Thematic Description

Socrates remains one of the most—if not the most—influential figures in the Western tradition in large part due to the rise in the years following his death of a new literary genre, the Socratic discourse, and the output especially of the two most prominent Socratic authors, Plato and Xenophon, extending in the next generation through the distinctive rhetoric of Diogenes of Sinope, and through him into the figures of the Cynic philosopher and the Stoic sage; and four centuries before the presumed time of Jesus, Socrates provides the literary precursor of a character tried and executed for idiosyncratic political and religious views. Already in his own lifetime, Socrates’ literary influence is apparent in Aristophanes and other writers of comedies. In modernity, the image of Socrates both fascinates and repels the attention, notably, of Nietzsche. Apart from the rough outlines of his biography, it is all but impossible to recover any sense of the “historical Socrates”; at the same time we must ask whether Socrates’ influence is not rather an artifact of the doxography itself than the result of his intellectual contributions. Even given that he did actually exist, isn’t what we have of him really just literary fiction?
Overview

As a seminar designed for first-year students in the College of Arts and Science, this course has a number of complementary goals.

First, it is intended to be a formative social and intellectual introduction to your new life as an undergraduate student in the liberal arts. Together with your classmates and the others in your cohort, you will be learning what it means to join in the community of scholarship that is the University.

Second, we will pursue our studies in a liberal spirit, not for their practical utility, but for what they reveal about the human condition and how they help us to imagine the higher possibilities of our human freedom.

Finally, the seminar is intended to introduce you to methods of research in the humanities, and your major goal for the course will be to complete a substantial work of independent research. Together with the other reading and writing skills we will practice, the seminar should help hone the critical and analytic abilities you will need for success in your later studies and for your future lives as thoughtful individuals and engaged citizens.

We shall begin by examining the use to which the figure of Socrates is put by a modern author, Nietzsche—in the process certainly learning more about him than about Socrates; but our interest here is precisely to measure the extent of the tradition’s reception and development in this influential and (relatively) recent thinker’s works. We then shift to consider some prominent ancient Socratics—the Cynics, Xenophon, and Plato—the origins of the doxographical tradition, and end finally with an assessment of Socrates’ originality, recognizing full well the difficulty of recovering it.

Requirements

You are expected to read each of the works listed below, to attend all class meetings, to arrive at class promptly, and to participate actively and appropriately in class. In-class writing exercises and brief weekly homework assignments will also be required, as well as some supplemental reading. Each student will also make a seminar presentation on a selected reading or on their research project. Finally, you will be required to write three papers. The first two will be short papers (2-3 and 4-6 pages, respectively, typed, double-spaced). The final paper will be a substantial work of independent research, 10-12 pages. All work will be graded as submitted, with no opportunity for revision, and credit will be withheld for poor grammar and spelling.

In determining your grade, I 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 ...............................................................10%
Seminar presentation ...........................................................10%
Weekly homework assignments .............................................15%
Papers (5%, 10%) .................................................................15%
Final Paper ..........................................................................50%

Note well that a failing grade may be assigned to any student with more than one absence from class. 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 all members of the seminar, please arrive at class promptly, and, apart from emergencies, please remain in the classroom for the duration of our meeting. Please be sure to shut off all cellular telephones at the beginning of class. Note also that use of tablet or laptop computers is prohibited.

Recording & Transcription

While you are encouraged to take notes in class, you may not make audio tapes or any other kind of recording of the seminar. 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 books are required. Please be certain to purchase exactly those specified below. All have been ordered through the N.Y.U. Bookstore. The remaining required readings are included in a course pack of photocopies.


Listed below is information for texts excerpted in the course pack and other recommended works.


Schedule of Classes

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


T 10/13: Xenophon: *Apology, Oeconomicus*.

T 10/20: Xenophon: *Oeconomicus*.

T 10/27: Xenophon: *Oeconomicus; Symposium*.


T 11/17: Plato: *Symposium*.


T 12/15: Final Paper due by 9:50 a.m. in 903 Silver.