Conversations of the West
Antiquity and the Enlightenment: Spring, 2007

Introduction

This is a very ambitious course. It includes a great deal of reading on many critical issues and problems of Western culture. These issues spanned the centuries and concerned diverse communities. They help us understand why our society looks like it does today, where many of our values come from, and why certain tensions characterize our culture. But our primary focus is not our society today, but the great authors, philosophers and religious leaders of the past who influenced the different cultures that preceded and informed our own. Our first task is to understand the authors in their historical situations. Although we study the perennial problems of Western culture, every moment in history is comprised of unique events, circumstances and peculiarities.

The first half of our course explores the “Judeo-Christian” and Hellenistic traditions. The former tradition emerged from the civilization of Ancient Israel, the second from the civilizations of Greece and Rome. Already in antiquity the traditions collided, and both the Christian Scriptures and Augustine are products of that encounter. The second half of our course jumps to the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries. Enlightenment thinkers grappled with the fusion of these traditions that they had inherited, subjected both to serious criticism, and tried to revise them based on recent scientific advances. In a way we will see the Judeo-Christian and Hellenistic traditions merging together in the first half of our course and splitting apart in the second half, as a new tradition—science and technology—rises to prominence.

Required Texts

1. Oxford Study Bible.
3. Plato, Apology and Crito in The Trial and Death of Socrates, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Hackett)
4. Plato, Symposium, trans. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff (Hackett)
5. Augustine, Confessions (Penguin)
7. Alexander Pope, Essay on Man (Dover)
8. Voltaire, Candide and Other Stories, trans. Roger Pearson (World’s Classics.)
Requirements

(1) Reading and Participation: This is most important. You will not learn unless you read the texts, think about them and struggle with the ideas. Lectures will help you to understand the texts, but you will gain the greatest rewards by analyzing, thinking critically, grappling with the writings yourself and participating in discussions. Reading and Participation includes several elements:

(a) Attending discussion sections. Too many absences will adversely affect your grade. Do not come to discussion sections or lectures without your text for that day. Attendance will not be taken at lectures. However, since discussion section will often take up issues raised in lectures, failure to attend lectures will impact the quality of participation in discussion.

(b) Keeping up with the reading and participating in the discussion sections.

(c) Response papers. Each student will write a response paper for each text (i.e. one paper for Genesis, one for Exodus, one for The Symposium etc.). The responses should be about one-typed page in length, and must be turned in on the day the text is first discussed. You should select a passage, idea or claim that intrigues you and write a brief response. These can be passages with which you agree (and explain why) or with which you disagree (and explain why). Or you might select a passage that you don’t completely understand but wish to attempt to puzzle out. Your papers should focus on particular passages rather than summarizing the text as a whole. Occasionally I may ask you to write on a specific passage or to take up a specific question.

Some of the texts will strike you as strange or offensive. You are welcome to write about what seems strange or offensive to you. But your approach should be to try to understand why the author proposes an idea that you find alien. For example, you might find that the depiction of God in Genesis clashes with how you conceive of God, or that Plato’s celebration of homosexual love strikes you as unethical. Avoid this type of reaction: “The picture of God in Exodus is primitive and silly. How can God get so mad at the Egyptians and kill them all? How stupid to portray God as if he is on a power trip....” “Plato must have been a lecherous and disgusting pedophile to celebrate the love of boys....” Rather, you should frame your response as follows: “The portrayal of God in Exodus as punitive and warlike differs radically from my conception of God. I have always been taught that God as merciful to all his creatures. What could have motivated the author of Exodus to conceive of God in this fashion? Perhaps the Israelites were constantly fighting battles with the surrounding nations and it inspired the soldiers to think that their God fought on their side in war etc.” I am asking you not simply to react, but to try in each case to understand the author within his world.

(d) Writing Assignments / Papers assigned in sections

(2) A midterm exam.

(3) A final exam.
Grading

Participation, response papers, writing assignments: 35 %
Midterm: 30 %
Final: 35 %

Schedule (* indicates a response paper is due that day)

Jan 17: Introduction
Jan 22: Genesis 1-24*
Jan 24: Genesis 25-50; Exodus 1-19, *
Jan 29: Exodus 20-34, Deut 29-30, Jonah
Jan 31: Sophocles, Oedipus the King * (entire play)
Feb 5: Sophocles, Oedipus the King
Feb 7: Sophocles, Antigone*
Feb 12: Plato, Symposium*
Feb 14: Plato, Symposium
Feb 19: no class -- (Presidents’ Day)
Feb 21: Plato, Apology, Crito*
Feb 26: Matthew *
Feb 28: Matthew / Galatians*
March 5: John 1; Acts 1-11
March 7: Midterm

March 19: Augustine, Confessions*
March 21: Augustine, Confessions
March 26: Enlightenment: Introduction
March 28: The Philosophes: Denis Diderot, Encyclopedie* (handout)
April 2: Deism and Optimism: Alexander Pope, Essay on Man*
April 4: Lecture: Newton and his Influence
April 9: No Class
April 11: Encounters with Foreign Cultures: Montesquieu, Persian Letters*
April 16: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Second Discourse*
April 18: Rousseau, Second Discourse
April 23: Voltaire, Candide*
April 25: Voltaire, Candide
April 30: Conclusions

For each text I have prepared study questions. These will help guide your reading and focus you on important passages. When I lecture I will assume that you have paid close attention to the questions and the passages to which they refer. The questions may also serve as the basis of discussions in the discussion sections.
Examples of Response Papers

(1) “Wait the great teacher, Death; and God adore...Man never Is, but always To be blest.” (Alexander Pope, Essay on Man, Epistle I, Section III.) These lines are puzzling and interesting. The author claims that death is a teacher, which is not how we typically think of death. In what way can this be so? Perhaps death can be a teacher insofar as the fear of death drives humans to act in noble ways. They learn from their mistakes in order not to make them again, and not to risk the chance of dying a miserable death, or just the chance of dying at all.

Note that Pope combines the idea of death as our teacher with the instruction to “adore” God. This seems to imply that although death appears to be an all-powerful force that dictates the way in which we live our day-to-day lives, there is a higher power that tends to be overlooked. This power is God. If we continue to adore God and put our trust in Him, we can rid ourselves of the fear of mortality that seems to be innate in our being. God does not let us know the future; rather He gives us hope. This hope derives from the comfort and confidence that we receive through our faith.

Pope continues by saying that man is never actually blessed but that he will be blessed. I think he means that no matter how fortunate we are in this world, we can never be truly happy. Only in heaven, when we do not have to confront our fear of death, will we be blessed. When we are no longer human beings within bodies, but pure souls in heaven, then we will be completely happy and blessed. On the other hand, it is impossible to blessed while on earth, because a blessing implies happiness and peace. But this can never be the case when the fear of death hangs over us. The only place where there is ultimate happiness and eternal peace is in Heaven with God where we are all repentant souls.

(2) In Antigone, Sophocles includes a mysterious character, Ismene. Ismene represents a cross between an unappealing person—one whom Socrates does not admire—and a playwright’s device to set the scene for the coming action. Ismene can be seen as an antithesis to Antigone and Creon. These two are passionate, even stubborn characters. Antigone is not content to see that her brother is given the proper burial rights; she must “shout it out” (99). The chorus notes that “She does not know / how to yield to trouble.” Antigone is determined to do what she sees is right. Creon, similarly, is determined to do what he sees as right. He says, “But he that is loyal to the state / in death, in life alike, shall have my honor” (228-229). In fact, Creon and Antigone share almost identical philosophies. Antigone would replace the word ‘state’ with ‘family’.

Ismene on the other hand has not made up her mind. When Antigone invites her to join in the deed, Ismene answers “To act in defiance of the citizenry / my nature does not give me means for that (91-92). However, when Creon charges Antigone with the crime, Ismene tries to take the blame for what Antigone did, saying, “But in your troubles I am not ashamed to sail with you on the sea of suffering” (594-5). Ismene is concerned with her appearance in the eyes of others. When she thinks Antigone will be seen as a treasonous criminal, she declines to join her. But when she sees that Antigone is in fact acting in a noble and tragic way, Ismene wants that too for herself. By portraying her in this fickle way, Sophocles shows that he dishonors those people who exemplify the traits
of Ismene. While Creon and Antigone are seen as noble and tragic characters, deserving of respect, Ismene is dishonored by being ignored the majority of the play.

Ismene can also be seen as a device used by Sophocles to set up action that follows. The dialogue between Antigone and Ismene hardly contributes to a greater understanding of the main conflict of the play (which takes place between Antigone and Creon). The dialogue mainly explains to the audience why Antigone acts as she does, and describes the conflict she faces with Creon. In sum, Ismene is not a fully developed character, but is important in her juxtaposition with Antigone.

(3) Augustine, in his Confessions, said to the Lord, “For to love this world is to break troth with you.” I find this to be very interesting; Augustine is saying that one cannot love the world and love G-d and the same time, that one is breaking some kind of godly bond by loving the world. Yet, doesn’t Augustine assert that G-d is the Creator of the Universe and hence also of this world? Augustine recites from the Bible, “all things find in You their origin...the center of their being,” (22), therefore it is shown that people should love G-d’s worldly creations since a part of G-d resides in each creation. Therefore, it seems to be a little rash that Augustine must categorize everything: one side is this world, which is flawed and should be discarded, and on the other is G-d and Heaven, which is perfect and should be prized. If a perfect entity, such as the Lord makes something, then at least this part of that creation should contain a small amount of perfection, and should be loved. Therefore, it is essential that one loves this world, G-d’s creation, as a means to help oneself to love and appreciate his Creator. However, in the context of the writing, I believe that through this statement Augustine is trying to caution readers against replacing worldly objects and intellectual pursuits with godly worship and knowledge. Augustine, through his own experience, is saying that it is difficult to balance appreciation of worldly things with the worship of G-d, that if one isn’t wholly contributed to the Lord, then he will be sucked into materialism. This may be true, however, it remains that Augustine makes a somewhat contradictory statement by forcing a separation between love for G-d and love for His world.

NOTE: Additional assistance for this class is available to you free of charge at the College Learning Center located on the 1st Floor of Weinstein Hall (right behind Java City). For information on one-on-one and group peer tutoring, please stop by the CLC or go to their website: http://www.nyu.edu/cas/clc