9.68 Affect: Biological, Psychological, and Social Aspects of "Feelings"

Reaction Papers

Writing Assignment: “What is good, Phaedrus? And what is not good? Do we need anyone to tell us these things?” With this quintessentially Platonic epigram, we embark with Robert Pirsig on a virtual cross-country motorcycle trip. In the company of his nameless narrator, his son Chris, and a couple of friends, the Sutherlands, we will shortly be meeting up with the narrator’s (author’s?) mysterious and ghostlike alter ego, and with them undertake an “inquiry into values.” Before too much more time passes and you begin to get too “contaminated” by the opinions of others, let’s try to get a preliminary fix on your present view of those ancient and still abiding questions:

“What is good? What is better? What is best? What is not good? What is quality? Who is to say? How do we know? What is an emotion? Write a 1-2 page “reaction paper” addressing these questions.

NOTE: Completed writing assignments are due on or before deadlines as indicated. Use proper essay format and scholarly apparatus (citations, footnotes, etc.) Proofread and check spelling carefully. When quotations are used or bibliographies are appended, please identify the sources that you have actually consulted in the original and distinguish them from citations borrowed from secondary or tertiary sources. Submissions will not be accepted in raw email form. Be sure to have your journal as well as hard copies of all your papers with you at all class and study group meetings. Except for the final term paper (see below) no letter or number grades will be assigned to the written work that you turn in. However, it is our intention to carefully and completely read all timely submissions and to provide prompt feedback, in writing, on the quality of form and/or content. All papers received on time will be read, commented upon, queried and critiqued as needed, before returning them to you (if possible), before the following class session. Tardy submissions will be received and recorded as such and may be returned unread. Without objection, we will occasionally redirect and redistribute submissions with the intention of facilitating the learning process.

“Things of beauty and beholder’s eyes”– In search of quality at the MFA

(3) Writing assignment: Write a reaction paper ON THE FOLLOWING SUBJECT: “ZAAMM my reading of it thus far. “These papers will be collected in hard copy form on the bus to the MFA. We will read and comment on them during your time at the MFA and return them to you on the bus at the end of the field trip, in exchange for your fully completed copy of the “reaction form” appended to your copy of Handout #4. Please do not fail to fill-out the form before you leave the MFA and turn it in on the return bus ride.

MFA Field-Trip Follow-up

Write a reaction paper entitled: “On searching for Quality at the MFA. "The point here is to reflect upon and to draw some conclusions about "values" from your field trip experience. What was noteworthy for you about the field trip and/or the museum in general? Compare/contrast facial expressions of affect in artworks from different traditions/cultures. What, similarities and differences are observed? Any evidence here either for or against the idea that there are cross-cultural “affective universals.” Feel free to discuss in some depth and detail any relevant cognitive and affective aspects of your encounter(s) with specific object(s). Writing this reaction paper and sharing its contents with your group mates should well prepare you to participate constructively in this week’s class discussion. Bring a hard copy of your paper with you to class, so you’ll be prepared to read or refer to its contents as appropriate during the discussion.
“What is quality in education?
Write a reaction paper on “quality and my MIT education.”

“Home is where one starts from.” As already noted, this is a topic regarding which all of you can unquestionably lay claim to equipotentially credible “expert” opinions! Thus, in your remarks, try to avoid the usual cliches as much as possible; be as precise and specifically detailed as you can about your own first-hand experience.

For example, you might choose to identify and describe some aspect(s) of student life and learning during the freshman year; or focus on an activity or activities that you participated in and/or observed and which you regard as having been of spectacularly “high” or abysmally “low” educational quality. Consider (if you wish) your “homelife” experience with peers in living groups; your “real life” (sports, recreation, hobbies or other extracurricular activities), as well as your MIT “worklife.” How mentally and behaviorally well prepared were you for your encounter with the first year science core curriculum? With this assignment, we’re inviting you to begin making a serious effort to describe and to evaluate -- in a scientifically informed and consensually credible way, insofar as you can in this context -- quality -- as an aspect of your own educational experience.

Affective Dialectics: Bipolar notions of Selves and others, us and them, Eros and Eris, Love and strife, intimacy and aggression, cooperation and competition, affiliation and alienation, etc. Fear, Anger and Contempt – the affective dimensions of conflict; Wrap-up of ZAAMM

(1) Write a Reaction Paper: “On the experience of reading ZAAMM... in the context of 9.68/02”.
(2) Prepare, and bring with you to class, a list of (at least 3) “take-home lessons, key questions or issues needing to be further discussed.”

Paradigms: Beliefs, Values and Practices in Science: What is a “scientific revolution?”

Write a reaction paper summarizing and evaluating Kuhn’s central argument as you understand it. Include a description of the beliefs, values and practices that have been changed in an actual case in which a “crisis” was resolved in a given field of scientific activity at a specific time and place. Is the concept of “paradigm shift” applicable to instances in which a comparably significant conceptual and material change occurs in some other complex human system at biological, psychological and/or socio-cultural levels of organization? If so, describe a case or cases in point. If not, explain why not.

Midterm Assignment:

(1) Write a reaction paper: What has been (is being) learned here? What has been the quality of my learning experience in 9.68/02 thus far?
(2) Write a reaction paper: “Spring Vacation: The quality of my experience.”
Looking ahead through the syllabus at topics still to come, you should already be thinking about the topic of your term paper. Paper topic proposals no longer than two pages in length may be submitted for approval at any time between now and the proposal deadline (see above).

Paradigms Lost and Regained: Changing beliefs, values and practices in science and society.

Write a reaction paper commenting on (not summarizing!) the main argument(s) made in this article.

The neuropsychology of affect. The emotional brain.

Write a reaction paper on “Three Key Ideas about the Neuropsychology of Affect.”
Note: We have only 4 classes to go after this one; this week is the deadline for submission of term paper topic proposals; proposals will be reviewed for acceptability and returned to you by return e-mail at or before the end of the Patriot’s Day holiday weekend.

The science of violence and vice-versa?

Write a reaction paper on “Psychosurgery: The key scientific, technical and ethical issues as I see them.”

Environmental Values: Muddy River Fieldtrip

Writing Assignment: According to a statement that I have long attributed to the seventeenth-century English social philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, (but whose actual provenance has been questioned and is thus unknown to me) "The greatest power in any society is the power to give names and to enforce definitions.” What is your opinion of this assertion? Write a reaction paper addressing this question in relation to one or more of the substantive issues raised 9.68 thus far. Note, this assignment may be done individually or collaboratively.