Thematic Description

Despite having written nothing himself, Socrates is—if not the most influential—certainly one of the most influential intellectual figures in the Western tradition, for it is with Socrates, we are told, that “philosophy” seems first to move from natural history to an explicit concern for human affairs. Indeed, so great is the magnitude of this change that we continue to term earlier thinkers “pre-Socratic philosophers.” His stature is marked again in the name given to a distinctive form of philosophical literature, the Socratic discourse, and an approach to philosophical inquiry and instruction, the so-called Socratic method. In antiquity, importantly, he inspired Plato, Xenophon, the Stoics, the Skeptics, and the Cynics, beyond those thinkers stretching to influence in Rome and Judea...and four centuries before the presumed time of Jesus, Socrates had already suffered martyrdom for his idiosyncratic political and religious views. In modernity, his life both fascinates and repels the attention, notably, of Nietzsche; though criticisms of his mode of existence he had already endured in his own time at the hands of the comedian Aristophanes, among others. Given the state of the evidence, one can look only to the history of the reception of his thought to try to recover any sense of the “historical Socrates”; but we must likewise ask whether he does not perhaps exert a greater influence as a result of the reception of the doxography itself than for his actual intellectual contributions. In short, had Socrates never existed, would not the tradition essentially have had to create him, in its move from its origins to ethics and political philosophy? Even given that he did actually live, is what we have of him really just such a necessary fiction?
Overview

As a departmental seminar, this course is intended for advanced students completing a major or minor program in Classics, and it seeks to introduce you to modes of scholarly research and inquiry. Other students are welcome, too, and no prior background with the material is expected (of course a strong interest in the material is assumed), but such students will do well to have already completed Texts and Ideas and their Expository Writing course work. All readings will be in English translation, although students with the requisite ability are encouraged to select research project that will make use of texts in their original languages. The major work of each student will be a substantial research paper. (See below for requirements for students not in Classics.)

Because Socrates wrote nothing himself, we rely entirely on the doxographical tradition for our knowledge about his life and thought. Our inquiry therefore highlights problems of scholarly method, thus making the focus on Socrates a fitting occasion for the intended introduction to research.

The goals of this course are therefore several. Students should gain some specific knowledge of the history of philosophy, they should develop an appreciation of the special interpretive problems that arise in its study, they should sharpen their critical and analytic abilities as a result of working through the details of this material, and they should learn to conduct scholarly research in the humanities through completion of a substantial research project.

We shall begin by examining the use to which the figure of Socrates is put by a modern philosopher, 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.

As a part of your research, you will complete an essay in which you review the major literature that will inform your project for the term. This will require you to look beyond the materials we shall be covering in class. You should therefore be sure to consult with me early in the semester about appropriate secondary literature.

Requirements

You are expected to read each of the works listed below, to attend all meetings of the seminar, to arrive at class promptly, and to participate actively and appropriately in class. In-class writing exercises and brief homework assignments may also be required, as well as some supplemental reading. Finally, you will be required to sit for a midterm examination, complete a substantial research paper (12–15 pages, typed, double-spaced), and make a presentation to the seminar about your research.

In determining your grade, I shall 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class participation and homework</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral presentation on research</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm literature review</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm examination</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term Paper</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For students who are not majoring or minoring in Classics, the requirements will be an oral presentation on one of the readings, a final exam in lieu of a term paper, and two short papers (c. 4–6 pages, typed, double-spaced). With my consent, the second of these may be a revision of the first, if appropriate. These assignments will be weighted as follows.

- Class participation and homework ................................................................. 12.5%
- Oral presentation on selected reading ............................................................. 12.5%
- Midterm paper ................................................................................................ 12.5%
- Midterm examination ...................................................................................... 12.5%
- Final paper ...................................................................................................... 25%
- Final Examination .......................................................................................... 25%

Students majoring or minoring in Comparative Literature should consult with me and with their departmental advisor about which set of requirements they should fulfill.

Note well that a failing grade may be assigned to any student with three absences from the seminar. 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 appropriate texts to class.

T  1/24:  Introduction.
Th 1/26:  Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*.

T  1/31:  Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*; “The Problem of Socrates.”

T  2/7:  Socratic Doxography: Aristophanes, Aristotle, Diogenes Laertius.

T  2/14:  Cynicism.
Th 2/16:  Cynicism.

Th 2/23:  Xenophon: *Apology, Oeconomicus*.

T  2/28:  Xenophon: *Apology, Oeconomicus*.
Th 3/2:  Xenophon: *Oeconomicus*.

T  3/7:  Xenophon: *Oeconomicus; Symposium*.
Th 3/9:  **Midterm Examination.**

T  3/14:  [Spring break.]
Th 3/16:  [Spring break.]

Th 3/23:  Xenophon: *Symposium; Memoribilia*.


T  4/4:  Plato: *Apology; Parmenides, 126A–142B*.
Th 4/6:  Plato: *Symposium*.

T  4/11:  Plato: *Symposium*.......................... **Literature Review or Paper I due.**


T  5/2:  Does Socrates have a method? Plato, *Euthyphro*.
Th 5/4:  Conclusion. .......................................................... **Paper II due.**

T  5/16:  **Final Examination, 10:00–11:50 a.m.; or Term Paper due.**