Platonic Idea) of things and their interrelationships. Nominalism, which laid the foundations for modern idealism and empiricism with William of Ockham, argues instead that general concepts are merely intellectual constructs or names formed within individual consciousness. This nominalism shapes modern thought as a whole, in which the sensory object becomes detached from a higher sacred or metaphysical order.

3: Liberal Democracy and the Limits of Reason

The transition to modernity was accompanied by the disintegration of religious and metaphysical consensus, leading to the emergence of liberal societies and the idea of the social contract. Thinkers such as Immanuel Kant placed the autonomous human being at the center, capable of formulating the rules of coexistence through the use of their own reason. Jürgen Habermas developed this idea in his theory of communicative action, in which social rules and democratic legitimacy emerge from free, argumentative discussion among citizens.

Without being anchored in objective truth, however, pure reason quickly lapses into undecidability and eristic argumentation, as Carneades had already demonstrated by arguing with equal persuasiveness both for and against justice. Critical thinkers such as Karl Popper and William Warren Bartley pointed out that rationalism, too, rests on an act of faith that cannot be rigorously proven. Contemporary critiques of reason reveal that pure

reason, on its own, cannot provide a decisive foundation for choices without presupposed axioms.

4: From Premodern to Modern and Postmodern Thought

Although modern thinkers often look down on premodern cultures, ethnopharmaceutical examples demonstrate that premodern peoples and traditional medicine possessed profound insights that can be empirically verified. Folk wisdom concerning the influence of the Moon on plants and trees has likewise been confirmed by recent biological research.

The typically modern conception of humanity emerged during the Renaissance with Pico della Mirandola, who described human beings as free creatures who have not been given a fixed nature and can shape themselves according to their own will. This drive for autonomy degenerated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries into libertinism and free-thinking, in which secular reason was used to cast off traditional moral teachings. René Descartes sought to renew knowledge radically and formulated a provisional morality (morale par provision) pending the completion of a comprehensive science. The Marquis de Sade effectively carried Enlightenment materialism to its ultimate, cynical conclusion: a cruel, energetic ethic in which human beings are merely arbitrary portions of matter within nature.

In the twentieth century, Georg Simmel placed adventure and unpredictability at the center of historical experience, marking the transition towards postmodernism. The postmodernism or differentialism of Jacques Derrida rejects any objective external world or universal truth and reduces reality to a freely floating network of language and subjective viewpoints.

5: Modern Ethics, Morality and the Crisis of Human Values

In bourgeois-liberal society, a narrow morality prevails, limited to minimal social rules intended to guarantee individual freedom and the functioning of the market. Because this leads to moral disorientation, modern educators and thinkers seek to restore the value of fundamental human principles. Sociobiology, represented by Jean-Pierre Changeux, attempts to reduce morality to genetic and neurological mechanisms of evolution, an approach criticized by phenomenologists such as Paul Ricoeur as an illegitimate extrapolation.

Arthur Schopenhauer grounded morality in compassion and in recognizing one's fellow human being as another self, an “I-again”, whereas an evil character sees the other person as a “non-I”. Karl Marx and Friedrich

Engels exposed how the bourgeoisie had stripped all sacred values of their dignity and replaced them with cold cash payment and unscrupulous commercial freedom. Jesus' parable of the cynical judge illustrates the desacralized human being who neither fears God nor cares about others, seeking only personal gratification. Vladimir Solovyov, by contrast, argued that morality rests on three natural fundamental feelings: shame, compassion and reverence. Søren Kierkegaard criticized the characterless, intellectual passionlessness of modern times. The sexual revolution and postmodern literature, such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, placed morality-free eros at the center, prompting authors such as Pia Pera to respond by restoring the child's protection and perspective.

6: Modern Reason, Fate and the Ecological Question

An analysis of fate makes it clear that human action is always constrained by fate and unpredictable historical circumstances. Systems thinkers such as Jon Elster demonstrate that rational, purposeful action often turns into its direct opposite in practice. Thus, the philosophies of Descartes and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel unintentionally paved the way for radical materialism. Similarly, the revolutionary reason of thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche culminated historically in Robespierre's Terror, Lenin's totalitarian Bolshevism and Hitler's fascism.

Ecologically, modern technological expansion leads to a global environmental catastrophe, to which reason responds by transforming environmental protection into a new economic sector. In the biblical vision, all creation shares in the human condition and groans under the consequences of humanity's lack of conscience, eagerly awaiting redemption. Finally, Panajotis Kondylis argued that the three great modern ideologies—conservatism, liberalism and socialism—have collapsed, causing intellectuals to lose their leading role and humanity to move towards planetary conflicts over scarce resources.