Fall 2006

V55.0404, Conversations of the West: *Antiquity and the 19th Century*

Professor Vincent Renzi
903C Silver Center
212-998-8071
vincent.renzi@nyu.edu
Office Hours: Mondays, 2:00–3:00 p.m., Thursdays, 10:00–11:00 a.m., and by appointment.

Lecture:
§001: Tuesdays & Thursdays ..... 2:00 p.m. – 3:15 p.m..... 101 Cantor Center

Recitations:
§002: Fridays ..... 9:30 a.m. – 10:45 a.m..... 145 Fourth Avenue, room 210
§003: Fridays ..... 11:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m..... 194 Mercer Street, room 201
§004: Fridays ..... 9:30 a.m. – 10:45 p.m..... 25 West 4th Street, room C–12
§005: Fridays ..... 11:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m..... 194 Mercer Street, room 207
§006: Fridays ..... 11:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m..... 48 Cooper Square, room 103
§007: Fridays ..... 12:30 p.m. – 1:45 p.m..... 25 West 4th Street, room C–7
§008: Fridays ..... 11:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m..... 48 Cooper Square, room 121
§009: Fridays ..... 12:30 p.m. – 1:45 p.m..... 48 Cooper Square, room 119

Preceptors:

Ms Carin McLain (§§ 006, 007)
ccm28@columbia.edu
Office Hours: By appointment.

Ms Christine Mills (§§ 002, 003)
cm333@nyu.edu
Office Address: By appointment.

Ms Nicole Watson (§§ 008, 009)
naw222@nyu.edu
Office Hours: By appointment.

Mr. Garrett Ziegler (§§ 004, 005)
garrettziegler@hotmail.com
Office Address: By appointment.

Website:
http://www.nyu.edu/classes/renzi

Thematic Description

For their idiosyncratic religious beliefs, both Socrates and Jesus, so we are told, were lawfully executed. Through this shared circumstance of their deaths—a combination of religious and political motives—they have together had an undeniable influence on moral imagination in the West. Neither appears to have written anything himself. To appreciate their influence we are therefore left to rely on study of their precursors, contemporaries, and later doxographers. Our focus on these two ancient figures thus affords us the opportunity to re-examine salient features of Western culture and at the same time highlights issues of scholarly methodology.

Overview

As one of the first courses in the Foundations of Contemporary Culture, Conversations of the West serves as an introduction to the study of the liberal arts. The course has a number of complementary goals.

First, it provides N.Y.U. undergraduates with a common academic experience on which to draw both in interactions with one another and in later academic work. Although we share some readings with other sections of Conversations of the West, this core experience is defined not so much by a canon of texts as by a shared concern to introduce you to modes of humanistic inquiry.

Second, because the course is intended for students early in their college careers, heavy emphasis is placed on building your ability to reason soundly and to analyze texts critically. As in *Writing the Essay,* you will complete frequent writing assignments; however, in this course you will be expected to produce finished work without the constant feedback that that workshop class provides. Likewise, the discussion that occurs in your weekly recitations will focus more on the interpretation of the works we are studying than on the process of writing generally. In this sense, your work in this class should move you beyond the expository assignments of *Writing the Essay* to the sort of argumentative essays that will be expected of you later in your academic and professional careers.

Third, Conversations of the West seeks to develop your appreciation of the cultural relevance of selected works in the humanities. Although we shall be concerned to situate works in their respective historical contexts, the course is not a survey of "great books" definitive of *the* (putative) Western cultural tradition. Instead, our purpose is to understand how works can be interpreted as constituting a tradition or history and to consider various attempts to define what a culture is or might be. I have chosen the texts for this class with a view to their relevance to this project and to one another, and because they are challenging materials on which to build academic skills. I do hope that you will come away from the class with an appreciation of their artistic and philosophical merits; but as to whether any are "great books," I leave it to you to discover if they engage you greatly.

Finally, this class will consider themes, concepts, and ideas of enduring influence and interest. We will be concerned, for example, to examine the different ways the creators of the works we shall study have understood our history, human nature, place in the world, and individuality. Our investigation is thus *humanistic* in precisely this sense, namely that it leads us to consider fundamental aspects of our human condition; and the modes of inquiry we shall employ should help you appreciate the extent to which our human self-understanding in turn reflects particular views of history and human society. This investigation is therefore *liberal* in the sense that it seeks to free us from our accidental historical circumstances, allowing us to gain a greater perspective on the possibilities of human existence.

The spirit of liberal education that finds expression in these course goals is itself an excellent example of the influence exerted on our contemporary society by ancient ideals—in this case derived from Classical Greece. Among the ancient Greeks we find articulated the duplicate concern for a purpose to learning greater than rote mastery of information and for an education that aims to achieve such happiness as derives from understanding our humanity, not merely the fame or profit that comes of technical competence. In this spirit, no direction will here be given for the pursuit of any special study or particular profession; neither will you learn strategies for success in commerce or politics. In this sense the course is entirely impractical in its design; but there are good reasons to think this liberality will nevertheless provide the best preparation for your future endeavors: The skills you learn here are not restricted only to one line of work but are general in their application, and the emphasis is not on mastery of a fixed body of knowledge but rather on preparation for a life of learning. I cannot claim, more than this, that the course will make you happy; but the not immodest hope shared by many of the authors we shall study is that their works should help you be so. Seen in these ways, the class is preeminently practical, preparing you to flourish in dynamic circumstances in your later studies and professional work, and also, perhaps, for the hard task of deciding what sort of person you will be and what sort of life you will lead. Of course, we cannot presume to measure your humanity. Your overall grade will therefore be based on essays you will write about the works we shall study and your knowledge of basic facts necessary to their interpretation; but your education, I hope, will continue beyond your satisfaction of the course requirements.

Organization

In this class, you will have two weekly lectures and a weekly recitation section. This is a typical structure for university-level courses. It most likely differs from that of classes you had in primary and secondary school. Those classes usually meet daily in small groups, provide close direction of your studies, and seek to prepare you with skills and knowledge necessary for later work. By contrast, college classes meet less frequently, ask you to synthesize information from a variety of sources, and require you to recognize independently what you need to know to understand the complexity of an idea—and expect you to take the initiative to learn it.

As with any course, you will get the most out of this class if you prepare in advance. This means doing more than skimming the reading. When you read, you should highlight passages of particular importance and make notes about questions you have or points in the text that you feel bear further exploration. Although the lecture is not primarily intended for discussion, I encouraged you to ask questions both about the readings and about the lectures themselves. Most importantly, after class you should review your notes and re-read the texts.

Because the lecture brings everyone together, it is the best place for me to give you general information, to demonstrate its relevance to the interpretation of the works we are studying, and to discuss broad themes common among them. By contrast, the small size of the recitation makes it ideal for specific discussion of the texts and for personal attention to your development. The homework assignments and papers are intended to build your interpretative skills and to provide a basis for discussion. You should come to recitation prepared both to discuss the readings and what you have written about them.

The recitation is not intended to save you the trouble of doing the reading or attending the lectures; neither is its purpose simply to answer questions you may have about them. Rather, the recitation provides a time for focused engagement with your course work. It does not replace but complements the lecture, and it should provide the opportunity for you to integrate the information presented in the lecture with your own insights and those of your classmates. This said, the recitation nevertheless is still only a guide. It remains for you to continue to grapple with the material outside of class—in your conversations with friends, in moments of quiet contemplation, and in re-reading the texts—and in writing your papers and exams.

Requirements

You are expected to read each of the works listed below, to attend all lectures and meetings of your recitation section, to arrive at class meetings promptly, and to participate actively and appropriately in class. In-class writing exercises and brief homework assignments will also be required, as well as some supplemental reading. Finally, you will be required to write six papers and to sit for two examinations. The six papers should be 2–3 pages each (typed, double-spaced). All work will be graded as submitted, with no opportunity for revision, and credit will be deducted for poor grammar and spelling.

In determining your grade, we will weigh your completion of the course requirements approximately as follows; bear in mind, however, that you are expected to complete *every* assignment in order to receive a passing grade for the class.

Class participation & homework	18%
Papers (6 @ 7%)	42%
Midterm Exam	15%
Final Exam	25%

Note well that a failing grade may be assigned to any student with three absences from lecture and/or recitation. Late work and electronic submissions will not be accepted. Incompletes will be considered only in cases of documented medical emergency or other, comparably grave circumstances. In the event that you are for good reason unable to attend class, you are expected to contact me in advance (or as soon as is practicable) by telephone or e-mail.

A Note on Classroom Decorum

As a matter of courtesy to the instructors and your fellow students, please arrive at class promptly, and, apart from emergencies, please remain in the classroom for the duration of the lecture or recitation.

Please be sure to shut off all pagers and cellular telephones at the beginning of class.

Recording & Transcription

While you are encouraged to take notes in lecture and recitation, you may not make audio tapes or any other kind of recording in class. Neither may you take or exchange class notes in return for remuneration. Violation of this policy will result in a failing grade for the course.

Bibliography

The following texts are required. The course pack is available for purchase from Unique Copies, 252 Greene Street. Book have been ordered through the N.Y.U. Book Center. Be certain to purchase exactly those listed below.

Aristophanes. *Four Plays* [*The Clouds, Lysistrata, The Birds, The Frogs*]. William Arrrowsmith, Douglass Parker, & Richard Lattimore, transs. New York: Meridian, 1994.

Augustine. *Confessions*. Henry Chadwick, trans. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

The New Oxford Annotated Bible, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books. New Revised Standard Version. Michael D. Coogan, ed. Third, College Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Euripides. *Alcestis, The Medea, The Heracleidae, Hippolytus,* with an introduction by Richard Lattimore. Richard Lattimore, Rex Warner, Ralph Gladstone, & David Grene, transs. Volume 1 of the works of Euripides in The Complete Greek Tragedies, David Grene & Richard Lattimore, eds. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1955.

The Book of J, translated from the Hebrew by David Rosenberg, interpreted by Harold Bloom. New York: Vintage, 1991.

Plato. *Five Dialogues* [*Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*], translated by G. M. A. Grube, revised by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002.

--------. *Gorgias,* translated by Donald J. Zeyl. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987.

Freud, Sigmund. *Moses & Monotheism*. [1939.] Katherine Jones, trans. New York: Vintage, 1967.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear & Trembling*. [1843.] Published together with *Repetition*. Howard & Edna Hong, transs. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. [1887.] Keith Ansell-Pearson, ed.; Carol Diethe, trans. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Schedule of Classes

Please complete the readings prior to the lecture at which they are first discussed. Be sure to bring the appropriate texts to class.

Lecture		Assignment
T 9/5:	Introduction.	
Th 9/7:	[Quodlibetal day.]	
T 9/12:	Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality,* Preface, Essay I.	
Th 9/14:	Aristotle, *Poetics*; Euripides, *Medea.*	
T 9/19:	*Book of J.*	
Th 9/21:	*Book of J,* Genesis, Exodus.	
T 9/26:	Kierkegaard, *Fear & Trembling.*	
Th 9/28:	Kierkegaard, *Fear & Trembling.*	
T 10/3:	Isaiah, Daniel.	
Th 10/5:	Paul, Galatians. Luke, Acts of the Apostles.	
T 10/10:	Gospel of Matthew. Gospel of Mary.	
Th 10/12:	**Midterm Examination.**	
T 10/17:	Freud, *Moses & Monotheism.*	
Th 10/19:	Freud, *Moses & Monotheism.*	
T 10/24:	Augustine, *Confessions.*	
Th 10/26:	Augustine, *Confessions.*	
T 10/31:	Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality,* Essay II.	
Th 11/2:	Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality,* Essay III.	
T 11/7:	Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments.* Nietzsche, "The Problem of Socrates."	
Th 11/9:	Aristophanes, *The Clouds.*	
T 11/14:	Xenophon, *Apology.*	
Th 11/16:	Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito.*	
T 11/21:	Plato, *Gorgias.*	
Th 11/23:	[Holiday.]	
T 11/28:	Plato, *Gorgias.*	
Th 11/30:	Plato, *Phaedo.*	
T 12/5:	Plato, *Phaedo.*	
Th 12/7:	Nietzsche, *Joyful Science* §341, "Zarathustra's Prologue."	
T 12/12:	Conclusion.	
T 12/19:	**Final Examination.** **2:00–3:50 p.m.** **Location T.B.A.**	