What is genuinely valuable? What makes one thing better than another? How can we make judgments of value that transcend personal or group prejudice? These questions have come to seem impossible to ask, let alone answer. And yet they remain central to our lives, especially in a time of conflict so intense it threatens thought. In order to gain insight into our predicament, this course offers a moral psychology of the human subject since 1800: an account of the transformations of human consciousness that accompanied the social changes of modernization, including the rise of capitalism and democratic egalitarianism, the decline of aristocratic and religious authority, and the growth of technology and the mastery of nature. Readings are split evenly between social theory and literature, and include Schiller on aesthetic education, Hegel on the master/slave dialectic, Marx on alienated labor, Nietzsche on nihilism and the revaluation of values, James on religious experience, Du Bois on double consciousness, Weber on rationalization and disenchantment, Adorno and Horkheimer on the dialectic of enlightenment, and poetry and prose texts by Wordsworth, Keats, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson, Stevens, and Baldwin that, amid modernity’s crises of transcendence, reground value in persons, things, and existence itself. Students will also develop their own methods of judgment and discrimination in order to discover what these critical practices might look like in 2020. We will ask: What criteria of value can we bring to bear upon works of art and thought? What does it mean to “get it right” in the humanities as opposed to the sciences? What is the relation between a fact and an insight? Above all, we will seek to grasp how acts of judging and valuing are central to what it means to be a person.

Course Requirements

Careful preparation; attendance; active participation (20%)
Short paper: 5 pp. (20%)
Reading responses: 1-2 pp. (20%)
15 min. in-class presentation (10%)
Final paper: 10-12 pp. (30%)

Schedule of Readings (subject to change)

1. 1/15: Introduction to the course; Friedrich Schiller, Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man (#2, 6, 9); passages from Kant’s Groundwork and Critique of Judgment
Optional further reading:
Herbert Marcuse, “The Aesthetic Dimension” in Eros and Civilization
Gayatri Spivak, Introduction to An Aesthetic Education in a Globalized World
Jacques Rancière, Aesthetics and its Discontents, 26-36
Paul de Man, “Kant and Schiller” in Aesthetic Ideology
Jürgen Habermas, “Excursus on Schiller’s Aesthetic Education” in Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 45-50.
M. H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism, 206-217.
Charles Taylor, Secular Age, 313ff.


4. 2/5: Karl Marx: 1844 manuscripts on alienation; selections from Capital on labor and value; Martin Hägglund, This Life (sections on Marx and value); Michael Clune, “Judgment and Equality”; L. Kolakowski on Marx’s theory of value, 267-274.


7. 2/26: Walt Whitman: 1855 Preface to Leaves of Grass, “Song of Myself” #1-11, 21-33, 50-52; “As I Ebb’d With the Ocean of Life”; “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”; “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”

8. 3/4: Emily Dickinson: “Success is counted sweetest” (Franklin 112); “I should have been too glad, I see” (283); “There’s a certain slant of light” (320); “I felt a funeral in my brain” (340); “The soul has bandaged moments” (360); “After great pain a formal feeling comes” (372); “I dwell in possibility” (466); “Because I could not stop for death” (479); “There is a pain so utter” (515); “I heard a fly buzz when I died” (591); “The brain is wider than the sky” (598); “The tint I cannot take is best” (696); “I cannot live with you” (706); “My life had stood a loaded gun” (764); “Further in summer than the birds” (895); “Tell all the truth but tell it slant” (1263)

9. 3/25: Friedrich Nietzsche, selections from The Gay Science and The Will to Power


+James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Further reading:


Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*
David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste”
Isaiah Berlin, “JS Mill and the Ends of Life” in *Liberty*
P B Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry”
Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction; The Rules of Art*
Schiller--->Marx, Ruskin, Morris
Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Contingencies of Value” ch. 3
Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*
Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*
Simone Weil, *Notebooks; Gravity and Grace*
Iris Murdoch, “The Sovereignty of Good”
Geoffrey Hill, *Inventions of Value*
Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*
Theo Davis, *Ornamental Aesthetics*
Kateb on Shklar as moral psychologist
Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (ch. on Weber: “Distinction Betw. Facts and Values”)
Camus, Sartre, David Bohm, Angus Fletcher
Justin Smith, *Irrationality*
Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*