

Course Title: *Political Philosophy and History*

James Nichols, Professor of Government, Claremont McKenna College

Rationale:

The fundamental purpose of this course is to understand the turn that Western political and moral philosophy took from inquiring chiefly into nature toward examining above all history. The syllabus has included such authors as Rousseau, Burke, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Kojève, and Heidegger. From my most recent experience of teaching this course and from subsequent work that I did on the French-Russian Hegelian Alexandre Kojève, I was more deeply impressed than ever before by the crucial role played by secularization in the way historicist philosophers, above all Hegel, have understood historical development. The Hegelian conception of secularization, I have come to think, is the most crucially important and fundamental: a view that originally religious conceptions (such as of the human being as a free, historical individual) are transformed from mere ideal into actual truth through being realized in the historical secular world. To develop more deeply the theme of secularization in this course, I propose to devote particular attention to Hegel's analysis of the Christian religion and its Reformation; I propose also to highlight this Hegelian secularization by comparing it with the classic interpretation of religion as an element of human historical development presented by the Roman Epicurean poet Lucretius.

Overall Purpose: This course seeks to explore how and why philosophy, in its attempt to understand human affairs, moved from inquiring chiefly into nature to looking mainly at history. A particular emphasis is to examine how religion is understood in the development of human life, both in ancient philosophy as exemplified by Lucretius and in the modern account of secularization as exemplified by Hegel.

Required Texts (books ordered at Huntley; some other Xeroxed materials may be distributed for your use).

Lucretius: *De rerum natura* (translation by Rolphe Humphries: *On the Nature of the Universe*).

G. W. F. Hegel: *The Philosophy of History* (Dover)

Alexandre Kojève: *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Cornell University Press)

Friedrich Nietzsche: *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (Hackett)

Martin Heidegger: *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (Harper & Row).

Leo Strauss: *On Tyranny* (University of Chicago Press)

Topical Outline

- I. Introduction: What is history? A survey of competing notions: xeroxed general statements by Thucydides, by Tacitus, and by Machiavelli; and Nietzsche's *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*.
- II. An ancient general account of human development from primitive beginnings to civilized life with perfected arts and sciences, with particular emphasis on the emergence and evolution of political society, of religious beliefs and practices, and of the relation of religion and politics: The *De rerum natura (On the nature of things)* of Lucretius.
- III. Hegel's rational history and historical rationalism in *The Philosophy of History*, with particular attention to the place of religious conceptions and the way in which they may become actual in the secular world.
- IV. Kojève's updating of Hegel's philosophy: selections from *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*.
- V. Heidegger's meditation on history and being.
- VI. Modern historicist rationalism or Socratic rationalism? An attempt to understand what is at stake in the two fundamentally different approaches supported by Leo Strauss and Alexandre Kojève in their debate occasioned by Strauss's interpretation of Xenophon's dialogue *Hiero or On Tyranny*.

Course Requirements and Grading:

Contributions to class discussion. (counts 15%)

Mid-term examination, take-home. (counts 20%)

One ten-page term paper. Each student should consult individually with me about a suitable topic. (counts 30%).

Final examination at the regularly scheduled time. (counts 35%).