HUMANITIES 10A: SEMINAR NORMS

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I. Norms of Reading

Hum 10a has a considerable amount of reading. In order to get the most out of your reading:

- **Budget your time** accordingly. You should aim to read the book **before the Tuesday lecture** each week.
- For books that are short but dense (e.g. Plato's *Symposium*, Descartes' *Meditations*) plan to read the text **more than once**.
- **Take notes** while you read, recording essential plot details, interesting or puzzling structural elements, questions or issues that you think deserve some discussion. **Bring those notes to class.**
- The editions of the books we are using usually have scholarly **introductions**. They contain valuable information and can be essential in giving you context and perspective on the works as we jump through time and space in our reading. We encourage you to read them, either before or after reading the text. (Some like to prepare themselves for the text ahead; others prefer to dive in cold and then get oriented. It's a personal choice.)

II. Norms of Discussion

Section is a time for us to discuss the text and you will be graded on your participation in the discussion. *But what does good discussion participation amount to?* It does *not* amount to simply getting your voice into the discussion as much as possible; that's a recipe for chaos. Discussion is a **team sport.** A good soccer player does not simply try to get the ball for herself as often as possible and try to score every goal herself. Instead she keeps track of where the ball is at all times and of where the other players are; she tries to determine who is in the best position to advance the ball; and she tries to do what it takes to ensure that that player gets the ball and (with luck) scores. Good discussion works the same way. You should not simply try to share every thought you have, or try to be the one to make all the brilliant points. Our aim as a group is to understand the text better. Sometimes you will contribute to that goal by sharing an observation you made while reading or by offering up a question or puzzle that you think is critical to understanding the text. But there are other ways of contributing to a good discussion that are just as important. They include:

- Ask another student for **clarification** of her point (that might take the form of trying to put the point in your own terms: "Are you saying that…?")
- Ask another student for **evidence** for his point ("Where in the text are you finding evidence of that?")
- **Support** another student's point with evidence of your own
- **Link** another student's point to other readings, issues, discussions we've had
- Pose a constructive **challenge** to another student's point
- **Synthesize** points that have been made
- Point out a hidden **assumption** of another student's point (e.g., "you are assuming we can *trust* that whatever Odysseus says is true!")
- Offer an **alternative point of view**, backing it up with evidence

Along the way, it's important to navigate between the conversational Scylla and Charybdis:

- **Scylla:** disrespect and behavior that excludes others. It's important to show the other students in the class (and the teachers!) **respect and inclusiveness:** don't interrupt; don't dominate the discussion; don't flatly dismiss another person's view (leave open the possibility that there is a reply to your objection); acknowledge the insights of other people; don't use potentially offensive examples.

- **Charybdis:** rampant relativism. It's important to **challenge** each other's views and to be willing to **be challenged** (indeed to **be wrong**) about one's own view. Just as we won't get anywhere if people are rude and dismissive, so we won't get anywhere if everyone takes the attitude that every idea that is put on the table is equally good. Some of us (including Professor Simmons and Rachael) will put ideas out there that turn out to be misguided, unhelpful or just plain wrong. *That's critical to learning.* We learn by *making mistakes in a constructive and supportive environment and jointly figuring out how to do better.*

Navigating this Scylla and Charybdis is not easy (no more than it was for Odysseus). The advantage we have over Odysseus is that we're going to navigate the waters together and we're going to help each other identify instances of Scylla and Charybdis as they come up. (Sometimes we veer toward them without even knowing it, and it's helpful to be told.)

III. Norms of Academic Integrity

As per Harvard's honor code, you are all part of an academic community, and for that community to function we have obligations to each other. The most important obligation to keep in mind for this course (apart from the Norms of Discussion outlined above) is to **give credit where credit is due**. We build on the work of others in the academy, and we need to acknowledge that work. It's no different, really, from a report you might give to your roommate on a conversation you had at a party: you come home and say, "John said that p; I disagree with him because y; but Julie thinks that not-p because of q and I don't think *that's* a good reason to reject p…" You ***report what people said***, what ***reasons*** were given for what they said, what ***your reactions*** were, what ***reasons*** you have for your reactions, and what ***your conclusion*** was. The same is true in the academic setting. An academic paper is, in effect, a report on a conversation with other people who are thinking (or have thought) about the same issue--other scholars, historical figures, and other students. With that model in mind, here are some guidelines:

- We encourage you to **discuss the course material and the paper topics** with us, other students, teachers, strangers (but maybe not the man-eating ones!). Feel encouraged to read books, articles and websites on the material. That's how you learn.
- When it comes to **writing the papers**, however, **the work must be your own.**
- That doesn't mean that in writing your papers you can't have someone read your draft over and comment on it (proofread, offer objections or suggestions). We will be working a *lot* on writing this year, and draft conferences and workshops will be a key part of this course. You simply need to **report the conversation:** if you change something important because of what a reader said, ***cite it***; if you have a particularly helpful conversation with other students, ***cite it***. It's just a way of indicating that they were part of the conversation. When in doubt, ***cite it***. You don't lose points for citing things unnecessarily.