Spring 2008

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.

Class Meetings:
§028: Tuesdays 2:00 p.m. – 3:15 p.m. 804 Silver Center
§028: Thursdays 2:00 p.m. – 3:15 p.m. 804 Silver Center
§030: Fridays 11:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m. 802 Silver Center

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

Thematic Description

Some problems about justice, suggested by an extended reading of Plato’s Republic: What is justice? Where does it come from? What does it mean to lead a just life? In examining these questions Plato reminds us that if we knew the answers they would not be problems, and also that it seems impossible to search for what one does not know. It looks, therefore, as if we are necessarily bound to start with the wrong or with ill-formed questions. With this Platonic paradox in mind, our constant supplement is Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morality—an approach which leads us to consider whether it isn’t rather something other than justice that we were seeking all along.

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 preeminent 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**

This section of Conversations of the West is being offered in a small-group format. Typically MAP courses have two weekly lectures and a weekly recitation or laboratory section. Here, we will still meet three times a week; but the small size of the class will allow us engage the texts primarily through discussion each day. Though I will still do some brief “lecturing” in order to provide general information, our primary focus will be close reading, discussion, and active engagement with the texts and ideas.
Our meetings are occasions for focused engagement with the texts and opportunities for you to integrate the information I present with your own insights and those of your classmates. This is a group effort and requires your active participation. This means you need to come to class prepared—and 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; and you should arrive at class ready to contribute to the discussion. Importantly, after class you should review your notes and re-read the texts.

Requirements

You are expected to read each of the works listed below, to attend all class meetings, 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 four papers and to sit for two examinations, a midterm and a comprehensive final. The four 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, 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 (including attendance) & homework..................20%
Papers (4 @ 11% each)..................................................................44%
Midterm Exam ..............................................................................10%
Final Exam.....................................................................................26%

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 instructor and your fellow students, please arrive at class promptly, and, apart from emergencies, please remain in the classroom for the duration of the class.

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 class, you may not make audio tapes or any other kind of recording. 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.


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.

T 1/22: Introduction.
T 2/5: *Book of J* ................................................................. Paper I due.
Th 2/7: *Book of J*, Genesis, Exodus.
T 2/12: [Cancelled.]
Th 2/14: [Cancelled.]
F 2/15: [Cancelled.]
T 2/19: *Republic*, Book I.
Th 2/20: *Republic*, Book I.
F 2/21: Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.”
T 2/26: *Republic*, Books II–IV.

T 3/4: Sophocles, *Oedipus*.

[Spring Break.]


T 4/8: **Midterm Examination.**
Th 4/17: Kierkegaard, *Fear & Trembling*.
F 4/18: Kierkegaard, *Fear & Trembling*.
Th 5/1: Conclusion.

T 5/13: **Final Examination.** 2:00–3:50 p.m.